

PROPAGANDA OF TERROR: THREATS TO SECURITY AND SAFETY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION¹

PROPAGANDA DO TERROR: AMEAÇAS PARA A SEGURANÇA DA UNIÃO EUROPEIA

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Abstract

Daesh has revolutionised the way terrorism is carried out. Using a powerful propaganda machine, it has combined narrative, ideology and spectacle to achieve levels of popularity and recruitment that any organization would like to enjoy. Europe is now suffering the effects of this propaganda: lone wolves, terrorist cells, foreign fighters and a polarised society are the consequence of the cycle of hate triggered by the recruitment-attack-xenophobia dynamic. This study uses a qualitative strategy and deductive reasoning, based on an analysis of UN Security Council reports, scientific articles, interviews, and news articles on how the facts on the ground are developing to: identify the policies and tools that have been used by the police and the military to counter the potential threats that *Daesh* poses to the security of the European Union. The findings revealed that, while the number of terrorist attacks has decreased, this does not mean that the threat level has been reduced, but rather that this is a transitional phase that spells an uncertain future for Europe, especially considering the number of plots and attempted attacks that have been thwarted by counter-terrorism efforts. In other words, this transitional phase does not mean that terrorists are less motivated, but rather that their ability to plan and execute attacks has been disrupted.

Keywords: *Daesh*, terrorism, propaganda, lone wolves, foreign fighters.

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Resumo

O Daesh revolucionou a forma de fazer terrorismo, pois, através de uma potente máquina propagandística, foi capaz de alinhar narrativa, ideologia e espetáculo, alcançando uma popularidade e recrutamento cobiçados por qualquer organização. De facto, a Europa está a sofrer os efeitos desta propaganda: lobos solitários, células terroristas, combatentes estrangeiros, bem como a polarização da sociedade como consequência de um ciclo de ódio criado pela dinâmica recrutamento-ataque-xenofobia. Uma análise dos relatórios do Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas, artigos científicos, entrevistas, e notícias sobre a evolução dos factos no terreno, possibilitou, mediante uma estratégia qualitativa e raciocínio dedutivo, atingir o objetivo desta pesquisa: identificar as políticas e ferramentas, nos domínios policial e militar, que têm funcionado no combate contra as potenciais ameaças do Daesh à segurança da União Europeia. Resumidamente, concluiu-se que embora os atentados tenham diminuído, isto não se traduz numa redução da ameaça, mas antes num período de transição que revela um futuro de incertezas para a Europa, especialmente quando observado o número de conspirações e tentativas frustradas, fruto dos esforços antiterroristas. Ou seja, esta fase de transição não resulta de uma perda de motivação dos terroristas, mas da perturbação da sua capacidade para planear e executar ataques.

Palavras-chave: *Daesh, terrorismo, propaganda, lobos solitários, combatentes estrangeiros.*

1. Introduction

Despite the impact of COVID-19 on the world and its inhabitants, according to De la Corte and Summers (2021, pp. 40, 54), the threat posed by terrorism has not changed significantly.

In fact, even though *Daesh* has lost the entirety of the territory it once controlled (UNSC, 2019, p. 3), it has been consolidating its insurgency strategy in Iraq and Syria and, according to General McKenzie of the United States of America (US) Central Command, “if there is a decrease in counterterrorism pressure”, it could regain control of both countries “in a short time” (O'Donnell, Klimow, & Calvaresi, 2020, pp. 2, 15).

It would be important to understand why thousands of people joined the ranks of this group, leaving their lives behind (VOX, 2015) to become foreign fighters (FF) or loyal followers willing to perpetrate attacks on their home countries, becoming perfect examples of individual, “do-it-yourself” jihad. It is also worth noting that many of these attackers were European citizens, which raises a sensitive question regarding the citizenship and integration of these individuals (McDowell & Maplecroft, 2016, p. 739).

According to EUROPOL (2020, p. 14), in 2019 there were seven terrorist attacks in the European Union (EU) and another fourteen were prevented by security forces, which shows that the group still has the ability and motivation to operate, even when it is in a vulnerable situation. In other words, it is still an effective threat. This study falls within the field of Military Sciences and the subfields of Crises and Armed Conflict Studies and Internal Security and Criminal Phenomena Studies, and it is particularly relevant in light of the potential threats to security in the EU, as it addresses the use of military and law enforcement capabilities to counter terrorism.

The study object is the propaganda produced by *Daesh*. However, it will be delimited according to clear and objective dimensions, that is, in terms of content, time and space:

- With regards to content, the study will analyse the evolution of the group's propaganda, its distribution, themes, the use of social networks (SN) and its effects on target audiences (TA), as well as the military and law enforcement efforts to counter it.

- Temporally, the study will cover the period between July 2014 (the date the Caliphate was declared) and June 2019 (the insurgency phase after the group lost the entirety of its territory). However, in order to confirm that the terrorist threat in the period under study is still active, other periods are also analysed.

- Spatially, the study will focus on the EU; however, to enrich the research, it will also address the group's presence in cyberspace – online propaganda –, the actions in Syria and Iraq (specifically, the use of the military instrument), and, when relevant, the effects of propaganda in other places of the world.

The general objective (GO) of this study is thus *To analyse the military and law enforcement policies and tools that have proved effective in countering the threats created by Daesh's propaganda*. The GO was subdivided into a set of specific objectives (SO):

SO1: To describe the main features of *Daesh's* propaganda;

SO2: To analyse the effects of this propaganda on its target audiences;

SO3: To analyse the actions taken by the military to counter the effects of *Daesh's* propaganda;

SO4: To analyse the actions taken by law enforcement agencies to counter the effects of *Daesh's* propaganda.

These objectives were operationalised in the form of a research question (RQ):

What policies and tools have military and law enforcement agencies used to counter the threats created by Daesh's propaganda?

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

2.1. Concepts

This section will explain the key concepts addressed in the study from an instrumental perspective: terrorism, propaganda, threat and security.

Terrorism has been defined as the deliberate act of generating and exploiting fear through the use of violence or the threat of violence, in order to effect political change. A terrorist attack is specifically conceived to *reach* more than the immediate victims or targets of a terrorist attack (Hoffman, 2006, p. 40).

Propaganda is an important tool in achieving this goal. As Primer Minister Margaret Thatcher (1985) stated, it is essential “to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend [...]”. Street (2003, p. 7) defines propaganda as an activity that aims to influence as many people as possible through the spread of ideas (Ejupi et al., 2014, p. 644). These ideas influence people, create followers and encourage certain trends within societies, which can become threats depending on the interests, actions and behaviour they elicit.

In a hostile environment, a *threat* is any event or action (either ongoing or foreseeable)

of any type (military, economic, environmental, etc.) that hinders the efforts to achieve an objective, and that usually causes moral or material damages. In the field of strategy, the threat assessment is focused on identifying threats coming from a conscious intention, gauging the combination of intent and capability behind them (Couto, 1980, p. 329).

Protecting societies from these threats requires *security*, which can be defined as “the absence of military and non-military threats that endanger the core values of a person or community and that imply a risk that force may be used” (David, 2001, p. 27).

2.2. Literature review

Since the advent of *Daesh*, much has been written about the group, from various perspectives. Some studies on SN have analysed the organization’s online propaganda, such as Berger and Morgan (2015) and Convey et al. (2017), which show that *Daesh* has proved to be remarkably resilient online, despite the measures that have been taken to counter the group’s influence.

With regards to its mobilisation capacity, a set of studies by the Soufan group (2014, 2015, 2017), and the United Nations (UN) report published in 2018, *The challenge of returning and relocating foreign terrorist fighters*, shed light on the flow of FF and on the current status of the problem. Another important study by Vidino et al. (2017, p. 35) stresses that propaganda and narrative are important tools for influencing individuals without operational links to the group. Terrorism experts Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal call this the “IS-effect”.

Other studies on threats focus on the relationship between immigration and terrorism, such as Beck, Diza and Searl’s 2017 work, *Bridges and Bandits on the Road to the New Jerusalem: A Study of the Correlation Between Immigration and Terrorism*.

With regards to the fight against terrorism, a 2016 study published by the Institute for Strategic Studies of the Spanish Ministry of Defence, *Estrategias para derrotar al Daesh y la reestabilización regional*, provides a multidisciplinary analysis of the work to be developed by the various instruments that States have at their disposal to counter terrorism, including the military and the police. The 15th issue of the *Caderno do Instituto Universitário Militar: O Daesh, Dimensão Globalização, Diplomacia e Segurança* [IUM Notebooks: *Daesh, Globalisation, Diplomacy and Security*] addresses the same topic.

Based on the literature review, it is clear that propaganda has successfully mobilised a broad range of individuals, both FF and lone wolves. The literature review also revealed the role of immigration for this area of study. The measures taken by the military and law enforcement to combat *Daesh* in the early stages, prior to its defeat, were also analysed.

Having reviewed the literature on the topic, this study will endeavour to provide a new approach, different from the ones mentioned above: it begins by analysing how the facts on the ground have evolved to confirm if the policies and strategies used against *Daesh* have been effective, particularly the actions taken by the military and law enforcement agencies to counter *Daesh*’s propaganda and its impact on the EU.

2.3. Analysis model

Table 1 contains the analysis model that guided the investigation.

Table 1- Analysis Model

Research Question	R!: What policies and tools have military and law enforcement agencies used counter the threats created by <i>Daesh's</i> propaganda?			
Data collection techniques	Concept / Variable	Dimensions	Indicators	Subsidiary questions
Literature review and semi-structure interviews	Propaganda	Media machine	Communication Offices	SQ1: What are the main features of <i>Daesh's</i> propaganda?
		Content / theme	Military / Non-military	
		Target Audiences (Domestic / Foreign)	Enemies / <i>Daesh</i> fighters/ Followers / Potential recruits	
		Offline / Online	Products (<i>Al-Naba; Rumiya</i>) Apps: Telegram, Twitter Branding / Recrutamento	
	Threat	Hybrid threat	Individual <i>Jihad</i> Types of attack Foreign fighters Immigration Xenophobia	SQ2: What are the effects of propaganda on its target audiences?
	Security	– Military actions – Police actions	Kinetic Actions (Air Strikes- Operations) Courses / Training Retrieval of content Intelligence / operatives Blocking servers Police actions Interagency cooperation	SQ3: What action have been taken by the military to counter the effects of <i>Daesh's</i> propaganda? QD4: What actions have been taken by law enforcement to counter the effects of <i>Daesh's</i> propaganda?

3. Methodology and method

3.1. Methodology

This study uses deductive reasoning, a case study design and a qualitative strategy (Santos & Lima, 2019).

3.2. Method

During the literature review, a request to conduct a semi-structured interview was sent to senior officers² of the Intelligence Services of the *Guardia Civil*, which also served to obtain feedback on the interview script. Once the interviewees agreed to the interview and were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of the study, a face-to-face interview was scheduled. The interview answers cited in this study were validated by interviewees.

3.3. Data processing techniques

Operationalising the key concepts made it possible to understand the phenomena under analysis, as patterns and relationships emerged during the investigation (Santos & Lima, 2019, pp. 116-117).

² Linked to Operation Tajmil (section 4.3.2).

4. Data presentation and analysis of findings

4.1. *Daesh's* psychological operations: between marketing and propaganda

4.1.1. *Daesh's* media machine

As early as 2005, the current leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, stressed the importance of communication in a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (the predecessor of *Daesh*): “we are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media” (Cottee, 2015).

Aware of the importance of the information war to its strategy (Gambhir, 2016, p. 7), the group worked tirelessly, building on the momentum it gained by taking Mosul in 2014 to gain global visibility by distributing an array of media products that helped popularise its brand, polarise societies and drive its rivals to the sidelines (Winter, 2017a, p. 1).

This required a complex media machine to produce and disseminate its propaganda. The group achieved this by adapting the military and political ideology of the Ba’ath party, using a pragmatic military and political strategy that involved establishing governing structures in Iraq and Syria (Figure 1) (Habeck et al., 2016, p. 7), which it was able to do thanks to the experience of former agents from Saddam Huseim’s intelligence services (insurgency and counterinsurgency professionals) it had managed to recruit into its ranks (Caretti, 2016).

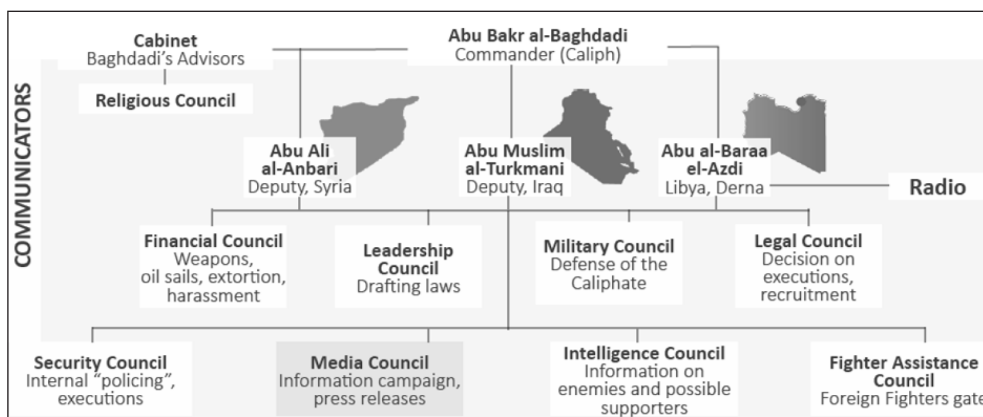


Figure 1 – *Daesh* organizational structure

Source: NATO (2015, p. 23).

The success of its information campaign was largely due to how effectively it was organized. This was possible thanks to a single chain of command, responsible for its agile and adaptive behaviour, as well as for aligning its media machine, military instrument and religious institutions (Gambhir, 2016, p. 20). Furthermore, since the group’s defeat, it has been able to evolve and decentralise, and shift the spotlight to its branches³ (Iguarada & Summers, 2020, pp. 2,3).

³ See Section 4.3.3.

4.1.2. *Daesh's communication strategy: psychology, narrative, branding and marketing*

Propaganda can be described as an act of communication that aims to elicit an emotional response in the TA (Simons, 2018, p. 6). According to Pratkanis and Aronson (2001, p. 11), it influences emotions and judgments by manipulating images, slogans and symbols. The TA can be analysed according to the effects that the group aims to achieve with its propaganda (NATO 2015, pp. 35-37):

- To (1) support and (2) unite: potential recruits, Muslims around the world and followers;
- To (3) intimidate: Western societies and dissidents;
- To (4) inform: Western societies, followers, local citizens and the general public.

For Lesaca (2015, p. 106), the broadcast of a video featuring Imam Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in July 2014 marked the birth of “marketing terrorism”, a new type of terrorism that uses social psychology and technology to manipulate public opinion and recruit followers all over the world. A combination of military successes and a successful propaganda campaign during the summer of 2014 and early 2015 helped establish the *Daesh* brand. As a result, the organization reached a level of recognition that any politician or multinational company would like to enjoy (Winter, 2018, p. 8).

Lesaca (2015, p. 111) highlights the importance of analysing this propaganda through a qualitative lens: at least 25% of *Daesh* videos are inspired in shows, video games, movies or music clips that are popular among young people and thus resonate with them.

It is commonly believed that the organization's media products mainly show barbaric acts (Zelin, 2015; Winter, 2015; Milton, 2016). However, the theme of a functional, utopian Islamic State where Muslims can live in harmony and be happy is the most important feature of its propaganda (Andhika, 2017; Winter, 2017a; Winston, 2018).

In fact, at the peak of its territorial expansion (2014-2015), the group's propaganda focused on images of an idyllic life in the Caliphate. During that phase, *Daesh* mainly posted videos of happy children in parks or doctors talking about health services. In interviews, different FF extolled the virtues and advantages of travelling to *Daesh* territory and doing the *hijrah* (Winston, 2018, p. 5). On the other hand, when the GCI (Global Coalition against ISIS) and the Iraqi Forces began to conquer territory, *Daesh* began calling for lone wolf attacks (Gunaratna, 2017, p. 107).

As *Daesh* came under military pressure in Syria and Iraq (Almukhtar & Watkins, 2016) and Western governments implemented measures to prevent FF from joining the organization's ranks (Kalin & Tolba, 2016), the group's narrative evolved, and the space left by its lost utopia was filled by calls for indiscriminate violence against the “enemies of Islam” (Winter, 2017b).

Torres (2016, p. 187) explains how the military instrument can be used to neutralise the group's propaganda, which relies on buildings, communication networks, equipment and personnel that can be attacked and destroyed. The lack of ability to replace members who are capable of producing propaganda ultimately affects not only its quantity but also its quality.

Therefore, as Milton (2018, pp. 5-6) stresses, recruitment challenges, difficulty travelling to the territory held by the group, military defeats, pressure from governments and private

firms, as well as the actions taken to eliminate the group's sources of funding have all played a role in curbing propaganda.

Eliminating propaganda operatives has hindered the organization's ability to produce media content. Figure 2 shows 100 operatives were killed between 2015 and 2018, which is a significant number. On the other hand, it also reveals that, since 2016, the US has focused on targetting / attacking this type of personnel. In 2016, international media outlets reported on a plan to attack the group's propaganda arm, particularly its English language capability (Milton, 2018, p. 7), as part of the US strategy to eliminate the group's leaders (Calvo, 2016, p. 85).

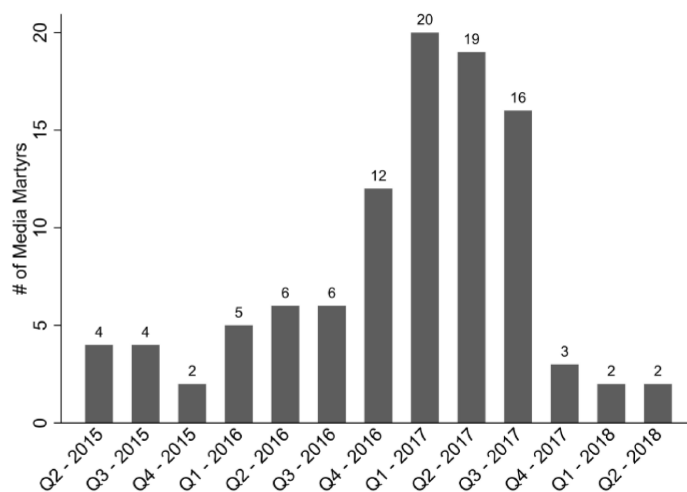


Figure 2 – *Daesh* ads on dead propaganda operatives, 2015-2018

Source: Milton (2018, p. 6).

4.1.3. The use of the internet and new technologies: a key factor

When one considers the reach of the internet and how terrorists have been able to use it (Jawhar, 2016, p. 24), it becomes clear that this type of communication tool allows them to reach audiences worldwide and offers numerous possibilities for organizing, recruiting, spreading propaganda, raising funds and gathering intelligence, as well as for inspiring and coordinating terrorist attacks (Fine, Linick & Calvaresi, 2017, p. 27).

In fact, the internet has enhanced the effect of techniques such as the 3 Rs (reach, relevance, resonance), which are used to generate credibility. Thus, an analysis of how *Daesh* has used SN, and Twitter in particular, shows that these tools not only amplify the group's reach, they also enhance the relevance and resonance of the message with its TA (Ingram, 2016, p. 25), allowing the group to reach audiences it would never have been able to reach in person (Awan, 2017, pp. 138-139).

When it began losing territory to military attrition, *Daesh* began using encrypted applications, such as Telegram, to evade the anti-terrorist measures implemented by security forces. It taught the art of anonymity to their followers, showing that it was capable

of changing tactics. In military terms, it avoided detection by taking their Command and Control (C2) and Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence (C4I) offline (Matejic, 2016). Meanwhile, the group's followers continue to use SN, encryption and the dark web to communicate, inspire and facilitate attacks (UNSC, 2018a, pp. 5-6).

Finally, in addition to internet propaganda, the group also publishes a widely read newspaper, *Al-Naba*, which is produced offline. According to Mahloully & Winter (2018, p. 5), each publication is tailored to a specific TA. Thus, while *Rumiyah* magazine was intended for distribution to its followers all over the world, *Al-Naba* was, and still is, directed at personnel in the conflict area.

4.1.4. Brief overview and answer to SQ1

The above analysis provided the answer to SQ1, *What are the main features of Daesh's propaganda?* The analysis revealed that the propaganda produced by the terrorist group known as *Daesh* is based on a planned, centralised communication campaign, in which themes and messages are directed at specific TA and at the international public through the use of psychology and marketing tools. The credibility, narrative, justification, resonance and spectacle that *Daesh* has been able to achieve have allowed the group to consolidate its brand in a reliable, frightening and credible way.

Once its military defeats began contradicting the narrative of an idyllic life in the Caliphate, the group turned to a narrative of victimisation and revenge that set the stage for its calls urging followers to commit attacks in the West in an effort to remain relevant. At this time, the group began using the dark web and encryption protocols to avoid detection by military and police actions.

Finally, the internet was essential to amplify the reach, relevance and resonance of the group's message, as well as to raise funds, inspire or coordinate attacks, as well as other activities.

4.2. The effects of *Daesh's* propaganda: from Individual Jihad to Foreign Fighters.

4.2.1. Individual *jihad*: do-it-yourself

According to Styszyński (2016, pp. 1-2), organizations such as *Al-Qaeda* and *Daesh* consider the idea of "individual jihad" essential, as it allows them to bring the fight to Western countries by exploiting "lone wolves" who are persuaded by jihadist propaganda to commit attacks.

Al-Qaeda's Inspire magazine published an issue with instructions on using a vehicle as a terror weapon as early as 2010 (Bergen, 2017). *Daesh* employed a similar tactic, publishing a series of issues of *Rumiyah* magazine titled *Just Terror Tactics*, with each issue explaining the use of a given method of attack (Figure 3) (POOLRE, 2017, p. 26). From June 2014, the date the Caliphate was declared, to February 2017, *Daesh* directed or inspired about 143 attacks in 29 countries, causing the death of approximately 2 thousand people and injuring many more (SG, 2017, p. 14).

 Edition of Rumiya Date released	 Date released	 Just Terror Tactics number	 Attack methodology highlighted
2	October 2016	None	 Knife attacks
3	November 2016	Just Terror Tactics 1	 Vehicle attacks and  additional weapons
4	December 2016	Just Terror Tactics 2	 Knife attacks
5	January 2017	Just Terror Tactics 3	 Arson attacks
9	May 2017	Just Terror Tactics 4	 Hostage-taking

Figure 3 – *Just Terror Tactics* figures and suggested methods of attack

Source: Adapted from POOLRE (2017, p. 26).

According to Igualada et al. (2018, p. 31), an analysis of the terrorist actions listed in Figure 4 reveals that, as early as 2018, attackers began acting independently using rudimentary and, in most cases, easily accessible tools, which made it extremely difficult to predict attacks (Duarte 2017, p. 19).

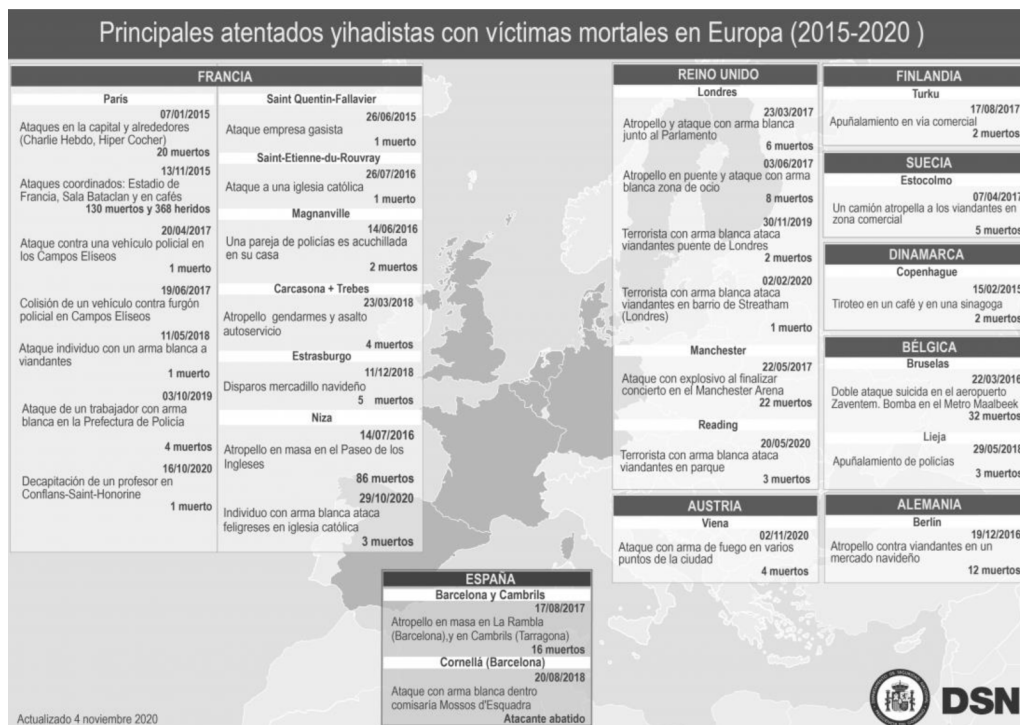


Figure 4 – Number of deaths caused by *Jihadist*-inspired attacks in Europe, 2015-2020

Source: DSN (2020).

Despite a decrease in the number of attacks in 2018, the threat level has not decreased. Rather, this should be seen as transition phase that spells an uncertain future for Europe (Igalada et al., 2018, p. 15). While these low-cost attacks are easy to plan and execute, the Brussels and Paris attacks prove that terrorists are also capable of conducting operations that require complex logistics and coordination (Duarte, 2017, p. 19), and the attacks in Sri Lanka⁴ and Tunisia⁵ confirmed this. This highlights the threat that traditional cells still represent (SIGC, face-to-face interview, 01 August 2019).

Daesh uses the publicity it gains after an attack to inspire followers and as a recruitment tool. Lone wolves need the group to give meaning to their actions and to maximise their impact beyond the immediate effects of an attack. Without an organization, a terrorist is nothing more than a killer with a car and a knife. Similarly, *Daesh* needs lone wolves to show its reach and sphere of influence to the world. The wolf needs the pack just as much as the pack needs the wolf (Greene, 2017).

In 2018 and 2019 there were, respectively, 511 and 436 arrests for jihadist terrorism in Europe (EUROPOL, 2020, p. 33). These are still high figures that reveal that the motivation to commit attacks still exists.

4.2.2. Foreign fighters and returnees

The phenomenon of FF is not new. Many conflict zones, including Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan and Pakistan, etc., have attracted foreigners in the past. What makes the current phenomenon unique is the unprecedented number of FF (Figure 5) that mobilised to fight in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, many of these FF (including those who are European citizens) are returning (RAN, 2017, p. 15).

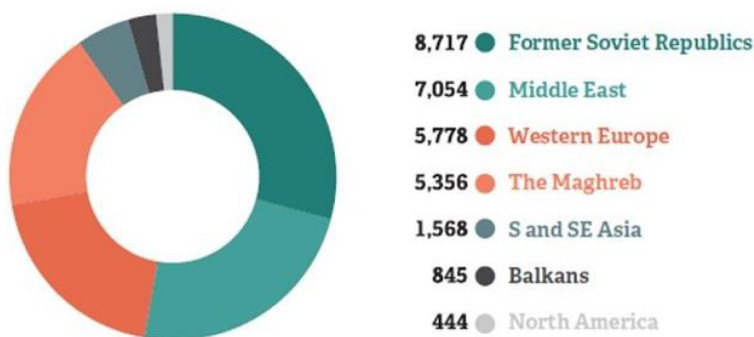


Figure 5 – Number of Foreign Fighters by region

Source: SG (2017, p.11).

This begs the question: what drives these people to abandon their lives and their country of origin to fight in a war in another land? What motivations and factors influence this phenomenon?

⁴ The attacks on churches in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday caused more than 250 deaths (Amarasingam, 2019, p. 1).

⁵ On 27 June 2019, two simultaneous attacks in Tunisia caused at least one death and injured eight people (González, 2019).

Borum and Fein (2017, p. 250) explain how motivation is one of the most important challenges when it comes to mobilising personnel to conduct and sustain a military campaign. Applying the same rationale to FF, there is no simple answer, as motivation includes both push factors (such as integration difficulties) and pull factors (such as defending a group identity).

Radicalisation mechanisms are, then, the result of the interaction between these factors, and radicalisation occurs at different speeds. There is no single cause that leads to radicalisation and violent extremism, but rather a kaleidoscope of factors and numerous individual combinations (RAN, 2016, pp. 1,3,4).

If one looks at *Daesh's* early successes, it is clear that many followers wished to join the group because they believed they would be a part of a new State that would provide everything they did not have at home (SG, 2015, p. 20). As the group began losing its ability to hold territory, their ability to recruit was limited to those whose main motivation was to fight or to commit terrorist attacks. This trend, along with the measures taken by States to monitor FF, succeeded in almost stopping the flow of FF (UNSC, 2018a, p. 5).

What, then, is the threat they represent to EU security?

Returnee FF were involved in the execution of the Brussels attacks (2014 - Jewish museum; 2016 - airport and metro station), as well as in the Paris attacks of November 2015. According to a study by Vidino, Marone and Entermann (2017, pp. 15-16), while only 18% of the perpetrators of the 51 attacks that occurred between June 2014 and June 2017 were returnees, those attacks were the most lethal. Another noteworthy fact is that they took place in 8 different countries: France (17); the US (16); Germany (6); the UK (4); Belgium (3); Canada (3); Denmark (1); and Sweden (1). That is, there were 32 attacks in Europe (63%) and the remaining 19 occurred in the US (37%). Finally, according to the same study, 73% of attackers were citizens of the country where the attack occurred.

What will happen to the FF that joined the ranks of *Daesh* who are still alive today?

Another fact that should be noted is that the figures on FF are sometimes contradictory: At the end of 2017, the GCI estimated that there were fewer than one thousand terrorists in the area of operations between eastern Syria and western Iraq (UNODC, 2018, p. 6). According to an SG report of October 2017 (2017, p. 5), the flow of FF dropped abruptly as *Daesh* lost territory and States implemented measures to prevent travel to the Caliphate. However, according to a US Defence Agency, the group controlled: (1) up to 30 thousand fighters in August 2018 (Cafarella, Wallace & Zhou, 2019, p. 8); and (2) according to a UN report published in August 2020, more than 10 thousand *Daesh* fighters remain active in Syria and Iraq, organized in small cells that move freely across borders.

Therefore, as Hassan Hassan (co-author of *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*) reflects, the number of FF that joined the ranks of *Daesh* may have been inflated, in the sense that the figures may have been increased to justify the presence of troops in Syria (Gutiérrez, 2017). This makes even more sense if one considers that, when the US pulled its troops from Iraq in 2011, it made it possible for the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, the predecessor of *Daesh*) to recover from the important military defeat inflicted by the US and the Sunni tribes (Fuente, 2018, p. 11).

There are hundreds of FF from different countries in Syrian and Iraqi prisons, as well as women and children in refugee camps. Several countries have expressed concerns about bringing hardened *Daesh* FF back into their territory, as it is difficult to collect evidence to

support investigations and prosecutions. The UN has also expressed concerns about the release from prison of these returnees (BBC, 2019), who include hundreds of European citizens (including women and minors) because, while many of them are effectively victims, they may have received training and could pose a threat in the future (EUROPOL, 2019, p. 7).

4.2.3. Immigration, terrorism and xenophobia

Simcox (2018, p. 1) highlights that 44 refugees or asylum seekers were involved in 32 conspiracies that resulted in 814 people injured and 182 deaths from 2014-2017. Refugees or asylum seekers were involved in about 16% of jihadist plots in Europe. *Daesh* had links to most of the plots, and Germany was the most affected country.

Based on prior experience, it is clear that the aim of terrorist attacks in Europe in recent years has been: to provoke a strong anti-Muslim sentiment that will lead to hate crimes, alienation and social divides, and the triumph of the right and far right on an anti-Islamic and anti-immigration platform (Bin Sudiman, 2017, p. 10). On 15 March 2019, New Zealand witnessed the best example of the success of this strategy, which resulted in the murder of 51 people in two mosques. Brendon Tarrant, the attacker, is said to have published a manifesto where he declared that one of his strategic objectives was “to incite violence, retaliation and further divide between the European people [the West] and the invaders currently occupying European soil” (Macklin, 2019, pp. 18-21). Indeed, according to the UNSC (2019, p. 3), attacks on places of worship such as the one described above create a narrative of ongoing interfaith conflict.

Terrorists feed on and exploit this polarisation (Byman, 2019). *Daesh* has skilfully adopted its strategy, exploiting the recruitment-attack-xenophobia dynamic to create a cycle of hate in the countries that oppose it. This dynamic generates potential recruits and followers while also aggravating anti-Muslim sentiment (Guo, 2015).

A study by Beck et al. (2017, pp. 83, 98) analysed six countries⁶ and found that immigration is one of several factors linked to an increase in terrorism, as it establishes a physical link or “bridge” that can be crossed by an ideology, a culture, and most importantly, by people who can bring extremism from countries with terrorism problems to regions that were previously unaffected by it. On the other hand, Bove and Böhmelt (2016, p. 25) argue that an increase in immigration from countries that are not prone to terrorism correlates to lower numbers of terrorist attacks.

When analysing these threats, one aspect that should not be forgotten is that many perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the EU over recent years were European nationals who are descendants of citizens from Middle Eastern countries, either second or third generation immigrants who were educated in a Western system that was supposed to integrate them (Sarcinschi, 2016; Nail, 2016). Terrorists use these first or second generation communities as a hub to expand their reach to other countries by radicalising and recruiting recent migrants (Beck et al., 2017, p. 83), using Europe as a platform to replicate the effects that allow it to achieve its goals.

4.2.4. Brief overview and answer to SQ2

The availability of jihadist manuals on the internet, a powerful narrative, the simplicity of planning and executing attacks, and the ease of access to low-cost tools make individual jihad a serious threat

⁶ Germany, Turkey, Greece, USA, Canada and Australia.

that is difficult to predict and neutralise. The decrease in attacks, when considered alongside the intention to commit attacks and the number of detainees, spells a period of uncertainty for Europe.

Daesh has been able to skilfully exploit the most vulnerable of the generations of immigrant descendants living in Europe. It uses the cycle of hate created by the recruitment-attack-xenophobia dynamic to polarise the population to its advantage, legitimise its cause and recruit followers, who provide it a platform to replicate these effects.

The above analysis answered SQ2: *What are the effects of propaganda on its target audiences?* The effects of *Daesh's* propaganda are lone wolves, FF, returnees and traditional cells, as well as a society polarised by the cycle of hate created by the recruitment-attack-xenophobia dynamic.

4.3. Countering the effects of *Daesh's* propaganda: the role of the military and law enforcement

4.3.1. Military actions

When the world powers (the GCI on the one hand, and the Syrian government and its allies on the other) determined which strategy would be the most effective to counter *Daesh* on the ground, they looked back to past experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan and decided that a strategy of “asphyxiation”, in the sense of depriving the group of its resources, forcing it to fight on several fronts until it exhausted its reserves (Calvo, 2016, pp. 83, 90, 91), was the right choice. The “train, advise and enable” (TAE) model that was conceived consisted of a contingent of Western forces tasked with training local forces, advising them and providing the combat capabilities they would need to ensure *Daesh's* defeat (Garamone, 2019).

The GCI has defined five lines of effort to combat the group: (1) providing military support to military partners; (2) stopping the flow of FF; (3) neutralising *Daesh's* sources of funding; (4) addressing humanitarian crises in the region; and (5) exposing the true nature of *Daesh* (GAO, 2017, p. 11).

It should be stressed that ideology is the most important part of *Daesh's* Centre of Gravity because it is what allows this type of terrorist organization to survive (Habeck et al., 2015, pp. 10-11), as General Dunford confirms: “It’s the flow of foreign fighters, the ability to move resources, and the ideology that allows these groups to operate” (TDP, 2018).

On the other hand, countries have different interests, which are sometimes conflicting and oppose each other. These interests must be considered, as they will influence any lasting and coherent solution that builds on the results that have been achieved on the ground (Pires, 2016a, pp. 96-97). This is particularly relevant in Syria, where there are multiple actors with different interests and agendas, some of whom follow a zero-sum principle.

In fact, according to Calvo (2016, p. 87), it was Russia’s intervention in 2015 that triggered the actions of the US and its allies, who began targeting the group’s tankers, banks and cash depots to avoid being pushed to the background.

With regards to these measures, the UNSC (2018b, p. 6) argues that there may be a causal link between the military defeat of the Caliphate and the decrease in the number of attacks on European soil in 2017 and 2018. The group’s command and control capacity was affected when many operatives and members responsible for planning attacks, including al-Baghdadi

himself, were killed in targeted strikes (Mackintosh et al., 2019). While the leader of *Daesh* was uniquely skilled at reviving past glories and expanding the group's reach (Barton, 2019), Seligman (2019) warns that his death is not necessarily a "death knell" for the organization, just as bin-Laden's death did not mean the end of al-Qaeda.

The measures described in line (3), neutralising sources of funding, were especially important, as, unlike most terrorist groups, *Daesh* had a population from whom it could collect taxes and a territory to exploit, either by extracting natural resources, seizing property, or robbing banks and shops. Therefore, as shown in Figure 6, territorial losses have had a significant impact on *Daesh*'s ability to generate revenues (IHS Markit, 2017), and the actions taken by the GCI have had a similar impact on the group's sources of funding (Heißner et al., 2017, p. 12).

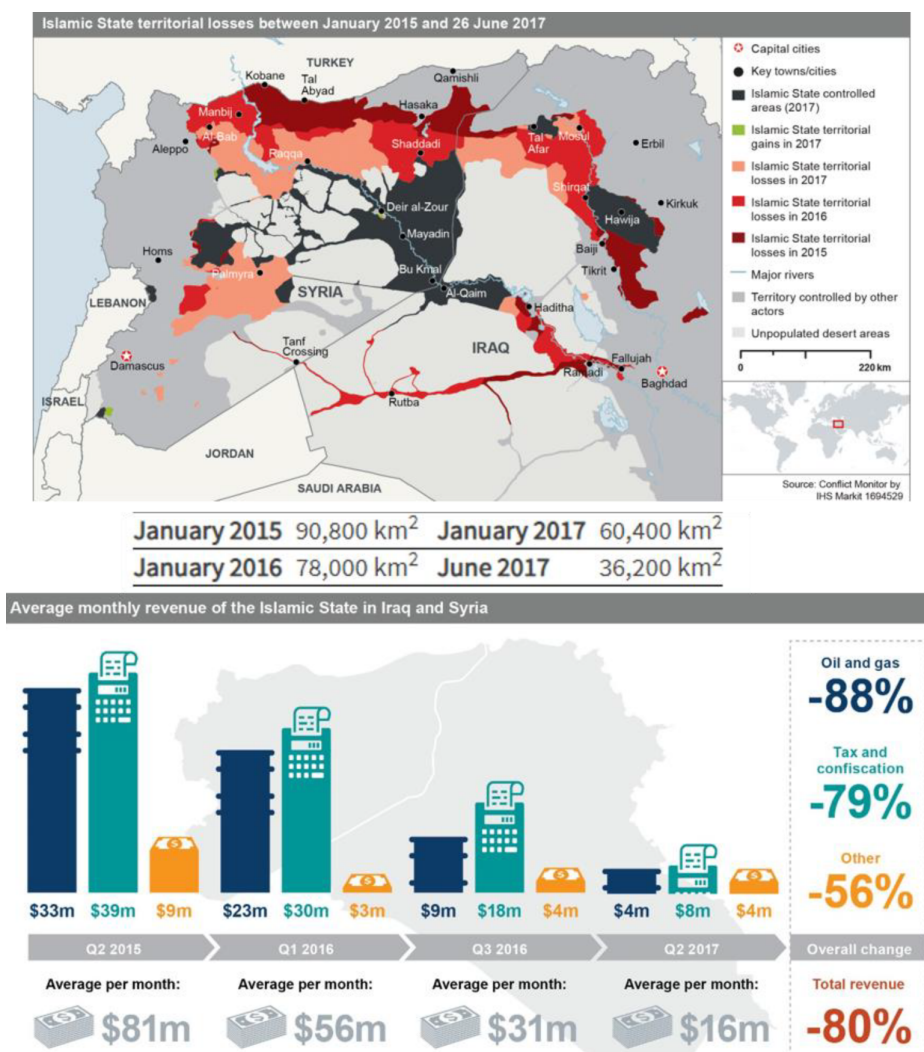


Figure 6 – *Daesh* territorial and revenue losses, 2015-2017

Source: Adapted from IHS Markit (2017).

Thus, the military actions described in Table 2 stripped the group of its territory and contributed to decrease the group's attacks on European soil.

Table 2 - Measures taken by the military instrument to counter *Daesh*, according to the lines of effort of the International Coalition

Line (1): provide military support to military partners
1.1 Asphyxiation: joint attacks by all global Powers (Calvo, 2016, p. 91). There are two different axes (US-Saudi Arabia vs. Russia-Syria-Iran) and countries follow a zero-sum principle when deciding whether to help their allies. When the interests of States aligned to counter terrorism, Daesh was defeated. As Milosevich-Juaristi (2017) explains, Russia helped its former ally oppose the Syrian rebels and attacked Daesh along the way. President Putin regained the status of international leader and countered the negative effects of the Ukraine issue.
1.2. Air strikes targeting the group's facilities, as well as media production facilities; the launch of Operation Tidal Wave II in October 2015, which targeted oil fields, transport systems and cash depots.(Heißner et al., 2017, p. 12).
1.3. Eliminating skilled operatives (Milton, 2018).
1.4. Eliminating leaders (Calvo, 2016) - including Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself (Mackintosh et al., 2019).
1.5. Train, Advise and Enable model, using a contingent of Western forces to train and advise local forces, and provide the combat capabilities required to ensure Daesh's defeat (Garamone, 2019). Western public opinion does not approve of its soldiers being deployed to third countries to sustain long counter insurgency campaigns, as the European and American professional armies have proved to be ill-suited for this type of warfare (Calvo, 2016, p. 83). The Train, Advise and Enable model follows the same logic.
1.6. Kinetic operations led by local forces: broad spectrum of military capabilities (Pires, 2016a).
Line (2): stopping the flow of Foreign Fighters
The GCI cooperates closely to prevent the phenomenon of FF , both those who are currently detained and others who may be lying in wait, ensuring they cannot return to the battlefield or to any other location from where they can plan international attacks. Information sharing among all partners on Daesh's FF and their movements is key to counter the phenomenon. These partners include INTERPOL, in accordance to the agreements reached during the sixth review of the United Nations strategy to counter Daesh. This highlights the importance of prohibiting any form of direct or indirect support that may facilitate the movement of FF , in accordance with the relevant UNSC resolutions (USDOS, 2019).
Line (3): neutralising Daesh's funding sources
3.1. In August 2015, the Iraqi government made the decision to stop paying wages to civil servants in territories controlled by the group (Heißner et al., 2017, p. 12). 3.2. There are continued efforts to reduce cross-border smuggling with Turkey and the areas of Iraq under Kurdish control (Heißner et al., 2017, p. 12). 3.3. The kinetic operations and airstrikes on facilities such as oil fields, transportation systems and cash depots described in Line 1.2 resulted in loss of territory and resources. As Daesh's funding depended on its ability to exploit territory (through fees, taxes, looting and resource exploitation), losing control of it affected its revenues (Heißner et al., 2017).
Line (4): addressing humanitarian crises in the region
The GCI has encouraged its members to raise about \$ 20 billion in humanitarian and stabilisation aid to support Syrians and Iraqis. It has provided equipment and training to more than 210 thousand security forces personnel as part of its efforts to alleviate suffering and stabilise local communities. These efforts have come at great cost, as tens of thousands of Syrian and Iraqi partners and at least 46 GCI members have been killed in this war (USDOS, 2019).

Despite the group's military defeat, some UN member states have expressed concerns that the underlying causes of terrorism are still present, perhaps even more severely than before. The decrease in attacks is therefore likely to be temporary, until *Daesh* can recover and reorganise. As such, member states measure the decrease in the number of successful attacks against the constant levels of terrorist-inspired activity, which suggests that this relative calm is not due to lack of motivation, but rather to the disruption of *Daesh's* ability to plan and execute attacks (UNSC, 2018b, p. 6).

4.3.2. Law enforcement actions

Of the more than 5 thousand FF who travelled from Europe to Syria and Iraq from 2011-2016, about 1,200 have reportedly returned (EP, 2018, p. 31). The lethality of terrorists' actions depends on their level of training and ability to obtain weapons and explosives. This has resulted in both complex, well-planned attacks such as the ones in Paris and Brussels and in the use of "lone wolves" (Navarrete, 2016, p. 106).

In 2005, the Council of the EU adopted its comprehensive Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which aims to contribute to a safer Europe. This strategy rested on four basic pillars: (1) prevent; (2) protect; (3) pursue; and (4) respond (Consilium, 2018a). According to the SIGC (op. cit), the changes to EU legislation that have been introduced since the publication of UN resolution 2178, as well as the creation of tools such as EUROPOL's Internet Referral Unit (IRU) have been instrumental in countering *Daesh* more effectively.

From the perspective of human resources, it is impossible to monitor all individuals with criminal records on a permanent basis (Gutiérrez, 2018). Given the high number of suspects, the main problem for authorities is prioritising targets and defining a case-by-case approach (SG, 2017, p. 26). In any case, enhancing the visibility and authority of the EU counter-terrorism coordinator (Consilium, 2020) would help improve the system.

The main purpose counter-terrorism police activities is to prevent attacks from occurring, which requires powerful intelligence capabilities, as well as establishing linkages, cooperation and coordination mechanisms (SIGC, op. cit). Therefore, law enforcement authorities consider internet surveillance an essential tool in this digital age.

The *Guardia Civil's* Operation Tajmil to counter *Daesh's* propaganda is an example of these cooperation efforts. Thanks to this operation, it was possible to obtain sensitive information and identify users in 133 countries. The information was then used to plan an international operation coordinated by EUROPOL in April 2018, which greatly damaged part of *Daesh's* propaganda machine (GC, 2018). The group's propaganda platforms, including *AMAQ*, *al-Bayan* radio, and the *Halumu* and *Nashir* news outlets, were simultaneously blocked and hacked. Although their activity resumed shortly after, the real goal of the operation was the information obtained from the servers, which could be analysed to determine who was behind the propaganda, who was receiving it, and, therefore, who was a potential terrorist threat. Knowing the means terrorists use to disseminate their content and the jihadists' Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTP) made it possible to draw a map of who is doing what in the online war that the group has been waging to radicalise potential recruits (Bussoletti, 2018).

Figure 7 shows the effectiveness of the efforts to counter terrorism in Europe. According to these figures, Italy has never been targetted by a serious terrorist attack. This is an aspect that should be analysed, as Italy is both an access point for migrants and the most prominent of the "nations of the cross" (Catholic nations).

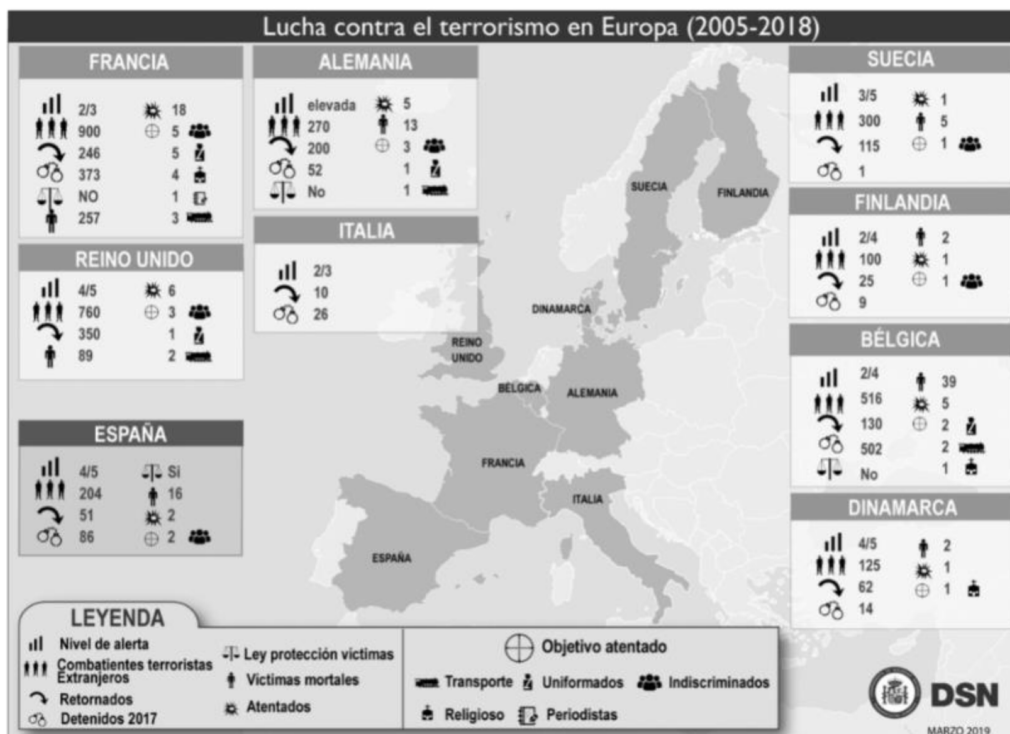


Figure 7 – Counter-terrorism measures in Europe (2005-2018)

Source: DSN (2019).

According to several experts on terrorism (such as Lorenzo Vidino and Edward Luttwak), the widespread use of administrative deportations and strict nationality laws are important factors that help explain why there is almost zero terrorist activity in Italy. In fact, to date, the country has managed to prevent attacks on its territory. Also curious is that the use of these measures has not garnered much discussion in the country (Marone, 2017). Furthermore, Vidino points out that the perpetrators of attacks in the West have almost exclusively been second-generation citizens, whereas Italy barely has a second generation (Montgomery, 2016).

To complement the above analysis, Table 3 lists the measures taken by law enforcement to counter *Daesh*.

Table 3 – Legislative measures and measures taken by law enforcement to counter *Daesh*

The findings revealed that both the measures taken by law enforcement agencies and the legislative measures implemented in the EU have helped counter <i>Daesh</i> more effectively: (1) inter-agency coordination (SIGC, op. cit); (2) information sharing (Consilium, 2018b; SIGC, op. cit); (3) monitoring terrorist activity (internet) (EUROPOL, 2016; SIGC, op. cit); (4) monitoring the activity of traditional cells (SIGC, op. cit) (5) border control (EP, 2018); (6) arms control (EP, 2018); (7) control of explosives and precursors (EP, 2018); (8) the creation of the IRU (EUROPOL, 2016; SIGC, op. cit); (9) the creation of the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) (Consilium, 2018b); (10) the appointment of a new EU security commissioner (Consilium, 2018b); (11) the creation of a criminal taxonomy of terrorist actions, such as training or travel for terrorist purposes, facilitating such travel, or providing or collecting funds for terrorist groups or activities (Consilium, 2018b); (12) countering online radicalisation (Consilium, 2018b); (13) the creation of police agencies specialised in countering terrorism (SIGC, op. cit); (14) the creation of specialised judicial bodies, such as the Spanish Audiencia Nacional, that can try crimes of terrorism (SIGC, op. cit).
The EU counter-terrorism coordinator is responsible for (Consilium, 2020): (1) coordinating the Council's counter terrorism work; (2) presenting proposals for measures and priority areas for action; (3) monitoring the implementation of the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy; (4) having an overview of the situation in Europe, reporting to the Council and following up on the Council's decisions; (5) coordinating with the Council's preparatory bodies, the European Commission and the European External Action Service; (6) ensuring that the EU actively participates in the fight against terrorism; (7) improving communication between the EU and third countries; (8) working closely with EU institutions to tackle terrorism in the EU. According to the Consilium (2020), the EU counter-terrorism coordinator operates in accordance with three counter-terrorism priorities: (1) ensuring the safety of EU citizens; (2) preventing radicalisation; and (3) cooperating with international partners.

4.3.3. An uncertain future

According to Cafarella et al. (2019, p. 8), despite having lost the entirety of the territory of the so-called Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, *Daesh* is far from having been defeated. Moreover, the Iraqi authorities have expressed concern at the government's inability to provide basic services. By exploiting both the weaknesses and failures of the Iraqi government and sectarian tensions, *Daesh* is attempting to replicate the conditions it previously exploited to gain followers and conquer territory in Iraq (Fine et al., 2019, p. 8).

Despite the effects of COVID-19 on the world and its inhabitants, according to De la Corte and Summers (2021, pp. 40, 54), the terrorist threat has not changed significantly, even during a pandemic, as the total number of attacks increased in relation to 2019 and 2020 (Figure 8).

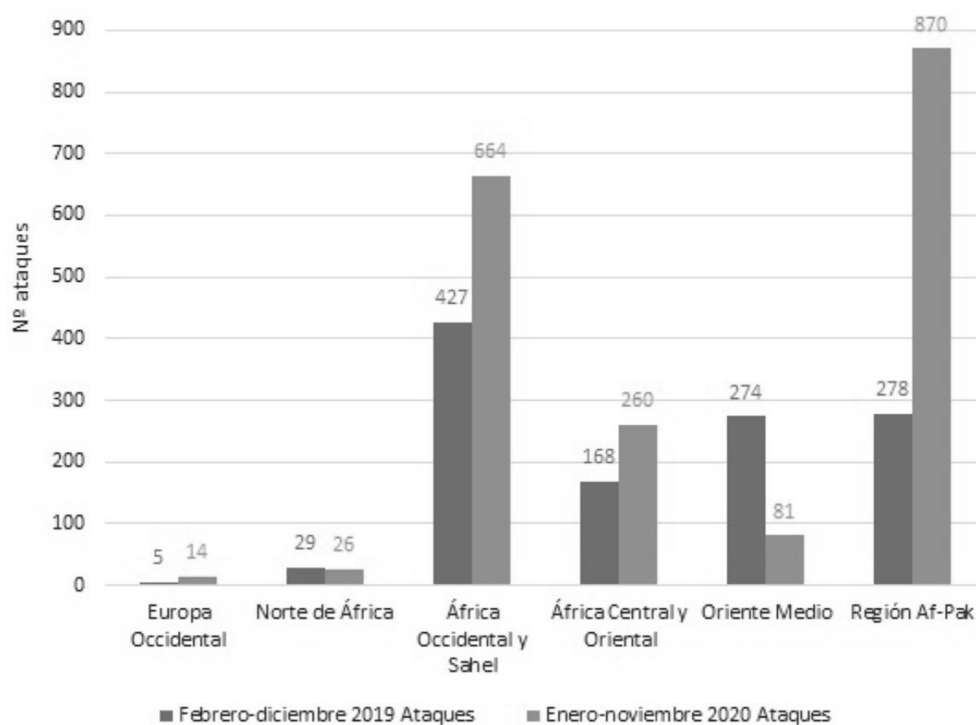


Figure 8 – Number of jihadist attacks, 2019-2020

Source: De la Corte and Summers (2021, p. 40).

On the other hand, during the 2020s, *Daesh* shifted the spotlight to its subsidiaries and franchises (such as the Islamic State of West Africa), in a decentralisation strategy that began with the group's defeat (Iqbalada & Summers, 2020, pp. 2, 3).

Attacks on European soil continued to occur during 2020 (Figures 4 and 8), showing the terrorists' determination, intentions and motivation, even during a pandemic.

Therefore, Nesser (2018) emphasises that it is a common mistake to assess the threat in terms of successful attacks, and that one must also consider the planned attacks thwarted by law enforcement, as well as other factors. In addition to seven successful attacks in 2018, EU member states reported 16 thwarted attacks (Figure 9), which proves that counterterrorism efforts have been effective. However, both the high number of thwarted plots and *Daesh's* attempts to conduct attacks outside conflict zones also reveal that the threat level in the EU remains high (EUROPOL, 2019, p. 6).

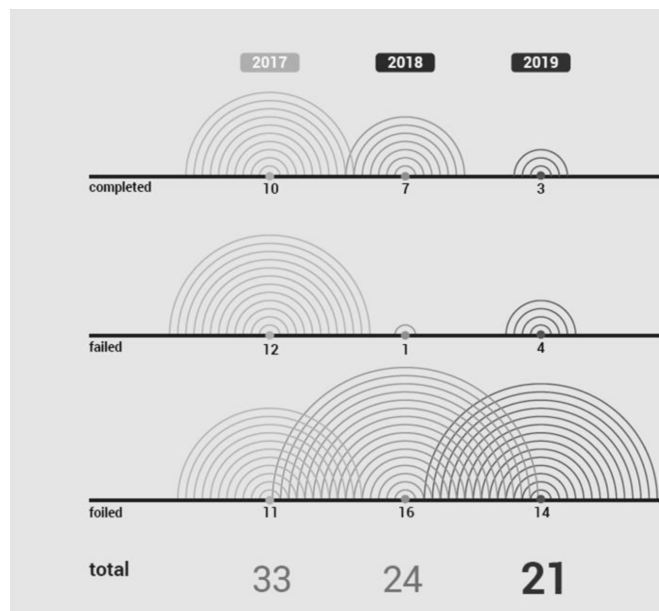


Figure 9 – Jihadist conspiracies and plots in 2017 and 2019

Source: EUROPOL (2020, p. 14).

Joseph Nye compares fight against terrorism to *Jiu-Jitsu*, a martial art in which a small-sized fighter can defeat a large opponent by using the latter's force against themselves. Thus, hard power and soft power must be used in combination to enable moderate responses. The military and police instruments should be used against hardened terrorists that cannot be rehabilitated, but programmes should also be implemented to attract the people in their communities (PS, 2017), as success depends on the ability to make progress in non-military areas (McInnis, 2016, p. 2).

Finally, as Pires (2016b, p. 123) stresses, countering groups such as *Daesh* requires multifaceted responses and a range of instruments, one of which is the military instrument. These responses should be complemented, coordinated and aligned with the other instruments at the disposal of countries and International Coalitions.

4.3.4. Brief overview and answers to SQ3 and SQ4

The use of the military has played a decisive role in defeating *Daesh's* efforts on the ground, disrupting its command and control capabilities, its ability to recruit and disseminate propaganda, and its sources of funding.

The “asphyxiation” strategy that was used to eliminate the group's resources, in combination with a vast array of military capabilities, have progressively stripped *Daesh* of its territory. However, this victory was only possible because countries' interests temporarily aligned, despite the conflicting interests of global powers. This answers SQ3: *What actions have been taken by the military to counter the effects of Daesh's propaganda?*

The legal and operational counter-terrorism measures that have been implemented by European societies and law enforcement agencies, as well as interagency cooperation, have made it possible to thwart a significant number of terrorist plots. However, despite these efforts by the military and the police, which have led to a decrease in the number of successful attacks, the constant level of terrorist-inspired activity and the number of thwarted plots indicate that terrorists are still determined to attack. Therefore, the threat has not disappeared, even though the ability to plan and execute attacks has been temporarily affected. This answers SQ4: *What actions have been taken by law enforcement to counter the effects of Daesh's propaganda?*

Managing the new generations of citizens who descend from migrants, as well as the communities to which many terrorists belong, will be crucial to ensure a safer Europe, as success in non-military areas is essential to eliminate the motivations and ideology that mobilise *Daesh's* followers and, consequently, the group itself.

5. Conclusions

This study analysed the policies and tools which the military and law enforcement agencies have used to counter the threats created by *Daesh's* propaganda. This was done by elaborating an analysis model (Table 1) to structure the data collection process. The analysis resulted in two findings: (1) the counter-terrorism measures taken by the military and by law enforcement agencies have succeeded in stripping the group of its territory and have led to a decrease in the number of attacks in the European Union (EU), thanks to the interests of global powers temporarily aligning, as well as to the coordination between EU law enforcement agencies; (2) however, this does not mean that the threat level has decreased, rather it is a transitional phase that spells an uncertain future for Europe, as it is not due to loss of motivation, but to the disruption of terrorists' ability to plan and execute attacks.

Now that the group has gone into clandestine insurgency mode in Syria and Iraq, and that the Caliphate's physical manifestation is gone, it raises the question of whether the organization remains a danger to the West. The attacks in Tunisia and Sri Lanka, the group's global expansion through affiliates, and especially the situation in Syria and Iraq should be taken as a warning that the causes that led to the emergence of *Daesh* have not disappeared. In addition to the number of thwarted attacks, the number of detainees and the FF about to be released or repatriated suggest that the group will continue to pose a threat in the future.

Therefore, the threats created by *Daesh's* propaganda and the military and police responses to counter those threats were analysed, thus achieving the GO and answering the RQ: *What policies and tools have military and law enforcement agencies used to counter the threats created by Daesh's propaganda?*

The study used a qualitative strategy with quantitative elements, a case study research design and deductive reasoning to analyse the operational concepts of terrorism, propaganda, threat and security, following the four-chapter structure described in our analysis model. The study methodology comprised a literature review of articles, GCI reports and reports issued by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as well as other documents, and semi-structured interviews conducted with experts from the *Servicio de Información de la*

Guardia Civil (SIGC) on the importance of operation Tajmil and the international operation coordinated by EUROPOL to counter the group's propaganda.

The findings revealed that the group has been able to develop an organized and centralised communication campaign, with different themes and messages tailored to specific TA, as well as to the international public, using psychology tools, new technologies, the internet and traditional media to create a new *marketing terrorism* based on narrative, justification, spectacle, resonance, reach, adaptability and global expansion. This achieved SO1: *To describe the main features of Daesh's propaganda.*

With regards to SO2, *To analyse the effects of Daesh's propaganda on its TA*, the most visible effect are the actions of lone wolves. Individual jihad is the perfect tool for terrorist groups to operate in the West and *Daesh* is no exception. When the group began losing territory and suffering military defeats, it called for attacks in the West and Europe, ideally combining the following factors: (1) operational isolation, which makes attacks unpredictable and difficult to detect; (2) low-cost tools, such as vehicles and knives, which are easily accessible; (3) the group provides instructions on how to commit and claim attacks, in order to claim any *Daesh*-inspired attack as their own, thus extending its reach and influence and making it seem as though it is everywhere.

Thousands of individuals mobilised for war. Of those, 5 thousand were European nationals, and 1,200 are reported to have returned. Against this background, and bearing in mind that these attacks were the most lethal due to the attackers' experience, it is urgent to use objective data on attacks and routes to establish policies and controls that allow us to help those fleeing the war, while also detecting and detaining those who wish to attack Europe and profit from the suffering of others.

Daesh's strategy is effective: It tries to confront Europeans and create a climate of fear and anti-Muslim sentiment, which in turn leads to hate crimes, social divides and alienation, polarising society and allowing the group to manipulate vulnerable second generation immigrants, using them as a platform to attack Europe. Immigration can be both a bridge to terrorism and a generator of xenophobia, as Islam is often held directly responsible for attacks. This is an issue that *Daesh* skilfully exploits, as it provides it a source of recruits among those who suffer from the grievances that the organization itself fosters, as a result of the pull and push factors in society.

As a consequence of the cycle of hate created by the xenophobia-recruitment-attack dynamic, a large number of European nationals have been involved in attacks. Between June 2014 and June 2017, 73% of attackers were citizens of the country where the attack occurred. Moreover, there are numerous FF in prisons in Syria and Iraq, as well as women and children in refugee camps, many of whom may have been trained. Even more worrying is the fact that many are European nationals. The phenomenon of returnee FF that will soon be released from prison cannot be ignored.

Against this background, the solution is not to further alienate Muslims in general, as this is exactly what *Daesh* wants because it will make it easier to recruit followers, but rather to find ways to ensure the safety of all citizens and to integrate the communities that constitute *Daesh's* TA by helping them not fall prey to the organization's manipulation.

Lone wolves, FF, returnees, and traditional cells, as well as a society polarised through the cycle of hate created by the recruitment-attack-xenophobia dynamic, are thus the effects of *Daesh's* propaganda. This achieves SO2: *To analyze the effects of propaganda on its target audiences.*

To achieve SO3 and SO4, the study analysed the tools used by the military and the police to counter the threats created by *Daesh's* propaganda. Global powers, the GCI and the Russia-Syria-Iran axis relied on the experience they acquired in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to determine that an “asphyxiation” strategy would be the best solution, temporarily aligning their interests to serve the common good, despite the fact that this decision was based on a zero-sum principle. The use of kinetic strikes, air strikes, the elimination of skilled operatives and leaders, and the application of the TAE model were all factors that contributed to disrupt the group's access to resources by stripping it of its territories. This affected the group's command and control structures and limited its ability to conduct attacks against the West. However, it bears repeating that the elimination of *Daesh* leader al-Baghdadi, while an important milestone, does not mean that the organization has ended, just as the death of Bin-Laden did not cause the end of al-Qaeda. This achieved SO3, *To analyse the actions taken by the military to counter the effects of Daesh's propaganda.*

The measures taken by law enforcement agencies have also contributed to the decrease in attacks, and the large number of plots thwarted in Europe by security forces is proof that cooperation has been crucial to success. Coordinated legislative measures have prevented travel to conflict zones and improved border and arms control, as well as the detection of explosives and their precursors. Monitoring internet activity, e.g. the establishment of the Internet Referral Unit (IRU), and intelligence sharing have also been instrumental tools used by law enforcement. Therefore, SO4, *To analyse the actions taken by law enforcement agencies to counter the effects of Daesh's propaganda,* was achieved.

The answer to the RQ is thus that global powers and regional actors temporarily aligned to asphyxiate the group's resources, and the cooperation and legislative measures taken by law enforcement agencies stripped the group of its territory and of local populations to exploit, resulting in a decrease in attacks on EU soil. However, the fact that the number of attacks decrease in 2018 does mean that the threat has been reduced, but rather that Europe is facing an uncertain future. The significant number of detainees, thwarted plots and executed attacks, even in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, shows that the motivation to commit attacks has not disappeared.

As for the study's *contributions to knowledge*, Tables 2 and 3 achieved the study's goal of determining what military and law enforcement policies and strategies have proved effective in countering *Daesh*.

With regard to *practical considerations*, countering terrorism requires moderate responses. It is *Daesh* that has the most to gain by linking terrorism to immigration in order to foster extremism. When immigration is not linked to terrorism and occurs in an organized manner, it benefits both migrants and the societies that host them. However, this must not lead to policies that are not based on facts. There are objective and quantifiable data on the attackers and on the *modus operandi* they used in recent attacks. These data should serve

as a guide to create policies that protect citizens while respecting Islam as a community of people. *Daesh* is well-aware of how difficult it is to strike the right balance, and uses the excesses committed by States to feed its cycle of hate in European societies. Therefore, the authority and powers of the EU counter-terrorism coordinator should be enhanced, as this would improve the process of prosecuting and investigating crimes.

The most relevant *study limitation* was the fact some of the data collected are contradictory. The best example of this are the numbers of FF in Syria and Iraq, which vary up to several thousands. However, thanks to the trend revealed by these contradictory data, it was possible to overcome this difficulty.

An excellent topic for *future studies* would be to analyse and assess the use of other instruments available to States and International Coalitions that can complement the efforts by the military and law enforcement agencies, focusing on programmes to integrate FF as well as on the specific conditions and measures taken by countries that have not suffered attacks, such as Italy, as well as the circumstances that led second generation immigrants to perpetrate attacks. Finally, success in non-military areas is the most important part of a multifaceted holistic counter-terrorism response that combines the use of both soft and hard power, not only to destroy the group's military assets but especially the narrative and ideology on which groups such as *Daesh* depend to survive.

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