



The Crime-Terror Nexus in France

- The objective of this working paper is to present an overview of links between crime and terrorism (the crime-terror nexus) in France, highlight potential risks, and make a series of recommendations for how such risks can be mitigated.
 - It is part of a Europe-wide survey that will produce similar papers for all 28 member states of the European Union. In doing so, the aim is to generate a more holistic understanding of threats from crime and terrorism, and promote new and innovative ways of tackling them.
 - Though illicit activities are notoriously difficult to measure, the presence of links between crime and terrorism can be seen in three areas:
 1. **In Corsica**, where there have been social and operational links between organised crime and separatists;
 2. In **areas of high crime and social deprivation**, where jihadists with criminal pasts have leveraged criminal skills and connections for the purposes of terrorism, and actively encouraged crime for the sake of jihad;
 3. In **French prisons**, where the management of radicalised individuals has come under scrutiny, with a large number of radicalised individuals scheduled for release over the coming years.
 - Our recommendations include action on prisons, terrorist financing, information sharing, and collaboration between security agencies as well as between government and non-government actors.
 - Finally, while there is no inherent or automatic link between socio-economic conditions and involvement in terrorism, it seems clear that jihadist “delinquency” in France has occurred in some of the same geographical areas and demographic pools from which “ordinary” delinquency has emerged as well. Rather than further marginalising and excluding those areas, there needs to be a serious and honest discussion about the extent to which state and civil society can address the social conditions in which extremist narratives and ideologies resonate.
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1 Introduction

France has been at the centre of the recent “wave” of terrorist attacks in Europe. Not only have large numbers of French residents and citizens travelled to Syria in order to join Islamic State (IS), French supporters of the group have carried out large-scale attacks and atrocities at home. With 130 fatalities, the Paris attacks on 13 November 2015 were the single most devastating terrorist operation in Europe for over a decade. As with other attacks and attempted attacks, many of its perpetrators had criminal backgrounds. To what extent did their criminal pasts facilitate their involvement in terrorism? What links between terrorism and crime are there in France, and what does this mean for how terrorism should be fought?

The objective of this working paper is to present an overview of links between crime and terrorism in France, highlight potential risks, and make a series of recommendations for how such risks can be mitigated. It is part of a Europe-wide survey that will produce similar papers for all 28 member states of the European Union. In doing so, the aim is to generate a more holistic understanding of threats from crime and terrorism, and promote new and innovative ways of tackling them.

The paper’s empirical basis is a survey of open sources, including relevant government and inter-governmental reports, academic research, court documents, newspaper articles, as well as interviews with practitioners and subject matter experts. The research took place between January 2018 and March 2018, and was carried out by a team of French and British researchers.¹

Though illicit activities are notoriously difficult to measure and quantify, the presence of links between crime and terrorism can be seen in three areas:

1. **In Corsica**, where there have been social and operational links between organised crime and separatists;
2. In **areas of high crime and social deprivation**, where jihadists with criminal pasts have leveraged criminal skills and connections for the purposes of terrorism, and actively encouraged crime for the sake of jihad;
3. In **French prisons**, where the management of radicalised individuals has come under scrutiny, with a large number of radicalised individuals scheduled for release over the coming years.

¹ The authors of this report are Peter R. Neumann and Rajan Basra. We wish to thank Camille Rives and Alexis du Fayet de la Tour for their research support. We are also grateful to all interviewees, whether named or anonymous.

Our recommendations include action on prisons, terrorist financing, information sharing, and collaboration between security agencies as well as between government and non-government actors. We also believe that, given the strong link between areas of radicalisation and areas of high crime and social deprivation, there needs to be a new and concerted effort to address the social conditions in which it is possible for extremist narratives and ideologies to resonate.

The paper starts with overviews of organised crime and terrorism in France, before exploring three areas in which potential links have emerged: between organised criminals and separatists in Corsica; among French jihadists, whose criminal pasts have enabled terrorist operations; and in French prisons. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for policymakers, security agencies, and society as a whole.

Box 1: What is the Crime-Terror Nexus?

The concept of the crime-terror nexus emerged in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of globalisation. Amidst shifting geopolitics and the birth of the information age, analysts noticed that terrorist and insurgent groups were increasingly adapting criminal modus operandi to further their aims.

Since then, scholars have identified *three types of crime-terror nexus: institutional, organisational, and social.*

Institutional

One of the pioneers was Tamara Makarenko.² On her “crime-terror continuum”, she identified three types of institutional linkages between criminal and terrorist groups:

- At one end, criminal and terrorist groups engaged in *co-operation*, either in limited, transaction-based alliances, or in more sophisticated coalitions.
- Nearing the middle, *convergence* indicated when groups adapted skills belonging to the other, resulting in “hybrid criminal-terrorist groups”.
- At the other end was *transformation*, in which a group had completely transformed into the other by way of a shift in motivation.

Among the most prominent examples have been the Taliban, which have at times depended on Afghanistan’s heroin production; the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces’ (FARC) involvement in their country’s narcotics industry; and the smuggling of petrol and counterfeit goods by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Organisational

Writing at the same time as Makarenko, Letizia Paoli focused on the structural and organisational similarities between youth gangs and terrorist groups, which she categorised as “clannish” organisations:³

- They were involved in illegal activity, including violence;
- They required members’ “absolute commitment”;
- They offered *emotional benefits*, such as status, “brotherhood”, identity, and belonging.

continues...

² Tamara Makarenko, “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism”, *Global Crime*, Vol 6, No 1, 2004, pp.129-145.

³ Letizia Paoli, “The Paradoxes of Organized Crime”, *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, Vol 37, No 1, 2002, pp.51-97.

In Paoli's view, drawing sharp distinctions between actors based on their stated aims – criminal versus political – could be misleading, because the distinctions might be blurred and “goals [could] change”.

As an example, she cited white supremacist gangs in the United States, which recruited their membership according to ideological principles and professed to have a political programme but were heavily involved in “ordinary” crime.

Social

In a recent study of jihadist recruitment in Europe, Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann highlighted not the convergence of criminals and terrorists as groups or organisations but of their social networks, environments, or milieus.⁴ Rather than formalised collaboration or even transformation, they found that criminal and terrorist groups recruited from sociologically similar pools of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps.

This “new” crime-terror nexus had four facets:

- It affected processes of *radicalisation*, because involvement in terrorism could offer redemption and legitimise crime.
- It highlighted the *role of prisons* as environments for radicalisation and networking among criminals and extremists.
- It emphasised the *development of skills and experiences* that could be useful for terrorists, particularly access to weapons, forged documents, and the familiarity with violence.
- It facilitated the *financing* of terrorism, especially through petty crime.

Despite differences in approach and perspective, the *three types of nexus – institutional, organisational, and social* – are not mutually exclusive. Taken together, they provide the analytical framework of the Crime Terror Nexus Project.

⁴ Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 10, No 6, 2016, pp.25-40.

2 Organised crime

French law does not contain an explicit definition of organised crime. Rather, the Ministry of the Interior offers a general, all-encompassing categorisation, covering several organisational models and a range of crimes. The organised crime label, therefore, is applied to “professional” criminals on the “margins of society” that live off the profits of crime, as well as criminal syndicates that hold a monopoly on one aspect of crime in an area.⁵ In turn, these criminals carry out serious crimes, such as drug trafficking, extortion, counterfeiting, and money laundering, amongst others.⁶

Research into organised crime in France, meanwhile, is lacking. There exists neither a single independent centre for scientific research nor a university chair examining the phenomenon, which means the extent, operations, and impact of organised crime is – more so than usual – difficult to gauge.

Nevertheless, it is possible to highlight the general trends seen amongst crime groups in France. What seems clear is that, outside Corsica, organised crime in France is a significantly less organised and systemic phenomenon than in other Mediterranean countries, especially Italy. The following section provides an overview of this complex phenomenon, outlining the groups involved, their activities, and the locations in which they operate.

Groups

There are few, if any, traditional “mafia-style” criminal organisations in France – akin to the *Cosa Nostra* in Sicily – that seek to partially replace the state.⁷ In this way, France is a useful “counterexample” to countries such as Italy.⁸ Instead, organised crime is characterised by *Grand Banditisme* (“Grand Banditry”),⁹ which involves looser network structures, often without a hierarchy or known leader,¹⁰ as well as a prevalence of small, local, and specialised groups.¹¹

5 Central Directorate of Judicial Police, “La lutte contre la criminalité organisée”, Ministry of the Interior, available at: <https://www.police-nationale.interieur.gouv.fr/Organisation/Direction-Centrale-de-la-Police-Judiciaire/Lutte-contre-la-criminalite-organisee>.

6 Ibid.

7 Christian Choquet, “Evaluer la menace terroriste et criminelle”, *Cultures & Conflits*, 25 February 2005.

8 Interview with French security official, 13 February 2018.

9 Mathilde Régis, “Fabrice Rizzoli: Face à une criminalité érigée en système il ne faut pas être seul, sinon on se fait broyer”, *Le Lanceur*, 6 January 2017 (hereafter *Le Lanceur*, 6 January 2017).

10 Christian Choquet, “Evaluer la menace terroriste et criminelle”, *Cultures & Conflits*, 25 February 2005.

11 Laurent Borredon and Simon Piel, “Gang des cités ou d’Europe de l’Est: le nouveau visage du crime organisé”, *Le Monde*, 14 December 2013.

While French authorities have not publicly released an estimate of the number of crime groups operating in the country, the groups can be broadly categorised into three subtypes: the *Corso-Marseillais*, *banlieue* groups, and *foreign crime groups*.

The *Corso-Marseillais* is a social body comprised of the Corsican mafia alongside other groups in the French Riviera.¹² The Corsican mafia itself is comprised of various clans and groups, such as *Brise de Mer*, *Bergers de la Plaine Orientale*, *Unione Corse*, *Bande Venzolasca*, and *Bande du Petit Bar*.¹³ *Brise de Mer* has a national reach, and is one of the most structured and hierarchically ordered, while others, such as *Bergers de la Plaine Orientale*, have a local reach. Beyond Corsica and the French Riviera (Marseille) there are no comparable mafia-style organisations in France.

In recent years these groups have increasingly infiltrated the island's economy and politics,¹⁴ and are firmly embedded within the social fabric of Corsica.¹⁵ Their violence and secrecy – abetted by corruption – means that it is difficult to fully appreciate the role of the Corsican mafia on the island.¹⁶ Their growth was inadvertently abetted by the French security services' focus on separatism, allowing organised crime to grow relatively unchecked.¹⁷

Banlieue groups (including street-gangs), which originate from the suburbs of major French cities such as Paris, are relatively new actors in *Grand Banditisme*. Their activities have a long-standing link to the drug trade,¹⁸ and their involvement can frequently trigger a spiral of retaliatory violence, in turn potentially leading to the economic “desertification” of French suburbs.¹⁹

Foreign groups are primarily from Eastern Europe (especially the Balkans), though also include Italian and Russian organised crime groups. They are especially present in the Paris and Rhône-Alpes regions, and specialise in typical organised crime activities such as drugs, as well as more esoteric crimes such as the trafficking of metals.²⁰ They are sometimes involved in the supply-chain of drugs to *banlieue* groups.²¹

Activities

Crime groups carry out a range of activities, from the trafficking of people and firearms, to extortion, fraud, robberies, and money laundering.²² The primary organised crime activity – as seen throughout

12 “Hélène Constanty: ‘Une mafia est à l’œuvre en Corse’”, *Le Point*, 18 March 2017. Mathilde Régis, see above.

13 *Le Lanceur*, 6 January 2017; Interview with Prof. Xavier Crettiez, 16 February 2018.

14 Caroline Politi, “Règlements de compte: ‘En Corse on ne tue pas comme à Marseille’”, *L’Express*, 13 September 2012.

15 Interview with Jean-François Gayraud, 7 February 2018.

16 Corsica has a long-standing high per capita murder rate; “Corse: l’île aux homicides”, *Corse Matin*, 23 October 2015. Interview with Jean-François Gayraud, 7 February 2018.

17 Interview with Prof. Xavier Crettiez, 16 February 2018.

18 Jean-Marc Leclerc, “Ces mafias qui prospèrent en France”, *Le Figaro*, 26 June 2012.

19 *Le Lanceur*, 6 January 2017; for more on this, see the work of the European Commission’s “Projet Falcone: criminalité et immigration”, available at: https://issuu.com/mafias/docs/projet_falcone.

20 “Le crime organisé en France: pas de mafia mais des ‘organisations structurées’”, *20 minutes*, 30 November 2013.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Transcrime, *From Illegal Markets to Legitimate Businesses: The Portfolio of Organised Crime in Europe*, Università degli Studi di Trento, 2015, pp.101-106; Stefan Lollivier and Christophe Souliez, *La criminalité en France*, Observatoire National de la Délinquance et des Réponses Pénales (ONDRP), 2016.

Europe – is *drug trafficking*.²³ The overall French market is estimated at €3.5 billion per year.²⁴ Cannabis is the most consumed narcotic product, with Morocco being the largest provider: there are 1.2 million regular users and 550,000 daily users, with the market requiring an annual quantity of 200-300 tons.²⁵ The highly profitable, transnational drug trade often has a localised impact: it contributes, for example, to the large underground economy in the northern suburbs of Marseille.²⁶

Weapons trafficking is difficult to quantify in France. France's Central Office for Combatting Organised Crime (OCLCO) has highlighted that firearms are principally imported from the Balkans, with two routes used: southern Europe via Italy and southern or northern France via Slovenia, Austria and the east of France.²⁷

Locations

Geography has an important influence on organised crime in France. Sitting at the heart of Western Europe, the country – much like its neighbours Belgium, Italy, and Spain – serves as an ideal transit country for illicit trade.²⁸ Of particular note is the drug trafficking route from North Africa via Spain, that crosses France in order to access central and northern Europe.

Crime in France can be generally mapped on a North-South axis that extends from Lille to Corsica, via the Paris region. Each of the key areas in this axis – Paris, Marseille, and Corsica – have their relative speciality: drug trafficking in the Greater Paris area (Paris, Hauts-de-Seine, Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-de-Marne), and extortion in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region in the south-east.²⁹

Overall, it seems clear that France has organised crime structures that can be clearly located in terms of geography and networks, but that it is significantly less affected than other Mediterranean countries.

23 Transcrime, *From Illegal Markets to Legitimate Businesses: The Portfolio of Organised Crime in Europe*, Università degli Studi di Trento, 2015, p.102.

24 "Les dernières tendances du crime en France", *RTL*, 17 November 2014.

25 Stefan Lollivier and Christophe Souliez, *La criminalité en France*, Observatoire National de la Délinquance et des Réponses Pénales (ONDRP), 2016, p.36.

26 Fabrizio Maccaglia and Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, *Atlas des mafias: Acteurs, trafics et marchés criminels dans le monde* (Paris: Autrement, 2014).

27 *Ibid.*

28 "Le crime organisé en France: pas de mafia mais des 'organisations structures'", *20 minutes*, 30 November 2013.

29 Interview with French security official, 13 February 2018; Laurent Borredon and Simon Piel, "Gang des cités ou d'Europe de l'Est: le nouveau visage du crime organisé", *Le Monde*, 14 December 2013.

3 Terrorism

While France's exposure to organised crime has been limited, it has been severely affected by terrorism.³⁰ A wave of jihadist attacks since January 2015 have caused the deaths of 239 people, with many more injured, and the government declaring a state of emergency from November 2015 to November 2017.³¹ This wave of violence has also affected the social fabric of the country, contributing to greater polarisation in society and the electoral rise of the far-right.

The greatest threat is from jihadist terrorism, emanating from groups such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, though there exists a latent threat from nationalist, far-right, and far-left terrorism.

Jihadists

The jihadist terrorism threat in France has been at an apex since the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks. The nature of the threat is broad: from rudimentary attacks with minimal preparation – such as vehicle rammings or knife stabbings – to more sophisticated plots, involving coordinated bombings and marauding firearms attacks. Attacks have included those that require little organisation, logistics, and connections (so-called “attacks of initiative”), to those by highly networked cells, either home-grown or directed from overseas.³²

Attackers do not fit a single profile. They have included a 40-year-old PhD student with few signs of previous involvement in extremism (Farid Ikken),³³ as well as a former criminal with long-standing connections to jihadist movements (Larossi Abballa).³⁴ With notable exceptions, almost all attackers have been male,³⁵ and many have had criminal pasts.³⁶ Their anchoring in ideology varies, from long-time believers to recent converts. Similarly, some were known to French counterterrorism authorities (and labelled with a “Fiche S” flag), while others were unknown.

30 We define terrorism as symbolic acts of politically motivated violence. See Peter R. Neumann and M.L.R. Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2008), p.8.

31 “Terrorisme: 239 morts dans des attentats en France depuis janvier 2015”, *LCI*, 2 October 2017.

32 For more, see Marc Hecker and Elie Tenenbaum, “France vs Jihadism: The Republic in a New Age of Terror”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, Ifri, January 2017.

33 “Paris attack: Notre-Dame assailant identified,” *BBC News*, 7 June 2017.

34 “Everything We Know About the Paris Knife Attacker Inspired By ISIS”, *Time*, 14 June 2016.

35 There are examples, however, of female plotters, as seen in the failed attack on Notre-Dame cathedral in September 2016. A car, filled with gas bottles and parked next to the cathedral, failed to explode.

36 Interview with Jean-François Gayraud, 7 February 2018; Interview with Fabien Truong, 28 February 2018. His latest book, *Loyautés radicales: L’Islam et les « mauvais garçons » de la Nation* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017) investigates the criminal past of Islamist radicals.

It is likely that the threat will remain high. Jihadist propaganda has targeted France over its foreign policy, domestic religious policies, as well as the “essence” of France as a “flagship of disbelief”, which have found a receptive audience in the country due to a variety of sociological, cognitive, psychological, and personal factors.³⁷ These explanations, alongside recent foiled plots, suggest that jihadism will remain a threat in France – despite the Islamic State’s recent territorial losses – and will continue to resonate and inspire attacks in the country.³⁸

Attacks, Plots, and Arrests

Since 2012, more than twenty terrorist attacks have been carried out in France, with the majority taking place in Paris.³⁹ They have frequently targeted the military and police, as well as indiscriminately attacked civilians. Notable events include:

- *March 2012*: Mohamed Merah killed seven people, targeting French soldiers (two of them Muslim) and Jewish civilians (including children), during multiple attacks over several days in and around Toulouse.
- *December 2014*: Bertrand Nzohabonayo injured three policemen with a knife in front of the police station of Joué-lès-Tours (Indre-et-Loire).
- *January 2015*: Chérif and Saïd Kouachi killed twelve people during a firearms attack at the offices of Charlie Hebdo, a satirical newspaper, in Paris. Their attack was coordinated with Amedy Coulibaly, who killed five people in a series of shootings over three days, including a hostage situation at a kosher supermarket in Paris.
- *June 2015*: Yassin Salhi beheaded his boss and drove his vehicle into gas canisters at a factory in Saint-Quentin-Fallavier. Salhi later committed suicide in prison.
- *August 2015*: Ayoub El Khazzani, a Belgian-Moroccan man, opened fire in the Amsterdam-Paris Thalys train before his gun jammed and he was subdued by passengers. There were no fatalities in the attack.
- *November 2015*: A group of Islamic State terrorists carried out coordinated explosives and firearms attacks at the Stade de France, the Bataclan, and cafés and restaurants in Paris. They kill 130 people and injure over 400.
- *June 2016*: Larossi Abballa killed two police officers in a knife attack in Magnanville. Abballa live-streamed the aftermath of the attack, prior to being shot dead by police.
- *July 2016*: Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel killed 86 people and injured more than 300 by driving a truck into the Bastille Day crowds in Nice.

³⁷ For more, see Laurence Bindner, *Jihadists' Grievance Narratives against France*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), Policy Brief, February 2018.

³⁸ “France has foiled two Islamist attacks this year – minister”, *Reuters*, 25 February 2018.

³⁹ Jean-François Gayraud, *Théorie des Hybrides* (Paris: CNRS Edition, 2017), pp. 206-211.

- *July 2016*: Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitejean killed 85-year-old priest Jacques Hamel with a knife during mass at the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray in Normandy.
- *April 2017*: one week prior to the presidential election, Karim Chuerfi kills one police officer and injures two others in a firearms attack on the Champs-Élysées.
- *August 2017*: Hamou Benlatrèche ran his car into a group of soldiers in the Levallois-Peret suburb of Paris, injuring six.
- *March 2018*: Redouane Lakdim killed four people in Carcassonne and Trèbes, culminating in a hostage situation at a supermarket. Lakdim demanded the release of Salah Abdeslam, a jihadist involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks.

Many other attacks were thwarted: Gérard Collomb, the Minister of the Interior, has stated that 20 plots were foiled in 2017, with two foiled so far in 2018.⁴⁰ The number of arrests is at a similarly fast pace: from 2012 to 2016, there were at least 1,228 arrests made for jihadist-related activities, with the annual totals increasing each year.⁴¹

Foreign Fighters and Returnees

More than six thousand Europeans “foreign fighters” have joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. France has been hugely affected by this mobilisation, with 1,910 individuals having left the country to fight amongst those groups.⁴² According to the government’s February 2018 estimate, approximately 680 adults and 500 children remain in the conflict zone.⁴³ This makes France the largest supplier of foreign fighters in Europe in absolute terms.

There is collective anxiety in Europe regarding the threat from returning foreign fighters, given that many have been trained in the use of weapons and explosives, and likely remain committed to jihadist ideology. An estimated 217 adults (20 per cent being women), and 54 children have returned to France,⁴⁴ which also poses difficult questions on how to (re)integrate minors.

Separatists and Nationalists

There is a low residual threat from separatist terrorists, which have sporadically planned and carried out attacks in France over the last few decades. From 2012 to 2016, there were 294 reported attacks – most of which received little media coverage – and at least 283 arrests for

40 Interview for *Le Progrès*, 8 January 2018; “France has foiled two Islamist attacks this year – minister”, Reuters, 25 February 2018.

41 The annual breakdown is: 2012 (91), 2013 (143), 2014 (188), 2015 (377), and 2016 (429). The 2017 figures have yet to be released. Figures from Europol’s annual *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Reports (TESAT)*, 2013 to 2017.

42 Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Center, 2017, p.12; “Collomb sur les Français de retour de Syrie et d’Irak: ‘Nous en sommes à 217 majeurs et 54 mineurs’”, *Le JDD*, 6 August 2017.

43 Many of these children were born in the conflict zone. French Government, « *Prévenir pour protéger* »: *Plan nationale de prévention de la radicalisation*, Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalisation (CIPDR), February 2018, p.29.

44 “Collomb sur les Français de retour de Syrie et d’Irak: ‘Nous en sommes à 217 majeurs et 54 mineurs’”, *Le JDD*, 6 August 2017.

separatist terrorism-related activity.⁴⁵ The threat originates from Corsican separatists and Basque nationalists, though the primary armed groups – the Corsican FLNC and the Basque ETA – have renounced violence.

The *Front de Libération Nationale Corse* (National Liberation Front for Corsica, or FLNC) is a terrorist group created in 1976 to “defend the Corsican nation” against “French colonists”.⁴⁶ It carried out more than 4,500 attacks over 40 years – killing 11 people in total – targeting banks, gendarmerie stations, tribunals, government officials, as well as “second homes” on the island belonging to non-Corsicans.⁴⁷ In June 2014, the FLNC agreed to a ceasefire, and allied with nationalist political parties.⁴⁸ In July 2016, however, a faction within the group announced that they were prepared to respond violently if the “radical Islamists of Corsica” carried out an attack on the island.⁴⁹

The Basque separatist group, *Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA)*, was created in 1959 by Marxist-Leninist students, and aimed for an independent Basque country. It was mostly active in Spain, targeting representatives of the state, though it claims parts of France and its members often sought refuge in the country. Their last fatal attack was in 2010, when a French police officer was killed in Dammarié-les-Lys, and its four-decade armed campaign killed at least 825 people.⁵⁰ The group declared a ceasefire in 2010, and ostensibly disarmed in 2017.

Far-Right and Far-Left Extremists

There is a low threat from far-right and far-right extremists. From 2012 to 2016, there were seven far-right terrorist attacks in France, with none from the far-left.⁵¹ In the same timeframe, there were only 14 arrests.⁵² There is also the risk of retaliatory violence, as seen in the aftermath of the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks, when far-right terrorists attacked six mosques,⁵³ and a plot to bomb a mosque in Montélimar was foiled in April 2015.⁵⁴ While attacks are rare and fail to cause fatalities, there exists the potential for far-right terrorism targeting Muslims, refugees, and migrants, as well as from the far-left.⁵⁵ There is the additional risk of “reciprocal radicalisation”, whereby extremist groups radicalise – and potentially even target – each other.

45 Europol *TESAT* figures; they are not broken down by ideology or group affiliation. Despite the remarkably high number of attacks, most attacks are not intended to cause fatalities.

46 “Corse: le FLNC abandonne la lutte armée”, *Les Echos*, 25 June 2014.

47 National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Global Terrorism Database*, 2017, available at: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

48 Corsica has a particular political status in France, having its own assembly and therefore greater power to decide policies on the island.

49 “Corsican nationalists warn jihadists of tough response”, *BBC News*, 28 July 2016.

50 “L’ETA: 825 morts en 40 ans d’attentats pour l’indépendance du Pays basque”, *AFP*, 9 February 2009.

51 Europol *TESAT* figures.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Europol, *TESAT 2016*, p. 41.

54 *Ibid.*; “Le terrorisme d’extrême droite”, *Mediapart*, 31 January 2017.

55 Interview with Jean-François Gayraud, 7 February 2018.

4 The Corsican Nexus

An example of social and institutional links between organised crime and terrorism in France has existed in Corsica, where – until 2016 – the island was home to both a separatist terrorist group (the FLNC) as well as the Corsican mafia, comprised of groups such as *Brise de Mer*. The island, therefore, is an example of what Jean-François Gayraud has labelled “hybridisation”. The Corsican nexus is unique to Corsica, and involves both social and institutional linkages (see Box 1).

This nexus is facilitated by the social overlaps between criminals and separatists. Quite simply, the island is small – home to a population of approximately 330,000 – and the criminal and separatist activity is concentrated on the eastern side of Corsica, which results in social overlaps.⁵⁶ These social ties are frequently reinforced by stays in prison, where Corsican inmates coalesce.⁵⁷ Moreover, family circumstances have seen families containing police officers, separatists, and criminals.⁵⁸

For example, the former leader of the *Brise de Mer*, Francis Mariani, closely knew the leader of the FLNC, starting from their days at school together.⁵⁹ Another former leader of *Brise de Mer*, Richard Casanova, was previously a radical Corsican separatist.⁶⁰ And Alain Orsini, a former high-ranking member of the FLNC, created a splinter organisation that quickly descended into venality, and Orsini later left Corsica and became involved in crime.⁶¹

While criminals and separatists compete over the taxation of criminal income (called “racketeering” by criminal organisations and a “revolutionary tax” by terrorists), they have engaged in operational cooperation. Some groups within the FLNC progressively shifted activities towards racketing and slot machines, creating bridges between terrorism and organised crime. In exchange, the FLNC helped in blackmailing industrialists.⁶² Yet, with the FLNC declaring an end to its armed campaign, it remains to be seen to what extent its network of militants will engage in organised crime.

56 Interview with Nicolas Hémin, 1 March 2018.

57 Interviews with Prof. Xavier Crettiez, 16 February 2018, and Jean-François Gayraud, 7 February 2018.

58 Ibid.

59 Interview with Prof. Xavier Crettiez, 16 February 2018.

60 Jean-François Gayraud, *Théorie des Hybrides* (Paris: CNRS Edition, 2017), p.102.

61 Interview with Jean-François Gayraud, 7 February 2018.

62 Jacques Follorou and Vincent Nouzille, *Les parrains corses: Leur histoire, leurs réseaux, leurs protections* (Paris: Fayard, 2009).

5 The Social Nexus

In France, there exists a partial merging of criminal and jihadist milieus, whereby jihadists are recruited from the same demographics, locations, and social conditions as criminals. Of the country's foreign fighters, 48 per cent were already known to the police for delinquency, as per a Coordination Unit of the Fight Against Terrorism (UCLAT) analysis of 265 jihadists believed to have died in Syria and Iraq.⁶³ It has likely been a long-standing issue: Olivier Roy's database of jihadis in France between 1994 to 2016 shows that almost 50 per cent had criminal pasts.⁶⁴ This is a social nexus between criminals and extremists, rather than one characterised by formal and structural links.

One effect of this nexus is that criminals-turned-jihadists can draw upon the skills, networks, and opportunities that their criminality affords them. This comprises exchanges, assistance, and business dealings from long-standing friends and acquaintances that live in the same social circles.⁶⁵ For his 2012 attacks, for example, Mohammed Merah bought his bulletproof vest and firearms from Fettah Malki, a trafficker with whom Merah had already done business. Similarly, Amedy Coulibaly bought his weapons from an arms dealer he had met through his criminal network.⁶⁶

Further encouraging this nexus is the legitimacy that criminals can find in jihadism, with extremist narratives offering redemption from previous sins, as well as justifying acts of crime. Indeed, the Islamic State has itself encouraged this worldview, as seen, as seen in its eulogy of French jihadist Macreme Abrougui (see Box 2). The dynamic here is self-referential: extremism offers purification and redemption from criminal sins, while also justifying the very same criminal behaviour that caused them to seek purification in the first place. It can also be interpreted as a way for criminals to hide their predatory goals and to continue their criminal practices in good conscience.⁶⁷

63 "Quels sont les profils de 265 djihadistes français tués en Irak et en Syrie ?" *LCI*, 1 September 2017.

64 Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of the Islamic State* (London: Hurst, 2017), pp. 20, 28. Roy's database contains "about one hundred people involved in terrorism in mainland France and/or having left France to take part in a 'global' jihad between 1994 and 2016".

65 Interview with Wassim Nasr, 12 February 2018; Interview with Fabien Truong, 28 February 2018.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Jean-François Gayraud, *Théorie des Hybrides*, p.122.

Box 2: Macreme Abrougui's eulogy in Rumiya

The Islamic State's magazine Rumiya has acknowledged the role of the crime-terror nexus. In 2017, it lionized the criminal past of a French jihadist, Macreme Abrougui, after his death on the battlefield in Syria.⁶⁸ Even though the eulogy of Abrougui almost certainly contains embellishments and omissions, it remarkably frames the crime-terror nexus as a boon for jihadists.

The obituary describes how Abrougui was allegedly drawn to jihad from a life of crime. It praises his character even while living as a criminal, transforming from a "fierce gangster" and a "man whom people would fear" to beginning "a new life as a true Muslim."⁶⁹ As a prolific criminal, Abrougui "wouldn't care about France's police officers, as he would have shootouts with them and succeed in escaping from them during his robbery campaigns or when selling drugs."⁷⁰ Neither would he be "afraid of confrontation, nor would he run from a fight."⁷¹ The Islamic State, it seems, not only admires the criminal skillset, but makes it aspirational.

In recounting Abrougui's first operation with a group of jihadis, IS also highlights the blurred distinctions between crime and jihadism. In search of money to fund its jihadi activities, the group – "French youth who supported the mujahidin" – located a drug dealer who had apparently hidden €200,000 in his house.⁷² They stalked the location for days, planning a home invasion with the aim of stealing the cash. For all its similarities to an "orthodox" criminal act, IS explained why it was different:

"With most of those possessing experience in this field, it was due to their having entered into the world of robbery and gangs in their previous lives, but the assault this time differed as it was a form of worship by which they sought to draw closer to Allah, not as a means to increase in indulgence in disobedience and corruption."⁷³

Here the Islamic State seems to be saying to criminals: you do not need to change your behaviour, only your motivation. This message promises immediate gratification, as well as spiritual legitimation for criminal behaviour. It shows the Islamic State as an equal opportunity employer to would-be jihadis, both accepting of past excesses and offering redemption for them. It appears as though the group has calculated that for a criminal questioning his lifestyle, this could be a tempting offer, and perhaps explains why many criminals – and, indeed, those from troubled pasts – involve themselves in jihadism.

68 AlHayat Media Center, *Rumiya*, Issue 11, 2017, pp.44-52.

69 *Ibid.*, p.45.

70 *Ibid.*

71 *Ibid.*

72 AlHayat Media Center, *Rumiya*, Issue 11, 2017, p.46.

73 *Ibid.*

6 The Prison Nexus

Prisons are a central feature of the crime-terror nexus. France's response to its recent wave of terrorism has focused on prisons, and their management of the country's 70,000 prisoners has led to public debate and criticism.⁷⁴ The pool of radicalised inmates is huge. Currently, more than 500 prisoners are incarcerated for terrorism (400 for Islamist terrorism), and between 1,200 and 1,500 other "common law" detainees are considered to be "radicalised".⁷⁵ These numbers alone suggest that prisons will remain important centres of gravity for the jihadist movement.

While there is often sensationalist coverage regarding prison radicalisation, recent examples highlight the role of prisons as potential incubators for terrorism. In September 2016, Bilal Taghi – who had attempted to travel to Syria in 2015 – attempted to kill prison guards inside Osny prison.⁷⁶ And in October 2017, prison authorities thwarted a plot by two radicalised inmates which was planned for *after* their release.⁷⁷ The pair had been convicted for common crimes, and were able to communicate with extremists abroad by using smartphones within prison.⁷⁸

Moreover, Mohammed Merah and Mehdi Nemmouche were – at least partially – radicalised behind bars, as was Amedy Coulibaly, who was also able to socialise and network with extremists. In the case of the latter, he formed a friendship with Chérif Kouachi in Fleury-Mérogis, after spending seven months together on the same wing in 2005, where the duo was mentored by Djamel Beghal, an al-Qaeda recruiter.⁷⁹

Indeed, in a 2008 interview, Amedy Coulibaly himself explained how "beneficial" prisons can be for criminals:

*Prison is the best ****ing school of crime. In the same walk, you can meet Corsicans, Basques, Muslims, robbers, small-time drug dealers, big traffickers, murderers ... Over there, you learn from years of experience.*⁸⁰

74 Jean-Baptiste Jacquin, "Prisons: le nombre de détenus en baisse partout en Europe, sauf en France", *Le Monde*, 13 March 2017; Christopher de Bellaigue, "Are French prisons finishing schools for terrorism?", *The Guardian*, 17 March 2016.

75 Comments by public prosecutor François Molins at Institut des Hautes Études de Défense Nationale conference, 12 February 2018; "Des espions en prison, une 'révolution culturelle'", *RTL*, 1 February 2017.

76 "Attaque à la prison d'Osny: le détenu agresseur mis en examen", *Le Monde*, 8 September 2016; "Caged fervour: Jihadism in French prisons", *The Economist*, 17 September 2016.

77 "Soon-to-go-free jail convicts snared in French attack plot probe", *Reuters*, 10 October 2017.

78 *Ibid.*

79 Angelique Chrisafis, "Charlie Hebdo attackers: born, raised and radicalised in Paris", *The Guardian*, 12 January 2015; "Djamel Beghal, maître à penser du terrorisme", *Le Monde*, 29 January 2015.

80 Luc Bronner, "Amedy Coulibaly: 'La prison, c'est la putain de meilleure école de la criminalité'", *Le Monde*, 13 January 2015.

What happens when inmates are released is crucial: they can either disengage from extremism, or continue – and even escalate – their involvement. In the case of Coulibaly, he continued to associate with both criminal and extremist milieus after his release, and was encouraged in doing so by his mentor Beghal, who provided him with an ideological licence to commit crimes to promote jihad.⁸¹ This cell – which had its genesis in prison – would become involved in a number of extremist plots, culminating in the attacks of January 2015 in Paris. With several hundred jihadists set to be released from prison before 2020 after having served their time, there is a need to assess post-release arrangements.⁸²

The French authorities have sought to address the issue of prison radicalisation. One attempted measure was the creation of 300 isolation cells in different prisons for the most radicalised and dangerous inmates.⁸³ This follows the trend throughout Europe of separating extremist inmates from “regular” criminals. More recently, the authorities inaugurated the Central Bureau of Penitentiary Intelligence (BCRP) in April 2017, which aims to tackle terrorism and organised crime.⁸⁴ Essentially, it is an intelligence service within prisons, whose agents will have access to methods such as telephone tapping, IMSI catchers, and sounding cells, in order to counter radicalisation.⁸⁵

Attempts have also been made outside of the prison context. In 2015, then-Prime Minister Manuel Valls announced the creation of “deradicalisation centres” for young people, resulting in the complex at Pontourny in Indre-et-Loire, with a capacity of twenty-five people. Yet in 2017, the project was abandoned due to a lack of results.⁸⁶ The episode highlights the need for patience in introducing, managing, and evaluating relatively new and experimental methods.

81 Guillaume Gendron, “Le crédit à la consommation, bon plan des jihadistes”, *Libération*, 16 January 2015.

82 “Jailbird jihadists, a security threat for Europe”, *AFP*, 19 March 2018.

83 “Radicalisation en prison: le gouvernement abandonne les unités spécialisées”, *Le Monde*, 25 October 2016.

84 “Le renseignement pénitentiaire ouvre ses portes pour la première fois”, *RTL*, 28 November 2017.

85 “Des espions en prison, une ‘révolution culturelle’”, *RTL*, 1 February 2017.

86 “Fermeture de l’unique centre de ‘déradicalisation’ de France”, *Le Monde*, 28 July 2017.

7 Recommendations

This paper has examined potential links between crime and terrorism in France. While the existence of highly networked, if not institutionalised, links between organised crime and terrorist groups is limited to Corsica, there are areas of concern, especially when it comes to the merging of criminal and jihadist milieus in areas of high social deprivation – the so-called social nexus (see Box 1). One is the potential for individuals with criminal backgrounds to use their skills – be it in forging documents, procuring firearms, or raising money through criminal means – to facilitate terrorist attacks. Another area of concern is the potential for the radicalisation of criminal inmates within prisons.

To prevent such links from re-emerging or becoming further entrenched, we recommend the following actions and/or good practices:

1. Effective monitoring

We recommend that authorities continue to periodically review their statistics on organised crime and terrorism, and consciously monitor them for emerging linkages between the two phenomena. Some areas – such as the link between drugs and terrorism – may require further research.

2. Re-thinking radicalisation

Given the partial merging of terrorist and extremist milieus, core assumptions about radicalisation need to be reconsidered. The behaviour of jihadists with criminal pasts often contradicts the notion that extremism correlates with religious behaviour. Where needed, we recommend that authorities update their checklists, indicators, and training materials in order to reflect changing patterns and profiles.

3. Safer prisons

The authorities in France have recognised the importance of prisons as potential incubators of links between crime and terrorism. We encourage them to move forward with implementing systematic efforts to make prisons safer from crime, terrorism, and any links between them. It is also important to systematically measure and assess the impact of these changes, and consider post-release arrangements, which involve re-integration as well as monitoring.

4. Countering all streams of terrorist financing

Efforts to countering terrorist finance have excessively focused on the international financial system – with meagre results. In light of France’s global commitment to counter the financing of terrorism, we recommend that authorities broaden their efforts at countering terrorist finance to include small-scale and petty crime, such as drug dealing, theft, robberies, and the trafficking in goods.

5. Information sharing

As the lines between terrorism and “ordinary” crime have become increasingly blurred, relevant agencies need to become more effective at sharing relevant information across departments and “disciplines”, as well as forming new “coalition” of individuals and institutions that may not be used to working with each other.

We recommend that governments continue to review existing channels and systems of information exchange, explore creating new partnerships (such as with local authorities, civil society, and the private sector), and make appropriate changes reflecting the new – and multi-dimensional – nature of the threat.

6. Addressing social conditions

While there is no inherent or automatic link between socio-economic conditions and involvement in terrorism, it seems clear that jihadist “delinquency” in France has occurred in some of the same geographical areas and demographic pools from which “ordinary” delinquency has emerged as well.

Rather than further marginalising and excluding those areas, there needs to be a serious and honest discussion about the extent to which state and civil society can address the social conditions in which extremist narratives and ideologies resonate.



Crime Terror Nexus

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The Crime Terror Nexus is a project that investigates links between crime and terrorism, and identifies better ways to counter them.

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