Horrors at Home: Assessing the Islamic State's Strategy to Attack France and Belgium from Within

Giacoma Kokotakis*, Georgetown University

1 Introduction

"There is no excuse for any Muslim not to migrate to the Islamic State ... joining [its fight] is a duty on every Muslim. We are calling on you either to join or carry weapons [to fight] wherever you are," said a spokesperson for the Islamic State in a May 2015 audio message (Gardner 2015). It served as perhaps the clearest indication of the Islamic State's external strategy: conducting attacks against the West from within.

From a perspective of lethality, the Islamic State successfully employed this strategy. Between 2014 and 2019, five Islamic State-directed attacks in Europe have killed 188 people (Bergen, Sterman, and Salyk-Virk 2019), and including other attacks that have been conducted by individuals inspired by Islamic State ideology, this figure has increased considerably. Even though it lacked the military power to face the West head-on, the Islamic State's actions caused tragic losses that shook European communities and worsened social tensions arising from the refugee crisis.

This paper examines past Islamic State attacks using foreign fighters and homegrown terrorists in France and Belgium, its networks in those countries, and its Western-targeted recruitment strategies. It concludes that the Islamic State's strategy to direct attacks against the West from within succeeded because of its French and Belgian networks and the Al-Hayat media branch's effective Western-targeted propaganda, although the strategy proved unsustainable due to territorial loss and social media content moderation. Currently, the group's increased activity, 'digital caliphate,' and returning foreign fighters require the Islamic State to be viewed as an enduring, significant threat to the West.

*Gia Kokotakis graduated magna cum laude from Georgetown University in 2024, where she studied government, French, and Jewish civilization. Currently, she is pursuing a Master's degree in Terrorism, Security & Society at King's College London. Her research focuses on American far-right extremism and international terrorist groups.

2 Notable Islamic State Attacks in France and Belgium: Shared Connections

From 2014 to the present, the Islamic State has inspired and facilitated attacks in Europe ranging in lethality, weapons, and targeting. The November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and the March 2016 bombings in Brussels are the most lethal attacks in France and Belgium in which the Islamic State may have provided support and direction. Although the attacks' targets and weaponry differed, they shared a high involvement of foreign fighters and were connected through the same network, providing an extensive team for logistical support and thus facilitating more complex attacks.

On November 13, 2015, three bombers detonated suicide vests at a soccer match at the Stade de France in Paris, followed by three gunmen conducting shootings at restaurants and bars in Paris's 11th District. Another gunman engaged in a hostage event after carrying out a mass shooting at the Bataclan Concert Hall. One hundred and 30 people died from the attacks committed by nine assailants, although 30 individuals were involved to provide logistical support for the attacks (Cragin 2017).

On March 22, 2016, bombers associated with the Islamic State detonated two IEDs at Zaventem airport and one at the Maelbeek underground station, killing 32 people along with the three suicide bombers (Wojtasik 2021). One bomb was discovered undetonated in the airport terminal, along with an AK-47 rifle that was not used in the attack (Elliot 2017). Three of the bombers had known each other from childhood and had fought together in Syria (ibid.).

Foreign fighters played instrumental roles in both attacks. In Paris, seven assailants, although having been born in France or Belgium, had previously traveled to Syria to fight for the Islamic State (Cragin 2017). Sixteen of the 30 logisticians who provided essential support for the Paris attacks and the Brussels suicide bombers were also returned foreign fighters (Reed, Pohl, and Jegerings 2017). As the Islamic State continued to lose territory, its foreign fighters relocated, with a 2016 report suggesting the organization may "systematically export terror cells to Europe" to conduct attacks like those in Paris and Brussels (ibid.). Even though only a small percentage of foreign fighters return to commit attacks in their home countries, they may also pose a threat by providing logistical, financial, or recruitment services to the terrorist organization, as seen by the high number of logisticians involved in facilitating the Paris attacks.

Individuals involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks also had significant overlap. Forensic evidence suggests offline links between the terrorists, as "fingerprints of at least three Paris attackers were found in apartments rented by two of the Brussels bombers" (Buchanan and Park 2022). Overlap also occurred between those supporting the Paris attacks and those carrying out the Brussels attack. Individuals who provided key logistical support for the terrorist attacks in Paris "rapidly transitioned to an operational role in Brussels," such as how "Naajim Laachroui helped construct explosives for the Paris attacks before donning his

own suicide vest in Brussels" (Gartenstein-Ross 2016). The connections between logisticians and attackers in the two plots committed by European nationals, many being returned foreign fighters, demonstrate the existence of an extensive Islamic State network in Europe.

In addition to personal connections, the sheer complexity of the attacks required an extensive network of logisticians far surpassing the terrorists who carried out the violence, thus confirming to authorities the existence of this Islamic State network. The 2015 attackers managed to "successfully [detonate] their suicide belts in seven locations in Paris, indicating that the group had mastered both how to mix the compound and how to set it off" (Callimachi 2016). The bombers in Brussels also successfully coordinated the explosion of three bombs in two separate locations. Both attacks demonstrate an elevated complexity in the open-source intelligence of targets and communication needed to successfully execute the plots, suggesting a highly organized effort, and thus the existence of a network (ibid.).

3 Islamic State Networks in France and Belgium: Abaaoud, Zerkani, and their Origins

The Abaaoud network and the Zerkani network's recruitment of foreign fighters, facilitation of those fighters' travel to Syria, and oversight of their training in Syria were instrumental to the success of the Islamic State's use of European nationals to attack France and Belgium from within. Two entities that I describe in greater length below, Sharia4Belgium and Katibat al-Muhajirin (KAM), also played significant roles in acting as feeders into the Zerkani and Abaaoud networks.

From 2014 to 2017, the Islamic State played a significant role in directing or enabling attacks in Europe, and these Islamic State-connected plots demonstrated a higher level of sophistication and casualties (Bergen, Sterman, and Salyk-Virk 2019). Foreign fighters increase the Islamic State's capabilities to attack France and Belgium due to their ability to carry out complex, effective plots and facilitate the growth of extremist networks. As seen in the Paris and Brussels attacks, foreign fighters "are often better trained, more highly motivated and networked, and tied to skilled planners back in the war zone" (D. Byman 2019). Attacks involving foreign fighters are likely to be far more lethal than those conducted by non-foreign fighters. A study published in 2017 examining 51 successful jihadi attacks throughout Europe and North America found that returning foreign fighters who commit terrorist attacks at home kill five times more people on average than non-foreign fighter assailants (Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann 2017). Returned foreign fighters may also play other roles in attacks that increase their complexity and lethality, such as "logisticians, travel facilitators, [and] passport forgers" (D. Byman 2019) or may facilitate the travel of new foreign fighters, acting as a bridge between growing extremist networks at home and violent terrorist organizations abroad (Reed, Pohl, and Jegerings 2017). Thus, foreign fighters are integral to the Islamic State's ability to carry out high-lethality attacks and grow their extremist networks in France and Belgium from within.

In the earlier stages of the Syrian civil war, connections made in Sharia4Belgium led to significant waves of Belgians leaving to join the jihad. Some of these fighters would join KAM, the main francophone cluster in the Islamic State's external operations branch (Brisard and Jackson 2016). The relationships formed in these earlier groups either before or during the individuals' time fighting in Syria often translated to their maintenance of contact following their return to Europe and thus their integration into the same Islamic State networks in France and Belgium (ibid.).

Mostly active in Antwerp and Vilvoorde, Sharia4Belgium was a "Flemish extremist group founded by Fouad Belkacem" (Ostaeyen 2016). The group, although having mostly amateurish recruits, had a prominent internet and social media presence, increasing its ability to attract individuals from diverse backgrounds (Ostaeyen 2019). Sharia4Belgium officially disbanded in October 2012 following Belkacem's arrest for a myriad of hate crimes, leading a group of high-ranking members to depart for Syria to join some of the earliest jihadi networks operating there (Ostaeyen 2016). Individuals in Sharia4Belgium who traveled to Syria as foreign fighters often connected with other friends in the group still in Europe, encouraging them to join the Syrian jihad and eventually creating a snowball effect of Belgian jihadi recruitment (ibid.). Although the group had already officially ended, its role in recruiting Belgian foreign fighters for the Syrian jihad led it in 2013 to be called "the biggest recruitment base for Belgian foreign fighters" (Ostaeyen 2017). The connections formed in Sharia4Belgium facilitated the growth of a network that would bring together the plotters, logisticians, and attackers responsible for the Paris and Brussels attacks.

KAM was the original cluster involved in the Islamic State's external operations composed mostly of French-speaking volunteers who often developed strong personal connections with one another, some even predating the Syrian jihad (Brisard and Jackson 2016). Having begun in Syria in 2012 as a Chechen battalion (Steinberg 2014), the number of francophone foreign fighters in the cluster increased over time, making it particularly alluring to Belgian and French foreign fighters. Many of KAM's members expressed an early interest in returning to Europe to carry out the terrorist attacks for which they had acquired the necessary training during their time as foreign fighters (Brisard and Jackson 2016). KAM's alumni went on to organize, support, and carry out attacks for the Islamic State on French and Belgian soil, often falling back on connections made within KAM while fighting abroad to fulfill their plots. For example, the KAM alumnus who attacked the Brussels Jewish Museum in May 2014 was in contact with two other KAM alumni residing in Belgium, one being Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a few months before his own attack (ibid.).

The recruitment, radicalization, and networking efforts of two individuals would largely facilitate the Islamic State's foreign fighter strategy in France and Belgium. Before fighting in KAM, Abdelhamid Abaaoud was recruited into the Zerkani network, one of the largest recruiters and facilitators of Islamic State foreign fighters out of Belgium. Based around the Molenbeek district of Brussels, 42-year-old Moroccan-born Zerkani, a resident of Brussels, avidly recruited young men and led them like a criminal gang (Ostaeyen 2016). Operating in a secret fashion, Zerkani's network "was responsible for recruiting at least 57 individuals

from Brussels" (Ostaeyen 2017), and it is estimated that he arranged the travel of 30 of his recruits to fight in Syria (ibid.). He often facilitated this travel through Turkey and paid foreign fighters "up to €4,000 from the proceeds of the gang's thefts" (Ostaeyen 2016). Although Zerkani was not involved in planning or executing the 2015 Paris attacks or the 2016 Brussels attacks, "the foreign fighter recruitment networks he established from 2012 to 2014" were "at the center of IS's ongoing operations in Europe" until at least 2016 (Gartenstein-Ross 2016).

Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a Belgian national who fought for the Islamic State in Syria after being recruited into the Zerkani network, constructed a network now known as the Abaaoud network. He was connected to the Brussels attack (as his fingerprints were found in a safe house rented by two of the Brussels bombers)(Buchanan and Park 2022) and an attack at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels in May 2014, among others. Most importantly, he assembled the team of Paris attackers. As a tactical commander in the Islamic State's Amn al-Kharji, the "shadowy wing of IS's bureaucracy responsible for selecting and training external operatives and for planning terrorist attacks in areas outside of IS's core territory" (Gartenstein-Ross 2016), Abaaoud facilitated the emergence and expansion of an Islamic State network stretching across France and Belgium that would birth the two deadliest Islamic State plots in both countries (D. Byman 2019).

4 Al-Hayat, Social Media, and Western-Targeted Propaganda

In addition to its founding and maintenance of networks in Europe, the Islamic State's strategy of attacking the West from within succeeded due to its propaganda machine. Before they can become foreign fighters, the Islamic State must radicalize and recruit European nationals. Up until 2019, the Islamic State put the majority of its focus on propaganda, with Al-Hayat Media focusing on "recruiting and representing an idyllic society" (Gerstel 2016). Al-Hayat's targeted messaging and high-production quality, as well as Islamic State propaganda's high volume of outreach through effective social media strategies, made it a startlingly effective propaganda machine capable of recruiting thousands of people from democratic countries like France and Belgium.

Al-Hayat's propaganda messaging was designed to resonate with Westerners, presenting a positive image of life in the caliphate tailored to different audiences. Through Al-Hayat, the Islamic State portrayed itself and the caliphate as the ultimate utopia, romanticizing terrorism in a way that appealed most greatly to teenagers. The organization directed its recruitment efforts at 16- to 25-year-olds "who are isolated from their societies and who do not have a strong sense of identity or purpose" and who "often know little about Islam or have learned about religion from IS operatives" (ibid.). The Islamic State targeted youth by displaying its members in the most positive light possible, although what this positivity entails differed between men and women.

Al-Hayat's propaganda primarily targeted men, portraying the Islamic State as a welcoming environment, a place to find camaraderie, and a rewarding lifestyle. The organization's visual propaganda went "to great lengths to illustrate the multi-ethnic background of its members," with pictures in its publication Dabiq often showing a diverse range of soldiers embracing each other like athletes before a match (ibid.). The Islamic State thus presented itself as a haven for recruits from all nations. The Islamic State also compared itself to the West's failures, particularly with regard to racial relations. In Al-Hayat's film *No Respite*, the narrator explains that in the Islamic State, "there is no difference between an Arab and a non-Arab, or a black man and a white man except through piety" before showing Islamic State soldiers of different races smiling with their arms around each other's shoulders (Macnair and Frank 2017). By portraying the Islamic State as a welcoming environment for people of all races, especially in contrast to tumultuous Western race relations, the Islamic State presented itself as a utopia of equality, friendship, and peace—a welcoming haven—in order to draw in young people who may feel lost, isolated, or unwelcome in their Western homes.

Islamic State propaganda targeting Western men leaned heavily on themes of fulfillment. Multiple videos "showcase Western recruits discussing the great friends they have made in the Caliphate," thereby "offering [potential recruits] the hope of friendship they do not have at home" (Gerstel 2016). Emotional analysis of Al-Hayat propaganda concluded that repeated uses of words like "brother" and "son" in Islamic State messaging contribute to conveying a feeling of belonging (Maragkos and Maraveakis 2022). Interviewed Islamic State fighters describe how they were unhappy until they devoted their lives to the Islamic State's cause, portraying the life of a terrorist as meaningful and happy (Macnair and Frank 2017). Islamic State thus lured young, isolated men from the West with the promise of belonging and acceptance, presenting the terrorist organization as a place to find existential fulfillment.

Propaganda from Al-Hayat also conveyed to potential recruits that by joining the Islamic State, they will have a rewarding lifestyle. Islamic State propaganda portrayed its fighters' lives in a glamourized manner, presenting their roles in a video game-like style. The Hollywood-quality production of Al-Hayat films enabled the Islamic State to use special effects and production tricks "to portray IS terrorists as heroes and depict fighting for IS as akin to playing in a real-life video game" (Lieberman 2017). The films directly copied the visuals and aesthetics of first-person shooter games, thereby offering "a way to recruit young, technologically savvy, men while sanitizing the violence they were being recruited to participate in" (Dauber et al. 2019). By employing "rapid-fire action montage[s] accompanied by a recruitment hymn," the Islamic State implied "that warfare is a real-life game of 'Grand Theft Auto,'" including scant depictions of Islamic State atrocities such as "abduction, rape, destruction of mosques, persecutions, crucifixions, and the whipping of women who were caught without a hijab" (Lieberman 2017). In addition to drawing young men in by presenting fighting for the Islamic State as similar to fighting in video games, the Islamic State suggested that by joining the terrorist organization, they would have access to sexual encounters that they lacked in their home European countries. Islamic State magazine articles promoted the idea that in jihad, the relief of sexual tensions is allowed in order to increase

men's ability to fight well, with a highly controversial 2013 fatwa used as justification for the organization's sexual slavery (Gerstel 2016). The broadcasting of access to sex slaves in Islamic State propaganda toward Western audiences "appeals to lonely, sexually frustrated young males who are IS's target audience" (ibid.). Thus, through Al-Hayat's propaganda, the Islamic State presented the life of a terrorist as rewarding by simulating violent acts like video games and promising access to sex slaves.

While Islamic State propaganda aimed at a male audience painted the organization in a positive light by emphasizing its diversity of soldiers, belonging to a brotherhood, and rewarding participation in violence and sexual acts, its propaganda aimed at female Westerners portrayed the group as a family-friendly environment where gender equality thrived. Although the Islamic State mainly targets men, it also purposefully targets Western women, as at least 100 French women in 2014 were recruited to become jihadi brides or suicide bombers for the Islamic State (Lieberman 2017). To appeal to Western women, Al-Hayat propaganda portrayed the Islamic State as a family-friendly environment. Scenes where Islamic State fighters are shown "enjoying an average family life and playing with children in the sunshine" (ibid.) presented the terrorist organization as a pro-family utopia and emphasized the role of marriage and family (Gerstel 2016). Islamic State propaganda also included shots of jihadi brides participating in military-like activity, showing them in "the al-Khansaa police brigade and carrying AK-47s" (ibid.) or posing "around a luxury BMW, brandishing guns much like their male counterparts" (Lieberman 2017). These images suggest the idea that in the Islamic State, women are held equal to male fighters. Even though reports of the group's harsh and unequal treatment of women reveal this propaganda to be a wholly inaccurate depiction of the organization and its values, it nonetheless served the purpose of painting the Islamic State as a utopia for women as well as men.

The high-production quality of Al-Hayat's propaganda materials added to its recruitment efficacy among Western audiences by inflating the perceived strength of the Islamic State as an organization and thus legitimizing the caliphate. The Islamic State viewed its media strategy as two-thirds of its battle (Siboni, Cohen, and Koren 2015), devoting significant resources to maintaining a high-quality propaganda machine. In so heavily investing in Al-Hayat, the Islamic State was able to produce videos "professionally produced and shot in high-definition, as well as the equally high-quality periodical magazines ... which are translated in several languages including English" (Macnair and Frank 2017). Such propaganda quality emphasized the bravery and efficacy of Islamic State fighters, depicting them as victorious over weak and evil enemies to present the terrorist organization as strong and prepared. In addition to high visual quality, Al-Hayat's propaganda materials were also high-quality in the way in which they were produced to connect strongly with potential Western recruits. The complexity of the outlet's website, used to combine "content and diverse material with new video clips and subtitles for earlier clips, in addition to articles, news reports, and translation of jihad material" for non-Arab speakers, suggested that it was "designed by a team with experience in producing material for a Western audience." In Al-Hayat's documentaries, the narrator speaks in perfect English with no identifiable accent (ibid.), making the organization's message more professional and impactful on Western

audiences. The high quality of these messaging outlets in film, print, and digital means conveyed that "IS has successfully established a caliphate and recruited thousands of members to join the terrorist organization" (Lieberman 2017). By producing propaganda of such high quality, the Islamic State legitimized itself as an organization, portraying the terrorist group as strong, well-funded, and meant to be taken seriously on an international level.

Finally, the Islamic State's use of social media to increase its outreach and volume of messaging contributed heavily to the efficacy of its propaganda machine. The Islamic State took advantage of "the ungoverned and loosely regulated nature of social media" in the 2010s, establishing "a dominant position on social networks that allows them to easily communicate with potential recruits" (Gerstel 2016). They made innovative use of popular social platforms to amplify their propaganda (Zerofox Team 2015). Specifically, the group used strategies of hashtag hijacking and large volumes of posts to target thousands of potential Western recruits.

Islamic State propagandists on Twitter employed a simple strategy known as "hashtag hijacking," implanting popular words into posts containing Islamic State material to gain the attention of people looking for more mainstream content (Siboni, Cohen, and Koren 2015). This strategy began in 2014 as only one of an array of tactics used by Islamic State propagandists to maintain the organization's heavy presence on social media (Girginova 2017), reflected the group's strategic choice to cater to groups extending past believers in jihadism or others they consider as supporters (Winter and Bach-Lombardo 2016). Hashtag hijacking increased the number of people viewing Islamic State material on social media, broadening the audiences exposed to Islamic State propaganda and thus increasing its chances for recruitment of Westerners.

The Islamic State used homegrown extremists as propagandists and independent social media applications to increase and maintain the volume of posts they produced on social media. Between the Al-Battar battalion, "a Twitter-based team designated to push IS propaganda and castigate IS opponents" (Fernandez 2015), and sympathetic Islamic State "fanboy" accounts outside of the group's territory, the Islamic State assembled a social media propaganda force in 2016 of at least 3,000 users capable of producing up to 90,000 tweets per day (Gerstel 2016). Additionally, the Islamic State magnified its quantity of propaganda posts on Twitter through an independent application called "Dawn of Glad Tidings." Through this application, once available for download on the Google Play store, individuals gave the Islamic State automatic access to their accounts' posting capabilities. Islamic State had access to an army of "puppet Twitter profiles," which it used to reach "tens of thousands of users, giving the perception that their message was more widespread and popular than it truly was" (Zerofox Team 2015). By assembling an array of supporting propaganda accounts outside of its territory and using an application to take control of puppet accounts' posting capabilities, the Islamic State was able to increase and maintain an elevated level of propaganda output on social media, making its propaganda machine extremely effective.

5 An Unsustainable Strategy

Although the Islamic State successfully conducted high-lethality attacks against France and Belgium from within, its strategy ultimately proved unsustainable. In recent years, Islamic State attacks in the two countries have declined both in number and lethality, attributed mainly to the group's decreasing involvement in enabling and directing attacks. The quantity and quality of Islamic State propaganda have also declined as the group suffered territorial losses in Syria, resulting in fewer foreign fighters.

The effectiveness of an 85-country coalition dedicated to fighting the Islamic State has made the terrorist organization's strategy to attack France and Belgium from within largely unsustainable, as shown by a decrease in the number of attacks and the lethality of those attacks in Europe. The Islamic State suffered significant military losses at the hands of the coalition, with U.S. and Syrian forces regaining "the last remnants of ISIL territory in eastern Libya" in March 2019 (Institute for Economics and Peace 2020). The same year, a U.S. military operation killed the leader of the Islamic State at the time, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (ibid.). Such heavy military defeats deprived the Islamic State of "a haven in which to recruit, organize, and plan attacks" (D. L. Byman 2017). The group's capability to facilitate attacks against the West has been considerably reduced by "the consequent attrition of personnel and reduction in resources" due to military engagement by U.S. and coalition forces (European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation 2019). As a result, Europol concluded in its 2019 report that in Europe, "all jihadist terrorist attacks were committed by individuals acting alone" (ibid.), highlighting how the "diminished sophistication in the preparation and execution of jihadist terrorist attacks contributed to a lower number of casualties in completed attacks" (ibid.). An effective military campaign against the Islamic State and subsequent territorial and financial losses therefore disrupted the terrorist organization's ability to direct and support attacks plotted by any remaining Abaaoud-like tactical coordinators in France and Belgium.

Such heavy military losses also dealt the Islamic State propaganda machine a serious blow. Due to the U.S.-led coalition's victories, Islamic State propaganda declined in both quantity and quality. The terrorist organization's monthly propaganda output plummeted by 75 percent when it began to lose significant strategic territory and a number of its leading propagandists from November 2016 to April 2017 (Wilson Center 2018). By the spring of 2017, the terrorist organization had "lost more than half of its internet outlets after losing the cities of Mosul and Fallujah," with Mosul having been "one of the Islamic State's main media operation centers." A 2019 Europol report noted that 2018 saw "a decrease in the number of IS videos featuring high-production values and high-definition drone footage of battlefields" with official Islamic State videos featuring "little beyond ruined towns and occasional forays into enemy territory" (European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation 2019) With the central Islamic State propaganda machine floundering, as demonstrated by the decreasing quantity and worsening quality of its propaganda, the responsibility for propaganda dissemination and recruitment fell much more heavily on the shoulders of Islamic State supporters and sympathizers. Overall, the propaganda has shown to be far less effective than in its peak years, as the group's main appeal—the Islamic State's successful construction

and maintenance of a true Islamic State—can no longer be painted as a victory or a utopia (D. L. Byman 2017). Consequently, the number of foreign fighters leaving Western Europe, including those from France and Belgium, has fallen alongside the Islamic State's territorial losses (Reed, Pohl, and Jegerings 2017).

Furthermore, accelerating content moderation efforts that began in the mid-2010s across a multitude of social media platforms to target pro- Islamic State accounts and content made the organization's social media propaganda efforts considerably more difficult. A widespread effort to suspend pro-Islamic State Twitter accounts beginning in 2015 resulted in "devastating reductions" in "ISIS follower accounts" and "a net loss of ISIS social media presence" (Maddox 2019). In 2019, Europol's Action Day saw a coordinated effort across nine social media platforms to identify and remove pro-Islamic State accounts and content. These efforts particularly impacted Islamic State support on Telegram (Europol 2019), a prominent platform of choice for pro-Islamic State users following stricter content moderation by more mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. These advances in content moderation made previously successful Islamic State social media strategies—including hashtag hijacking and other tactics—largely ineffective, further curtailing the terrorist organization's ability to disseminate Western-targeted propaganda.

6 An Enduring Threat

Although the Islamic State's strategy of attacking the West from within proved unsustainable due to the organization's reduced capabilities, the group currently remains a threat to both countries because of its increasing activity, 'digital caliphate,' and returning foreign fighters.

Increased global Islamic State activity presents a concerning reversal of the group's diminished capabilities following massive territorial losses by the U.S.-led coalition. Even though U.S. national security officials still view the group as a minimal threat (Seldin 2024), the Islamic State has demonstrated a widespread "uptick in operational capabilities" (Vincent and Zimmerman 2023). In Syria, the Islamic State claimed responsibility "for 16 various operations in our [Syrian Democratic Forces] regions and more than 30 operations in the Syrian desert region" within less than two months, an uptick from 2023's figures (Seldin 2024). Most recently, the Islamic State's Afghan branch, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), carried out an attack on a concert hall in Moscow on March 22, 2024, that killed over 133 people (Doyle 2024). Although it is unknown if this attack presages a resurgence by the group in the West (Gera 2024), the scale and international target of the Moscow attack demonstrate an increased operational capability that directly contradicts earlier U.S. claims this year that the Islamic State's waning strength limits it to conducting "small attacks ... in Iraq and Syria" (Seldin 2024). The Islamic State's suspected increased capabilities present the possibility that they will refocus their attention on directing attacks against the West, since "those groups that once demonstrated or sought to develop transnational attack capabilities still seek to target the United States and Europe" (Vincent and Zimmerman 2023).

Next, Islamic State activity has also increased in the form of territorial expansion into Africa, attracting foreign fighters and creating the possibility for the group to expand its financial activity. As of 2023, efforts to stop the expansion of groups like the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida into the Sahel region in Africa have failed (Al Jazeera 2023). The group has claimed new territory in Mali and Somalia, retaken land previously lost to counterterrorism campaigns in Mozambique, and pushed into Africa's center and southern regions (ibid.). These new expansions have increased the flux of foreign fighters to join the terrorist group, as a noticeable number of foreign fighters, mostly from Spain and Morocco, have traveled to join the Islamic State in Mali (Zelin 2024). Although the number of fighters traveling to Africa is "nowhere near what was seen in Syria last decade, even small mobilizations can lead to external terrorist operations in Western countries, as seen with plots emanating from Somalia and Yemen years ago" (ibid.). Moreover, growing territorial control in Somalia presents a concerning financial opportunity for the Islamic State, as Somalia is a "key node in the Islamic State's global fundraising networks" (ibid.). Therefore, the Islamic State's recent territorial expansions into Africa are increasing its draw of foreign fighters and may facilitate revenue growth, increasing the threat it poses to the West.

While the collapse of the caliphate and new content moderation policies made the Islamic State's previous propaganda strategy unsustainable, the emergence of the Islamic State's unofficial digital caliphate has allowed the organization to overcome some of these challenges and continue reaching young, Western audiences. Because territory loss crippled its propaganda machine—which relied on individuals physically in Islamic State-controlled regions of the Middle East to create and disseminate propaganda for the recruitment of foreign fighters from the West—decentralized, pro-Islamic State communities online are now responsible for the bulk of IS propaganda heavy lifting (Criezis 2022; Ayad 2025). These widespread digital communities form a digital caliphate that creates and disseminates pro-Islamic State content geared at young, Western audiences while devising resourceful and anticipatory strategies to avoid content moderation and deplatforming (Ayad 2025). Members of this digital caliphate have created online magazines for young Western viewers and translate official Islamic State news into multiple Western languages (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Bellaiche 2023). Although the quality and length of these Western-geared online magazines fall short when compared to its official Islamic State predecessors, such as Inspire and Dabiq, one editor claimed to have "adapted the Dawah (proselytization)' to the needs of today's youth who are used to 'short and quick information' and are inspired by the popularity of short Tik-Tok videos and Youtube 'shorts'" (ibid.). Other pro-Islamic State online users dedicate themselves to translating official Islamic State news into a multitude of languages, engaging in "grass-roots projects" to develop independent "brand names" for their translation collectives (Criezis 2022). Furthermore, the digital caliphate consistently develops new strategies to evade content moderation algorithms, allowing pro-Islamic State content to flourish on multiple different platforms. These strategies include using emojis to replace terrorist language, tempering overtly pro-Islamic State rhetoric in English posts, and blurring photos with Islamic State-identifying symbols, among others (Criezis 2022; Scott 2022). Users coordinate strategies, applying certain tactics to different platforms in order to most effectively weaponize "blindspots within each social media platform's content poli-

cies to promote a hateful and violent ideology" (Scott 2022). The pro-Islamic State digital caliphate thus allows the organization to overcome propaganda difficulties it has faced since the crumbling of the caliphate while still targeting young, Western audiences.

Next, returned and missing Islamic State foreign fighters from France and Belgium perpetuate the threat posed by the terrorist group. Small numbers of foreign fighters from France and Belgium have been recorded as returning. As of 2020, 270 French foreign fighters and 125 Belgian foreign fighters have returned to their countries of origin (Gartenstein-Ross, Clarke, and Chace-Donahue 2020). These individuals will likely face prison sentences, though neither France nor Belgium uses capital punishment. Many former foreign fighters are estimated to have been released by the end of 2020 (ibid.). Furthermore, in addition to the foreign fighters France and Belgium have identified as returnees, a significant number remain unaccounted for (Simcox 2019). According to an April 2019 Europol assessment, European law enforcement has "lost track of at least 150 Belgian FTFs [foreign terrorist fighters]" (Ostaeyen 2019). Considering this significant portion of foreign fighters whose locations are unknown, the number of reintegrated former fighters to France and Belgium may be higher than previously recorded.

Although some may deradicalize, foreign fighters who do not can spread Islamist ideologies in their local communities and contribute to extremist networks. Because they return home "with the stature and glory that attends a man who fought for his faith and community, foreign fighters are well-positioned to promote a more extreme version of Islam," effectively spreading this ideology within isolated Muslim communities so that "the jihadist movement [endures] even without a conflict, as radical groups form in fighters' home countries" (ibid.). Returned foreign fighters may also sustain existing networks in Western countries or create new ones. These networks may be connected to or independent from the Islamic State. Lone actors, now responsible for a large percentage of recent attacks in France and Belgium, were rarely *truly* lone actors. Most of these individuals maintained online relations "in loose networks or small unstructured groups, and may [have] receive[d] material and/or moral support from like-minded individuals" (European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation 2019). Although these networks are not connected directly to the Islamic State in the way that the Abaaoud network was, they nonetheless foster the radicalization of individuals and communities. Offline extremist networks may be built or reconstructed by returning foreign fighters in prisons. France's policy of separating extremist prisoners from the general population "could help returnees and other radical prisoners create and solidify extremist dawa (proselytization) networks" (Gartenstein-Ross, Clarke, and Chace-Donahue 2020). French and Belgian returnees may use these connections formed in prison to "join other extremist facilitation networks throughout Europe to coordinate attacks." French and Belgian officials should therefore continue to consider the Islamic State a threat to their countries due to the influence returned foreign fighters may have in European extremist communities.

7 Conclusion

The Islamic State succeeded in attacking France and Belgium from within, effectively using foreign fighters and an efficient propaganda machine to launch deadly attacks against the two European countries. In particular, the Zerkani and Abaaoud networks funneled the largest number of French and Belgian foreign fighters to Syria. Under Abaaoud, many of these European nationals were trained with the expectation that they would return to France or Belgium to support or carry out Islamic State-directed attacks. The propaganda produced by the group's Al-Hayat Media Center connected strongly with Western audiences due to its targeted messaging and high production quality. The Islamic State's innovative use of social media to establish a dominant digital footprint and expand its online audience also contributed to the effectiveness of its propaganda.

However, although highly lethal and therefore successful for a number of years, the Islamic State's territorial collapse under a U.S.-led coalition's campaign rendered the strategy of attacking France and Belgium from within unsustainable. Following heavy military losses, the Islamic State could no longer play a significant role in directing attacks against the West, resulting in fewer and less lethal attacks in France and Belgium attributed almost exclusively to lone-wolf attackers (not members of Islamic State-connected networks). The organization also struggled to produce propaganda of the same quantity or caliber, leading to significant drops in the recruitment of foreign fighters. Gains in social media content moderation in the mid- to late 2010s also reduced the group's propaganda presence on mainstream social media platforms.

However, considering the Islamic State's recent uptick in activity and operational capability, digital caliphate, and returning foreign fighters, the group still poses a considerable threat to France and Belgium, as well as the West as a whole. With the possible resurgence of the Islamic State as a global menace, policymakers around the world must reexamine the strategies that brought it to the brink of destruction five years ago: crippling territorial losses and widespread, effective content moderation policies. By increasing international cooperation to halt the Islamic State's expansion into Africa, the international community can deny the group the opportunity to regain significant territorial control in a manner that magnifies its operational capabilities through foreign fighter recruitment and financial expansion. Although other international crises, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, have captured the majority of global leaders' attention, turning away from the Islamic State's growing presence in different regions across Africa hands the terrorist group the opportunity to rebuild potentially to the threat level it once posed in the early to mid-2010s.

Furthermore, although Islamic State supporters have adapted to content moderation guidelines and learned to circumvent them, content moderation has proved to be a significant obstacle for the terrorist group in the past. Coordinated content moderation efforts like Europol's 2019 Action Day have dealt a significant blow against pro-Islamic State networks on mainstream platforms, and although "de-platforming violent extremists on major

platforms is far from a catch-all solution," it still "limits their wider reach of influence and forces them to restrict themselves to more obscure platforms" (Criezis 2022). Islamic State supporters online are currently forced to spend time and effort planning for both ways to avoid de-platforming and how to stay connected if channels or accounts are removed by platform administrators (ibid.).

In order to clamp down on Islamic State supporters' ability to connect with one another and radicalize others by spreading pro-Islamic State propaganda, social media companies (both mainstream and alternative) must work jointly with international leaders and organizations to develop new content moderation strategies that are both reactive and proactive. In addition to training algorithms to recognize Islamic State supporters' new strategies to remain undetected, proactive policies to reduce the efficacy of Islamic State supporters' evolving online evasion tactics must be made a priority. Only by investing in the research and development of a proactive approach will the international community cease playing a game of whack-a-mole against online Islamic State supporters (Makuch 2014) and begin making long-lasting, impactful change that curbs the terrorist group's ability to recruit and radicalize.

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