



SJSU Research Foundation
210 N. Fourth St., 4th Fl.
San José, CA 95112

Tel // 408.924.7560
Fax // 408.924.7565

transweb.sjsu.edu

Board of Trustees

Founder

Secretary Norman Mineta

Honorary Co-Chairs

Congressman Bill Shuster

Congressman Peter DeFazio

Chair

Nuria Fernandez

Vice Chair

Grace Crunican

Executive Director

Karen Philbrick, Ph.D.

Joseph Boardman
Anne Canby
Donna DeMartino
William Dorey
Malcolm Dougherty
Mortimer Downey
Rose Guilbault
Ed Hamberger
Steve Heminger
Diane Woodend Jones
Will Kempton
Art Leahy
Jean-Pierre Loubinoux
Michael Melaniphy
Abbas Mohaddes
Jeff Morales
Marlene Turner
Beverley Swaim-Staley
Michael Townes
Bud Wright
Edward Wytkind

Emeritus

Executive Director

Rod Diridon, Sr.

Trains, Concert Halls, Airports, and Restaurants—All Soft Targets: What the Terrorist Campaign in France and Belgium Tells Us about the Future of Jihadist Terrorism in Europe

Brian Michael Jenkins and Jean-François Clair

MTI Project #1532

June 2016

The terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, which left 130 dead, and in Brussels on March 22, 2016, in which another 35 people were killed, underscore the heightened terrorist threat Europe faces as those who left European countries to join the ranks of the Islamic State or other jihadist fronts in the Middle East return home. Some come back disillusioned, others traumatized by their experience, but some return determined to bring the war home. Their goal is slaughter. Their targets vary—concert venues, sports stadiums, churches, restaurants, trains, airport terminals—all public places where people gather. That coincides with a long-term trend identified in previous MTI research—public surface transportation is especially attractive to terrorists seeking high body counts. Easily accessible transportation targets have become terrorist killing fields.

U.S. intelligence efforts, although still not optimal, have been remarkably successful.

Study Methods

Media coverage too often gives us a disconnected view of events. We see shards of violence, not the whole. In fact, the attacks in Paris and Brussels were part of a continuing campaign of terrorism that began in 2014. Many of the earlier events attracted less international attention because police intervened before the terrorists were able to carry out their plans, or because their attacks failed. By connecting the events, we were able to discern more about the group behind the campaign. And this, in turn, told us more about the subculture from which this terrorist enterprise emerged, and the conditions that created this subculture. In a way, it was an anthropological inquiry to see what observed behavior can tell us about the society that produces it.

Findings

- The network responsible for the terrorist campaign combined fighters returning from Syria with local confederates who provided the returnees with logistical support and additional recruits. This combination enhanced the group's operational capabilities.
- The relationships among the participants preceded the terrorist campaign. Many were petty criminals and had carried out crimes or served in prison together.
- The terrorist network emerged from a subculture that transcended the criminal underworld and a radicalized underground. While these young men went to Syria to fight for the Islamic State, some saw Syria as a base from which to launch a terrorist campaign at home.
- This subculture has roots in the conditions that prevail in some of the immigrant diaspora in Europe, making it a broader societal problem, but European authorities also point to a long-term, radicalization campaign that instigates violence.

- It is not clear whether the Islamic State was the incubator or, as French authorities believe, the central command behind the attacks. The network appears to be the creation of a terrorist entrepreneur who the Islamic State either ordered or exploited to carry out a terrorist campaign in Europe.
- The criminal backgrounds of the participants enabled them to easily acquire weapons on the black market. Those returning from Syria were clearly a more violent bunch—they carried out most of the suicide bombings or died in shootouts with police.
- European authorities were overwhelmed by the sudden increase in the volume of homegrown terrorists and those heading to or returning from Syria.



Brussels Airport

Policy Recommendations

- While this particular network has been largely dismantled, a number of suspects remain at large and the embryos of new networks have been uncovered. The terrorist threat to Europe remains high.
- Intelligence has proved critical in preventing attacks. Cooperation among European governments needs to be improved.
- The number of Americans going to Syria is a fraction of that seen in Europe. And domestic intelligence efforts have proved remarkably effective in uncovering terrorist plots.
- Attacks in Europe and plots in the United States indicate that attacks on public transportation are in the terrorist playbooks and will remain favored terrorist targets.

About the Authors

Jenkins is the director of the Mineta Transportation Institute's Center for Transportation Security. Clair was the deputy director of the Directorate of Territorial Surveillance (DST), France's internal security service, from 1998 to 2007; from 1983 to 1997, he led the Anti-Terrorism Branch of the DST.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1532.html