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The Acute Jihadist Threat in Europe

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On March 26, the Belgian federal police's counterterrorism force, or Special Units, conducted a felony car stop on Hakim Benladghem, a 39-year-old French citizen of Algerian extraction. When Benladghem reacted aggressively, he was shot and killed by the police attempting to arrest him. The Special Units chose to take Benladghem down in a car stop rather than arrest him at his home because it had intelligence indicating that he was heavily armed. The authorities also knew from their French counterparts that Benladghem had been trained as a paratrooper in the French Foreign Legion.

Additional intelligence showed that Benladghem had traveled extensively and that, through his travels and email and cellphone communications, he appeared to be connected to the international jihadist movement. Rather than risk a confrontation at Benladghem's apartment, where he had access to an arsenal of weapons as well as a ballistic vest and helmet, the police decided to arrest him while he was away from home and more vulnerable. The Belgian authorities did not want to risk a prolonged, bloody siege like the one that occurred in April 2012 in Toulouse, France, when French police attempted to arrest shooter Mohammed Merah.

The intelligence regarding Benladghem's arsenal was confirmed when a search of his apartment revealed several weapons, including an assault rifle, a submachine gun and a tactical shotgun. He also possessed a large collection of tactical equipment, including a ballistic vest, a Kevlar helmet, a ballistic shield and two gas masks. With such equipment and training, Benladghem would have been well-equipped to not only handle an assault on his apartment but also to

conduct an armed assault -- intelligence indicating that he was preparing to conduct such an attack March 27 is reportedly what led the police to try to arrest him. Authorities are still closely guarding the identities of Benladghem's targets, but given France's involvement in the case, it is likely they were transnational in nature; there are a number of such targets in Brussels, which houses NATO and EU headquarters.

Belgian authorities are now undoubtedly working with their European and other allies to investigate Benladghem's contacts in order to determine the scope of the network he was a part of and what threat his associates still pose. This potential threat is a reminder of the challenges that radicalized European Muslims present for European authorities.

The Roots of the Problem

There are long, historic ties between the Muslim world and Europe. From the earliest days of Islam and the Umayyads' invasion of Spain and France in the early 700s, through the Crusades and the European colonization of North Africa and South Asia in the 1700s and 1800s, to the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I and the European colonization of the Middle East, the threads of Europe and the Muslim world have been tightly woven together by geopolitics into a vivid tapestry of conflict and cooperation.

The proximity of North Africa to southern Europe and the Europeans' colonization efforts, combined with the many people in the Muslim world seeking education and employment in Europe, have resulted in large populations of Muslims living on the Continent.

But this close relationship has not been without friction. Though a large portion of Muslims in Europe come from families who have lived there for four or five generations, many have not become integrated into European society and frequently live in isolated, Muslim-dominated areas. Moreover, while Europe as a whole is suffering from the economic crisis, the Muslim population has been hit particularly hard and the unemployment rate for young Muslims is alarmingly high in many parts of Europe. This, in addition to the frequent discrimination against Muslims in the job market, leaves many Muslims feeling alienated, disenfranchised and resentful. When this resentment is combined with the European welfare state, in which working is not necessary to survival, many of these Muslims have the opportunity to be exposed to radical discourse and to become involved in radical political or even militant activity.

Europe's immigration and asylum laws, which granted refuge to many jihadist ideologues who were persecuted in their home countries, have exacerbated this situation. Men like Omar Bakri Mohammed, Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza al-Masri and Mullah Krekar, among many others, were allowed to set up shop on the Continent, and Europe's Muslim areas provided target-rich environments for the jihadist preachers, who were looking to recruit disaffected young Muslims to their cause.

Although European countries have taken steps to expel or extradite many of these jihadist theologians since the 9/11 attacks, they have been replaced by a second generation of preachers and the issue of disaffected Muslim populations has persisted and grown. Large numbers of vocal Islamist fundamentalists currently attend European universities. Incidents such as the French burqa ban and anti-Islamic rhetoric of politicians like Geert Wilders reinforce the narrative put forward by jihadist recruiters that Islam is under attack from Europeans and help the preachers' efforts to recruit new followers.

There is a great deal of variety in the way Muslims are radicalized, but recruiters have consistently used mosques, gyms and university Islamic associations as places to spot potential recruits. The recruits usually are then taken aside, away from the view of the community, and radicalized in a one-on-one or small-group setting. These recruiters often have contacts with other radical cells inside Europe, as well as links to jihadist and militant groups overseas, and use these links to facilitate travel to training camps and war zones.

It is important to recognize that while young Muslim men can become radicalized and are often sought for the purpose of recruitment, they are not the only demographic group susceptible to radicalization. We have also seen older adults become radicalized -- men like 39-year-old Benladghem or the 37-year-old French particle physicist, Adlene Hicheur. Such individuals with degrees, practical career experience and clean criminal backgrounds can more easily travel between Europe and other foreign countries if necessary and are less likely to raise suspicions than the younger men. Women can also become radicalized and can serve as important conduits for funds and intelligence or as recruiters and propagandists.

There are no accurate counts of European Muslims currently fighting or training abroad, but there are at least several hundred, and there have been thousands over the past decades. Not all are jihadists; many who have traveled to Libya and Syria are nationalists or non-jihadist Islamists. Nevertheless, there are many jihadists among them, along with other Muslims who become heavily influenced by the jihadists after fighting with them.

Taken together, these conditions have made it very difficult to mitigate the jihadist threat in Europe. If anything, based on the tempo of attacks, plots and arrests, the threat is growing more acute.

The Outlook for Europe

A timeline of attacks and thwarted plots in Europe shows that the pace of jihadist activity on the Continent is increasing. As was the case in the United States, major attacks like the March 2004 Madrid train bombings and the July 2005 London subway bombings have caused European authorities to become far more focused on this threat, and consequently they have become more proactive in their approach to combating it.

However, the nature of the jihadist threat is slightly different in Europe than it is in the United States due to differences in the Muslim communities. In the United States, where the Muslim community is more integrated and less likely to be isolated in their own districts, plotters tend to be more self-radicalized and aspirational. Once they become radicalized -- frequently via the Internet -- it is quite common for them to be arrested as they seek assistance with their plots from individuals who are FBI agents or police informants working on sting operations. The Oct. 17, 2012, arrest of Qazi Nafis, who tried to bomb the Federal Reserve Bank in New York, and the Sept. 15, 2012, arrest of Adel Daoud, who thought he was bombing a Chicago bar, are recent examples of this trend. Aspiring terrorists in the United States also tend to be younger and have less experience than their European counterparts, though there have been some notable exceptions, such as U.S. Army Maj. Nidal Hasan. In addition, there are fewer cases of radicalized females in the United States.

Due to Europe's concentrated and disenfranchised Muslim population, it is not difficult for radicalized European Muslims to find confederates who are not police informants. Even more aspirational and inept groups -- such as the four men who were arrested in April 2012, in Luton, United Kingdom, and who pled guilty to plotting to attack a British army base on March 1, 2013 -- can be part of a larger radicalized community and have friends and relatives who have been involved in prior plots or who have traveled overseas to fight jihad. This was true for Toulouse shooter Merah: Although he conducted his shooting attacks alone, Merah had long been part of a larger militant community and had traveled to places like Pakistan and Afghanistan to train and fight. French authorities also reportedly investigated Merah's older brother, Abdelkader, in 2007 for helping European Muslims travel to Iraq to fight.

The portrait of Benladghem that is beginning to emerge is somewhat similar to that of Merah. Benladghem maintained contact with a number of people associated with jihadist networks in France and Belgium as well as with jihadists overseas. According to news reports, he came to the attention of the French government after being denied entry to Gaza from Egypt while carrying ballistic vests and gas masks. Pressure by the French government after his return from Egypt may have caused his immigration to Belgium. Stratfor sources have said that French authorities alerted their Belgian counterparts about Benladghem when he moved to Belgium and that he was under close scrutiny due to his history.

Nevertheless, Benladghem does appear to have been able to participate in some illegal activity while in Belgium. He was reportedly involved in the March 21 armed robbery of a restaurant outside Brussels as he attempted to steal weapons from the restaurant's owner. According to news reports, two accomplices accompanying Benladghem during the armed robbery were arrested, and both implicated Benladghem during the police interrogation.

It is not clear if Benladghem was aware of his colleagues' arrest. He apparently did not attempt to cache or otherwise dispose of his weapons and equipment, nor did he flee the country, as he might have done if he had feared arrest.

Like Merah, Benladghem had armed himself and was competent with the weapons he had acquired. He did not have to reach out to a police informant to obtain the weapons. He also somehow had managed to support himself and acquire an expensive four-wheel drive vehicle,

though he reportedly had not worked for years. It is not yet clear if he received outside support or if he supported himself through armed robberies like the one he conducted March 21.

Trained, dedicated and armed operatives with international connections, such as Merah and Benladghem, pose a very different threat than the aspiring and incompetent jihadists frequently seen in the United States. This means that European authorities will have their work cut out for them. But this is not only bad news for Europeans; it could also portend more anti-American attacks in Europe or even attacks outside Europe, as militants with European passports travel elsewhere.