

House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
*Subcommittee on National Security, Subcommittee on Government Operations*

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# Radicalization in the U.S. and the Rise of Terrorism

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Washington, DC  
September 14, 2016

Chairman DeSantis, Chairman Meadows, Ranking Member Lynch, and Ranking Member Connolly, and distinguished members of both subcommittees, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, it's an honor to appear before you to discuss today's topic.

This country is in the midst of the largest spike in homegrown jihadist terrorist activity that it has ever seen, both in the overall number of cases and also the number of fatalities caused by terrorists claiming to act in service of the jihadist cause. While I assess jihadism to remain the top domestic terrorist threat, adherents to several other U.S.-based movements have also engaged more frequently in terrorist violence in recent years, including members of the anti-government Sovereign Citizens movement, and both white nationalists and black nationalists.

This testimony will first show that the problem of terrorism is growing in scale. It then argues that both analysts and the media have an unjustifiable default assumption that relatively small-scale attacks have likely been carried out by "lone wolves." This prevalence of this assumption was crystal clear in the wake of Omar Mateen's bloody June 2016 attack in Orlando.

### **The Growing Threat of Terrorism**

By the end of last year, it was demonstrable that the United States was in the midst of an unprecedented surge in jihadist militant activity. This pattern could also be discerned in other Western countries.

By now, federal prosecutors have charged over 100 people in the U.S. in connection with Islamic State (ISIS) activity.<sup>1</sup> But when looking beyond criminal charges, the magnitude of the problem becomes more clear. In one of the most rigorous studies examining ISIS's presence and activities in America, Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes of George Washington University's Program on Extremism wrote:

In June 2015 the FBI states that "upwards of 200 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to participate in the conflict." A few weeks later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence estimated that more than 250 individuals from the U.S. had traveled or attempted to travel to the conflict area, a few dozen had joined the ranks of ISIS, and some 20 had died.

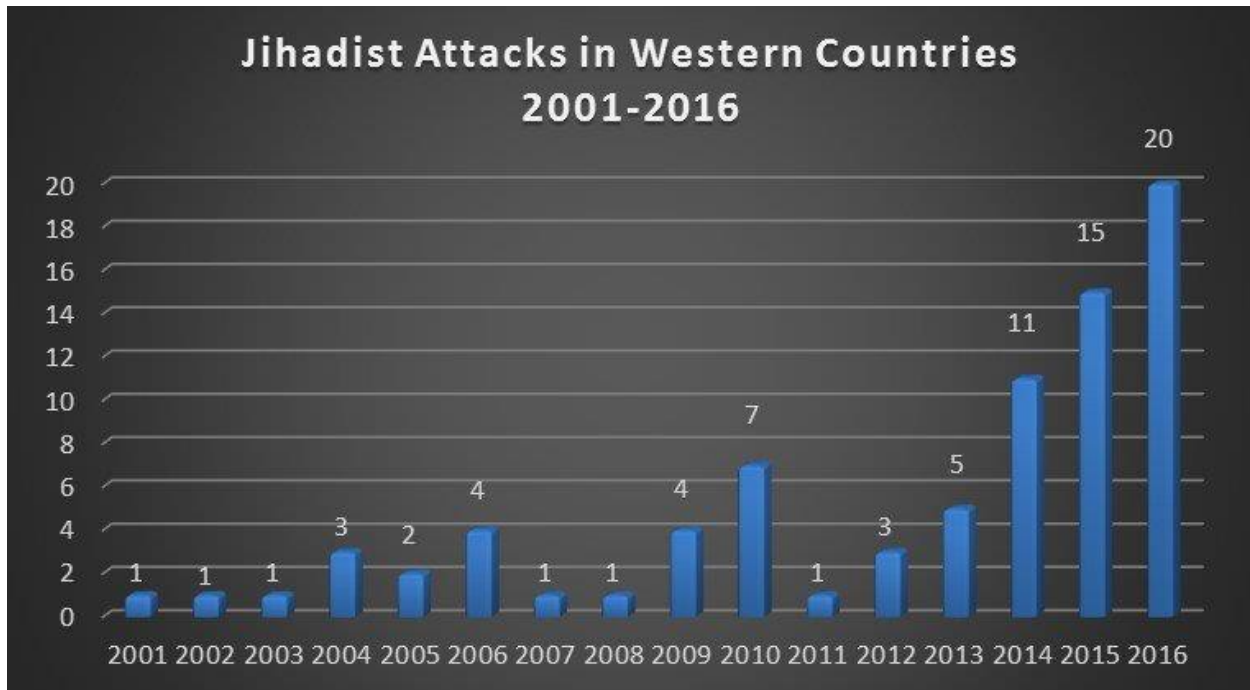
Moreover, the surge in the number of American foreign fighters is small compared to those who sympathize with and embrace ISIS's ideology. American authorities have consistently said that the popularity of ISIS's propaganda, driven largely by its savvy social media tactics, wholly overshadows that of al Qaeda. Tellingly, in May 2015 FBI Director James Comey spoke of "hundreds, maybe thousands" of ISIS sympathizers and potential recruits across the country, disclosing that the Bureau had related investigations running in all 50 states. A

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<sup>1</sup> See Adam Goldman, Jia Lynn Yang and John Muyskens, "The Islamic State's Suspected Inroads into America," *Washington Post*, updates August 8, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/isis-suspects/>.

few months later, in October 2015, Comey revealed that the FBI had a staggering 900 active investigations against homegrown violent extremists.<sup>2</sup>

These trends have remained consistent since. The amount of domestic jihadist activity is far greater than it has been in any previous period, including the spike in homegrown terrorist cases in 2009-10. The number of attacks is also growing across various Western countries, as this graphic recently produced by terrorism researcher Sam Mullins makes clear:



It has become an item of received wisdom that the jihadist threat we face in the United States is not the same as that which confronts the Europeans. This is true for a variety of reasons—including the American Muslim community’s level of integration and affluence—but these are not normal times in terms of the domestic threat of jihadism. Several factors are pushing the level of risk steeply upward. First, the explosion of jihadist social media usage, and the proficiency with which these groups use the online space, has created far more mobilization than we have seen in any previous period.<sup>3</sup> Second, the bloody Syria conflict—in which jihadists have managed to become a significant power on the battlefield—has had a tremendously galvanizing impact. Third, the growing pressure put on Muslims’ place in American society, including the

<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, *ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa* (Washington, DC: Program on Extremism, George Washington University, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> For more on jihadist use of social media, see, e.g., Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Nathaniel Barr, “The Social Science of Online Radicalization,” *War on the Rocks*, October 29, 2015; J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015) (describing ISIS’s use of Twitter at the group’s height on that platform); J.M. Berger and Heather Perez, *The Islamic State’s Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions Are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters* (Washington, DC: George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2016) (describing ISIS’s growing challenges on Twitter after the platform focused on account takedowns).

focus put on the issue in this year's presidential campaign, may further the sense of grievance within this community.

And jihadism is far from the only domestic terrorist challenge that we face. Anti-government violence has been growing as well. Here are some examples from the past several years:

- 2010: Man flies plane into IRS building in Texas; police officers killed by Sovereign Citizens in Arkansas.
- 2011: Alaska Peacemakers Militia members arrested and charged with plotting to kill or kidnap state troopers and a Fairbanks judge; Georgia militia members arrested in an alleged plot to bomb federal buildings, attack Atlanta and other cities with ricin, and murder law enforcement officials.
- 2012: Sovereign Citizens ambush and murder police in Louisiana.
- 2013: Sovereign Citizens arrested in Las Vegas allegedly had plans to execute random police officers.
- 2014: Robert Talbot, Jr. arrested for alleged scheme to launch "American Insurgent Movement"; antigovernment extremists murder two police officers in Las Vegas.
- 2015: Antigovernment Sovereign Citizen arrested prior to alleged coup plot in West Virginia.
- 2016: Armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

There has also been disturbing racially-motivated violence in recent years that can be characterized as terrorism. Recent examples of white nationalist/racist violence include:

- 2011: David Pedersen and Holly Grigsby engaged in a multi-state killing spree, killing four in three states.
- 2012: Wade Michael Page murdered six people during an attack on a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.
- 2014: Frazier Glenn Miller opened fire at Jewish institutions in Overland Park, Kansas, killing three.
- 2015: Dylann Storm Roof, hoping to incite a race war, killed nine African-American churchgoers at a bible study; a group of white separatists shot five African-Americans at a Black Lives Matter protest.
- 2016: Three people were stabbed during clashes at a Ku Klux Klan rally in Anaheim.

There have also been black nationalist-related acts of terrorism, often related to the shootings of African Americans by police officers that have also helped to spur the Black Lives Matter movement. Gavin Long and Micah Johnson are recent examples of this phenomenon.

As we see sub-state violence growing across several countries, including our own, one factor I would point to as particularly significant is social media, which I mentioned previously. Social media can make fringe causes embraced by disparate individuals more popular, and can hasten mobilization. This is true of both non-violent protests and also sub-state violence.

### **The Orlando Attack and the Over-Categorization of Lone Wolf Terrorism**

Omar Mateen, who struck the Pulse nightclub in Orlando on June 12, 2016, wanted the world to associate his attack with ISIS. Mateen felt so strongly about this that he took time out of his rampage to call 911 and swear allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. For its own part, ISIS was happy to associate itself with his attack. The group's Amaq News Agency has described Mateen as a "fighter from the Islamic State."

But should the Pulse attack be considered an "ISIS attack"? Almost immediately, commentators and experts referred to it as an act of lone wolf terrorism, the implication being that both Mateen and ISIS overstated his connection to the jihadist organization. The rush to label Orlando an act of lone wolf terrorism is part of a broader trend, one that has proven costly in the recent past.<sup>4</sup> We can see the tendency to quickly label attacks as lone wolf in other recent incidents. On July 14, Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, a Tunisian national residing in France, killed over 80 and wounded hundreds when he ploughed a 19-ton cargo truck through crowds celebrating Bastille Day in the southern French city of Nice. Mere days after the Nice massacre, a 17-year-old Afghan migrant seeking asylum in Germany attacked passengers on a train in Würzburg with an axe and a knife, wounding four before police killed him. A suicide bombing on July 24 injured 15 in the German city of Ansbach, and on July 26, two attackers claiming allegiance to ISIS stormed a church in a suburb of the French city of Rouen, slit an 84-year-old priest's throat, and took hostages.

These incidents are part of the aforementioned trend of increasing violence carried out by lone individuals. Analysts, journalists, and scholars were quick to label each perpetrator of these recent attacks as lone wolves: individuals who lacked substantial connections to ISIS or other jihadist groups, and who carried out their operations without the assistance of others. The designation has generally been applied within 24 hours of these attacks, before significant intelligence about an incident's planning and execution has emerged—and long before authorities have concluded their investigation. Observers have repeatedly erred by definitively categorizing attacks as lone-wolf operations when they would later turn out to be connected to broader cells or networks.

The tendency to view lone attackers as unconnected to the broader ISIS organization prevented observers from fully comprehending the magnitude of the network that was behind the complex coordinated attacks in Paris and Brussels. In April 2015, Sid Ahmed Ghlam, an Algerian national studying in France, called for medical help after accidentally shooting himself in the leg while handling a firearm. Authorities' investigation revealed that Ghlam, who was in possession of several guns, was planning to attack churches in the Paris area, and may have been involved in the murder of a woman found dead in a Paris suburb. In August 2015, three Americans restrained Ayoub El-Khazzani, a 25-year old Moroccan national, before he could open fire on passengers traveling by train from Amsterdam to Paris.

At the time, the two attacks were seen as disconnected, with Khazzani generally labeled a lone wolf. And the bumbling incompetence of both incidents—Ghlam shot himself, while Khazzani's weapon jammed before he could get off a shot—made the attacks seem like the work of amateurs. Meanwhile, ISIS fueled perceptions that it was primarily interested in inspiring lone-

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this point, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Nathaniel Barr, "The Myth of Lone Wolf Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, July 26, 2016, from which parts of this section are adapted.

wolf attacks rather than guiding them, with a pro-ISIS media outlet producing a propaganda video shortly after Khazzani's botched attack calling on "lone lions" to kill the group's enemies.

But after the devastating November 2015 attacks in Paris, it became clear that initial judgments had been wrong. A March 2016 *New York Times* article by Rukmini Callimachi detailed how Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the ground commander of the Paris attacks, had directed Ghlam, Khazzani, and several others to carry out attacks in Europe, even as he was preparing the Paris operation.<sup>5</sup> Although he of course wanted these small-scale plots to succeed, they also helped deflect attention from ISIS's more sophisticated operational planning, serving as a "smoke screen" that allowed the group to "calmly prepare" its future operations, in the words of one French official. Because counterterrorism analysts and officials viewed Ghlam, Khazzani, and other attackers as unrelated to one another, they did not identify the operational infrastructure involved in coordinating ISIS's various attacks in Europe.

The failure to identify common ties between supposed lone wolves and ISIS is part of a broader and long-standing pattern of underestimating the scope of jihadist networks in the West. An official inquiry into the July 7, 2005, terrorist attacks in London, for example, described the cell that carried it out as autonomous and self-actuating rather than tied to al-Qaeda.<sup>6</sup> The idea that the London bombings were unrelated to al-Qaeda was definitively refuted by a commemorative video the group released in July 2006, which showed a martyrdom tape recorded by cell leader Mohammad Sidique Khan. Al Qaeda's then-deputy emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, revealed that Khan and fellow plotter Shehzad Tanweer had visited al-Qaeda's training camps in Pakistan "seeking martyrdom," an account that has been corroborated by Western intelligence agencies. Bob Ayers, a security expert at London's Chatham House, commented when the new video was released, "It makes the police look pretty bad. It means the investigation was either wrong, or they identified links but were reluctant to reveal them."<sup>7</sup>

Since then, officials and analysts have often continued to ignore attackers' ties with broader networks. Part of the reason for the consistent failure may lie in a desire to avoid culpability; observers may perceive attacks carried out by networks as something officials should have prevented, but potential lone attackers are notoriously difficult to spot. Another reason may be a desire to downplay networks due to policy preferences, such as wanting to avoid taking kinetic action against the networks driving these attacks. But it is a mistake to conflate facts with policy preferences, and the truth is that terrorists' ties to broader networks are frequently overlooked.

The idea that lone-attacker plots carried out in 2016 were the work of individuals is already being discredited. When ISIS claimed responsibility for the July 2016 Würzburg train attack, the group released a video featuring the perpetrator that demonstrated ISIS had advance knowledge of his strike. Less than a week after the Nice attack, French authorities revealed that Lahouaiej Bouhlel may not have acted alone, as several individuals were detained. One suspect had posed

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<sup>5</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, "How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror under Europe's Gaze," *New York Times*, March 29, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons, *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005* (May 11, 2006), available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/11\\_05\\_06\\_narrative.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/11_05_06_narrative.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Sean Alfano, "Video: 2 London Bombers Were Qaeda," CBS News, July 7, 2006, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/video-2-london-bombers-were-qaeda/>.

for pictures in the truck that Lahouaiej Bouhlel drove through a celebrating crowd. The perpetrator had sent a text message to an alleged coconspirator minutes before the attack requesting “more weapons.”

The nature of radicalization and operational planning in the digital age has complicated efforts to interpret and analyze attacks perpetrated by single individuals. Jihadists plotting murders in the West used to congregate in person, meeting in small groups in underground mosques, houses, or other discrete locations. Radicalization occurred through in-person contact. Counterterrorism officials looked for physical hubs of recruitment, tapping phones and scanning surveillance videos for evidence that cells were meeting.

But with the social media boom and the growth in encrypted communications, radicalization and operational planning can easily take place entirely online. ISIS has capitalized on evolving communications technologies, building cohesive online communities that facilitate radicalization. The group has also established a team of “virtually planners” who use the Internet to identify recruits, and to coordinate and direct attacks, often without meeting the perpetrators in person. Junaid Hussain, a British ISIS operative who was killed in August 2015, played the role of virtual planner for the May 2015 strike against the Draw Muhammad contest in Garland, Texas. Hussain had communicated online with attacker Elton Simpson beforehand, and was the first to celebrate it on social media. It may take months—or longer—to detect the role of virtual planners in attacks.

The changing nature of operational planning underscores the need for a new paradigm for understanding the relationship between single attackers and networks. It no longer makes sense to apply pre-digital-age thinking to jihadist attacks perpetrated in the age of Twitter, Telegram, and end-to-end encryption.

Instead, it is useful to think of four categories of attacks, with descending connections to a network. The first category consists of operations in which the attacker was trained and dispatched by an organization. Reda Hame, who traveled to Syria and received weapons training from Abaaoud before being sent back to Europe, fits this mold. The second category is attackers in touch via social media with virtual planners such as Hussain, who help set targets, determine the timing of the attack, and provide technical assistance. The third category is operatives who are in contact with a militant group via online communications but do not receive specific instructions about carrying out an attack. Finally, the fourth category comprises the true lone wolves, individuals who strike without ever communicating with jihadist networks.

It is clear that few of the jihadists labeled lone wolves truly fit that definition. Recently, it seems that Europeans have been quicker to absorb that lesson. For example, after the recent gas canisters plot was foiled in France, it took little time for prosecutors to determine that the attackers had been directed by ISIS.<sup>8</sup> It’s not clear that we have absorbed that lesson in the U.S., but there are also networks at play in this country.

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<sup>8</sup> Camille Verdier, Steve Visser and Margot Haddad, “French Prosecutor: Women Who Planned Attack Were Directed by ISIS,” CNN, September 9, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/08/world/france-arrests-gas-cylinders-notre-dame/>.

## ISIS's External Operations and the State of Networked Terrorism

Currently networked terrorism is a far more powerful threat to Western countries than it has been in years, due to both a rise in mobilization to violence as well as a remarkable improvement in terrorist tradecraft due to numerous factors, including the explosion in end-to-end encryption. This section first looks at the network that recently carried out the Paris and Brussels attacks as an example of how networks function in 2016.<sup>9</sup>

The recent attacks in Paris and Brussels represent a watershed moment not just for ISIS, but for the entire jihadist movement. The attacks mark the first time that a single jihadist network succeeded in carrying out two separate mass casualty attacks in Europe. In the past, when jihadist networks struck in Europe, they were pursued with the full weight of European security and intelligence services, and relevant perpetrators were neutralized before they could mount a second attack.

ISIS's successes are the result of a complex strategy executed by officials in the Amn al-Kharji, a shadowy wing of ISIS's bureaucracy responsible for selecting and training external operatives and for planning terrorist attacks in areas outside of ISIS's core territory, including those in Europe. Though ISIS's attacks and plots in Europe have received a great deal of media attention, the Amn al-Kharji has largely stayed out of the spotlight. This aversion to publicity is deliberate, and demonstrates the Amn al-Kharji's importance to ISIS. While ISIS's military branches in Syria and Iraq readily advertise their exploits, the Amn al-Kharji is shrouded in secrecy, sometimes employing disinformation to mislead intelligence agencies. Nonetheless, enough information now has emerged in open-source reporting to paint a picture—however incomplete—of the Amn al-Kharji.

The most detailed information on the Amn al-Kharji comes from an interview given by an ISIS defector, known only as “Abu Khaled.”<sup>10</sup> According to Abu Khaled, the Amn al-Kharji is one of four agencies that fall under ISIS's amniyat, or security apparatus. The other three agencies are the Amn al-Dawla, which is responsible for internal security within ISIS's territory; the Amn al-Dakhili, which is akin to an interior ministry; and the Amn al-Askari, or the military intelligence wing. Abu Khaled, a former member of the Amn al-Dawla, explained that the Amn al-Kharji was responsible for conducting espionage and terrorist attacks in enemy territory, and that the agency had developed intricate tactics enabling its operatives' infiltration. Indeed, long before the Amn al-Kharji put its attack plans for Brussels and Paris into motion, the branch spearheaded operations behind enemy lines in Syria and Iraq. By the time ISIS began investing serious resources in European operations, the Amn al-Kharji had already refined its tradecraft for attacks outside ISIS-controlled territory.

Abu Khaled's testimony sheds light on key players within the Amn al-Kharji's opaque structure. According to Abu Khaled, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIS's late spokesman who served as one of the organization's top officials until his death, appointed the commanders of each of the

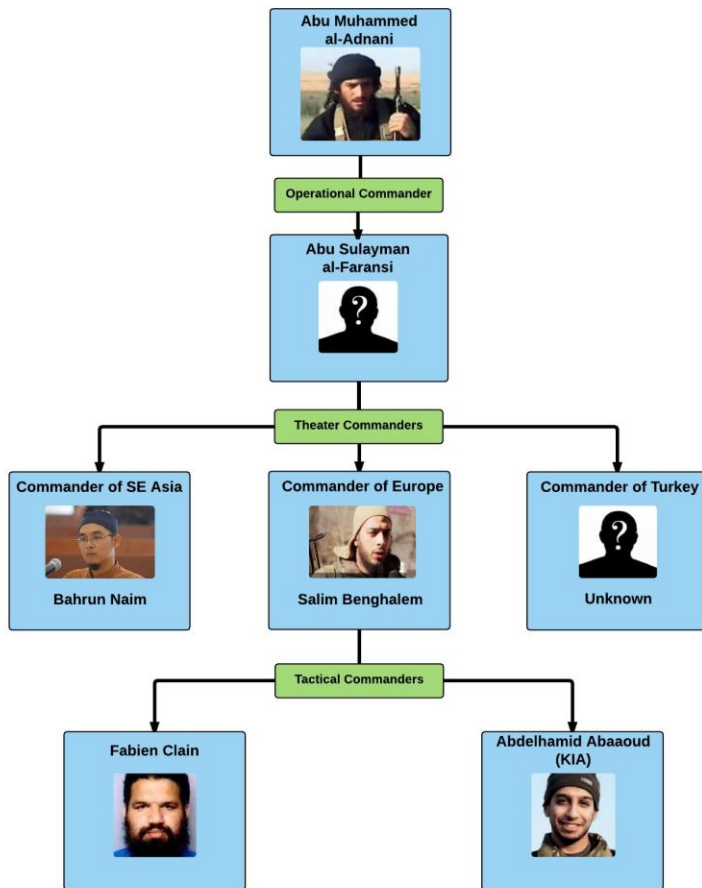
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<sup>9</sup> For more on this point, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Nathaniel Barr, “Recent Attacks Illuminate the Islamic State's Europe Attack Network,” Jamestown Foundation, April 27, 2016, from which parts of this section are adapted.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Weiss, “Confessions of an ISIS Spy,” *Daily Beast*, November 15, 2015.



amniyat’s four branches. Other reports identified the Syria-born Adnani as the operational commander of the Amn al-Kharji. However, given Adnani’s role in managing multiple agencies within ISIS, it is highly likely that his position in the Amn al-Kharji had been largely bureaucratic. That is, Adnani likely signed off on external operations, but was not involved in operational planning.



Rather, responsibility for directing ISIS’s external operations falls to an elusive figure known by his *kunya* (nom de guerre), Abu Sulayman al-Faransi. Despite his prominent role in ISIS, little personal information about al-Faransi is available. It is believed that—as his *kunya* suggests—Faransi is a French national. According to French sources, he now resides in northern Syria with his wife—also a French national—and two children. Reports allege that al-Faransi was promoted to external operations chief following the Paris attacks, suggesting that the Frenchman was rewarded for overseeing one of ISIS’s most high-profile attacks. Al-Faransi’s name also surfaced in investigations into the Brussels attacks. Belgian authorities investigating the contents of a computer owned by Ibrahim El Bakraoui, one of the two suicide bombers who struck the Zaventem airport, concluded that Bakraoui

had been in contact with al-Faransi, and that other cell members may have been, as well. Bakraoui had submitted attack plans to the Frenchman.

Below al-Faransi in the Amn al-Kharji are the theater commanders, responsible for planning operations in various regions that ISIS wants to target. Theater commanders are perhaps the most pivotal actors in ISIS’s external operations structure, as they serve as a bridge between strategic planners and tactical operators. It appears that ISIS appoints theater commanders who originate from the regions over which they are given authority. For instance, ISIS’s external operations in Southeast Asia are likely led by Bahrun Naim, an Indonesian militant now based in Syria who was responsible for coordinating the January 2016 attacks in Jakarta. ISIS has also likely appointed theater commanders for external operations in both Turkey and North Africa.

The theater commander for Europe is believed to be Salim Benghalem, another French national whose involvement in jihadism predates ISIS's emergence. Benghalem became radicalized in a French prison when serving an earlier sentence for attempted murder. He soon fell in with a network commonly known as the Buttes-Chaumont group, a Paris-based jihadist network involved in recruiting individuals to fight U.S. forces in Iraq in the mid-2000s. This group also included Cherif and Said Kouachi, the brothers who carried out the Charlie Hebdo massacre in January 2015. In 2011, Benghalem and Cherif Kouachi traveled to Yemen, where they received training from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Soon after traveling to Syria to join ISIS in early 2013, Benghalem was tapped to serve as a prison guard for French hostages whom ISIS had kidnapped. Several former prison guards from this group have emerged as key actors in ISIS's European external operations efforts. For instance, Mehdi Nemmouche, a fellow French national who guarded French hostages alongside Benghalem, returned to Europe and carried out an attack on the Brussels Jewish Museum in May 2014 that killed four. Naajim Laachraoui, a Belgian national who served as one of the suicide bombers at the Zaventem airport, had also been a guard. Benghalem now outranks all of his former prison guard colleagues.

As the theater commander for ISIS's European operations, Benghalem oversees several commanders responsible for training operatives, and planning and coordinating operations at the ground level. These tactical commanders play a hands-on role in ISIS's Europe operations, and sometimes participate in attacks. Given their more public role, these commanders often attract greater media scrutiny than their more discrete superiors. Such was the case for Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was killed by French authorities several days after the Paris attacks. In January 2015, Abaaoud deployed to Athens, where he directed a cell based in the Belgian city of Verviers that was disrupted when Belgian authorities intercepted telephone calls between Abaaoud and the plotters.

Between the Verviers plot and the Paris attacks, Abaaoud spent his time training operatives and planning unsophisticated, low-cost operations in Europe. In the summer of 2015, Abaaoud trained Paris native Reda Hame and at least one other operative to carry out mass casualty attacks on soft targets in France and Spain. This plan was disrupted when authorities arrested Hame's counterpart in Spain. Abaaoud was also in contact with Ayoub El Khazzani, who was tackled by passengers when he tried to open fire during an August 2015 train ride from Amsterdam to Paris. Khazzani never traveled to Syria, suggesting that, in addition to training operatives already in ISIS-controlled territory, Abbaoud sought to inspire radicalized individuals based in Europe to carry out attacks on their own.

These small-scale plots distracted authorities, who, as I warned in the first part of this testimony, *never looked beyond the lone-wolf paradigm to find the terrorist networks of which the plotters were a part*. All the while, Abaaoud was planning the Paris attacks, his jihadist magnum opus. In a move uncharacteristic of a commander of his stature, Abaaoud traveled to Paris to oversee and coordinate the operation personally. Though there is little information on Abaaoud's activities in Europe in the months and weeks before the Paris attacks, multiple news outlets reported that he traveled to the United Kingdom in the summer of 2015, possibly to case potential targets or to coordinate with other militants. Abaaoud then personally coordinated and participated in the

Paris operations, dropping off one of the suicide bombers, opening fire on civilians in several different locations, and later driving to an area near the Bataclan and contacting militants inside the concert hall. Unlike the Verviers plot, Abaaoud was committed to personally seeing the Paris attacks through to completion.

Abaaoud planned additional attacks after the Paris massacre, but French authorities caught and killed him in a raid on an apartment in a Paris suburb. Though Abaaoud's death eliminated one of ISIS's most skilled external operatives, it is believed that ISIS quickly replaced him with Fabien Clain, a French convert whose voice was featured in the audio message in which ISIS claimed responsibility for the Paris attacks.

A look at the networks involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks provides further evidence of the sophistication of ISIS's external operations, and some indication of how jihadist networks will look in the United States (though U.S. networks are not be as sprawling, and are often somewhat less interlinked). ISIS utilized a networked approach in executing the two attacks. That is, the group built a vast network in Europe to prepare for the Paris attacks, with some militants serving in an operational capacity while others played a support and logistics role. That ISIS was able to sustain such a vast support infrastructure in Europe is striking, considering the challenges of evading European intelligence agencies. Even more remarkable is that ISIS was able to keep its support network largely intact following the Paris attacks, and then subsequently mobilize this network to strike again in Brussels just months later amid a heightened security atmosphere. This feat reflects both the magnitude of ISIS's European network and the quality of its tradecraft.

**Zerkani Network**

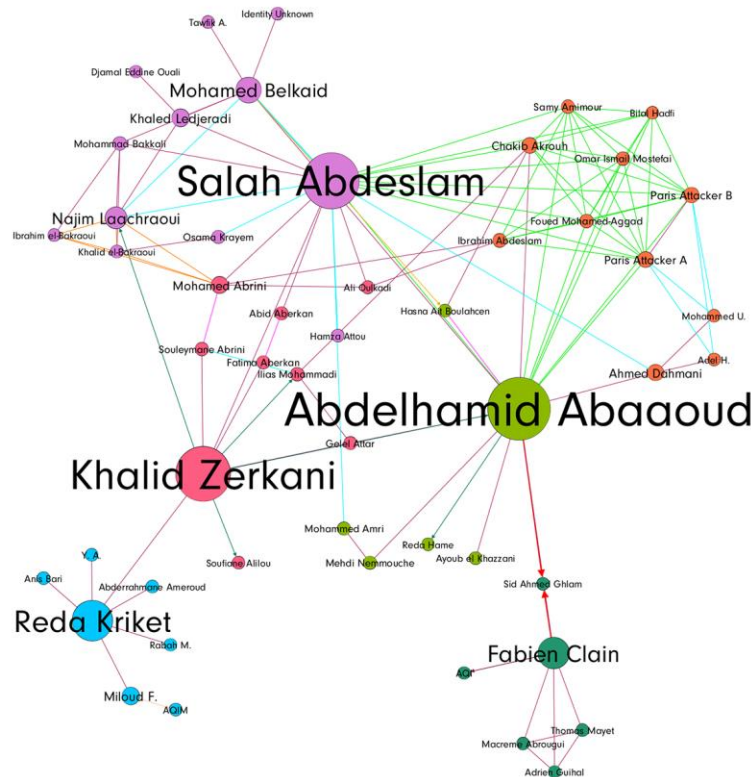
This graph represents connections between groups of Islamic extremists in Europe. The size of the node reflects its measure of betweenness centrality, or how frequently that node bridges the shortest distance between other nodes.

The node color uses modularity to attempt to determine distinct communities.

The edge color reflects the relationship between extremists.

**Edge Legend**

- Associate of
- Paris Attacker
- Brussels Attacker
- Recruiter of
- Traveled With
- Family Relationship
- Commander of
- Funded
- Supporter of
- Recruiter for



The graphic above reveals the scope of the networks involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks. Abaaoud sits at the center of the network, attesting to his role as the overall coordinator of the

Paris attacks. Another key actor is Khalid Zerkani, an integral jihadist player in the Brussels neighborhood of Molenbeek, a hotbed of militancy that has served as a safe haven for ISIS operatives. Though Zerkani—who has been sentenced to 15 years in prison for his role as a jihadist recruiter—was not involved in either the Paris or Brussels attacks, the foreign fighter recruitment networks he established from 2012 to 2014 have been at the center of ISIS’s ongoing operations in Europe. Several key individuals involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks, including Abaaoud, Naajim Laachraoui and Salah Abdeslam, are directly linked to Zerkani, as was Reda Kriket, who had amassed an “unprecedented” weapons arsenal and was in the final stages of operational planning when French authorities arrested him shortly after the Brussels attacks.

ISIS operatives in Europe linked with Zerkani have also relied on other members of the Zerkani network as they sought to evade European authorities and plan future attacks. After the Paris attacks, Salah Abdeslam contacted Abid Aberkan, the nephew of Fatima Aberkan, who has been described as the “mother” of the Zerkani network. Abdeslam hid at the house of Aberkan’s mother, where he was eventually discovered and arrested.

The graphic also reveals the extensive overlap between the Paris and Brussels attack networks. Key individuals involved in providing logistical support for the Paris attacks rapidly transitioned to an operational role in Brussels. For instance, Naajim Laachraoui helped construct explosives for the Paris attacks before donning his own suicide vest in Brussels. Mohamed Belkaid, who was believed to have been in contact with several of the Paris attackers via phone, housed Salah Abdeslam while Abdeslam was on the run from Belgian authorities. Belkaid was likely involved in planning attacks with Abdeslam when Belkaid was killed by Belgian forces in a raid several days before the Brussels attacks. Mohamed Abrini is yet another individual who played a support role in Paris before mobilizing in Brussels; he rented an apartment that was used by several Paris attackers and later tried to plant a bomb at the Zaventem airport, though he failed to detonate his explosives. This pattern suggests that ISIS’s strategy in Europe involves building dual-purpose cells that can be converted from a support to attack role in order to maximize the utility of its network.

The U.S. has also had domestic terrorist networks in recent years, though they are not as robust as the European networks. For example, indictments and other publicly-available sources of information reveal a remarkably dense ISIS network clustered around the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. Almost every actor in this network is linked with one another.

As we talk about lone wolf terrorism, let’s not lose sight of the role that networks will continue to play, especially in this age of improved tradecraft.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.