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Jihadist Infiltration of Migrant Flows to Europe

Perpetrators, Modus Operandi
and Policy Implications

Sam Mullins

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Sam Mullins
George C. Marshall European Center
for Security Studies
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

ISBN 978-3-030-13337-5 ISBN 978-3-030-13338-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13338-2>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019931933

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to all those who assisted with this research—in particular those who gave up their valuable time to be interviewed, submitted written responses to questions, provided additional case-related information or assisted with translation. I am truly indebted to you all. I also wish to sincerely thank everyone at Palgrave Macmillan for their faith in this project and stellar support throughout the publishing process. Finally, a big thank you to those who were generous enough to provide endorsements—I am humbled by your kind words.

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All views expressed within this book are solely those of the author and/or interviewees and do not necessarily represent the official position of any government or other institution. All case details described should be regarded as allegations (based on publicly available information available at the time of writing), which may be subject to change.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Jihadist Infiltration of Europe Since 2011: An Overview	19
3	Travel	43
4	Operational Activity and Connections	65
5	Investigations and Prosecutions	99
6	Counter-Terrorism	121
	Appendix A: List of Cases Included in the Analysis	159
	Appendix B: List of Notable Cases Excluded from the Analysis	167
	Index	173

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1	Migrant arrivals to Europe via the Mediterranean versus first-time asylum applications in the European Union from 2011 to 2017	22
Fig. 2.2	Location of arrests/offences/asylum applications involving terrorist asylum-seekers in Europe, 2011–April 2018	27
Fig. 2.3	Location of first-time asylum applications in Europe, 2014–2017	28
Fig. 2.4	Nationality of terrorist asylum-seekers in Europe, 2011–April 2018	30
Fig. 3.1	Terrorist asylum-seekers’ point of departure before travelling to Europe, 2011–April 2018	44
Fig. 3.2	Year of arrival versus year of capture/death for terrorist asylum-seekers in Europe, 2011–April 2018	47
Fig. 4.1	Plots vs. attacks by terrorist asylum-seekers in Europe, 2011–April 2018, divided by group type	75



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter offers a critical assessment of the highly politicized debate regarding terrorist infiltration of the recent wave of migration to Europe. Mullins argues that while on one end of the political spectrum, the threat has been greatly exaggerated, while on the other it has been summarily dismissed. Both historical and contemporary evidence are presented to show that terrorists have long exploited European asylum systems and continue to do so today. Yet, as is also made clear, the extent to which terrorists have infiltrated recent migration flows remains controversial, divisive and poorly understood. The need for systematic and empirical analysis of this issue is therefore particularly acute. As explained in the sections on “terminology” and “methodology”, the book attempts to address this need with an in-depth examination of more than a hundred jihadi “terrorist asylum-seekers” who came to Europe since the beginning of the recent migration crisis in 2011.

Keywords Terrorism · Migration · Asylum · Refugees · Security · Europe

Throughout 2015, the height of the current migration crisis in Europe, an average of nearly 3000 people a day arrived via the Mediterranean—most of them travelling in rickety boats packed far beyond capacity.¹ The vast majority were fleeing from conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, but the migrants came from far and wide and for a variety of reasons—many simply seizing the opportunity to pursue dreams of economic prosperity. Whatever their reason for coming, many were in possession of fraudulent documents or simply had no paperwork at all, and even when there was time to take fingerprints, many refused to cooperate.² The “hotspots” in Greece and Italy were overwhelmed. The result was that tens of thousands of people were able to enter Europe without being fingerprinted, registered or subject to security checks.³ Even when such checks were performed, they would only yield results if the people in question were registered in European or Interpol databases. This would be unlikely for foreign nationals emerging from the midst of civil war and insurgency, where law and order were largely absent. Such a chaotic situation is clearly ripe for exploitation, but it is also extremely perilous and thousands of migrants lose their lives each year trying to reach European shores.⁴ Yet despite the risks involved, terrorists were quick to seize the opportunity to slip into Europe undetected.

¹See International Organization for Migration, *Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond: Compilation of Available Data and Information: Reporting Period 2015* (Vienna: IOM, 2016), <http://doe.iom.int/docs/Flows%20Compilation%202015%20Overview.pdf>.

²*Annual Report on the 2014 Activities of the Central System of Eurodac Pursuant to Article 24(1) of Regulation (EC) No 2725/2000* (Strasbourg: euLISA, 2015), 6, <https://www.eulisa.europa.eu/Publications/Reports/Eurodac%202014%20Annual%20Report.pdf>; *Annual Report on the 2015 Activities of the Central System of Eurodac, Including Its Technical Functioning and Security Pursuant to Article 40(1) of Regulation (EU) No 603/2013* (Strasbourg: euLISA, 2015), 5, <https://www.eulisa.europa.eu/Publications/Reports/Eurodac%202015%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.

³“More Than a Third of Migrants Not Fingerprinted, Officials Say,” *Ekathimerini*, August 20, 2015, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/200728/article/ekathimerini/news/more-than-a-third-of-migrants-not-fingerprinted-officials-say>; Nick Squires, “Brussels Tells Italy to Use Force if Necessary to Fingerprint Refugees and Migrants,” *The Telegraph*, December 16, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/eu/12052156/Brussels-tells-Italy-to-use-force-if-necessary-to-fingerprint-refugees-and-migrants.html>.

⁴International Organization for Migration, *Missing Migrants: Tracking Deaths Along Migratory Routes*, April 16, 2018, <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

The first public indications that this might be happening date back to October 2014 when the German tabloid, *Bild am Sonntag*, claimed that US intelligence services had learned that ISIS was planning to dispatch operatives to Europe hidden within the flow of migrants from Turkey.⁵ The article even went as far as to specify that the terrorists would travel in teams of four and would be equipped with falsified passports.⁶ There was, however, a caveat—there was thus far no evidence that such attack teams were already on the way. As it turned out, they were just getting ready.

In the aftermath of the attacks in Paris in November 2015, it soon emerged that two of the attackers, believed to be Iraqis, had come to Europe posing as refugees, entering via the Greek island of Leros on October 3rd that year.⁷ Both men had been photographed and had their fingerprints taken, but with no indication of connections to terrorism they had been allowed on their way. It would later emerge that all of the Paris attackers—with the apparent exception of Brahim and Saleh Abdeslam—had similarly infiltrated the migrant flows to (re)enter Europe beginning in the summer of 2015.⁸ Leaving little to chance, the operational leader of the group, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, had taken care to dispatch a handful of scouts to travel the migration trail in advance—the first of whom were in position in Greece by late December 2014—little more than two months after *Bild* had raised the alarm.⁹ Of course, ISIS

⁵Kayhan Özgenc, Alexander Rackow and Burkhard Uhlenbroich, “Tarnen sich ISIS-Terroristen als Flüchtlinge?” *Bild am Sonntag*, October 5, 2014, <https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/isis/terroristen-getarnt-als-fluechtlinge-38011274.bild.html>.

⁶Although the sources behind this report will never be known, the fact that it was published in Germany’s most widely circulated newspaper (and subsequently republished in English by *RT News*) is significant. To the author’s knowledge, this marks the point in time when the idea that terrorists would infiltrate migration flows to Europe was first planted in European public and political consciousness. Notably, this occurred even before the number of migrant arrivals surged to the epidemic proportions seen in 2015.

⁷“At Least Two Paris Attackers ‘Travelled through Greece’,” *France 24*, November 21, 2015, <http://www.france24.com/en/20151121-least-two-paris-attackers-travelled-through-greece-refugees-syria-migrants>.

⁸Jean-Charles Brisard and Kevin Jackson, “The Islamic State’s External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus,” *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (2016): 8–15, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-states-external-operations-and-the-french-belgian-nexus>.

⁹“Aide to Paris Attacks Mastermind Held in Poland: Official,” *Agence France Presse*, March 8, 2018, accessed via Factiva; Guy Van Vlieden, “Following the Facebook Trail of Abdelhamid Abaaoud’s Scouts,” *Emmejihad*, March 19, 2018, <https://emmejihad.word-press.com/2018/03/19/following-the-facebook-trail-of-abdelhamid-abaaouds-scouts/>.

had been planning this for months. As a former hostage of the group who was held from March 2013 until May the following year revealed to Italian investigators, ISIS interrogators had asked “lots of questions about the refugees who sought asylum in Europe... [and] wanted to know how the procedure worked”.¹⁰

Including Abaaoud, at least twenty-seven ISIS operatives connected to the Paris attacks network (eleven of whom were European residents or citizens who had left to join the jihad in Syria) managed to infiltrate Europe posing as refugees before being arrested or killed.¹¹ In addition to the assault on the French capital, they were responsible for the narrowly thwarted Thalys train attack of August 2015 and the bombings in Brussels on March 22, 2016. In total, they claimed 162 lives and hundreds of injuries. These individuals were thus by far the most deadly group of terrorists to infiltrate the recent migrant flows to Europe. However, they are certainly not the only ones to have done so, nor were they the first. In fact, there are cases that date back to the very beginning of the crisis in 2011 when the wave of Mediterranean migrants first began to swell in response to the uprisings in North Africa. The first person to be prosecuted under Italy’s new “anti-foreign fighter” legislation—a Tunisian drug dealer named Louati Noussair—had come to Europe on a migrant boat which arrived at the Italian island of Lampedusa on March 20, 2011.¹² His countryman, the now infamous Anis Amri, who drove a 40-tonne truck through the Breitscheidplatz Christmas market in Berlin in December 2016, travelled the same route, arriving on April 4th.¹³ Less than three months later, a seasoned al-Qaeda (AQ) operative named Ibrahim Harun—a man of “murderous

¹⁰Matthieu Suc, “The Covert Operations Behind Islamic State’s Terror Campaign in Europe,” *Mediapart*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/180917/covert-operations-behind-islamic-states-terror-campaign-europe?onglet=full>.

¹¹Author’s database. See Appendix A, cases #5, #8, #13, #15, #18, #25, #26, #28, #34, #39, #40, #52.

¹²“Foreign fighter arrestato a Ravenna, prima udienza in tribunale,” *Ravenna Today*, July 7, 2016, <http://www.ravennatoday.it/cronaca/foreign-fighter-arrestato-a-ravenna-processo-interrotto-la-competenza-non-e-dell-assise.html>.

¹³Georg Heil, “The Berlin Attack and the ‘Abu Walaa’ Islamic State Recruitment Network,” *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 2 (2017): 1–11, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CTC-Sentinel_Vol10Iss228.pdf.

zeal” intent on attacking the West—was apprehended by Italian authorities after arriving on a boat from Libya.¹⁴

Since then, the number of “terrorist asylum-seekers” in Europe has risen quite rapidly and—at the time of writing—not a month goes by without a new case being discovered. Focusing on those who migrated or claimed asylum since 2011, they have so far been responsible for at least thirteen attacks in seven European countries, while some two dozen additional attack plans have been thwarted.¹⁵ They have further engaged in a variety of other subversive activities including recruitment, distribution of propaganda, fundraising and facilitation. Many of these individuals were trained operatives sent to infiltrate migration flows by foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs). As already noted, some of these operatives were in fact long-time European residents and citizens (i.e. *returning* “foreign fighters”) who were well known to authorities and could not risk regular means of travel for fear of being detected. The majority, however, have been foreign nationals with no previous ties to Europe for whom there would be little way of knowing they were members of FTOs. Others—such as the aforementioned Tunisians, Louati Noussair and Anis Amri—travelled as more or less legitimate migrants only to radicalize and be drawn to terrorism after their arrival.

In the light of these facts, there is legitimate cause for concern. Yet unsurprisingly, given the collision as it were, of two issues as politically charged as terrorism and migration, confusion and hyperbole abound. It has been suggested, for instance, that at the height of its powers ISIS had orchestrated a “Trojan horse” strategy—simultaneously driving migration flows while systematically infiltrating them in order to destroy Europe from within.¹⁶ Indeed, a number of self-professed ISIS

¹⁴“Al Qaeda Operative Convicted of Multiple Terrorism Offenses Targeting Americans Overseas,” *US Department of Justice*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/al-qaeda-operative-convicted-multiple-terrorism-offenses-targeting-americans-overseas>; Ellen Nakashima, “‘A Person of Murderous Zeal’: Al-Qaeda Operative Given Life Sentence for Deaths of U.S. Troops,” *Washington Post*, February 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-person-of-murderous-zeal-al-qaeda-operative-given-life-sentence-for-killing-us-troops/2018/02/16/4184d968-1346-11e8-9065-e55346f6de81_story.html?utm_term=.912825445fbb.

¹⁵See Chapter 4.

¹⁶“Zeman nennt Flüchtlingsstrom ‘organisierte Invasion’,” *Die Welt*, December 27, 2015, cit. Alex Schmid, *Links Between Terrorism and Migration* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016), 7, <http://icct.nl/publication/links-between-terrorism-and-migration-an-exploration/>.

supporters and collaborators have endorsed this theory—most notably an unnamed individual who met with reporters from *Buzzfeed* in southern Turkey in January 2015. Stipulating that “there are some things I’m allowed to tell you and some things I’m not”, he claimed to have already sent 4000 fighters to Europe posing as aspiring refugees.¹⁷

As was noted at the time, this number seemed “improbably high” and could have been a ploy to “boost the group’s stature and spread fear”.¹⁸ Importantly, just a few months later, ISIS publicly bemoaned the fact that Muslim migrants evidently preferred to flee to the West rather than swell the ranks of their so-called caliphate and produced a series of videos discouraging them from travelling to the “land of disbelief”.¹⁹ Of course, this does not negate the fact that they were simultaneously embedding their operatives within the flow of migrants, but it demonstrates a certain contradiction in the group’s strategic versus tactical priorities and calls into question the extent to which they might wish to encourage migration to Europe. On top of this, there are more practical questions about the level of control and influence that ISIS, or others, could possibly exert over the situation, as well as the scale of infiltration that might be feasible. Nevertheless, the Trojan horse theory persists and evidence of terrorist activity continues to be used selectively in order to demonize migrants and justify anti-immigrant agendas.²⁰

¹⁷Mike Giglio and Munzer al-Awad, “ISIS Operative: This Is How We Send Jihadis to Europe,” *Buzzfeed*, January 30, 2015, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/isis-operative-this-is-how-we-send-jihadis-to-europe#.egRJ5X8Lb0>.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Veryan Khan, Jasmine Opperman and Brian Watts, “TRAC Insight: IS Refugee Media Blitz Urging Syrians to Not Leave,” *Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium*, September 19, 2015; Aaron Zelin, “Targeting Europe’s Refugees Is Not the Answer,” *The Washington Institute, Policy Watch* 2524, November 16, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/targeting-europes-refugees-is-not-the-answer>.

²⁰Daniel Boffey, “ISIS Trying to Foment a Wave of Migration to Europe, Says UN Official,” *The Guardian*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/26/isis-trying-to-foment-a-wave-of-migration-to-europe-says-un-official>; “Hungary PM: Migration Is ‘Trojan Wooden Horse’ of Terrorism,” *The European Union Times*, March 7, 2017, <http://www.eutimes.net/2017/03/hungarian-pm-migrants-are-trojan-wooden-horses-for-terrorism/>.

Unfortunately, arguments to the contrary are often equally selective and dismissive of the available evidence. A UN report published in October 2016—by which time there had been more than forty reported cases of terrorists posing as asylum-seekers in Europe, who were responsible for numerous thwarted plots and six completed attacks—stated that “there is little evidence... that terrorists take advantage of refugee flows to carry out acts of terrorism”.²¹ A corresponding press release by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights boldly proclaimed “Refugees and Terrorism: ‘No Evidence of Risk’”.²²

More recently, renowned political scientist Olivier Roy stated in an interview that there is “no relationship between migration and terrorism”.²³ Sadly, this simply isn’t true. As Daniel Byman has observed, they “share a long and painful history”.²⁴ The origins of militant jihadist networks in the West can be traced to the arrival of foreign extremists during the 1980s and 1990s, many of whom came as asylum-seekers. This includes now-notorious individuals such as Abu Qatada and Omar Bakri Mohammed, who were instrumental in earning the British capital its pejorative nickname “Londonistan” and whose influence continues to reverberate throughout Europe even today.²⁵ At the time, militants from the Middle East and North Africa were seeking a safe haven away from the watchful eye of security services in their home countries so that they could continue to fundraise and proselytize relatively unimpeded. There is also historical precedent for terrorists posing as asylum-seekers with the specific purpose of infiltrating a country in order to attack it. The now infamous Ramzi Yousef (a master bomb-maker and nephew of 9/11

²¹“Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism,” *United Nations*, September 13, 2016, 4, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N16/285/61/PDF/N1628561.pdf?OpenElement>.

²²“Refugees and Terrorism: ‘No Evidence of Risk’,” *Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights*, October 21, 2016, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20734>.

²³Michael Hesse, “Keine Beziehung zwischen Migration und Terrorismus,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, April 3, 2018, <http://www.fr.de/politik/syrien-konflikt-keine-beziehung-zwischen-migration-und-terrorismus-a-1478798>.

²⁴Daniel Byman, “Do Syrian Refugees Pose a Terrorism Threat?” *Lawfare*, October 25, 2015, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/do-syrian-refugees-pose-terrorism-threat>.

²⁵See Sam Mullins, *‘Home-Grown’ Jihad: Understanding Islamist Terrorism in the US and UK* (London: Imperial College Press, 2016), 95–130; Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

“mastermind” Khalid Sheikh Mohammed) arrived at JFK airport in New York in September 1992, carrying a fake passport and claiming to have been tortured in an Iraqi prison.²⁶ After a brief interview and filling out a form to request an asylum hearing at a later date, he was allowed into the country. Less than six months later, he bombed the World Trade Center.

To put this in context, a study conducted by Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke found that of 202 jihadist terrorists who were charged, convicted or killed in Europe and North America between 1993 and 2004, 23% had travelled as asylum-seekers.²⁷ Notably, other forms of travel or legal status were more common (38% were European nationals and another 33% had been granted visas). Moreover, it is unclear how many of those who gained asylum were already involved in terrorism at the time of lodging their application versus those who radicalized in the host country after their arrival, which is a question of critical importance, given the different implications for how to respond. Nevertheless, the number is significant.

Besides the more immediate threat of terrorist infiltration (the primary focus of this book), there are longer-term challenges relating to integration of refugee and immigrant populations. Out of a sample of more than 500 jihadist terrorists from around the world, revered terrorism scholar and forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman found that around 60% became involved in terrorism while living in a country in which they did not grow up, while another 20% were second or third generation Muslim immigrants.²⁸ Similarly, the German security services found that of 784 jihadist travellers to Syria, 81% had “an immigrant background”.²⁹ In the words of Sageman, “the link between a diaspora and terrorism appears strong”.³⁰ Indeed, Olivier Roy himself has written at

²⁶Peter Lance, *1000 Years for Revenge: International Terrorism and the FBI—The Untold Story* (PerfectBound, 2003), Kindle Edition, location 1938–1971.

²⁷Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke, “The Quantitative Analysis of Terrorism and Immigration: An Initial Exploration,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 4: 503–21.

²⁸Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 65.

²⁹Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Officer for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism, *Analysis of the Background and Process of Radicalization Among Persons Who Left Germany to Travel to Syria or Iraq Based on Islamist Motivations: 2016 Update*, October 2016, <https://www.bka.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Publications/Other/AnalysisOfTheBackgroundAndProcessOfRadicalization.html?nn=53602>.

³⁰Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, op.cit., 65.

length about the fact that second and third generation immigrants—who are often socioeconomically marginalized and apparently torn between competing identities—are regarded as being particularly prone to radicalization and are especially prevalent among European jihadists.³¹

Although the situation of recently arrived asylum-seekers and refugees is quite different, they too are exposed to a variety of factors that place them at risk of radicalization and recruitment to terrorism.³² Depending on their reason for flight, they are likely to have a strong sense of political grievance and may have been—and continue to be—exposed to violence, militancy and crime. Combined with experiences of both actual and relative deprivation, and a sense of hopelessness, uncertainty and despair, the potential for involvement in terrorism is increased.³³ This is at least partially supported by statistical analyses. A study of refugee flows and terrorist attacks worldwide between 1969 and 2001 found that “refugee flows significantly increase the likelihood and counts of transnational terrorist attacks that occur in the host country, even when controlling for other variables”.³⁴ A more recent analysis, which looked at migrant inflows and terrorist attacks in 145 countries from 1970 to 2000, found that although “migrant flows per se actually lead to a lower level of terrorist attacks”, “migrants stemming from terrorist prone states... are indeed an important vehicle through which terrorism does diffuse”.³⁵ The current influx of migrants may thus carry medium and long-term, as well as more immediate threats.

³¹Michael King and Donald Taylor, “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (2011): 602–22; Olivier Roy, “Who Are the New Jihadis?” *The Guardian*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis>; Mirella Stroink, “Processes and Preconditions Underlying Terrorism in Second-Generation Immigrants,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–312.

³²Marina Eleftheriadou, “Refugee Radicalization/Militarization in the Age of the European Refugee Crisis: A Composite Model,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1516643>.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Daniel Milton, Megan Spencer and Michael Findley, “Radicalism of the Hopeless: Refugee Flows and Transnational Terrorism,” *International Interactions* 39, no. 5 (2013): 621–45.

³⁵Vincenzo Bove and Tobias Böhmelt, “Does Immigration Induce Terrorism?” *Journal of Politics* 78, no. 2 (2016): 572–88.

Given the sensitivity of this topic, we must be careful not to exaggerate the connections between migration and terrorism but we should also not deny that they exist. It is also necessary to go beyond the existing research (the vast majority of which is concerned with the vulnerability of refugees and immigrants to radicalization within the host country) in order to empirically evaluate the rather more pressing and controversial issue at hand—namely premeditated terrorist infiltration. In one of the most comprehensive examinations of terrorism and migration to date, the eminent terrorism scholar Alex Schmid noted that there were indications that ISIS “uses the refugee stream for the infiltration of (returning) foreign fighters into Europe”.³⁶ A subsequent study by Robin Simcox of the Heritage Foundation found that refugees or asylum-seekers had been involved in no less than thirty-two jihadist motivated plots or attacks in Europe from 2014 to 2017.³⁷ Most of these plotters hailed from the Middle East or North Africa and had radicalized prior to coming to Europe. Moreover, although the nature of connections varied, the majority of plots had direct ties to ISIS.³⁸

The question then, is not *whether* terrorists have exploited the recent migrant crisis in Europe, but *to what extent*? Although this is something we are gradually beginning to understand, there is still much we don’t know. What else have terrorists been doing in Europe, besides planning and conducting attacks? What gaps in counter-terrorism (CT) were they able to exploit? How do we prevent this from happening while still maintaining a commitment to human rights and international law? In order to answer questions such as these, we must build a comprehensive empirical foundation that incorporates the totality of known cases. Only then can “well- and ill-founded concerns... be separated and policies... be built on solid evidence”.³⁹ The present study attempts to address this need.

³⁶Alex Schmid, *Links Between Terrorism and Migration* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016), 3–4, <http://icct.nl/publication/links-between-terrorism-and-migration-an-exploration/>.

³⁷Robin Simcox, “Backgrounder No. 3314: The Asylum–Terror Nexus: How Europe Should Respond,” *The Heritage Foundation*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/BG3314.pdf>.

³⁸*Ibid.* Although it is beyond the scope of the current study to systematically compare findings with those of Simcox, it is worth noting that the two reports converge on a number of points despite using quite different sampling criteria. In particular, the findings are similar regarding certain offender characteristics (nationality and age), location of cases (concentrated in Germany) and ties to FTO (mainly ISIS).

³⁹Schmid, *Links Between Terrorism and Migration*, 5, op.cit.