



# **Terrorist Attacks, Failed Attacks and Plots in the West linked to the Syrian- Iraqi Context (2013-2016)**

**Center for the Analysis of Terrorism**

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*Canelle BEUZE*

*Analyst*

*Center for the Analysis of Terrorism*

## **Terrorist Attacks, Failed Attacks and Plots in the West linked to the Syrian-Iraqi Context (2013-2016)**

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### **Key findings**

**Between 2013 and 2016, 38 attacks, 9 failed attacks and 92 plots targeting Western Europe, the U.S., Canada and Australia can be linked to the Syrian-Iraqi context, amounting to 139 terrorist offences.**

**France is the most-targeted country** before the U.S., Germany, Australia and the United-Kingdom.

**The majority of the plotters are young men between 18 and 24 years old.** Among the identified individuals, 89.4% were men and 10.6% were women.

**In 67% of the attacks, failed attacks and plots, the threat originated from nationals of the targeted country.**

**Over the period 2013-2016, the proportion of foreign fighters who return and plot attacks against their home country or region is in the order of one in 142.**

**Between 2013 and 2016, 3 out of 100 returnees have been involved in terrorist attacks in the West.** The francophone returnees appear as the most active contingent in external plotting, with 13.5% of the Belgian returnees and 10.6% of the French ones.

**"Lone actors" have carried out 59% of the attacks, failed attacks and plots** identified in 2013-2016.

**The Islamic State (IS) has carried out or attempted to carry out several "remote-controlled" attacks in the West.** Indeed, 39 terrorist offences have been carried out by jihadis who were in contact with handlers in Syria and Iraq.

**Most of the terrorist offences (52.6%) were discriminate attacks, with 53% of them targeting military and police personnel and facilities.**

**Home-made Explosives (HMEs) are still the dominant type of weapons for terrorists.** In 2013-2016, they were used, or planned to be used, in more than one-third of all the identified terrorist offences.

**Terrorists are increasingly attracted toward weapons easier to handle than explosives.** Firearms were used, or planned to be used in more than one-third of all the identified cases and knife attacks and plots in 23.6% of the attacks and plots in 2013-2016. The use of vehicles to conduct mass killing is another significant development of this period.

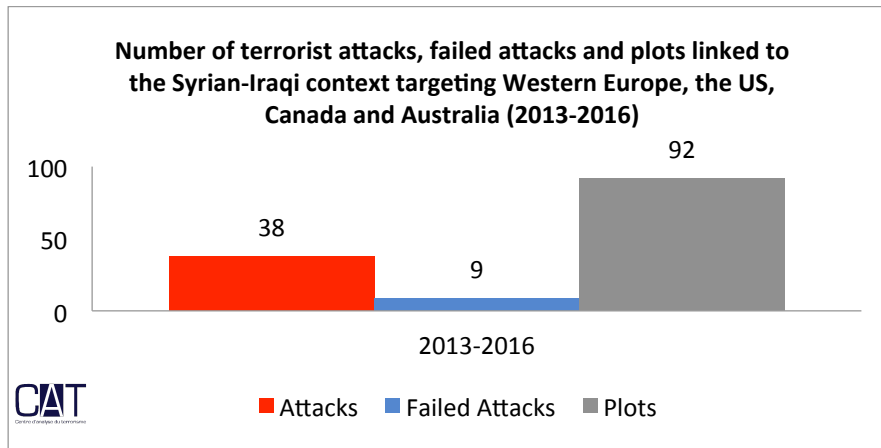
**Attacks are getting deadlier.** At least 336 people have been killed in 2015-2016 versus 8 people over the period 2013-2014.

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## I. Introduction

This study identifies **38 attacks, 9 failed attacks and 92 plots linked to the Syrian-Iraqi context targeting Western Europe, the US, Canada and Australia in 2013-2016**. Those terrorist offences took place in 13 countries and involved 282 individuals.



### ***Western Europe***

From 2013 to 2016, 24 attacks, 6 failed attacks and 64 plots linked to the Syrian-Iraqi context have targeted Western Europe. Among the 212 individuals involved in these terrorist offences:

- **186 are men (87.7%)**
- **More than one-quarter are young adults, aged between 25 and 29 years old**
- **29 are minors between 12 and 17 years old**
- **130 are nationals of the country they attacked (61.3%)**
- **49 are returnees (23%) and 37 are aspiring fighters (17.5%)**

### ***US, Canada, Australia***

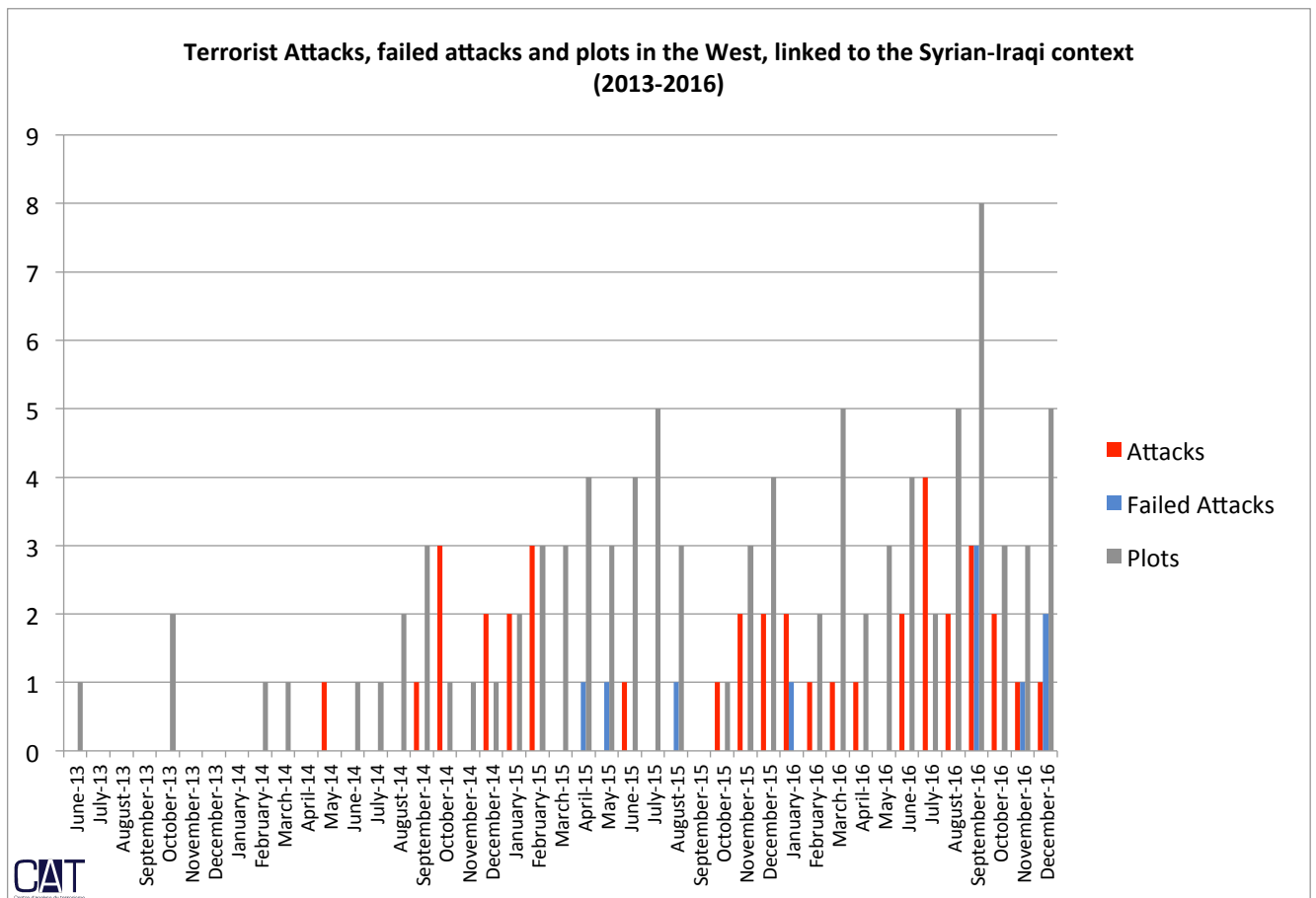
**70 individuals have been involved in 14 attacks, 3 failed attacks and 28 plots** linked to the Syrian-Iraqi context targeting the U.S., Canada and Australia in 2013-2016. Among these individuals:

- **66 are men (94.3%)**
- **More than one-quarter are young people aged between 18 and 24 years old**
- **8 are minors aged between 14 and 17 years old**
- **58 are nationals of the targeted country (82.9%)**
- **16 are aspiring fighters (22.8%)**

## II. Results of the Study

### a) Frequency

On September 22, 2014, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani urged the group's followers in the West to strike home, a turning point in IS' official communication. Sympathizers quickly reacted to this call as 10 of the 19 attacks and plots in 2014 occurred after al-Adnani's speech.



**In 2015-2016, the study found an average of 3 plots per month and a total of 31 attacks, whereas in 2013-2014 an average of one plot every two months and a total of 7 attacks were identified.**

### In Western Europe

Country	Attacks				Total
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2013-2016
Austria	0	0	0	0	0
Belgium	0	1	0	2	3
Denmark	0	0	2	1	3
France	0	1	5	4	10
Germany	0	0	0	6	6
Italy	0	0	0	0	0
Spain	0	0	0	0	0
Sweden	0	0	0	1	1
Switzerland	0	0	0	0	0
United-Kingdom	0	0	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>24</b>

Country	Failed Attacks				Total
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2013-2016
Austria	0	0	0	0	0
Belgium	0	0	0	0	0
Denmark	0	0	0	0	0
France	0	0	2	2	4
Germany	0	0	0	2	2
Italy	0	0	0	0	0
Spain	0	0	0	0	0
Sweden	0	0	0	0	0
Switzerland	0	0	0	0	0
United-Kingdom	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>

Country	Plots				Total
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2013-2016
Austria	0	1	0	1	2
Belgium	0	0	1	3	4
Denmark	0	0	0	2	2
France	2	4	6	16	28
Germany	0	0	0	5	5
Italy	0	0	2	4	6
Spain	0	0	3	0	3
Sweden	0	0	0	1	1
Switzerland	0	1	0	0	1
United-Kingdom	1	4	3	4	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>64</b>

### In the U.S., Canada and Australia

Country	Attacks				Total
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2013-2016
Australia	0	2	1	1	4
Canada	0	2	0	0	2
United States	0	1	2	5	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>

Country	Failed Attacks				Total
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2013-2016
Australia	0	0	0	1	1
Canada	0	0	0	0	0
United States	0	0	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>

Country	Plots				Total
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2013-2016
Australia	0	2	3	3	8
Canada	0	0	1	1	2
United States	0	0	16	2	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>28</b>

## b) Perpetrators' Background

*All the individuals taken into account in this article are those directly involved in carrying out the offences, whether as an attacker or as an accomplice.*

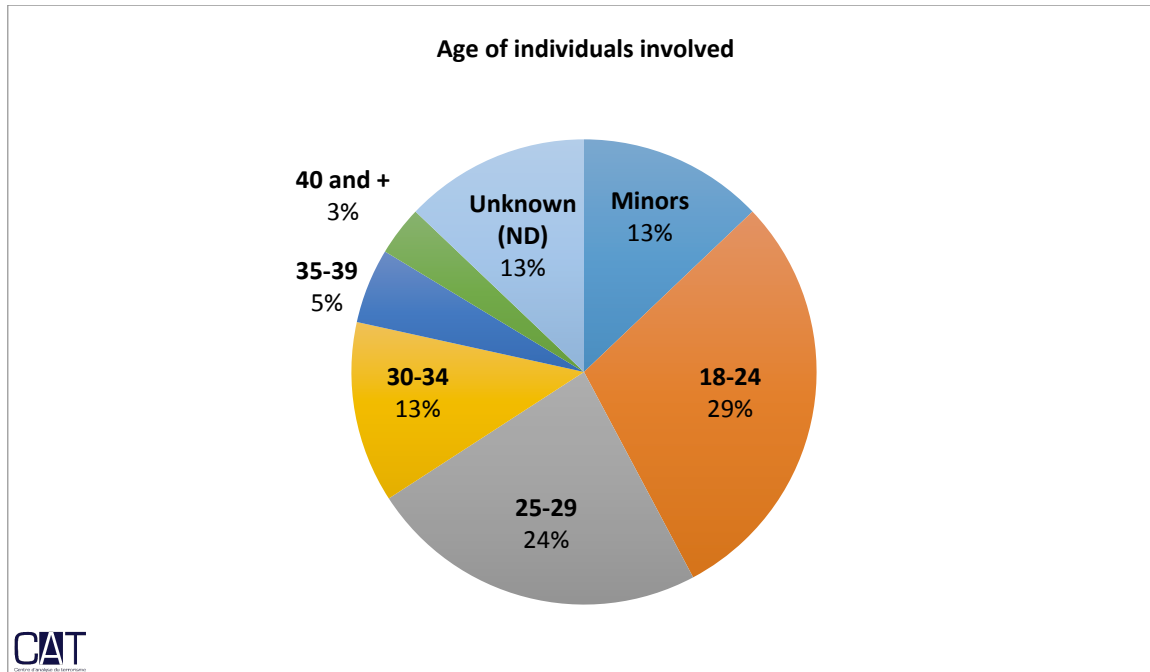
### Gender

**Among the 282 identified individuals 252 are men (89.4%) and 30 are women (10.6%).**

### Age

Nearly one-third of the 282 perpetrators are **between 18 and 24 years old**. The study also identifies **37 minors** between 12 and 17 years old. The youngest terrorist identified in this study is a 12-year-old German-Iraqi boy, who attempted to set off explosives in his hometown of Ludwigshafen, Germany, on two occasions.

**30% of the women involved were minors** (ages 15-17) versus 11% of minors (ages 12-17) among men.



*NB: The age of 37 individuals was not available.*

### Nationality

Based on the information gathered, **28 nationalities have been identified. 188 perpetrators were nationals of the country they attacked (66.6%)**. Among the 282 individuals involved, 77 were foreigners in the targeted country (27.3%).

Regarding the attacks, failed attacks and plots in the U.S., only 5 persons were foreigners. Indeed, 82.8% of the individuals involved were U.S. citizens.

*NB: The nationality of 17 perpetrators was unknown.*

### Returnees

**Of the 282 individuals** involved in the 139 terrorists offences, **50 are returnees (17.7%)**. All these returnees are men.

Among the 50 returnees, 49 are European citizens. The significant contrast with North America and Australia is largely due to the large number of Europeans who joined IS and then returned home. Indeed, only 105 jihadis have returned to Australia and North America while 1,367 returnees are reported in the 10 European countries considered.

A 2013 study<sup>1</sup> assessed that over 1990-2010 no more than one in nine foreign fighters returned to perpetrate attacks in the West. More recently, another study<sup>2</sup> suggested that

<sup>1</sup> HEGGHAMMER, T. Should I stay or should I go ? Explaining variation in Western Jihadists' choice between Domestic and foreign fighting. American political science review, Feb 2013.

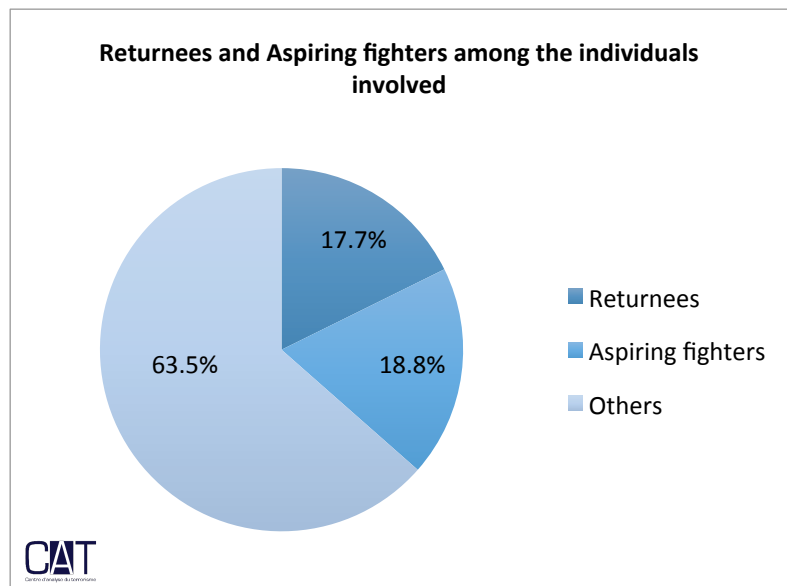


between January 2011 and June 2015, the "blowback rate" — the proportion of fighters who return and plan operations at home— is in the order of one jihadi in 360. From the information collected, the CAT estimates that, in 2013-2016, the blowback rate is about one jihadi in 142. This rate is significantly low compared with the one evaluated over the period 1990-2010. This is due to the high number of foreign fighters who joined the Syrian-Iraqi jihad.

Our data show that three out of 100 returnees have participated in terrorist offences in the West between 2013 and 2016. IS' French-speaking militants appear as the most prominent foreign fighters cadre, with 13.5% of the Belgian returnees and 10.6% of the French ones involved in terrorist activities. The veteran effect makes returnees more effective operatives than mere sympathizers. Upon their return, these battle-hardened militants determined to strike home generally form operational cells and plan mass-casualty attacks involving heavy weapons and explosives. At least 166 people have been killed by European returnees in 2013-2016.

### Aspiring Fighters

The study has identified 53 aspiring jihadis among the 282 individuals (18.8%). Aspiring fighters are those willing to join the Syrian-Iraqi front but who failed to do so (confiscation of their travel document, failure to cross the Turkish-Syrian border or arrest at the borders of other countries). Frustrated by their inability to join jihad abroad, some of them choose to direct their action toward their home country by planning attacks.



<sup>2</sup> HEGGHAMMER, T., NESSER, P.. Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West. Perspectives on Terrorism, North America, 9, jul. 2015.

## c) Modus operandi

### Command and Control

**Command and control processes at play in terrorist plotting activity in the West can take multiple forms.** Terrorist offences in the West since 2013 have been **directed** (planned and carried out by one or several returnees dispatched by their organization), **remotely-controlled** (conducted by individuals without any jihad experience abroad being guided by jihadis based in Syria and in Iraq), or **inspired** (no contact with jihadi groups).

The study identifies 22 attacks, failed attacks and plots directed by terrorist organizations based in Syria and Iraq, 39 remote-controlled attacks against Western countries, and 77 other terrorist offences, including several inspired attacks. For the purpose of the analysis, only one plot in March 2016 has not been categorized.

Finally, 15 out of 38 attacks (39.5%) have been claimed by the IS through its official (*al-Bayan* and *Nashir*) and semi-official (*A'maq*) channels.

### Lone Actor vs. Group & Network

In 2013-2016, 59% of terrorist offences were conducted by single actors while 40.3% were conducted by groups, sometimes directly affiliated to a terrorist organization as the commando of the Paris attacks in November 2015.

Western Europe			Australia and North America		
Action	Number	Percentage	Action	Number	Percentage
Single actor	50	53.2%	Single actor	32	71.1%
Group	43	45.7%	Group	13	28.9%
Unknown (ND)	1	1.1%	Unknown (ND)	0	0%
Total	94	100%	Total	45	100%

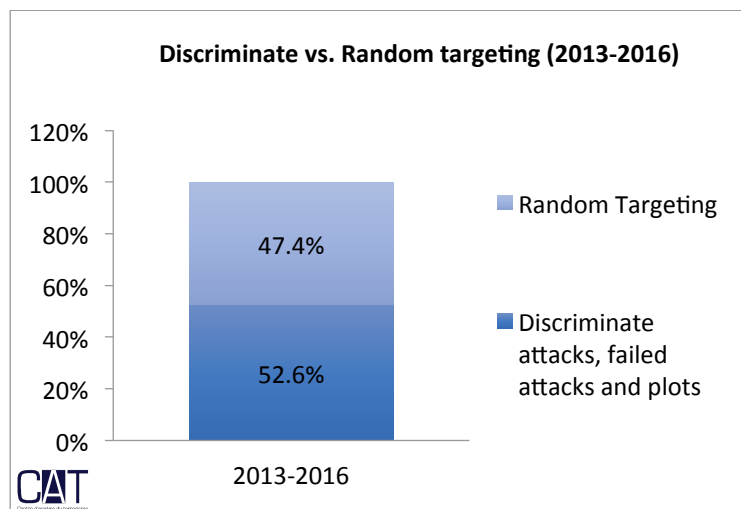
Complete Study		
Action	Number	Percentage
Single actor	82	59%
Group	56	40.3%
Unknown (ND)	1	0.7%
Total	139	100%

Although "individual actions" are more frequent, it should be noted that those involved are not necessarily without links to a jihadi group. Indeed, a number of them were in contact with IS members in Syria and Iraq who encouraged them to take action and provided them with operational instructions. Among these virtual planners are Junaid Hussain and Abu Issa al-Amriki for the English-speaking jihadi circles and Rachid Kassim for the French-speaking ones.

### *Discriminate vs. Random Targeting*

*11 plots have been thwarted before the perpetrators chose their targets. Therefore, they have been excluded from this part of the analysis. Finally, all considered and selected targets have been taken into account.*

**In most cases (52.6%),** terrorist offences were discriminated while 47.4% of the others were random targeting.



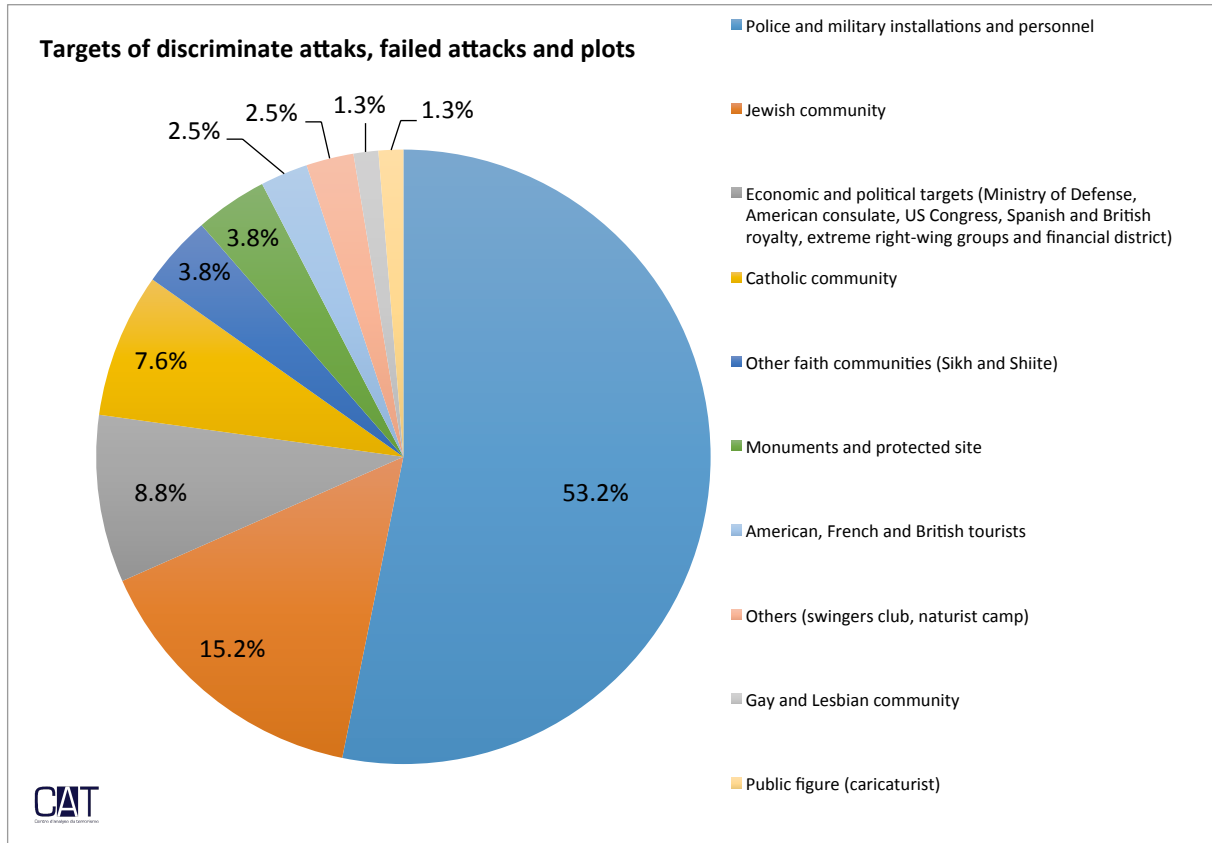
Prior to 2014, discriminate targeting was twice as common as random targeting<sup>3</sup>. Analysis of the CAT shows that discriminate and random targeting were about equally common between 2013-2016. This evolution fits in with the operational guidance given by Al-Adnani in a May 2016 statement in which he stated: "Know that your targeting of so-called "civilians" is more beloved by us and more useful to us, because it is more painful and harmful to them, and serves better to deter them"<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> NESSER, P., STENERSEN, A., OFTEDAL, E.. Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect. Perspectives on Terrorism, North America, 10, dec. 2016.

<sup>4</sup> « ISIS Spokesman Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani Calls on Supporters to Carry Out Terror Attacks in Europe, U.S. », MEMRI, 20 may 2016.

## Targets

**Around 53% of the 72 discriminate offences targeted military and police personnel and facilities. Several religious communities have also been the targets of Islamist terrorism.**

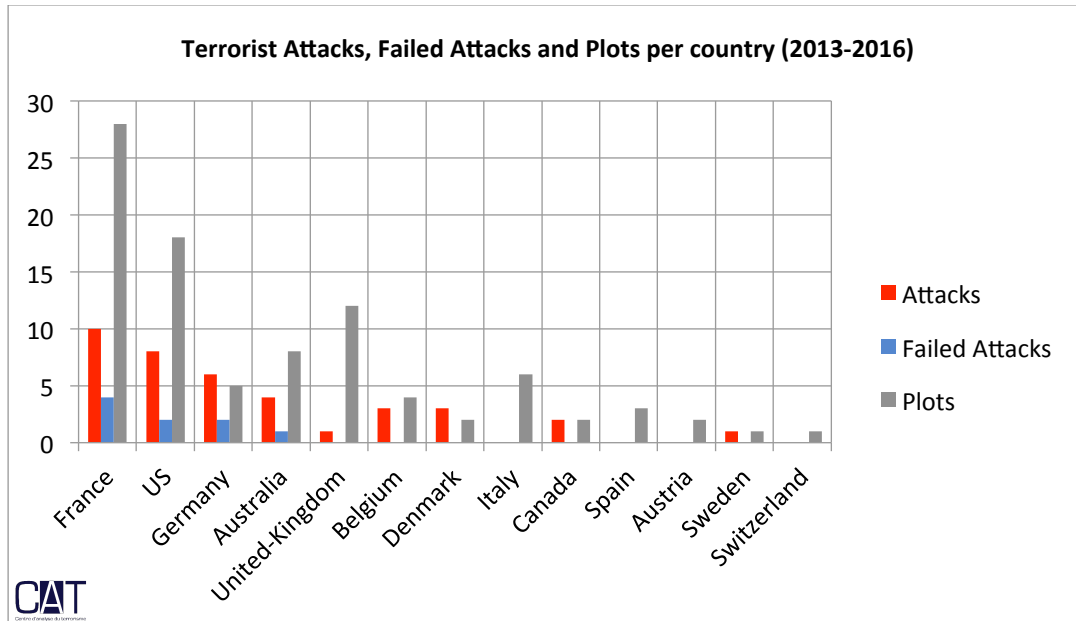


## Targeted countries

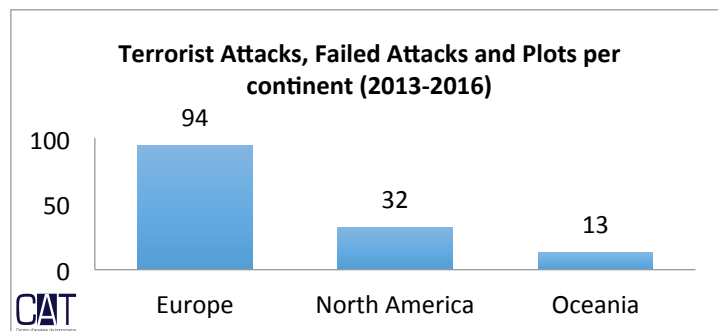
*The study focuses on attacks, failed attacks and plots related to the Syrian-Iraqi context, which targeted Western Europe, Australia, Canada and the United-States.*

**France is the most targeted country. Around 30% of all the Syrian-Iraqi linked attacks, failed attacks and plots specifically targeted the French territory. Among the other most-targeted countries are the U.S. (20%), Germany, Australia and United-Kingdom.**

As a member of the anti-IS Coalition, France features on the short list of IS most important Western enemies. Further, numerous francophone jihadis have been involved in the organization's external operations, guiding attacks and plots involving both returnees and aspiring jihadis.



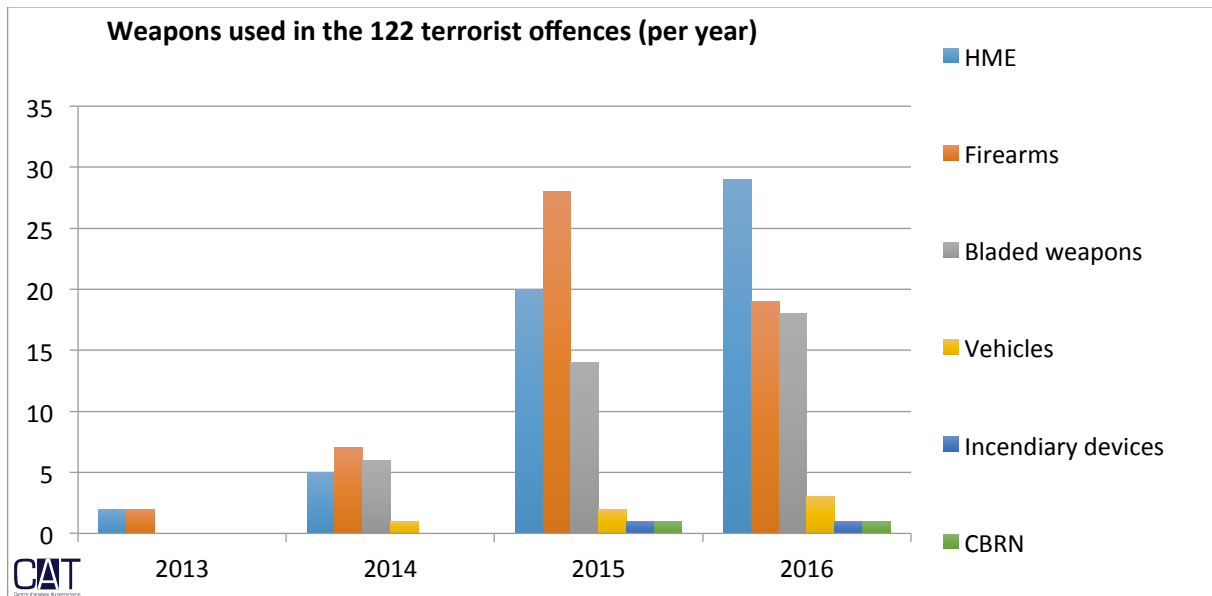
Europe has been the most-targeted continent by Islamist terrorism linked to the Syrian-Iraqi context over the period 2013-2016.



### Weapons

*In this part of the study, we examine the weapons used in 122 of the 139 identified terrorist offences. 17 plots have not been included because they were thwarted before the perpetrators chose their weapons.*

In 2013-2016, **HMEs and firearms were the weapons of choice of terrorists. Indeed, they were used or planned to be used in 34.8% of all documented attacks, failed attacks and plots.**



**The use of vehicles to conduct mass killings is one of the significant developments in 2014-2016.** During this period, cars and trucks attacks killed 98 peoples including 86 killed when a truck driver plowed into the crowd in Nice (07/14/2016).

There is a trend towards weapons like firearms and bladed weapons which require little time for preparation. **In 2014-2016, bladed weapons were used in 23.7% of the cases, compared to 13% in 2008-2013<sup>5</sup>.**

**Terrorists also combined several types of weapons.** The most identified combinations involved vehicles (car or truck), firearms, bladed weapons and/or HMEs.

The increasing use of simpler weapons and the use of vehicles echoes the tactical advice given by Al-Adnani in September 2014 when he encouraged its sympathizers to use "an explosive device, a bullet, a knife, a car, or rock, or even a boot or a fist".

Finally the study shows that in 2013-2016, the use of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear agents (CBRN) was anecdotal. Indeed terrorists favor simpler weapons rather than sophisticated materials.

#### d) Casualties<sup>6</sup>

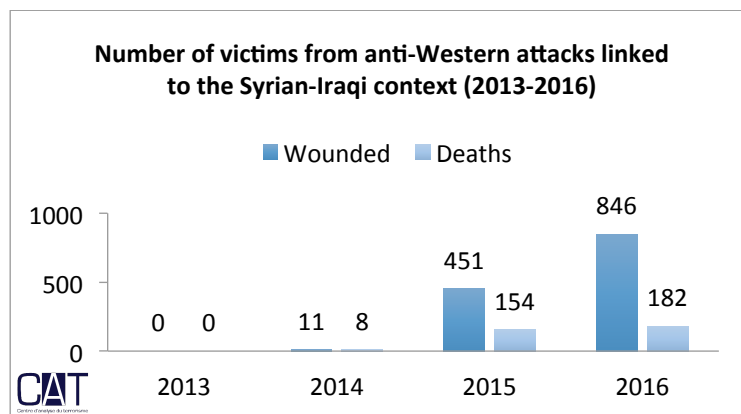
Over the period 2013-2016, the **38 terrorist attacks in the West have killed 344 people and wounded 1308 others. 2016 is the deadliest year on record with 182 people killed.**

<sup>5</sup> NESSER, P., STENERSEN, A., OFTEDAL, E.. Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect. Perspectives on Terrorism, North America, 10, dec. 2016.

<sup>6</sup> This analysis is limited to the killed and wounded victims.

Complete Study			
Year	Wounded	Deaths	Total
2013	0	0	0
2014	11	8	19
2015	451	154	605
2016	846	182	1 028
<b>Total</b>	<b>1 308</b>	<b>344</b>	<b>1 652</b>

The two highest-casualty operations both occurred in 2016, including the Nice attack (86 deaths and 434 wounded) and the Orlando attack (49 people killed). These terrorist attacks demonstrate how an IS sympathizer who never traveled to Syria can be, in some cases, as dangerous as a cell of seasoned militants.



### III. Conclusion

Since 2013, the jihadi threat remains significant in Western Europe, North America and Australia. **From all the armed groups based in Syria and Iraq, IS constitutes the most serious danger currently facing the Western countries.** Al-Baghdadi's so-called caliphate has managed to establish itself as the most attracting component within the jihadi current and to quickly galvanize its supporters staying behind in the West.

Nevertheless, the Islamic State continues to lose territory in Iraq and Syria, a factor which goes hand-in-hand with a loss of its members (deaths, desertions, arrests etc.). Besides, the organization also lost its crossing points on the Turkish border and saw the closure of the "Balkan route" — which offered the group a unique momentum to dispatch its veterans to Europe in summer 2015—. Hence, it became more difficult for foreign fighters to come back home unnoticed. Therefore, the organization has every reason to rely on supporters already behind the enemy lines to avoid losing further resources.

**Thus a number of lone-actors identified in this study are in fact remotely controlled by IS operatives based in Syria and Iraq.** Indeed, jihadis are using social media and online encryption technologies to communicate with unaffiliated radicalized Westerners. These "virtual-entrepreneurs" use social media and encryption to reach out to sympathizers in Western countries and encourage them to strike at home.

**At the same time, IS sympathizers have proved to be quite reactive to the group's calls to strike the West.** If IS did not invent "individual jihad" in the West, the organization did distinguish itself with its ability to quickly mobilize its overseas audience. In most cases, sympathizers do not need to have direct links with the organization to be serious threats for the western world. For example, Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik, who carried out the San Bernadino killings, acted on behalf of IS but were not in touch with its members. The same can apply to Omar Mateen (Orlando) and Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel (Nice).

**In this context, inspired and remote-controlled attacks will continue to be a major threat for the western world.**



## Center for the Analysis of Terrorism

13-15 rue Taitbout

75009 Paris

France

Tel. : +33 9 70 46 61 00

Email : [contact@cat-int.org](mailto:contact@cat-int.org)

Web : [www.cat-int.org](http://www.cat-int.org)

Twitter : @Cat\_Centre