



Refugees versus terrorists

by Marco Funk and Roderick Parkes

Syrian passports found near the bodies of two of the perpetrators of the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015 led to speculation that terrorists were infiltrating refugee flows to the EU. The idea must be taken seriously, and reflects valid concerns about how well refugees are being identified at the EU's external borders. But the problem is a far broader one, and also involves EU citizens travelling to Syria and returning to carry out terrorist attacks.

Parisian profiles

A look at the profiles of the Paris attackers and their accomplices reveals a group of individuals with roots in Europe, many of whom had travelled to the Middle East as 'foreign fighters'. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the suspected mastermind of the attacks, was a case in point. The 28-year-old Belgian national of Moroccan origin grew up in the Brussels neighbourhood of Molenbeek. He is believed to have joined the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2013 and spent time in Syria.

Similarly, all three of the Bataclan concert hall attackers, Omar Ismail Mostefai (29), Samy Amimour (28) and Foued Mohammed Aggad (23), were born and raised in France. As to Ibrahim Abdeslam, the 31-year-old French national who detonated a suicide vest outside a restaurant: he had travelled to Turkey in 2015 intending to reach Syria, before being turned back. Bilal Hadfi (20),

one of the Stade de France attackers, was a French national who lived in Belgium. The authorities knew that he had gone to Syria to join ISIL but failed to detect his return.

While most of the perpetrators were thus European, the attacks do raise concerns about the possible infiltration of refugee flows by foreign terrorists. Two of the Stade de France attackers were carrying Syrian passports. One of these documents was damaged beyond recognition, and the other has subsequently turned out to be falsified (an almost identical fake passport was found with a refugee at a Serbian reception centre just after the attacks), but the fingerprints and photos of the attackers do clearly match those taken at a refugee registration centre in Greece last October.

A backchannel for terrorists?

The refugee flows present foreign terrorists with a potential new mode of entry to the European Union from ISIL-controlled areas in the Middle East. The central Mediterranean route from Libya, for instance, provides direct access to the heart of the Schengen area: once they have gained entry to Italy, refugees are likely only to encounter border patrols which may delay but seldom prevent their onward movement. The eastern Mediterranean route up through Turkey to Greece has the advantage of being largely land-based, meaning that those taking it can avoid seasonal holdups caused by adverse weather conditions.

However, both routes would have considerable drawbacks from the perspective of a foreign terrorist organisation. The central Mediterranean crossing remains costly and dangerous, as it involves braving a long stretch of sea and increasingly hostile conditions in Libya. Currently, this route is mainly taken by sub-Saharan Africans who have few other options. As for the refugees arriving through the eastern Mediterranean, they are entering Greece, outside the main body of the Schengen area. Onward travel from there remains difficult.

Given these obstacles, it is unlikely that foreign terrorists could use these two routes as a reliable path into the Schengen area – hence the predominance of European citizens, with rights of free movement, amongst the Paris attackers. These European foreign fighters may, of course, have their own reasons to infiltrate refugee flows – for instance, if they know they are under surveillance. But that does not mean they will find the refugee route either efficient or feasible. The routes require time, money and stamina, as well as (often multiple) registration procedures.

Is ISIL ‘weaponising’ refugees?

ISIL may have a broader political interest in using refugees even if the success rates are not high. The fundamental objective of its terrorism in the West is less to disable strategic targets or kill Westerners *per se*, than to provoke certain political and social reactions. One means of achieving this is to stoke fears about Muslim refugees among European citizens. If registered refugees were to carry out attacks in Europe, ISIL would achieve this goal. Indeed, the mere suspicion that two newly-registered refugees carried out the November Paris attacks proved to be socially divisive.

But there are reasons for caution here, too. ISIL can achieve much the same effect by spreading simple misinformation, and has indeed sought to misrepresent the refugees to European publics. In a January 2015 interview, for example, an ISIL operative claimed that some 4,000 fighters had been sent to Europe via Turkey – an improbably high figure. There has also been speculation that the Syrian passports found with the two Stade de France attackers were planted.

It is worth mentioning, too, that ISIL may develop a deeper ambivalence towards the refugees which could prevent it instrumentalising them as terrorists. ISIL certainly resents the fact that so many people are leaving ‘its’ lands, and

considers the refugees to be traitors. However, reports from Libya and West Africa suggest that Islamist groups there have developed an interest in maintaining their smooth flow into Europe. These jihadist groups – being criminal organisations, involved in the smuggling business – see the refugee flows as a cash cow.

A risk of self-radicalisation?

Not all terrorist attacks in the EU will be carried out in such a coordinated manner as those of last November. In January 2016, for instance, a man of Moroccan origin who had previously stayed at a refugee camp in Germany was shot dead by police in Paris while carrying out what appeared to be an uncoordinated attack. This raises a final eventuality – the spectre that refugees could act as lone wolves, and that the EU is permitting entry to large numbers of foreigners who may harbour resentments against the West and become more radical over time.

As predominantly young, male and Muslim, the refugees – and migrants – from the Middle East do broadly fit the profile of those most susceptible to radicalisation, and allusions have already been made to the 2004 Madrid commuter train bombings, which were largely carried out by first generation immigrants from North African countries, some of whom were already radicalised before their arrival in Europe.

That said, it seems reasonable to assume that most refugees will have been set on the exact reverse trajectory by their experiences in Syria or Iraq. Moreover, it is not newcomers but second- and third-generation immigrants who seem most prone to radicalisation.

This highlights once again the sheer heterogeneity of the behaviour of refugees and migrants, and the difficulty both for ISIL in harnessing it and for EU states in legislating for it. For instance, some refugees will commit violent and criminal acts in Europe, but for reasons other than terrorism: these are young men, fleeing warzones, with a deep distrust of the state, and encountering new cultural norms for the first time. Meanwhile, a small number of European foreign fighters, disillusioned by their experiences in Syria, may participate in official counter-radicalisation efforts.

Marco Funk is an Executive Research Assistant and Roderick Parkes a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

