Religiously Inspired Terrorism in the European Union Countries

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Abstract

One of the main threats to the security of the European Union countries is the activity of radical Muslim circles, sympathizing with or inspired by Al Qaeda and the so-called "Islamic State". The reasons for this state should be sought in the deepening social and economic divisions and inequalities in the European Union. These factors, in many cases, initiate the process of religious radicalization, leading to fundamentalism and extremism, and in extreme cases, even to violence and terrorism. The aim of this paper is to study the impact of the phenomenon of religiously inspired terrorism on the level of security in European Union countries. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, a mixed research method was used during research, consisting of a desk review of primary sources, qualitative content analysis, comparative method and extrapolation method. The original contribution of this work is the determination of the characteristics of the contemporary jihadist terrorism threat and presenting possible directions of the evolution of terrorist threats in European Union countries, which seems to be particularly important in the context of creating effective long-term EU counter-terrorism policy.

Keywords: European Union, jihadism, religious radicalization, safety, terrorism

1. Introduction

Terrorism is undoubtedly one of the greatest threats to the security of the modern world. At the beginning of the 21st century, there was a dramatic increase in the activity of various types of terrorist groups operating in the EU, which has remained at a consistently high level so far. It should be noted here that the main source of terrorist threats for European Union countries is currently the activity of radical Muslim circles, sympathizing with or inspired by Al Qaeda and the so-called "Islamic State". The reasons for the escalation of jihadist terrorism should be seen in the political and economic transformations as well as cultural and religious changes taking place in Europe today. The crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic has further deepened the existing social divisions and precariousness, thus leading to the polarization and destabilization of social cohesion, and hence to the radicalization of the views of some Europeans. A very dynamic process of globalization, characterized by the tightening of ties and interdependencies between states and entire societies, apart from unquestionable benefits, also brings several negative phenomena, such as emerging socio-economic inequalities (Ştefanachi, 2012). Therefore, poverty and social exclusion appear to be the main factors initiating the process of religious radicalization, which can lead to fundamentalism and extremism, and in extreme cases, even to violence and terrorism. Another important factor that may lead to radicalization is also the lack of tolerance and openness to cultural and religious differences. This can be clearly seen in European Union countries, in particular France, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria, where, alongside secularized, liberal and consumerist indigenous communities, there are more and more numerous, alienated and conservative Muslim communities, entirely subordinated to the rigorous principles of the religion of Islam. We are dealing here with the phenomenon of a collision, a clash of two dominant cultures or even civilizations, which, according to Samuel Phillips Huntington (1993), is the main source of contemporary conflicts.

At this point, the question arises: what characterizes contemporary religious-inspired terrorism in EU countries and what is its impact on the level of security in these countries? In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to get to know the mechanisms of the religious radicalization process, i.e., to determine its causes, how it proceeds and who is most often transformed in the world view and system of religious values. Next, it is essential to characterize the contemporary sources of terrorist threats in the European Union and their relationship with such phenomena as home-grown terrorism and Jihadi terrorism. All this will allow us to finally determine the impact of the phenomenon of religiously inspired terrorism on the level of security in the European Union countries, which is the main goal of this work.

When analyzing the reports of Europol (2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021) it is not difficult to notice that almost all terrorist attacks conducted in EU countries in 2015–2010 in which people were killed (12 in 2020, 10 in 2019, 13 in 2018, 62 in 2017 and 134 in 2016) were organized by jihadists. Taking the above into account, it can be hypothesized that religiously motivated terrorism currently has a decisive impact on lowering the level of security in the EU countries.

2. Methods

In the initial phase of research, relevant databases, such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, Mendeley, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Eur-lex and Eurostat were explored, using appropriate keywords, i.e., *religious radicalization*, *terrorism*, *European Union*. After removing irrelevant results and repetitions, the literature strictly corresponding to the research topic was selected and the abstracts were examined. In the second stage of the research work, a qualitative content analysis (Hall & Steiner, 2020; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of the previously selected literature (monographs and books, fragments of some textbooks, as well as numerous studies, scientific articles and Internet sources) was performed, which allowed for the characterization of the process of religious radicalization, its essence, causes and course, and for a preliminary determination of the sources of terrorism in the EU. In the third stage of the research, a desk review of primary sources, such as Europol *Te-Sat Reports* (2016–2021), EU legal documents, and secondary sources, as well as an evaluation of EU policies and programs in the field of religious radicalization and terrorism was conducted. The information selected in this way, supplemented with relevant Eurostat statistical data, made it possible to accurately characterize the main threats to the security of EU countries, which are home-grown terrorism and jihadi terrorism. In the last stage of the research, comparative (Lijphart, 1971) and extrapolation (Armstrong, 1984) methods were used, which allowed for the identification of a catalog of features characterizing the modus operandi of contemporary jihadist terrorism and made it possible to outline conclusions.

3. Religious radicalization process

European Commission (2021) defines radicalization as "*a phased and complex process in which an individual or a group embraces a radical ideology or belief that accepts, uses or condones violence, including acts of terrorism, to reach a specific political or ideological purpose*". Similar definition adopts US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which determines radicalization as "*the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect social change*" (Harman, 2007). In the literature on the subject, it is most popular to define religious radicalization in terms of processes. For example, John Horgan (2009) defines radicalization as "*the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology. Radicalization may not necessarily lead to violence but is one of several risk factors required for this*". Similarly, this phenomenon is defined by Porter and Kebbell (2011), who believes that radicalization is "*the process by which individuals (or groups) change their beliefs, adopt an extremist viewpoint, and advocate (or practice) violence to achieve their goals*" and Vidino (2011), which defines radicalization as "*the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change.*"

As we can see above, there is no universally accepted definition in academia or government. While analyzing the definitions available in academic and legal literature, it is possible to distinguish several basic features constituting the phenomenon of radicalization, which include: a transformation of the world view and system of values, rejection of norms adopted by society as a whole, adopting extreme ideologies and beliefs based on various forms of violence, a negation of basic democratic values (such as pluralism, ideological neutrality and tolerance for diversity) and the growing propensity to use violence to achieve ideological goals. Radicalization can take many dangerous forms, from extremism to crime, religious fundamentalism and terrorism.

A particularly interesting socio-psychological approach to the course of the radicalization process at the individual (meso) level is presented by Randy Borum (2003) in his research. He proposes a four-step model of the process of individual radicalization:

- **Context: "that's not fair!"** – an individual or a group perceives that he or she is in an unsatisfactory situation, caused by various factors, e.g., economic (poverty, unemployment, poor housing conditions) or social (limitation of rights and freedoms, discrimination, exclusion). This situation generates a feeling of disappointment, leading the individual or group to conclude that "everything is going wrong."

- **Comparison: "it's not fair!"** – an individual or a group begins to perceive their situation as unfair, in other words, they perceive that the problem does not affect everyone to the same degree ("not fair"). The effect of deprivation is therefore a sense of injustice and resentment (long-term grief and resentment towards the individual / group to whom the situation is compared).
- **Attribution: "it's your fault!"** – an individual or a group identifies those responsible for their situation and selects them as a potential target of their actions.
- **Reaction: "you are angry"** – at this stage, the social and psychological inhibitors of aggression are neutralized. An individual or group that is suspected of creating an unfavorable situation is dehumanized and defined unequivocally as "bad". The mechanism of dehumanization and demonization of other people and groups justifies the necessity to use violence against them.

To correctly identify threats to the security of European Union countries related to the phenomenon of jihadist terrorism, it is necessary to take a closer look at its key element, which is the process of religious radicalization of the followers of Islam. This process is gradual and may last from several months to several years. The typical path of radicalization has four overlapping phases (Precht, 2007):

- **Phase I** – **Initial radicalization** – at this stage, the characteristic symptoms of radicalization are not yet present.
- **Phase II** – **Conversion** – there may be symptoms of a progressive radicalization process, such as a change in appearance (e.g., growing a beard), a gradual rejection of the Western lifestyle, a change of personality (gradual isolation from one's former life), increased religiosity manifested by frequent presence in a mosque or in religious groups, affiliation with like-minded persons.
- **Phase III** – **Indoctrination (advanced radicalization)** – the following symptoms of a progressive radicalization process may occur: travel to a Muslim country, especially in a conflict zone, participation in a terrorist training camp, strengthening collective identity, increased isolation from one's former life, meetings in private places, which are difficult to detect, enhanced security awareness.
- **Phase IV** – **Terrorist activity** – the final stage of radicalization, which is characterized by the following symptoms: purchase of bombs, explosives or other means of terror, reconnaissance, trial attacks, special attention to not attracting attention (clothing, behavior, etc.).

The transformation of apparently normal followers of Islam integrated into European societies into religiously radicalized terrorists is influenced by three categories of factors: source factors, triggers, and contributing factors.

During the initial radicalization phase, many different source factors emerge that make people more vulnerable to radicalization. The most common source factors include the crisis of religious identity, the experience of discrimination, relative deprivation, alienation, existence in parallel societies, adolescent rebellion and the lack of participation of Muslims in the public debate on Islamic terrorism (Precht, 2007).

The transition from the initial radicalization phase to the actual terrorist phase appears to be influenced by several triggers. The most important of them is the foreign policy of the countries of residence, military interventions in Muslim countries, the occurrence of provocative events (e.g., the publication of a caricature of Muhammad) or the appearance of a charismatic leader. Outrage and revenge or a personal crisis can also be a powerful trigger for the radicalization process (Aly, 2012).

Various venues, events or locations are factors that foster radicalization, offering the opportunity to meet like-minded people. Typical factors contributing to radicalization are mosques, universities, workplaces, prisons, sports activities (European Parliament, 2015), and the Internet, which is one of the main channels through which extremist views are disseminated, and people are recruited for terrorist activities. Social media has amplified the influence of both jihadist and far-right extremist propaganda, providing easy access to a wide audience and giving terrorist organizations the ability to "narrowcasting" or targeted messages to attract new recruits or create an internet army of "trolls" to support terrorist propaganda (Europol, 2018, 2019, 2020).

Advanced radicalization is often characterized by the strengthening of group ties between its supporters and their participation in external and paramilitary activities. The main conspiracy activities then take place in private, secluded places that are difficult for police and intelligence services to detect and surveillance. The formation of a clandestine group and the election of its leader seem to be the key elements for the transition to the final stage of radicalization, which is terrorist activity (Vidino, 2011).

4. Contemporary sources of terrorism in European Union countries

Terrorism is a very complex, evolving concept that cannot be grasped in a rigid framework. In the literature on the subject, we can find about 200 definitions of this phenomenon, most of which are highly subjective, showing the problem through the prism of the researcher's experience and personal assessment of the situation. The essence of this problem is fully reflected in the definition provided by Bruce Hoffman (2017), which defines terrorism as "*deliberately arousing fear as a result of violence or threats of violence in pursuit of political change*".

Most European Union Member States have been struggling with various types of terrorism for many years, e.g., separatist, extreme left (anarchist), extreme right, religious (Islamic), and even ecological terrorism. However, the greatest threat now comes

from terrorist activities radical Muslim circles sympathizing with or inspired by ISIS (Europol, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). Over the past two decades, Europe has become both the target and the organizational and logistic base of the new "home-grown" terrorism, which is fueled by its indigenous peoples – religiously and ideologically radicalized descendants of Muslim immigrants and white converts.

4.1. Home-grown terrorism

Until recently, Western countries identified Islamic terrorism with only external threats. However, the military intervention in Afghanistan following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the eradication of the Al Qaeda headquarters located there, as well as the significant expansion of various types of special services forced a major change in the strategy of Islamic terrorists. Costly and very difficult to implement in the current reality, centrally planned and organized attacks were abandoned in favor of promoting the idea of "open-source jihad". Currently, the main security threat to European Union countries is not the Islamic terrorists from Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria or Pakistan, but the new "home-grown terrorism", which is fueled by the indigenous people of Europe – religiously and ideologically radicalized descendants of Muslim immigrants and converts (Dzisiów-Szuszczykiewicz, 2010; Otłowski, 2010). The term "home-grown terrorism" means the use, intended use or threat of force or violence by a person or group of persons born, raised or living and acting mainly in the countries of the European Union to intimidate or coerce the governments, civilians, or any other part of it, for political or social purposes.

While some European Muslims, especially those of the first generation, are integrated and identify with the society of their country of residence, some reject the cultural values, social norms and traditions of the country in which they live and question its social order. Second generation Muslims seem to be the biggest problem, challenge, and threat to the security of European states. They are less integrated with European societies, feel rejected and frustrated, and identify more with the Muslim community. The reasons for this situation should be seen primarily in the high unemployment (Lindemann & Stolz, 2018) and poverty prevailing in their communities, as well as in the lack of knowledge of the language of the country of residence. Economic and linguistic isolation pushes Muslims to inferior neighborhoods, creates a feeling of rejection and social injustice in them, which increases frustration and violence. The integration process is also hindered by a fear of Muslims demonstrated by the indigenous peoples of the European Union, fueled by recent terrorist incidents and sometimes grows to the level of Islamophobia (Dzisiów-Szuszczykiewicz, 2010; Valfort, 2020).

An increasing problem for the EU is the growing number of converts, that is, indigenous Europeans who adopt the purest, most orthodox form of Islam. (European Commission, 2020b). "White Islamists" are an asset to radical and terrorist Muslim groups, giving them several significant benefits in the process of planning and conducting operations in the West, especially in Europe. These benefits relate to both the psychological and propaganda dimension (showing the vitality of your movement and its attractiveness also to indigenous Europeans) and the operational dimension (better "blending" with the environment, which increases the freedom of terrorists to act). From the radicals' perspective, "white Islamists" now represent a unique opportunity to make an effective attempt to attack the West on its own territory. In the case of converts, the fascination with radical interpretations of the Muslim religion is the result of the deepening civilization crisis in the West, where decades of secularization and socio-ideological experiments conducted in the name of "progress" created a spiritual and moral void that is now filled by spontaneous Islam. Radicalization is also fostered by the involvement of European Union countries in the war against terrorism, perceived by some Muslims as a war against Islam. Orthodox Muslims – both immigrants and converts – become easy targets for recruiting jihadists and go to regions where, in their opinion, there is a war with Islam (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b).

4.2. Jihadi terrorism threat

Groups or lone actors linked to jihadist terrorism continue to pose the biggest threat to Europe in terms of the using explosives in bomb attacks. In 2019, nearly half of all reported jihadism-inspired attacks (7) and disrupted plots (14) involved the use of explosives. All jihadist bombing attacks failed (2) or were thwarted by authorities (8). Unlike other terrorist groups, which use a broad range of methods and targets, explosive-related jihadist attacks in 2019 were exclusively aimed at civilian targets and places of mass gathering (public events, shopping areas, churches, etc.). An example is the bomb attack in Lyon on May 24, 2019, which targeted civilians in a busy shopping street with an improvised explosive device (IED) enhanced with metal fragments to maximize the lethality. By comparison, the most frequent targets of attacks against left-wing and anarchist terrorists in 2019 were private enterprises, critical infrastructure and public/government institutions (Europol, 2020).

Jihadist loose networks in the EU are multi-ethnic and multinational. In 2020, three EU Member States (Austria, France and Germany) suffered 10 jihadist attacks. Four of these attacks were carried out by EU citizens. The perpetrators of five of the attacks had entered the EU as asylum seekers or irregular migrants; in four cases, they had been in the EU several years before carrying out their attack. One perpetrator entered the EU from Tunisia via Italy approximately a month prior to his attack in Nice (France). Almost

70% of the 254 jihadist terrorism suspects arrested in 2020 were either citizens of a non-EU country or were born outside the EU. Most of them had online contact with followers of terrorist groups outside the EU (Europol, 2021).

While they seem to be based mainly in and around major cities, due to activities on social media, they tend to cover a larger geographic area. Recruiting terrorists is usually done through informal networks of friends and family members, as well as through social media. The focus on family ties is likely to increase the effectiveness of recruitment and decrease the risk of betrayal and information leakage. In addition to these structures, individuals or small groups that are not directly linked with larger networks have been noticed to radicalize, for example, through online activities (Europol, 2020).

Based on the analysis of terrorist attacks that took place in the 21st century and comparing them with acts of terrorism that took place earlier, it was possible to distinguish a certain catalog of features characterizing the modus operandi of jihadist terrorism. The most important include:

- **religious fanaticism**: it is a bond that binds members of the organization. It leaves no room for any doubts as to the rightness of the cause for which they stand for because it is transcendental, holy, it is even a revelation. The consequence is not only the belief in victory but also the conviction that the sanctity of a cause justifies every means used in the fight.

- **network nature of the organization**: it is characterized by decentralized structures consisting of autonomous cells that establish contact with each other on an ad hoc basis for the needs of a specific operation. The organization is dispersed, it does not have an unambiguous, permanent location or nationality. There is no clearly outlined hierarchy. Individual cells are inspired from above by a mentor rather than led/managed by a boss; they are united by a common ideology and commitment to the cause.

- **global communication**: a key element determining the functioning of a network organization is the effective use of the latest technologies of communication and information transfer (Internet, satellite phones, social networks, etc.). The most recent strategy is the so-called open-source jihad. It assumes that the terrorist craft of Islamists will be made public as widely as possible. On countless internet forums and in online magazines, such as Inspire and al-Naba, all potential jihadists can find properly selected religious and ideological content and, most importantly, details of terrorist know-how, e.g., instructions for building an improvised explosive device (Ranstorp, 2019).

- **suicide bombings**: the previous generation of terrorists considered the risk of death but did not assume it in advance and did everything to minimize such risk. The "new terrorism" seems to treat the perpetrator's death as an integral part of the attack, its component part, and a distinguishing feature that gives this new dimension. In this case, the tactics used so far by the anti-terrorist services, containing the threat of killing the perpetrator, are doomed to failure, because the prospect of the perpetrator's death becomes an inherent feature of contemporary terrorism (Bjørgo, 2005);

- **maximizing the number of victims** involves changing the doctrine of terrorism. For the terrorists of the previous generation, the attack as such was important, not the number of its victims. The main goal was to obtain certain political benefits, and the death of the victims was a bargaining chip to achieve them. In the case of modern terrorism, killing and uncontrolled violence are an end. It is not about negotiations but about evoking the feeling of terror, helplessness and shock in as many recipients as possible through mass killings, thus depriving the society of a sense of security – one of the basic human needs. Nevertheless, a significant repercussion of such attacks is the drastic strengthening of state security procedures, which inevitably involves limiting civil liberties and the right to privacy (control of telephone calls, e-mail, bank accounts, Internet, etc.).

- **new types of weapons**: thanks to the access to the arsenals of politically bankrupt and unstable states (Libya, Syria, Afghanistan), terrorists have gained the possibility of acquiring high-powered weapons, such as MANPADS (Man-portable air-defense systems) (Radomyski & Bernat, 2018), unmanned aerial vehicles, chemical weapons, biological or even radioactive isotopes that can be used to build a dirty nuclear bomb.

- **new tactics**: the dynamic technological development of anti-terrorist systems and services has paradoxically significantly expanded the spectrum of the tactics used by terrorists. There was a significant shift in the center of gravity of terrorist activity, consisting in replacing single, organizationally complex (and thus more exposed) attacks on the increasingly protected key infrastructure of the state (including nuclear power plants, petrochemical plants, communication nodes, tunnels, bridges, airports) something like an offensive, consisting of a series of varied in form, mutually coordinated, hybrid attacks on soft targets (places where people gather, e.g., public transport, hospitals, hotels, airports, tourist resorts, stadiums, etc.) (Laskowski, 2017a, 2017b). Additionally, attention should be given to the growing threat of cyber attacks on the key ICT infrastructure of the state.

5. Conclusion

Summing up the above considerations, it should be assumed that religiously motivated terrorism, specifically Islamic (Jihadi) terrorism, is currently one of the biggest threats in EU countries, and its occurrence has a decisive impact on lowering the level of security in these countries.

Therefore, in the near future, it should be expected that the main threat to the security of the EU countries will be people acting alone (or in groups of two or three), radicalized by the slogans of global jihad proclaimed on the Internet, trained in terrorist training camps, Islamic immigrants (especially second generation) or converts. Their actions will be spontaneous and much less prepared than those organized in groups, which will make them much more difficult to detect by security services. The threat of terrorist attacks will mainly concern Germany, France, the Netherlands and Great Britain, i.e., countries with the greatest ethnic and cultural diversity. Here, special attention should be given to the threat of the so-called "lone shooters", because in 2019 and 2020, almost all attacks (successful or unsuccessful) were carried out by people acting alone (Europol, 2020, 2021). To carry out attacks, terrorists will mainly use objects and weapons that are most easily accessible, i.e., white weapons, cars and trucks, and less frequently homemade firearms and explosives. Their attacks can be less complicated and more chaotic than the attacks carried out so far by terrorists operating in the group. Most often, large groups of people will be targeted at attacks to evoke an emotional reaction in society. The attacks will aim to maximize the casualties, as was the case in London, Paris, Nice, Stockholm, Manchester, Barcelona, and Gambrills. On the other hand, one can also expect attempts to conduct more technologically advanced attacks against individuals, assemblies, critical infrastructure or symbolic places, e.g., using commonly available drones carrying homemade explosives. It is also not without significance that terrorists are constantly trying to acquire chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials to turn them into weapons while developing the necessary knowledge and capabilities.

Therefore, it is extremely important in the context of creating the long-term European Union policy to counteract the root factors of religious radicalization and terrorism, such as deepening divisions and socio-economic inequalities, poverty, exclusion, and the lack of tolerance and openness to cultural diversity. At the same time, one should not forget about effectively preventing the spread of extremist ideologies on the Internet by monitoring the content posted there and quickly removing terrorist entries. To prevent the radicalization of Europeans, "soft", local-level measures in areas such as education, culture and sport should be undertaken. It will create the possibility of assimilation among young people at risk and thus promote social cohesion within the EU. The role of clergy and religious hierarchs is also very important here, as they should promote among the faithful a true image of religion, devoid of radicalism.

Declaration of interest
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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