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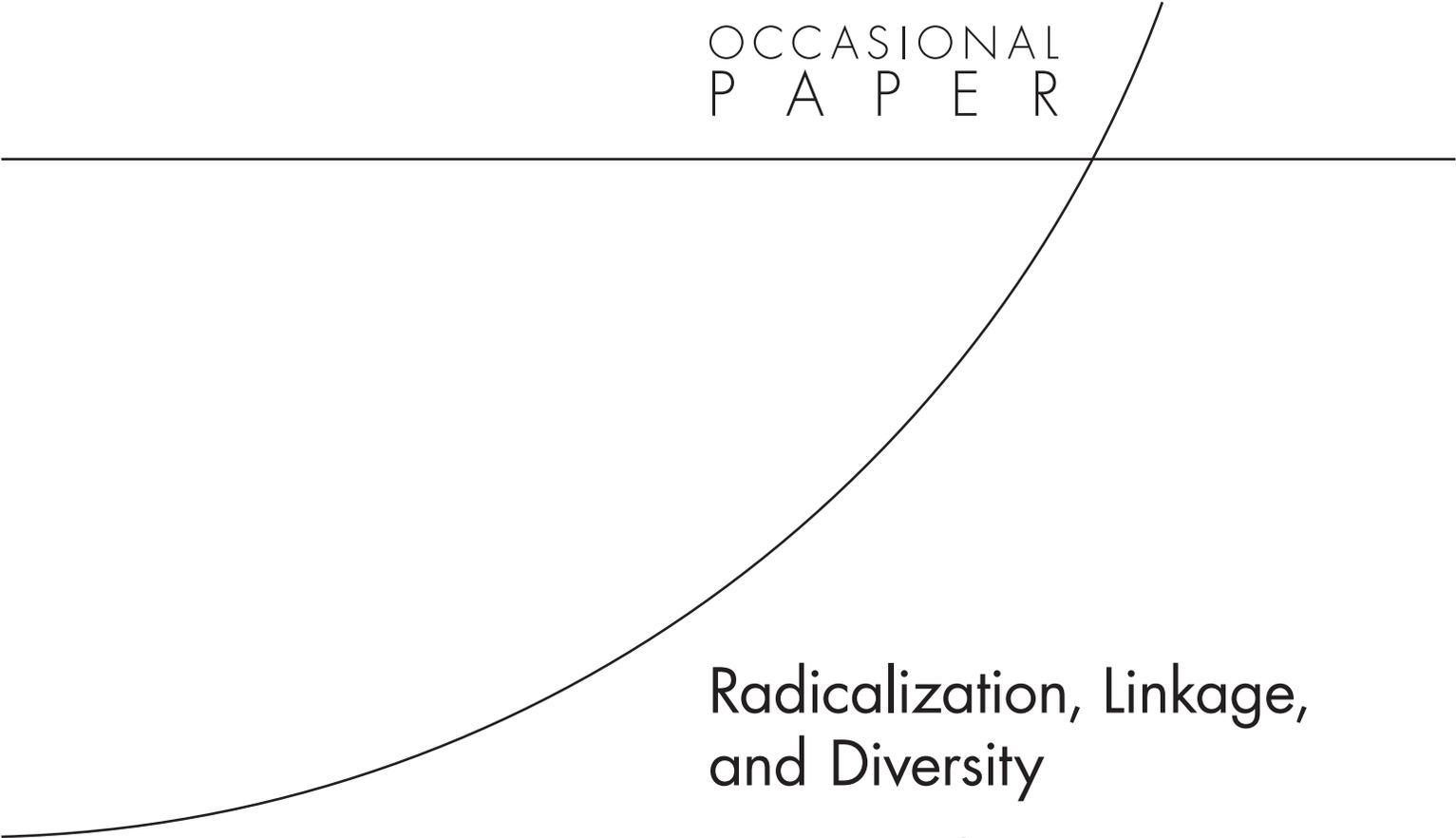
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P A P E R



Radicalization, Linkage, and Diversity

Current Trends in
Terrorism in Europe

Lorenzo Vidino

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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Summary

Although it has not suffered a successful attack since the July 7, 2005, bombings in London, Europe perceives itself to be under a constant threat from jihadist-inspired terrorism. Terrorist organizations inspired by other ideologies are still active throughout the European Union, but the 2010 Europol annual report clearly states that “Islamist terrorism is still perceived as the biggest threat to most Member States,” and statements from the highest-ranking officials in most European countries confirm this observation.¹ Authorities base their assessment on the extensive intelligence and investigative activities directed against jihadist networks taking place in virtually every European country. On average, in fact, European authorities arrest some 200 individuals and thwart a handful of plots of jihadist inspiration every year.² Keeping the global scenario in mind, European authorities deem this dynamic likely to continue in the foreseeable future.

Based on an extensive survey of indictments, court transcripts, intelligence reports, academic literature, and media sources, and on conversations with experts and government officials from various European countries, the United States, and a handful of non-Western countries, this paper seeks to provide an overview of the current trends in jihadism in Europe from an operational perspective. Its main finding is that most European plots appear to be independent, but the most-serious ones tend to have extensive operational connections to groups operating outside of Europe. Moreover, it finds that, contrary to common characterizations, there is little evidence indicating that al Qaeda and affiliated organizations operating outside of Europe conduct direct efforts to recruit European Muslims.

For the most part, in fact, the absorption of jihadist ideology by European Muslims is an independent process, taking place individually or, most often, with a small group of friends. In several cases, radical preachers, veterans of various conflicts, webmasters of radical websites, and, more generally, charismatic “jihad entrepreneurs” act as radicalizing agents, further exposing already sympathetic individuals to jihadist ideology. Although it is not uncommon for these radicalizing agents to possess various connections to al Qaeda and affiliated movements, rarely do they act as formal al Qaeda agents on a radicalizing drive. Similarly, al Qaeda and affiliated movements do regularly issue various forms of communications designed to attract European Muslims. However, these efforts are directed to the masses, and there is little indication of direct involvement in the radicalization of individuals. By the same token,

¹ Europol, 2010, p. 6.

² According to Europol data, European countries (excluding the United Kingdom) arrested 297 Islamist terrorists in 2008–2009 (see Europol, 2009, 2010). The United Kingdom does not differentiate according to ideology the individuals it arrests for terrorism-related crime. In 2008–2009 it arrested 190 individuals for terrorism-related crimes, an unspecified majority of whom were Islamists (see Home Office, 2009).

the cases in which al Qaeda sent members to Europe to recruit new affiliates are few and far between.

A significantly more common occurrence is the formation of a linkage between self-radicalized individuals or clusters based in Europe on one hand and al Qaeda and like-minded groups on the other, with the former reaching out to the latter. Moreover, based on an analysis of all plots against Europe between 2006 and 2010, this paper shows that this linkage is often the element that determines the level of sophistication of the plot. Although no completely successful attack has been registered in Europe since 2005, it is evident that attacks planned by individuals and networks with operational ties to groups operating outside of Europe tend to be more elaborate, professional, and potentially lethal than those hatched by individuals and networks who operate in complete independence. Training in handling explosives received overseas is, in most cases, the factor determining this difference. The paper also analyzes other current trends, from the travel destinations of aspiring jihadists to the growing demographic diversity of Europe-based networks.