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## Potential Adherents of Radical Islam in Europe: Methods of Recruitment and the Age of Perpetrators in Acts of Terror

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### *Summary*

This article's objective is to categorize potential jihadists in Europe and provide an overview of contemporary methods for their recruitment. Taking into account the ubiquity of the Internet and social networking platforms, and the fact that younger generations are spending an ever increasing amount of time using contemporary communication technology, this article focuses on those recruitment methods that make use of social networking platforms and mobile applications for the spread of extremist propaganda, as well as for communication with potential adherents. An analysis of the age structure of individuals involved in the planning and carrying out of terrorist acts in Europe from November of 2015 to September of 2017 supports a hypothesis that contemporary recruitment methods are especially effective in targeting a younger demographic. In addition, this article negates the importance of traditional physical exposure to radical behavior, which serves to explain the increasing number of terrorist attacks in Europe conducted by radicalized citizens of European countries.

*Keywords:* Islamic Radicalism, Terrorism, Jihad, Foreign Fighters, Islamic State

### **Introduction**

In recent years, Europe has been faced with an increasing number of terrorist attacks linked to Islamic radicalism. Although numerous jihadist<sup>1</sup> attacks were planned and

<sup>1</sup> The Encyclopedia of Islam defines jihad as "military action with the object of the expansion of Islam, or if need be, its defence" (Quareeshi, 2016: 15). The author recognizes the existence of different interpretations of the term "jihad", and therefore emphasizes that the term "jihad" in this article is used to describe the application of violence, and the term "jihadist" refers to an individual who participates in the planning or execution of terrorist acts.

conducted prior to 2015 (Nesser et al., 2016: 4),<sup>2</sup> 2015 seems to have become somewhat of a watershed year, with the terrorist attack in Paris in January of 2015 and the multiple attacks in the same city in November of the same year sparking widespread discussion of this issue. The topic was quickly propelled into the public spotlight, and consequently, politicians, security experts, and the media began to draw connections between the attacks and the possible appearance of foreign fighters (French citizens who had returned from the Syrian and Iraqi war zones with combat experience) and radicalized French citizens of Islamic background, who despite not having previously had direct contact with the conflicts in the Middle East, were ready to kill and die for their beliefs. Furthermore, after the Paris attacks, a trend of increasing frequency of both unsuccessful and successful terrorist attacks by fellow adherents of a radical Islamic ideology in other European countries (doubtlessly inspired by the success of their comrades in France) was recognized. It soon emerged that between 2011 and 2016, more than 5000 European Muslims travelled to Syria to participate in combat. During the same period, more than 1600 individuals were arrested in investigations related to jihadist activity within Europe (excluding the UK), which represented a 70% increase when compared to the immediately preceding five year period (according to the EUROPOL TE-SAT Report, 2017: 20).

As of April of 2017, 20 to 30% of foreign fighters had already departed Iraq and Syria, while 30% of European foreign fighters had already returned to their countries of origin – producing a number of roughly 1200 European foreign fighter returnees (Reed et al., 2017: 6).

From the beginning of 2014 to the end of 2016, jihadist attacks in Europe claimed 273 lives, which is a larger number than the totals of all previous years combined (Nesser et al., 2016: 3). According to EUROPOL, 135 individuals were killed in jihadist attacks within the EU (EUROPOL TE-SAT Report, 2017: 22), and up until the writing of this article, the number of fatalities caused by jihadist attacks on European soil during 2017 was 140.<sup>3</sup>

### **Article Objective and Initial Hypothesis**

The objective of this article is to categorize potential jihadists in Europe into four categories and give an overview of contemporary methods for their recruitment, in particular with respect to the targeted demographic group. The initial hypothesis is that contemporary recruitment methods for potential perpetrators of terrorist acts in

<sup>2</sup> According to Nesser, data exists on 90 planned and conducted European terrorist attacks that have been linked to Al Qaeda or other jihadist groups in the period from 1995 to 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Data is from publicly available sources detailing attacks that happened in European countries in 2017.

the name of a radical ideology are more effective when applied to a younger demographic, specifically one that is less than 30 years old. The research conducted prior to the writing of this article lasted several months, from May to September of 2017, using a qualitative methodological approach and data which was primarily found in secondary sources. The research began with a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature, consisting principally of the relevant academic publications that deal with extremism, radicalization and recruitment. Data used in the analysis of identified perpetrators of radical Islamic terrorist acts was collected from applicable websites, media statements of relevant state officials, the publicly available reports of relevant European and NATO bodies, as well as the Security and Intelligence Agencies of NATO and EU member states.

### **Limitations of the Article**

Existing scientific research regarding foreign fighters (or more broadly on transnational insurgents) is generally limited to their appearance as a global phenomenon, or to their role and contribution in a global jihadist movement. This research is based on identified trends and exact numbers in order to analyze the general phenomena, with a significant portion of the research being focused on the internal motivation of individuals for participating in jihad and the security implications that result.

For the purpose of the theoretical examination in this article, a large range of scientific and expert works have been used, while for the purpose of the analysis of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks, data about the perpetrators published in the media has been used. Although every collected piece of data has been checked with multiple, publicly available sources, one of the potential limitations of the article can be the veracity of this data. In addition, another potential limitation of the article is the reality that a significant portion of the available literature dealing with jihadists is focused on the means by which individuals are radicalized, whereas most authors neglect the important distinction between radicalization and recruitment (which this article will attempt to differentiate).

Finally, even though the exact values regarding the perpetrators of terrorist acts and their victims represent an appropriate quantitative metric, the effectiveness of contemporary methods of recruitment is difficult to scientifically quantify given the lack of relevant, publicly available data. As more details regarding these processes emerge, this issue will surely be the topic of future scientific research.

### **Categorization of Potential Adherents of Islamic Radicalism**

A detailed analysis of factors, such as the membership of potential jihadists in certain demographic groups, is important for a comprehensive understanding of internal motivations, but also the vulnerability of potential jihadists to recruitment

methods which are used by radical organizations resembling the so-called Islamic State (IS). It is also necessary to keep in mind that terrorist attacks by radical Islamists have been a recurring security issue for a longer period than is examined in this article, and that attacks have occurred at broadly dispersed locations globally, not only under the auspices of IS, but also of several other jihadist groups. This suggests that a significant decentralization in operational terrorist structures has occurred and as a result, we have progressed to the current manifestation of Islamic Terrorism – reciprocally independent radicalized groups and/or individuals, who are geographically and quite often logistically autonomous, and who are able to operationalize jihad with little or no external assistance. In light of this reality, it is necessary to pay careful attention to contemporary methods of jihadist recruitment, which includes a scientifically sound examination of the effectiveness of specific techniques on targeted demographic groups.

However, this is easier said than done. As John Berger and Bill Strathearn conclude in their analysis, it is relatively simple to identify the tens of thousands of social networking platform users who exhibit an interest in radical ideology, but it is very difficult to determine the ones who deserve additional scrutiny (Berger and Strathearn, 2013: 3). The ability of governments to identify potential perpetrators of terrorist acts motivated by a radical ideology, and in doing so to prevent such attacks from taking place, is very difficult to evaluate in an objective manner, primarily because the details of prevented attacks are often not publicized, or are made public after a protracted silence.

Nevertheless, the study of the available data detailing recent attacks and the identification of emerging trends can lead to profound insights. In analyzing published data describing individuals who perpetrated terrorist attacks in Europe ranging from January of 2015 to the most recent attacks in Barcelona in August and London in September of 2017, and then applying this analysis to a broader context, it is possible to categorize potential jihadists into the four categories illustrated in Figure 1.

The first category of potential adherents of Islamic Radicalism is made up of foreign fighter returnees, who are either citizens of one of the EU member states or citizens of one of the Western Balkan countries. The potential security threat posed by these individuals has relatively successfully been mitigated by identification, surveillance and prevention (Brzica, 2015: 34). Remarkably, although the term “Foreign Fighters” has been in use in both NATO and EU parlance for several years, a universally accepted definition does not exist. David Malet defines foreign fighters as non-citizens of countries in which conflicts are taking place, who join insurgent forces in civil wars (Malet, 2015: 455). Thomas Hegghammer elaborates this definition to exclude mercenaries, and according to his thinking, foreign fighters are best defined as individuals who travel from their (western) home countries to fight

Figure 1.



or receive military training (in the west or elsewhere) in organizations which share their ideological beliefs. Furthermore, Hegghammer recognizes that these individuals are not members of any country's armed forces, but they are members of radical groups and play active roles within them. Additionally, they do not have citizenship of the countries within which the conflict is taking place and do not receive financial compensation for their services (Gates and Podder, 2015: 107).

Following the European Parliament's first quarter of 2015 estimate that between three and five thousand foreign fighter returnees had returned to Europe, the Council of Europe addressed this issue, stating that a sustained and comprehensive approach was necessary, and that the primary responsibility for mitigating efforts would fall on the member states of the EU (EPRS Report, 2016: 4).

After a bomb attack in a museum in Bruxelles on May 24, 2014 by foreign fighter returnee and French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche, the French Minister of Interior Bernard Cazeneuve described the situation regarding foreign fighter returnees as a ticking time bomb. Interestingly, the French Security and Intelligence Services' assessment of the number of foreign fighter returnees in France at that time was 300 (at the end of 2013). More recent estimates, however, place the number of French citizens participating in jihad to be over 900, with the majority acting under the auspices of two key groups – Jabhat al-Nusrah and IS, previously known as ISIL.<sup>4</sup>

According to some sources, roughly 30% of all foreign fighters eventually return to their home countries with improved skills and an increased motivation to conduct conventional and non-conventional attacks (ICCT Report, 2016: 4). Quite often, radicalized returnees maintain links with organizations such as Al Qaeda and IS, and spread their radical ideology in their home countries. Unfortunately, secu-

<sup>4</sup> Islamic State is a radical Islamic group previously known as ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – and also known as “Daesh”, a name that its adherents consider offensive and degrading.

rity and intelligence services face difficulties in assessing the skills and abilities of individual foreign fighter returnees, let alone their degree of radicalization and willingness to act. Key to this assessment are the reasons for the foreign fighter's return, whether they are due to disillusionment with jihad and a desire for a return to normality, or feigned de-radicalization for the purpose of continued jihadist activity, albeit in new surroundings.

It is possible to determine the number of foreign fighters from individual countries from publicly available data. The Combating Terrorism Center at the prestigious West Point military academy has been monitoring and collecting publicly published data regarding foreign fighters originating from western countries who have travelled to Syria and Iraq for several years, as has the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence.

Reports identify the average age of foreign fighters to be 25<sup>5</sup> and they support the initial hypothesis of this article that the younger demographic, particularly unemployed and frustrated males younger than 30 with low self-esteem, are particularly susceptible to manipulation by organizations such as IS. Consequently, such organizations recognize fertile ground for recruitment and conversion in precisely this demographic group, and thus target them with focused and forceful propaganda. This article will evaluate the validity of this hypothesis, as it is crucial to understanding contemporary methods of jihadist recruitment.

According to a EUROPOL Report from 2016, most foreign fighters who return to Europe use the same routes used to travel to their respective war zones, or more precisely, they use indirect flights from Turkey and other European countries. The same report recognizes that a certain number of returning jihadists use the so-called "Balkan Route".

A second category of potential adherents of radical Islamism consists of radicalized citizens of European countries who have not participated in jihad outside of their country of origin. They may either be radicalized youth of Islamic background or converts to Islam. This category encompasses many self-radicalized perpetrators of "lone-wolf" attacks.

Recent terrorist attacks which have proven links to jihadist organizations demonstrate that terrorist propaganda has been focused specifically on this category of potential perpetrators of terrorist attacks, primarily through English language propaganda materials, usually published on the Internet (online magazines such as Inspire, published by the AQAP organization, or the Dabiq, Dar al-Islam and Ru-

<sup>5</sup> Data showing that the average age of perpetrators is between 22 and 27 can be found in multiple research studies, for example Neumann and Rogers (2007: 50-52), and Meleagrou and Kaderbhai (2017a: 62).

miyah online magazines published by IS), which are also often translated into the languages of target populations (Albanian and Bosnian for example). In addition to these online magazines, IS has been successful in creating striking, high quality propaganda content. This content is characterized by sophisticated video processing, with use of imaginative, high resolution video materials.

The representatives of this category and their intention are somewhat more difficult to identify. Revelations made by former NSA contractor and CIA employee Edward Snowden have exposed the ability of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in the UK and the US's National Security Agency (NSA) to recognize and monitor frequent viewers of radical Islamic propaganda materials on the Internet, by detecting IP addresses that visit known propaganda websites (unless masking techniques/technology that hinder tracking are used). Additionally, in many cases a key role in detection is played by people in the radicalized individual's immediate environment (friends, relatives, teachers, psychologists, clerics), who are the first to notice changes in the radicalized individual's behavior. Because of this, public education and awareness programs play an important role in detection and prevention, as does a quality network of informants to Law Enforcement and Security and Intelligence agencies. However, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of countries approach the radicalization of their citizens as an exclusively national issue, and thus a range of approaches to this problem exist.

A third category of potential adherents of radical Islamism, which is perhaps the most difficult to detect and monitor, consists of radicalized individuals who travel to Europe to commit terrorist acts. This category encompasses Radical Islamists purposely infiltrated among refugees and migrants, usually at the points of origin of migrant waves. The 2015-2016 migrant wave that swept Europe highlighted Europe's unpreparedness in facing such mass migrations, as the security structures of EU member states were ineffective in preventing the infiltration of the representatives of this category into Europe.

A fourth category of potential adherents of radical Islamism are migrants who have arrived to the EU, and who will potentially become radicalized due to their frustration with living conditions at their final destinations and in combination with exposure to radical jihadist propaganda online or via adherents of radical ideologies among established European Islamic communities. This least well known category consists of individuals who have fled their war-torn countries of origin in search of a better life. Some may have actively participated in conflicts, and a majority have probably suffered psychological trauma (and other horrors) that motivated their migration to western countries.

The latest EUROPOL report (TE-SAT Report, 2017: 6) anticipates the continuation of migrant arrivals in Europe, from existing and new conflict zones. IS

has already recognized the opportunity provided by the migrant wave to infiltrate its followers with an intent to commit terrorist acts in Europe, so the possibility of this reoccurring, whether by IS or by another radical organization, cannot be ruled out.

### **Contemporary Recruitment Methods**

There is a lack of scientific research regarding contemporary methods of jihadist recruitment, particularly those that make use of social networking platforms. One can assume that this can be explained by the simple fact that social networking platforms are a relatively recent phenomenon, but also by the fact that these types of activities are largely undertaken in secret (Shuck, 2015: 46). However, many articles identify the activities of extremist organizations on the Internet as one of the primary security issues of today (Frampton et al., 2017: 22).

The beginning of 2016 was marked by grandiose claims that IS would be obliterated from cyberspace by the end of the year (Forno and Joshi, 2016). However, almost two years later, it is apparent that the presence of IS and other extremist organizations on the Internet continues to be a major problem, primarily because it enables the jihadist network (including supporters) to constantly evolve and expand (Frampton et al., 2017: 31). It is irrefutable that the Internet facilitates rapid spread of information to broad audiences, while also enabling quick changes between communications platforms and almost instantaneous migration from one virtual location to another. In addition, the Internet has proven to be an excellent instrument in the hands of extremist organizations for propaganda dissemination, as well as the radicalization and recruitment of new adherents. It has demonstrated remarkable resilience in cases where extremist propaganda has been detected and removed (with user accounts deleted in some cases), only to reappear on other web locations almost immediately (*ibid.*: 32).

In order to gain an understanding of contemporary methods of potential jihadist recruitment, it is necessary to comprehend the power and impact that a terrorist organization can have on an individual using these methods (primarily via the Internet, social network platforms and mobile applications). In this context, it is important to once again stress one of the limitations of this article, and that is the fact that the majority of available literature is focused on the analysis of contemporary methods of online radicalization, with a majority of authors failing to make a distinction between radicalization and recruitment. More precisely, it can be said that an individual can be exposed to a process of cognitive radicalization online – leading to acceptance of the radical movement's beliefs and giving them outward support, but radicalization will not always result in the individual committing a terrorist act in support of a radical ideology.



In their early research on recruitment and mobilization of adherents of Islamist ideology in Europe, Peter Neumann and Brooke Rogers (2007) identified three key functions of the Internet in this process. The first function is to illustrate and reinforce ideological messages which potential adherents have previously been exposed to in private encounters. Secondly, the Internet enables potential adherents to surround themselves and contact with like minded individuals (virtually), as well as allowing them to reach out beyond their immediate (physical) circle of friends and ideological associates. Finally, the Internet is an environment that allows an individual to easily demonstrate his allegiance to an objective, as well as the means with which that objective should be realized (*ibid.*: 50-52). The above mentioned authors conclude their research with the prediction that the role of the Internet in recruiting potential adherents to radical ideologies in Europe will play an even more prominent role in the future. The exponential growth of forums and websites in European languages which seek to recruit converts, but also second and third generation European Muslims, prove that this is the case (*ibid.*: 52).

Furthermore, Neumann's research on Al Qaeda cells in Europe concludes that exposure to terrorist thinking speeds up the radicalization process by "normalizing" a radical ideology (Neumann, 2008: 55). Max Abrahms identifies two schools of thought regarding the influence of social media platforms on the adherents of radical ideologies. The first school of thought considers the effects of IS's recruitment of new adherents via social networking platforms to be an unprecedented success and that as a result, security services must direct all efforts to combatting IS efforts on social networking platforms. The second school of thought recognizes that the effects on recruitment are impressive, but that the brutality of IS's online propaganda is ultimately counterproductive because it unifies international efforts against IS, which then prevents IS from achieving its objectives by diplomatic and military means (Little, 2015). These schools of thought are complemented by some theorists who consider that the rise of online activity (to include use of social networking platforms) by extremists has enabled security services to gain a better understanding of the composition and structure of extremist organizations, as well as their way of thinking (Briggs and Silverman, 2014: 16).

Several newer articles, whose conclusions have been supported by extensive research, have been authored by John Berger. In one of his most publicized works "Who Matters Online: Measuring influence, evaluating content and countering violent extremism in online social networks", the authors designed a framework for measuring the influence and engagement of individual user accounts that promote a radical ideology and their followers (Berger and Strathearn, 2013). Newer contributions to Berger's scientific opus have additionally shed light on the ways that radical organizations such as IS use the Internet and social networking platforms

to strengthen their messages and exponentially increase their engagement (Berger, 2015a: 40).

Shuck conducted a qualitative analysis of IS and Al Qaeda in order to identify the breadth, means and objectives of Internet use by the two terrorist organizations. The results of this research showed that the Internet is being increasingly used as a propaganda platform, in order to radicalize and recruit new adherents (Shuck, 2015: 2). According to Shuck, both organizations use contemporary technologies (the Internet and social networking platforms) in the same manner as politicians and commercial organizations do, but he makes the observation that IS is more effective and interactive in engaging its target audience,<sup>6</sup> and it does so primarily via social networks (*ibid.*: 57).

IS has allocated significant resources to implementing an effective recruitment strategy (Berger, 2015b: 19). Their contemporary recruitment strategy is based on online access to a targeted demographic, and is conducted in several phases, starting with the introduction of its narrative, the shaping of social networks, and ending with a call for action (travel to a war zone or the execution of terrorist acts). The extremist narrative used to recruit new adherents consists of multiple ideological messages which have a common theme: they offer a way to a better world, and/or the realization of a better self (Charnock and Bouzar, 2017). These manipulative methods are particularly addressed at an under 30 target audience, because individuals in this group are often in search of purpose, social acceptance, and acceptance by their idols (*ibid.*).

The German security services contend that there is no doubt that jihadist groups will use every available opportunity to commit terrorist acts, but that in the past several years, the planning and execution of such acts was perpetrated by radicalized individuals or small groups. Contributing to this phenomenon were international and national efforts to prevent travel to war zones and participation in jihad by radicalized individuals, but also to prevent calls to conduct terrorist attacks in (Western) home countries in jihadist propaganda, which resulted in a geographical shift in targeting.

These calls, which no longer appeal for jihad exclusively in war zones (but rather seek to spread jihad globally) are becoming increasingly frequent as IS loses territory in Iraq and Syria. The rapid adoption by jihadists of new information technologies to spread these calls to jihad is best illustrated by EUROPOL reporting, which identifies mobile applications as the preferred method of communication be-

<sup>6</sup> For example, the author states that IS sympathizers are not only limited to following user accounts that promote a radical ideology, they actively communicate with those who publish these propaganda materials and with each other. Additionally, they disseminate these materials further, thus increasing the pool of potential followers.

tween jihadists in war zones, but also between jihadist organizations and potential recruits in the West (TE-SAT Report, 2017: 29).

Before an individual, representative of any of the categories of potential jihadists outlined above, becomes radicalized to a degree where he/she is ready to commit a terrorist act, he/she is exposed to targeted and intensive radicalization. Regardless of whether the individual has been previously exposed to jihad (like in the example of foreign fighter returnees or refugees from one of the existing war zones) or not (citizens of European countries without previous war zone experience), the catalyst for transformation from a frustrated individual to a jihadist is most often exposure to a radical ideology over a continuous (but varying) period of time. This exposure may be, but is not necessarily, a byproduct of association with radicalized individuals (radical Islamic networks who spread their ideology in European countries have been documented). Interestingly, the results of the research carried out by Neumann and Rogers in 2007 show that none of the radicalized individuals encompassed by their research was recruited exclusively online, and the authors conclude that online interaction will most probably never entirely replace physical interaction (Neumann and Rogers, 2007: 50). In contrast, Simcox's research of terrorist acts conducted by young jihadists in Europe during 2016 showed that only a small fraction (11.8%) of the perpetrators was in actual physical contact with IS operatives, while more than 50% of the perpetrators had exclusively virtual contact – via the Internet and mobile applications (Simcox, 2017: 22). This data supports the hypothesis that radicalized individuals, often referred to as lone wolves, or as Shuck labels them – satellite martyrs (Shuck, 2015: 64), are becoming increasingly frequent perpetrators of terrorist acts in the name of radical Islam (*ibid.*: 4).

### **Social Networking Platforms**

Social networking platforms, mobile communications applications, websites for free content sharing, and numerous tools for encryption and anonymity available online, have significantly eased the spread of extremist narratives, and by extension, the recruitment of future jihadists throughout the world (TE-SAT Report, 2017: 29). The global presence of IS on social networking platforms gives some insight into the profile of their operatives who seek to recruit future jihadists in this manner. Some theorists believe that it is precisely this presence on the Internet and recruitment via social networking platforms that makes IS different and more successful than other radical Islamic organizations (Ristori, 2016: 4). Research confirms the broad linguistic and technological abilities of operatives who use the Internet and social networking platforms to spread jihadist propaganda (Gates and Podder, 2015: 2). Morgan Winsor states that IS financially rewards operatives who are successful at recruiting over social networking platforms with monetary prizes ranging from

2,000 to 10,000 USD per successfully completed recruitment, depending on the quality of the individual recruit (Howell, 2017: 14).

Research on the use of the social networking platform Twitter shows that as early as 2015, almost 50,000 user accounts that supported and spread radical Islamic ideology and calls to jihad existed (Berger and Morgan, 2015: 2). Certainly, a large amount of effort has been undertaken in the last few years to prevent and control the spread of radical propaganda, including active efforts by Twitter to actively track jihadist user accounts and block them. According to Twitter's official reports, from mid 2015 to March of 2017, 636,000 user accounts were shut down in efforts to halt the spread of violent extremism.<sup>7</sup> However, the disseminators of radical ideologies consistently return,<sup>8</sup> and find new ways to communicate with each other and with potential jihadists via the Internet (Barrett, 2014: 54).

Alexander Meleagrou and Nick Kaderbhai (2017a: 47) conclude that the most significant characteristic of social networking platforms is their ability to adapt content in a way that is tailored to the specific values and interests of targeted followers, and it is this characteristic which makes them so attractive to the disseminators of a radical ideology. These findings are supported by Michael Steinbach, assistant director of the FBI, who highlighted the problem of the recruitment of adherents of a radical ideology via social networking platforms as one of the biggest challenges faced by security services globally in a lecture at the Washington Institute in September of 2016 (Steinbach, 2016: 5). That this applies to social networking platforms is illustrated by the fact that up until recently, extremist organizations had to wait until potential recruits made the first move (by declaring their interest in an online forum for example), while social networking platforms enable vulnerable and willing individuals to be flooded with messages that appeal to them. Steinbach goes on to explain that radicalization and recruitment no longer occur exclusively when an individual accesses a social networking website, but that an increasing role in these processes is being played by smart phone applications which are permanently logged in (*ibid.*: 3).

### Mobile Applications

Mobile applications have also created a technological revolution in that they have made the Internet, and more specifically certain parts of it, constantly and easily available. Besides making access to social networking platforms ubiquitous and

<sup>7</sup> Correction to Twitter report published by Reuters, 21 March 2017. Accessible on: <http://www.reuters.com/article/twitter-extremism/corrected-twitter-suspended-more-than-636000-accounts-since-2015-to-tackle-extremism-idUSL3N1GY4DU>.

<sup>8</sup> According to Barrett, even the most influential Twitter user accounts associated with IS have only between 500 and 1500 followers, which allows them to easily transfer to new user accounts if their initial accounts are blocked.

enabling individuals to constantly track what their peers are doing, saying and sharing with others, they are a vital component of contemporary technologies for the recruitment of potential adherents of radical ideologies because they enable relatively secure communications between individuals and groups. Commercially available and relatively well encrypted<sup>9</sup> applications such as Telegram, Whatsapp, and Viber (as well as many others) facilitate communication between terrorists (Graham, 2016: 21). Research by the Pew Research Center shows that 36% of owners of smart phones use at least one mobile application for communication, and that 17% activate automatic deletion of messages. The same research has shown the 18 to 29 year old demographic represented uses such apps significantly more than other demographics, with 49% using such applications (Rainnie and Madden, 2015: 26-30).

At the same time, IS invests great efforts to ensure secure communications (Graham, 2016: 2). Media reports state that IS members give detailed instructions on secure communications techniques, even producing and publishing videos on the Internet with advice and recommendations on such techniques (Coker, 2015). The characteristics of mobile applications which enable secure communication have established new channels for the radicalization and recruitment of individuals, as well as for directing them to commit terrorist acts (Engel, 2015).

The available literature indicates that members and adherents of IS often use the Telegram mobile application for communication (Graham, 2016: 22), and Telegram has published information detailing their efforts to combat the spread of radical ideologies. For example, in December of 2015, Telegram blocked 78 channels which they had identified as spreading IS ideology in 12 different languages (Schechner, 2015).

### **The Effectiveness of Contemporary Methods of Recruitment**

A limited number of scientific articles regarding the effectiveness of contemporary methods of recruitment (especially those that base their analysis on primary sources) exists. Ines von Behr et al. (2013) encompassed 15 radicalized individuals in their research, 9 of which had been convicted of committing terrorist acts in the United Kingdom. Their research was based on primary sources, interviews with perpetrators, court transcripts, and computer databases. Their analysis suggests that the Internet is the key source of information, communication and propaganda for their subjects (von Behr et al., 2013: xi).

<sup>9</sup> Encryption is the process of transforming information or data with the purpose of preventing unauthorized access. A large number of encrypted applications for communication which are used on contemporary smart phones exist, and each of them has its own user interface, capabilities and security characteristics (Coker, 2015).

In some of the newest research, Paul Gill et al. (2017) created a database which stored data on 223 perpetrators of terrorist acts for whom radicalization via the Internet has been shown. Of the individuals included in the research, 98% were men. In 61% of the analyzed cases, a connection between activity on the Internet and radicalization and/or the execution of terrorist acts was seen. Interestingly, there was a significant increase in the use of the Internet, from 54% to 76%, in preparation for executing the terrorist act, as compared to an earlier study from 2012 (*ibid.*: 103-107). The above mentioned research is the most recent and one of the most comprehensive scientific examinations of the effectiveness of radicalization and recruitment of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks via the Internet. Even though the authors included data about the age of the perpetrators in the data base used for analysis, their article does not include an analysis of effectiveness by age group. As one of the initial hypotheses of this article is that contemporary methods in recruiting potential perpetrators of terrorist acts in the name of radical ideologies are more effective when they target the younger demographic (individuals younger than 30), it would be very beneficial to conduct such an analysis on the sample of 223 individuals, as Gill et al. did.

### **Effects on the Younger Demographic**

Gill et al. (2017) did not pay particular attention to the analysis of all factors concerning the age of the perpetrators of terrorist acts, but their analysis did show that the range of individuals covered in their research was from 16 to 58, where the median age was 27, the mode was 22, and the mean age was 28 (*ibid.*: 107). IS recruiting documents, now publicly available, and which have been analyzed by the US Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, have produced valuable insight into the adherents of this radical group. These documents identify the average age of jihadists as 26, while at the same time recognizing that the average age of jihadists who travel from the West is lower than of those who are not from the West (Kohlma and Alkhouri, 2015: 3).

A substantial number of theorists support the hypothesis that jihadist propaganda is most effective when it targets the younger demographic (Milton, 2015), and recent events in Europe demonstrate this is so. According to Robin Simcox's research, jihadist propaganda is very effective in engaging its young audience (Simcox, 2017: 22). Simcox specifies that the youngest European terrorist is a 12 year old arrested in December of 2016 for trying to activate an explosive device at the Christmas fair in Ludwigshafen, Germany (*ibid.*: 23). The same author identifies numerous examples and statistics in support of the hypothesis that contemporary methods of recruiting adherents to radical ideologies are especially effective on the younger demographic. The ages of foreign fighters arriving from Europe to Syria

and Iraq range from 18 to 29, which is significantly less than in previous conflicts such as Afghanistan, where the ages ranged from 25 to 35 (*ibid.*). Rachel Briggs and Tanya Silverman, in their book *Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat*, quote Raffaell Pantucci, whose research demonstrated that the conflict in Syria is primarily attractive to teenagers, even though the average age of French citizens who participated in this jihad was 27, while the average age of Belgian and British citizens who participated was 23.5 (Briggs and Silverman, 2014: 12).

The series of terrorist attacks in Paris in November of 2015, with the most fatalities resulting from the shootings in the Bataclan concert hall, were conducted by jihadists who were all younger than 30 years of age.<sup>10</sup> Abdelhemid Abaaoud, a Belgian citizen who coordinated the attacks, was only 29 years old at the time,<sup>11</sup> while the other perpetrators were even younger: Salah Abdeslam (26), Chakib Akrouh (25), Omar Ismael Mostefai (29), Samy Amimour (28), Foued Mohammed Aggad (23), Ahmad el Mohammad (25) and Bilal Hadfi (20).<sup>12</sup> For the terrorist attack in Berlin on 16 April 2016,<sup>13</sup> the underage suspects are members of the Abu Walaa<sup>14</sup> network Yusuf T., Mohammed B. and Toldga I., who was only 16 at the time of the attacks (Kampf, 2016). The Nice attack in July of 2016 was executed by 27 year old Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, while the Manchester concert attack was committed by 22 year old Salman Abedi.

For committing two coordinated terrorist attacks involving vehicles in August 2017 in the Spanish cities of Barcelona and Cambrilis, Moussa Oukabir (17), El Houssaine Abouyaaqoub (19), Said Aallaa (19), Omar Hychami (21) and Mohamed Hychami (24) were arrested.<sup>15</sup> The most recent terrorist attack at a railway station in London in September 2017 was conducted by a group of radicalized youths, the youngest of whom was only 18 years old. In the nearly 50 attacks and attempted

<sup>10</sup> According to the analysis of publicly available data on perpetrated terrorist acts which the author briefly outlined in the table at the end of this article.

<sup>11</sup> From: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34835046>.

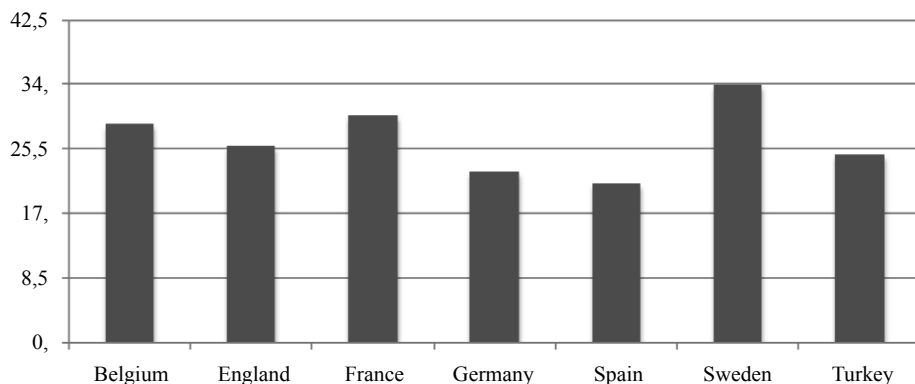
<sup>12</sup> From: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34832512>.

<sup>13</sup> An explosive device detonated next to a Sikh temple in Essen and injured three people (Reiner, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> According to the transcripts of the German Federal Prosecutor and documents from the prosecution against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic and Abdulaziz Abdulah in Heil, 2017. Abu Walaa was identified as the highest ranking representative of IS in Germany, and it is assessed that he was the key coordinator of terrorist activities in Germany, but also in other European countries based on intelligence on the network of which he was the head and its penetration throughout Europe.

<sup>15</sup> According to: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2017/aug/18/barcelona-cambrils-terror-attack-suspects-killed-latest-updates>.

**Figure 2.** Average Age of Jihadist by European Country for Terrorist Acts Committed between November 2015 and September 2017



attacks during 2016 and 2017 which were analyzed in the course of researching this article, the mean age of the jihadists was 27.21 years. The data used in this analysis was collected from publicly published information on planned and executed terrorist acts, and involved only those perpetrators whose direct involvement was proven.

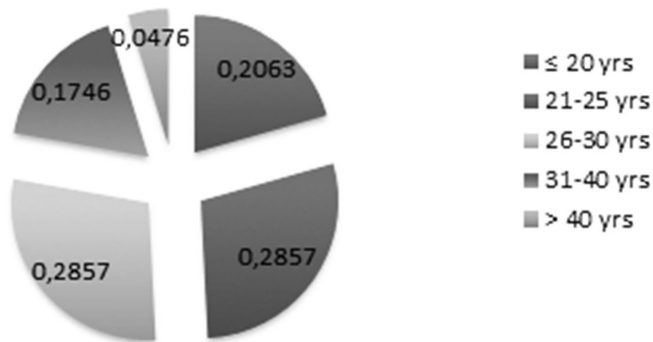
Figure 2 illustrates the analysis results which support the hypothesis suggesting higher effectiveness of recruitment methods on the younger target demographic, as well as supporting the results of the research conducted by Gill et al., Pantucci, Briggs, Silverman and other theorists who have studied this topic.

Taking into account the research results illustrated above, or the fact that contemporary methods of potential jihadist recruitment have a significant effect on the targeted demographic who are more computer savvy and spend more time online, and data about the perpetrators of terrorist acts in the name of radical Islam, it is clear that jihadist recruitment methods that rely on the Internet and mobile communications applications will continue to be a topic of interest for research in the future.

According to Simcox, the dissemination of jihadist propaganda via the Internet is the most important reason that IS has been able to achieve such spectacular results in this demographic group (Simcox, 2017: 21). According to the research conducted by the American Pew Research Center, only 1 percent of the representatives of the 18 to 29 demographic group do not use the Internet (Anderson and Perin, 2016), while 56% of individuals older than 18 use at least one of the five largest social networking platforms – Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram or Pinterest (Greenwood et al., 2016: 10).



**Figure 3.** Age Structure of Jihadists Who Have Committed Terrorist Acts in Europe from November 2015 to September 2017



## Conclusion

Extremist organizations like IS have recently been extraordinarily effective in exploiting contemporary recruitment methods in order to attract and motivate their adherents and future jihadists. However, besides succeeding in their objectives, their aggressive propaganda has triggered a reaction in the international community and facilitated coordinated countermeasures (Shuck, 2015: 64).

Taking into account the four categories of potential jihadists described in this article, the vulnerabilities which make them more susceptible to recruitment by radical groups include, but are not limited to: socioeconomic status, cultural differences, a sense of ethnic belonging (or lack thereof), religious convictions, and/or psychological factors (Charnock and Bouzar, 2017). Thus, that which makes an individual receptive to radical propaganda is the fact that for one of the above mentioned reasons, a lack of self-realization (Brzica, 2012: 119), or because he/she has inflated expectations regarding life in the European countries (this in particular applies to migrants), he/she is confronted with an inability to realize his/her objectives. The individual then turns to other means of self-realization and becomes a suitable target for recruitment. A majority of potential perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the name of radical ideologies (within the context of this article this refers primarily to those who are represented in the last three categories) have in common a level of radicalization and readiness to commit terrorist attacks that depends mostly on the propaganda that they are exposed to, most often on social networking platforms like Twitter (ICSR Report, 2014).

Furthermore, from the analysis of planned and conducted terrorist acts within Europe from November 2015 to September 2017 illustrated by Figure 3 above, it is evident that the mean age of the perpetrators of these acts is 27.21 years, that 20.63 percent of perpetrators are younger than 20, and that almost 60 percent are between 20 and 30 years of age. If extremist organizations like IS continue to aggressively recruit new adherents via the Internet and other contemporary communication methods that are popular among the younger population, it is expected that their effectiveness will remain significant. However, in the research that preceded the writing of this article, no theoretical evidence which would indicate that the radicalization and recruitment of identified perpetrators of terrorist acts committed in Europe between November 2015 and September 2017 transpired using solely contemporary recruiting methods. Because of this, one can conclude that despite the ever increasing use of social networking platforms and mobile applications, and of, most likely, an increasing effect on the target demographic, this method of recruiting adherents to a radical ideology is but one of many factors that help harden their motivation, intent and capability to commit terrorist acts in the name of a radical ideology (Gill et al., 2017: 114).

The above mentioned, alongside the fact that it is increasingly apparent that the degree of radicalization which is necessary for a young person who is a citizen of a European country to be recruited and decide to commit a terrorist act, in reality does not require direct physical contact of that individual with jihad, jihadists and a war zone, illustrates the need for a detailed scientifically sound and multidisciplinary approach to this problem. Furthermore, keeping in mind the distinction between radicalization and recruitment, future empirical research also must be directed towards understanding the reasons why a significant portion of individuals who have likewise been exposed to radical ideologies on the Internet, despite everything elaborated in this article, decide not to manifest political violence (Meleagrou and Kaderbhai, 2017a: 14).

Starting from the conclusions of this article, and keeping in mind the scientific opus of authors such as Gill et al., Berger, Neumann, Shuck and others, the undertaking of comprehensive scientific research on the actual effectiveness contemporary methods of recruitment have on the perpetrators of terrorist acts in the name of radical ideologies is a challenge in which a large number of international researchers with access to restricted information (or even the perpetrators themselves) must participate.

## Appendix

**Table 1.** Planned and Committed Terrorist Attacks in Europe in the Period from November 2015 until September 2017

	Month/Year	Country	City	Dead	Injured	Age of Perpetrator
1	September 2017	France	Bourgogne	0	2	18
2	September 2017	UK	London	0	29	18, 21
3	September 2017	France	Toulouse	0	7	40
4	August 2017	Sweden	Stockholm	0	1	29
5	August 2017	Belgium	Bruxelles	0	2	30
6	August 2017	UK	London	0	3	26
7	August 2017	Finland	Turku	2	6	18
8	August 2017	Spain	Barcelona	14	130	22
9	August 2017	Spain	Cambrils	1	6	22
10	August 2017	Spain	Barcelona	1	0	17, 24, 21, 19, 19
11	August 2017	Spain	Alcanar	1	6	20
12	August 2017	France	Paris	0	6	37
13	July 2017	Germany	Hamburg	1	4	26
14	July 2017	UK	Norfolk	0	2	26
15	July 2017	Italy	Milan	0	1	31
16	June 2017	Austria	Linz	2	0	54
17	June 2017	Belgium	Bruxelles	0	0	30
18	June 2017	France	Paris	0	0	31
19	June 2017	France	Lot et Garonne	0	1	39
20	June 2017	France	Paris	0	1	22
21	June 2017	UK	London	8	48	27, 30, 22
22	May 2017	UK	Manchester	22	119	22
23	April 2017	Germany	Prien am Chiemsee	1	0	29
24	April 2017	France	Reunion	0	2	20
25	April 2017	France	Paris	1	2	39
26	April 2017	Sweden	Stockholm	5	14	39
27	March 2017	UK	London	5	29	52
28	January 2017	Turkey	Istanbul	39	69	34
29	December 2016	Germany	Berlin	12	48	24
30	December 2016	Germany	Ludwigshafen	0	0	12

31	October 2016	Germany	Hamburg	1	1	23
32	August 2016	Turkey	Gaziantep	57	94	13
33	August 2016	UK	London	1	5	19
34	July 2016	France	Nice	86	202	27
35	June 2016	Turkey	Istanbul	44	239	32
36	May 2016	Germany	Grafing	1	3	27
37	April 2016	UK	Manchester	1	0	22
38	April 2016	Germany	Essen	0	3	16
39	March 2016	Scotland	Glasgow	1	0	32
40	March 2016	Belgium	Bruxelles	14	92	29, 24, 33, 27, 25
42	March 2016	Turkey	Istanbul	4	39	25
43	February 2016	UK	Rochdale	1	0	21
44	January 2016	Turkey	Istanbul	12	14	29
45	November 2015	France	Paris	119	340	29, 26, 25, 29, 28, 23, 25, 20
<b>MEDIAN =</b>				<b>27,21462963</b>		

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