

## Conversion to Terror

European converts to radical Islam pose security threat

**Countries in the European Union face a sobering reality: Cities, infrastructure and, most importantly, people are being targeted by radical Islamic terrorists. This is not a revelation — Over the past several years, Europeans have been the victims of numerous terrorist attacks in the name of violent jihad. Increasingly, however, EU citizens are threatened by violent Islamic extremists among their own countrymen.**

This realization was reinforced in October 2010 when the EU issued terror alerts triggered by intelligence warnings of an al-Qaida plot to conduct “Mumbai-style” attacks on European cities. A few days later, five Taliban militants with German citizenship were reported killed in a NATO attack on a militant hideout in Pakistan, which BBC News analysts speculated were connected to the attack warning. Then, over two days, French police arrested 12 people in antiterrorism raids, while Bulgarian police raided an Islamic organization that *The Sofia Echo* reported had “propaganda material preaching religious hatred and the overthrow of Bulgaria’s constitutional order.”

A growing threat in Europe is violent Islamic extremism stemming from domestic radicalization. “Islam is widely considered Europe’s fastest growing religion, with immigration and above average birth rates leading to a rapid increase in the Muslim population,” the BBC said. Data compiled by the BBC place an estimated 5 million to 6 million Muslims in France and more than 3 million in Germany — the highest numbers in the EU. Other nations with large Muslim populations include the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands and Italy. Balkan countries such as Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina also have substantial Muslim populations. Outside the EU, an estimated 20 million Muslims live in Russia, where Islamic separatist movements in the North Caucasus republics have spawned dozens of terrorist attacks over the past two decades, killing thousands. The November 2008 EU report “Radicalisation, Recruitment and the EU Counter-radicalisation Strategy” states: “The vast majority of Europeans, irrespective of belief, do not accept extremist ideology, and that amongst the small number that do, only a few turn to terrorism.” However, European governments are concerned about the threat posed by domestic radicalization. As recent terrorist attacks in London, Madrid and Moscow have shown, when sufficiently radicalized, small numbers of people are capable of producing great death and destruction.



A German court convicted (from top left) Fritz Gelowicz, Adem Yilmaz, Daniel Schneider and Atilla Selek for plotting terrorist attacks against U.S. interests in Germany. The case gained widespread attention because Gelowicz and Schneider are ethnic German converts to Islam and Yilmaz is a German citizen.

A French Soldier patrols at the Eiffel Tower as part of the national security alert system Vigipirate. France increased the terrorism threat level in September 2010 in response to intelligence warnings of a plot to attack European cities.



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

### From convert to terrorist

Western European Islamic extremists have largely come from backgrounds of Islamic heritage, either as recent legal immigrants or second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants. For example, three of the four London train bombers were British-born men of Pakistani descent, while members of the cell that carried out the Madrid bombing were primarily Moroccan immigrants. More recently, a British suspect born in Somalia was arrested in the Netherlands in September 2010, and three Germans were recently charged with supporting terrorism. According to the *Irish Examiner*, information provided by Ahmad Wali Siddiqui, a German citizen of Afghan origin captured by NATO forces in Afghanistan was responsible for the late 2010 terror alerts in Europe.

The radicalization of ethnic European converts to Islam has grabbed the attention of European law enforcement and security officials. Michael Taarnby, a terrorism expert from the Danish Institute for International Studies, told *The Washington Post*: “The number of converts, it seems, is definitely on the rise. We’ve reached a point where I think al-Qaida and other groups recognize the value of converts, not just from an operational viewpoint but from a cultural one as well.” Converts are tactically important to terrorist organizations because of their deep cultural knowledge of the target countries. Their physical appearance allows them to go undetected more easily. Security officials have also uncovered radicalized converts to Islam who were planning or attempting terrorist attacks

in the West. Richard Reid, the infamous “shoe bomber,” is British, as are Andrew Ibrahim, who planned to bomb a shopping center, and Nicky Reilly, who attempted to set off a suicide bomb in a crowded restaurant. One of the London metro bombers, Germaine Lindsey, was Jamaican-born. French converts Lionel Dumont and brothers David and Jerome Coutaille have been convicted of planning or aiding terrorist plots directed at Europe. And in March 2010, in what *Der Spiegel* called “the largest terrorist trial to take place in Germany since the times of the Red Army Faction,” a German court sentenced converts Fritz Gelowicz and Daniel Schneider to 12 years in prison for their roles in a plot to kill U.S. Soldiers and civilians.

In Russia, “investigators probing terrorism cases in the North Caucasus have noted a growing number of ethnic Slavs among the perpetrators,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reported in 2006 that more than half the members of a radical Islamist terrorist group broken up by police were ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, including former soldiers and a senior policeman. This group was responsible for the 2004 Moscow metro bombing.

Also of note is a wave of European women converting to radical Islam, one of whom, Belgian Muriel Degauque, committed a suicide attack against American troops in Iraq in 2005. French domestic intelligence chief Pascal Mailhos told *Le Monde*, “The phenomenon is booming, and it worries us.”

Security experts are concerned that police are not as alert to the potential threat from an ethnic European woman as they might be to that from a young man of Middle Eastern appearance. Female suicide bombers have been used extensively in Russia by Islamic terrorists from the North Caucasus, including the 2004 metro attack mentioned previously and subsequent Moscow metro attacks in March 2010. Bavarian Interior Minister Guenther Beckstein told *The Washington Post* that many converts, whether as contrition for past sins or to prove their devotion to the new religion, may be more easily led into extremism.

### Radicalization: a process

In order to understand and prevent radicalization, there has been extensive discussion about the causes. Anger about a perceived Western war against Islam and feelings of alienation among Muslims living in the West are frequently cited as contributing factors. Kenan Malik, a British author and journalist, blames failed multiculturalism for the sense of alienation: “Multiculturalism as a political ideology has helped create a tribal Britain with no political or moral center. Today many young British Muslims identify more with Islam than

Britain primarily because there no longer seems much that is compelling about being British,” he wrote in an essay for *The Times*. German Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed, saying that multiculturalism, as a policy, “has failed totally” in reference to the widespread lack of integration by mostly Muslim immigrants. A study conducted by John Venhaus of the U.S. Institute of Peace found that a common trait of these foreign fighters is “an unfulfilled need to define themselves” and identified them as belonging to one of four groups: revenge seekers, status seekers, identity seekers or thrill seekers.

Many Western nations are also looking at the menace of prison radicalization. According to James Brandon of the Quilliam Foundation: “There is increasing evidence that prisons in the West are now starting to play a similar role [as incubators of jihadist thought] — particularly in the United Kingdom, which has seen more ‘homegrown’ terrorist plots than any other Western country.” Brandon points out that violent extremists recognize prisons as ideal recruiting grounds. “Prisons are places where disaffected, often violent individuals are concentrated to be punished by the state,” he wrote in the *CTC Sentinel*. “Such individuals are naturally receptive to an ideology that glorifies anti-social and anti-state



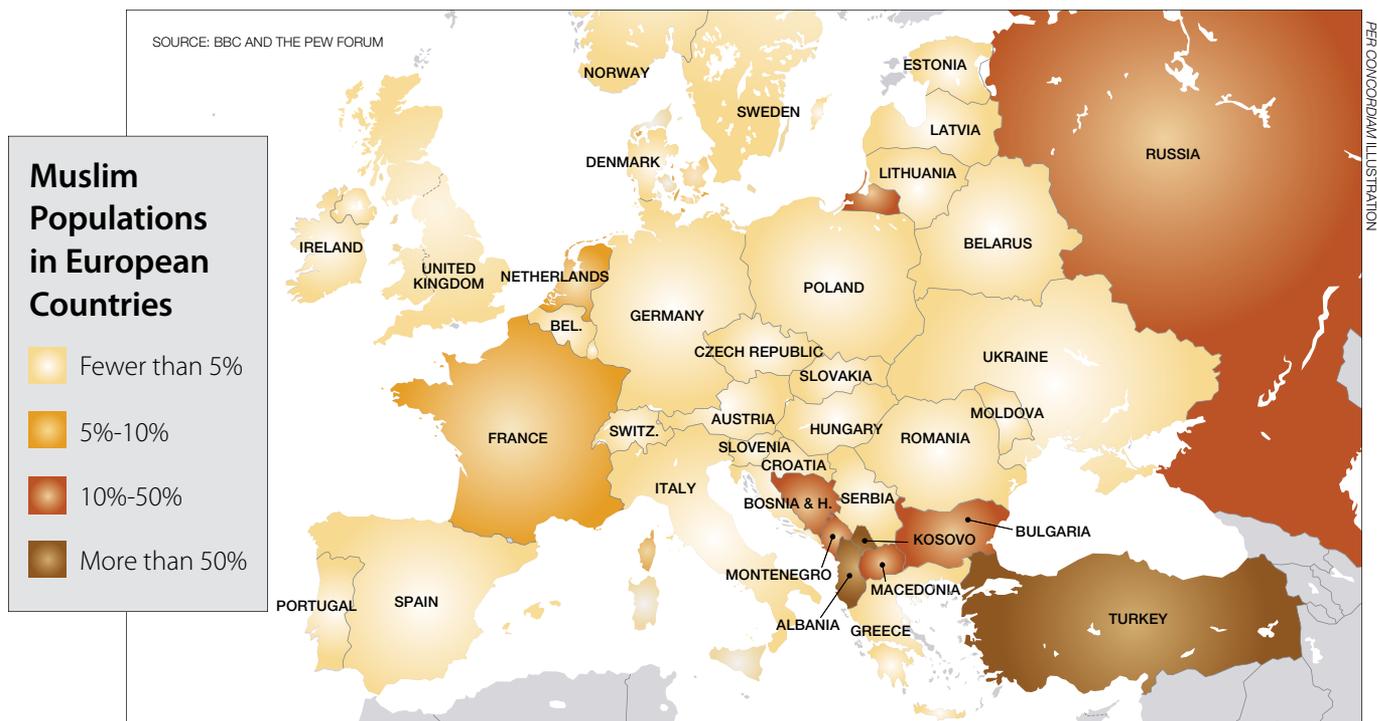
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Moscow commuters leave flowers at the Park Kultury metro station to honor victims of a terrorist attack in March 2010. Female suicide bombers affiliated with a North Caucasus terrorist group carried out the attack.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

French Foreign Legionnaires patrol a Paris train station. France increased the terrorism threat level in September 2010 in response to intelligence warnings of a plot to attack European cities.



violence and that appears to offer clear, albeit intolerant, solutions to complex problems of identity and belonging.”

A report for the New York City Police Department titled “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat,” examines 10 successful and unsuccessful terrorist plots (six in North America, three in Europe and one in Australia) and delineates common features in the radicalization process, including four distinct phases: Pre-radicalization, self-identification, indoctrination and “Jihadization.” The report concludes that radicalization in the West differs greatly from that in the Muslim world: “The transformation of a Western-based individual to a terrorist is not triggered by oppression, suffering, revenge, or desperation, rather, it is a phenomenon that occurs because the individual is looking for an identity and a cause and unfortunately, often finds them in the extremist Islam.”

The EU Counter-radicalization Strategy recognizes the need for authorities to identify those most vulnerable in order to develop effective policies to counter radicalization. It looks to the results of a 2006 Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies report that recommends the following steps: 1) increase societal trust; 2) increase political confidence; 3) increase religious defensibility; and 4) find ways of contacting radical youngsters. Venhaus agrees with this approach and recommends a range of programs to connect with those at risk.

Russian history and culture differ from those of Western Europe, contributing to a somewhat different path toward radicalization. In his book *Russia After Putin*, Mikhail

Delyagin, director of the Institute of Globalization, opined that ethnic Slavs may be attracted to radical Islam because Islam occupies the place voided by the collapse of Marxism, offering young people “the sense that they were contributing to a universal ideal,” and “provides a feeling of transcendence over everyday life.” Ali Polosin, a former Russian Orthodox priest who converted to Islam, explained to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* how Islam can be distorted to justify terrorism: “Islam is a religion of revolutionaries. Revolutionary ideas can be easily transformed into terrorist ideas. It is enough to slightly change the interpretation.”

### Whole-of-government approach

As the EU Counter-radicalization Strategy points out, “radicalization is a complex phenomenon that can only be caused by a combination of factors.” As such, a comprehensive approach is required to combat radicalization and mitigate its damage. A whole-of-government approach implies the cooperation and engagement of various levels of government, including law enforcement, intelligence, and community and social services. Different agencies should address the problems from their respective strengths, while communicating among themselves to facilitate policies and programs that are mutually beneficial. Not doing so increases the risk that agencies will work at cross-purposes. Cooperation and coordination among and within governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations and religious institutions can more efficiently address these complex radicalization and violent extremism issues. □