



# Trends in terrorism

by Florence Gaub

Although it is not the first time that Europe has experienced terrorism, for many Europeans, the phenomenon appears to be the most dangerous form of political violence today. So what is old and what new about today's terrorism?

## European terror: the heyday vs today

The 1970s and 1980s were Europe's most violent decades in terms of terrorism after the Second World War (the wave of anarchist terrorism in the early 20th century was nearly as violent). During the peak of this period, terrorism claimed more than 400 victims in Europe per year, nearly double the number that have been killed in terrorist attacks over the last five years. Between 1985 and 1986, for example, France experienced no less than 13 terrorist attacks on its territory.

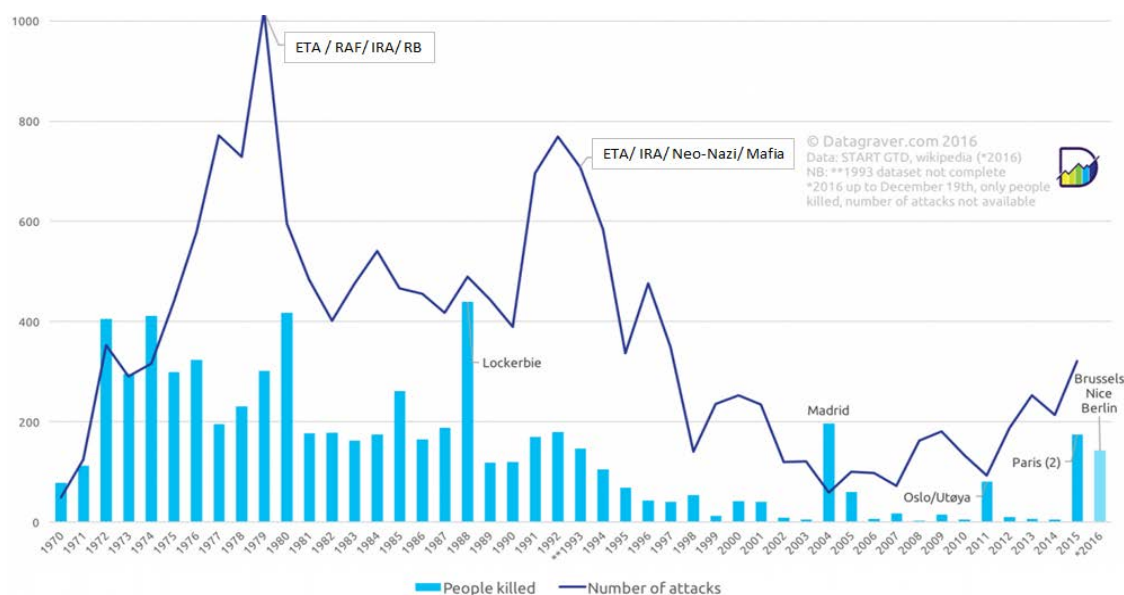
Both left- and right-wing terrorists in the 1970s and 1980s claimed the lives of around 100 civilians. While left-wing attacks were more frequent, right-wing attacks were more lethal: a single attack on Bologna central train station by a fascist group left 85 civilians dead in 1980, for instance. While terrorism during those two decades was a problem for several European states (it was a serious security issue for France, Germany and Italy), the overwhelming majority of European terror victims came from Spain and the UK: nearly 2,000 civilians were killed over the course of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and almost 900 fell victim to the actions of the Basque organisation ETA.

A large number of these terrorist attacks were driven by nationalism: whether Irish, Spanish or Palestinian terrorists acting on European soil, their ultimate proclaimed goal was often self-determination. Another portion – particularly left- and right-wing extremists – were, however, motivated by the desire for regime change. Whereas the German Red Army Fraction or the Italian Red Brigades pursued the establishment of a communist society by revolutionary means, right-wing organisations sought the imposition of other authoritarian systems. Other terrorist attacks, such as those funded by the Libyan regime, had no clear identifiable ideological goal beyond a desire to cause chaos.

Terror attacks in Europe finally died down in the late 1990s: the 1998 Good Friday Agreement significantly reduced violence in Northern Ireland, the German Red Army Fraction disbanded the same year, and ETA announced an extended ceasefire. Further afield, the 1993 Oslo Accords sharply reduced Palestinian terrorist activity on the continent, while the end of Algeria's civil war in the early 2000s stopped violence from spilling over into France.

However, this trend began to be reversed in the mid-2000s with the terrorist attacks of Madrid and London. And accompanying this numerical change was also one of substance and *modus operandi*. While terrorist attacks in Europe used to be perpetrated by separatist and revolutionary movements which acted largely independently of one another – although operational links did exist – the phenomenon is now far more

## Terrorism in Western Europe (1970-2016)



Source: Global Terrorism Database, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)

transnational in nature. Terrorism has become truly European in the sense that terrorists form networks, exchange funds and information across borders, and can live in one European country, perpetrate an attack in a second and hide in a third. A second novelty is that now more than before, European terror is linked to its southern neighbourhood. There had, of course, been previous terrorist attacks planned from the south, but whereas these were organised by citizens from third countries, it is now European citizens themselves who perpetrate attacks in the name of non-European organisations such as Daesh or al-Qaeda. This highlights the importance of a shared European response, particularly with regard to European returnees from Syria and Iraq.

Terror then and terror today still share a number of features. For instance, their targets are nearly identical. Although it is true that particularly leftist terrorist organisations displayed a preference for attacks on symbolically significant individuals and institutions, this cannot be said for the clear majority of other past European terrorist entities. Whether the IRA or right-wing organisations, they preferred attacks in public locations, which resulted in a large number of civilian deaths. Be it an attack on a pub by the IRA, on Paris-Orly airport by an Armenian terrorist organisation, or on Club Med headquarters by a right-wing group in a purported act of anti-Semitic 'resistance', this type of terror was deliberately designed to be as random and unpredictable as possible – like most terror attacks today. (It is worth noting, however, that Daesh occasionally also picks symbolic targets such as police officers, military personnel, religious representatives or artists, mimicking leftist target selection.) Now as then, cells differ in size, ranging from 5 to 50 individuals. The idea of the 'lone wolf' perpetrator, however, turns out to be a myth: in most

Daesh-related cases, investigators discovered that terrorists had been steered in some way from Syria.

Most importantly, leftist, right-wing or nationalist terrorism have not disappeared entirely. Quite the contrary, according to Europol, 'attacks specifically classified as separatist terrorism accounted for the largest proportion, followed by jihadist attacks'. 'Only' half of terror-related arrests made in 2015 throughout the EU were made in connection to jihadist terrorism, though the low absolute numbers of Islamic extremists means that this figure remains comparatively high.

### Putting terror into perspective

Compared to other countries, terrorist acts in Europe remain relatively uncommon. While it is true that terrorism as a phenomenon is on the rise (the numbers of its victims rose by 80% between 2013 and 2014), the majority of attacks (and fatalities) occurred in non-European countries. For example, 72% of all terrorist attacks in 2015 took place in only 5 countries: Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria. Turkey, which appeared to have successfully brought terrorism under control in the early 2000s after a decade of violence, now ranks 14 on the Global Terrorism Index. And in 2016, Turkey recorded the highest number of terror victims in 15 years – rising from 20 in 2014 to 337 in 2015. Of the 30,000 victims of terrorist attacks in 2015, 0.5% were Europeans (although they constitute 7% of the world's population). The vast majority of the victims – between 82% and 97% according to the US Counterterrorism Center – were Muslims in Muslim-majority countries.

*Florence Gaub is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.*

