

Generation Jihad: The Profile and *Modus Operandi* of Minors Involved in Recent Islamist Terror Plots in Europe

By Erik Hacker

Europe has largely avoided major jihadi attacks in recent years, though experts and officials from the United Nations as well as the Five Eyes intelligence alliance have repeatedly warned of the heightened terror threat increasingly linked to a new generation of teenagers, who radicalize primarily online. Yet, little is known about the specific profiles and *modi operandi* of these underage suspects. As this trend shows no signs of waning, a clearer understanding of these minors' specific characteristics is vital in order to adapt counterterrorism responses and sustain the current high rate of foiled plots. This article offers an in-depth account of the background and attack planning behaviors of 44 minors who planned to carry out jihadi terror attacks in Europe since 2022 but were arrested before they could act. By comparing their characteristics to adult terror suspects, it highlights the distinctive traits of this new generation of Islamist extremists and explores the strategic implications for counterterrorism efforts moving forward.

In March 2024, a 15-year-old Swiss teenager stabbed an Orthodox Jew in the immediate vicinity of a synagogue in Zurich after pledging allegiance to the Islamic State and being an active member of a decentralized online network supporting the group.¹ Two months later, a 14-year-old girl was arrested by authorities in Graz, Austria, for plotting an Islamic State-inspired attack with a knife and ax, intending to target “non-believers” at a supermarket or a square, or a priest.²

The young age of the suspects is striking, yet these examples of minors involved in jihadi terrorism in Europe are not outliers. Rather, they are indicative of a relatively new phenomenon. Some experts claim that the surge in jihadi terrorism in Europe³ since the outbreak of the war in Gaza following the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas and other Palestinian jihadi factions has been spearheaded by minors.⁴

To shed light on the increasing threat posed by radicalized

minors, this article examines findings from a dataset of thwarted jihadi attack plots in Europe between January 2022 and March 2025. It unfolds in four parts. The first section reviews recent literature on the nature of the youth threat. The second section presents the author's data, comparing plots involving minors to plots with only adult suspects. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of minor plotters' unique features. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the findings and offering recommendations for moving forward.

Youth Radicalization

The radicalization of young people in Europe used to be a fringe issue with a few isolated cases. This has changed in recent years, with the number of cases proliferating. A United Nations monitoring report from January 2024 highlighted that radicalized individuals are increasingly young, pointing to the recent case of a loose network run by two minors in Spain that radicalized over 50 other minors on video game communication platforms before being arrested.⁵

French officials have expressed similar concerns,⁶ noting that the number of terrorism-related indictments involving minors had grown from two to three in previous years to 15 in 2023.⁷ UK Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation Jonathan Hall claimed that “children are breaking records” in terms of terrorism-related convictions and arrests in the United Kingdom.⁸ In 2023, about a fifth of those arrested for terrorism-related charges in the United Kingdom were reportedly minors.⁹

The prevalence of young people involved in terrorism is on the rise globally, too, beyond just Europe. Aaron Y. Zelin and Ilana Winter reported that teenagers or minors were involved in at least 6.38% of Islamic State-related legal cases globally between March 2023 and March 2024, with the actual number likely higher given that many countries do not report the age of suspects.¹⁰ The gravity of the issue prompted the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance to release a rare public warning in December 2024, “calling for a whole-of-society response to help identify and deal with the radicalisation of minors – especially online – across the Five Eyes nations.”¹¹

An even more serious concern is that youth radicalization is increasingly turning into attack plotting. A recent analysis by Dino Krause warned about this development, highlighting that the frequency of Islamic State-related plots involving minors has increased notably since 2022,¹² confirming Peter Neumann's recent analysis with the same conclusion.¹³ An overview of the Islamist terror threat landscape in Germany in this publication also found that the average age of both attackers and plotters has decreased, with half of the thwarted plots being planned by suspects aged 18 or younger.¹⁴

Analysts link this development to changes in jihadi online propaganda as well as societal trends. Krause explains the

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proliferation of young plotters as the aftermath of the pandemic that introduced psychological distress and uncertainty into the lives of European youth. These challenges coincide with the recent publications tied to the Islamic State—particularly Voice of Khurasan replacing Dabiq and Rumiyah—being increasingly tailored to Western audiences with frequent calls for lone-actor attacks.¹⁵

Notably, according to Moustafa Ayad, much of the Islamic State propaganda geared toward minors is likely made and distributed by other minors instead of actual Islamic State members. Small networks of young supporters dispersed across countries reportedly run many of the 93 unofficial Islamic State outlets on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, Element, and RocketChat that Ayad examined. This ecosystem of unofficial outlets was directly linked to the only successful jihadi attack perpetrated by a minor in Europe in recent years (the Zurich attack mentioned earlier) and has undoubtedly inspired many of the minors arrested in Europe lately for their involvement in attacks, plotting, or spreading propaganda.¹⁶ Jonathan Sarwono also found that Islamic State propaganda actively targets young users on TikTok (with many referring to this as CaliphateTok), with propaganda utilizing popular culture and digital trends to recruit and mobilize young sympathizers.¹⁷ Ayad noted in his analysis that these minors are “well-versed in the language of the Islamic State and its history, while also steeped in internet cultures,” thereby largely diverging from traditional Islamic State circles with older patrons.¹⁸

Despite the numerous warnings and anecdotal evidence, no systematic analysis exists on the profiles and *modi operandi* of recent underage plotters, or their differences to adult counterparts.^a To fill this gap, this article examines original data on jihadi plots in Europe between January 2022 and March 2025 to contribute to understanding the extent to which the latest wave of jihadism in Europe is indeed driven by minors and what the profile of recent underage suspects is, particularly compared to older plotters. It argues that the issue requires more nuance than the recent warnings about minors’ involvement in terrorism in the West provide.

Generation Jihad: Characteristics of Recent Plots and Plotters in Europe

The following analysis utilizes the author’s original dataset of jihadi attacks and thwarted plots in Europe (E.U.-27, United Kingdom, Norway, and Switzerland) between January 2022 and March 2025. The database was compiled using open-source data,^b largely relying on secondary sources such as news articles, publicly available datasets (e.g., the Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Map¹⁹), as well as primary sources when available (e.g., official reports by authorities, press conferences, [leaked] investigation files, verified

social media information of suspects). The open-source nature of the database results in some notable data gaps, particularly regarding suspects’ citizenship and legal residence status. Such variables with a high share of unknowns are explicitly flagged in the text.

While Europe has been hit by a flare-up of jihadi attacks in recent years, only one out of 21 attacks since 2022 was carried out by a minor.^c Out of the 73 foiled plots and 21 successful attacks in Europe since 2022 recorded by the author, 31 incidents (~33%) involved an underage individual. This shows that while suspects indeed tend to get younger, successful jihadi attacks remain driven by adults, for now.

Table 1: Interception rate and online tip-off source for foiled plots involving minors versus adults only between January 2022 and March 2025 in E.U.-27, United Kingdom, Norway, and Switzerland

	<i>Foiled plots involving minors</i>	<i>Foiled plots with adults only</i>	<i>Difference (%)</i>
Foiled plots	30 (~41% of 73 foiled plots)	43 (~59% of 73 foiled plots)	—
Interception rate*	96.8% (30 out of 31 plots)	68.3% (43 out of 63 plots)	+ 28.5%
Tip-off online	21 (70% of 30 foiled plots by minors)	18 (41.9% of 43 foiled plots by adults)	+ 28.1%

* Based on 73 foiled plots and 21 successful attacks

However, when disregarding successful attacks and only considering foiled plots, these numbers shift drastically. Of the 73 foiled plots, almost every other involved at least one minor. Overall, 44 individuals under the age of 18 are suspected of having planned to carry out a jihadi terror attack, with the youngest suspect being just 12 years old.²⁰

These plots differ significantly in some aspects depending on whether minors are involved or not. All but one plot involving minors was thwarted by authorities (96.7%), in contrast to 68.3% of the plots involving only adults.

Notably, the lead for identifying and arresting these suspects before they carried out an attack was overwhelmingly (70%) generated via open-source intelligence (i.e., the suspects’ online footprint), which almost always included spreading terrorist propaganda online, but in many cases also online discussions of their intentions and plans for the attack. In the case of plots only involving adults, this number is significantly lower (41.9%),^d hinting at a much higher adult awareness of the importance of operational

a A study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation on underage terrorism offenders in England and Wales also highlighted the lack of data and transparent analysis regarding minors’ involvement in terrorism, while acknowledging the recent public attention to younger extremists. “Childhood Innocence?: Mapping Trends in Teenage Terrorism Offenders,” *ICSR Report*, November 15, 2023.

b Parts of the data collection process were supported by the Internal Security Fund of the European Commission under the framework of the project “PARTES: Participatory Approaches to Protecting Places of Worship” with Grant n° 101100542. The views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union.

c The author defined ‘minor’ as any individual below the age of 18 at the time of the relevant incident.

d The type of lead is unknown in eight foiled plots by minors (~26.6%) and in 21 foiled plots by adults (48.8%). In the author’s experience, leads generated via social media are widely reported in press and official reports, whereas other types of leads often involving sensitive sources tend not to be publicly disclosed.

security (OPSEC).^e This partially explains the major gap between adults and minors regarding the success rates of their attack plans.

Realistic Weapon Selection and Targeting

In terms of the weapons intended for use in the planned attack, the differences between adults and minors are minimal. Minors seem to slightly prefer knives over firearms and IEDs, whereas adult plotters tend to strive for more sophisticated weapons, such as IEDs and firearms, over knives.

Table 2: Weapon selection in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

Weapons	Foiled plots involving minors	Foiled plots with adults only	Difference (%)
Knives	28.2%	19.6%	+8.6%
IEDs	20.5%	32.1%	-11.6%
Firearms	20.5%	25%	-4.5%
Vehicles	7.7%	7.1%	+0.6%
Improvised incendiary devices	2.6%	—	+2.6%
Chemical weapons	—	1.8%	-1.8%
Unknown	20.5%	14.3%	+6.2%

In general, there is no clearly preferred weapon among plotters, regardless of age. Notably, there is a significant difference between plots and successful attacks regarding weapon selection: 16 out of 21 successful attacks in this time period were stabbings, marking a sharp deviation from the data on foiled plots presented above. While the stark contrast to successful attacks that are dominated by knives²¹ can likely be attributed to the wishful thinking in the plotting phase, these metrics suggest that minors are not more ambitious or unrealistic than adults. On the contrary, they tend to lean somewhat more toward unsophisticated and thus more accessible weapons.

^e Operational security is a term originating in military spaces for measures taken to protect plans, movements, communications, identities, and other aspects of an upcoming or ongoing operation from detection or disruption by adversaries. In the context of terrorism, this mainly refers to keeping attack plans secret and unknown by authorities (e.g., by using secure lines of communication, using coded language, and avoiding digital traces that would hint at the attack).

Table 3: Targets in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

Targets	Foiled plots involving minors	Foiled plots with adults only	Difference (%)
Indiscriminately targeted civilians ^f	24.3%	21.7%	+2.6%
Christians	18.9%	13.3%	+5.6%
Jews	16.2%	16.7%	-0.5%
Police	13.5%	11.7%	+1.8%
Government	8.1%	8.3%	-0.2%
Soldiers	2.7%	5%	-2.2%
LGBTQ	5.4%	8.3%	-2.9%
Unknown	10.8%	15%	-4.2%

Likewise, when it comes to foiled plots, minors do not significantly differ in their targeting preferences from their adult counterparts, and there are no apparent targeting patterns either in general.^g Indiscriminately targeted civilians are the most frequently considered targets overall, followed by religious adversaries prominently featured in jihadi propaganda, such as Jewish and Christian places of worship, events, and community members.

Overall, age does not seem to play a role in weapon and target selection, given that the differences between foiled plots involving minors and plots by adults only in these two aspects are minimal.

Targeted Country of Foiled Plots

As mentioned above, the only plot by a minor that successfully materialized took place in Switzerland. Among foiled plots, most targeted countries do not differ largely based on the involvement of minors, though two countries appear to be more affected.^h With six out of eight (75%) foiled jihadi plots in Austria since 2022 involving at least one underage suspect, the central European country is a major outlier due to the fact that its threat landscape appears to be dominated by minors.²² Austria is followed by Spain, with two out of three foiled plots involving minors, though this sample is small. France leads in absolute numbers of foiled plots both overall and involving minors. However, when looking at the relative share of plots involving minors, its numbers are less dramatic: 10 out of 22 (45.5%) foiled jihadi plots involved at least one minor, placing it third in relative terms.

The Involvement of Terror Organizations

With geopolitical developments affecting global terror

^f The category 'indiscriminately targeted civilians' refers to individuals targeted without specific ideological or symbolic justification beyond residing in European countries. This contrasts with other target categories that are selected discriminately based on jihadi ideology classifying them as 'enemies of Islam,' (e.g., representatives of Western governments (police officers, soldiers), and symbols and members of particular religious communities).

^g These targeting patterns largely resemble the patterns found in successful attacks, though the latter have a higher tendency (47.8%) to indiscriminately target civilians.

^h The countries targeted most by successful attacks in the covered time frame are Germany (eight attacks), France (five attacks), and Belgium (two attacks).

organizations²³ as well as the recent internal power shifts within the Islamic State regarding external operations,²⁴ the question of whether any particular branch appears to be favored by minors in Europe is key. Many experts and authorities have been warning about the threat posed by Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), mainly due to its strong online presence and utilization of the virtual planner blueprint.²⁵ So far, no successful attack in the covered European countries over the time period considered has been linked to ISK.ⁱ Out of the 21 attacks between January 2022 and March 2025, 14 attacks were linked to the Islamic State, with the rest (seven) having no ties to formal terror organizations.^j

Table 4: Group sympathy in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

<i>Group sympathy</i>	<i>Foiled plots involving minors</i>	<i>Foiled plots with adults only</i>	<i>Difference (%)</i>
Tied to Islamic State Core	23 (76.7% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	25 (58.1% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	+18.5%
Tied to ISK	3 (10% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	11 (25.6% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	-15.6%
No ties to terror entity	4 (13.3% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	7 (16.3% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	-3%

Based on the dataset used for this article, data on foiled plots offers limited support for these concerns, with ISK only being associated with a small number of known thwarted attacks. Overall, European jihadis still seem to be drawn toward Islamic State Core in general, with ISK, Africa-based Islamic State affiliates (Islamic State Somalia, Islamic State Greater Sahara), and other jihadi groups altogether being linked to less than a third of the foiled plots. Particularly among minors, the Afghanistan-based affiliate lags significantly behind Islamic State Core in its ability to inspire or direct foiled attack plots in the covered European countries both overall and compared to adult plotters, marking one of the few major age-based differences.

Table 5: Involvement of a cyber coach and plot execution modality (solo vs. multiple perpetrators) in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

	<i>Foiled plots involving minors</i>	<i>Foiled plots with adults only</i>	<i>Difference (%)</i>
Contact to cyber coach	4 (13.3% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	16 (37.2% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	-23.9%
Lone actor ^k	17 (56.7% of the 30 foiled plots involving minors)	25 (58.1% of the 43 foiled plots involving adults only)	-1.5%

Group sympathy also matters due to the different *modi operandi* of the various Islamic State affiliates for external operations. For example, contact to cyber coaches^l has recently reemerged as a concerning phenomenon, with the return of the virtual planner blueprint of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria now increasingly being utilized by ISK.²⁶ While cyber coaches consciously target young individuals online,²⁷ whether this demographic is (more) susceptible to such approaches has major counterterrorism implications. Despite young people being particularly vulnerable to online radicalization,²⁸ the author's data clearly shows that this increased vulnerability does not apply to online recruitment for attacks by members of terror organizations: Minor suspects plotting an attack are much less likely to have contact to online recruiters (13.3% of foiled plots involving minors) than adult plotters (37.2% of foiled plots by adults).

Another crucial aspect of jihadis' *modi operandi* in Europe has been whether the perpetrator(s) act alone or together with others. After all, since 2014, attacks perpetrated by cells in Europe have been significantly more lethal and sophisticated.²⁹ While all terror attacks in the covered European countries since early 2019^m have been perpetrated by lone individuals, there is a concerning contrast among plotters with an apparent return toward small terror cells as seen in earlier years in Europe.³⁰ However, once again, there is virtually no difference between adult and minor plotters in this regard: Regardless of age, about every other plot was planned to be executed by one person.

Suspect Profiles

The background of plotters is a crucial piece of the puzzle,

ⁱ The terror attack in Moscow, Russia, tied to ISK on March 22, 2024, falls beyond the geographic scope of the dataset used for this article.

^j These attacks are often described as lone-actor jihadi attacks, although they do not have ties to terror entities. These perpetrators often have a recognizable jihadi motive but also act within a broader politico-religious Islamist framework (e.g., revenge for perceived blasphemy or moral disgust with both a political and a personal objective for the violence). For more on this, see Liam Duffy, "Islamist terrorism has taken on a new, insidious form," CapX, April 16, 2025.

^k This category indicates whether suspects intended to carry out the attack on their own (i.e., lone actors) or together with other perpetrators.

^l The Islamic State has assigned some of its members to the role of cyber coaches, also known as "online entrepreneurs." These individuals actively seek to recruit and mobilize supporters online, oftentimes providing ideological encouragement, precise attack instructions and guidance, and also facilitating logistics on the ground by connecting supporters previously unknown to each other in the same region (e.g., for the purpose of weapon acquisition or other attack-related action items). This strategy is often called "virtual planner." See Rueben Dass, "Islamic State-Khorasan Province's Virtual Planning," Lawfare, May 19, 2024.

^m While this article only covers the timeframe between January 2022 and March 2025, given its focus on recent developments, the in-house dataset on jihadi terror attacks in the covered European countries also encompasses attacks from January 2014 onward.

potentially revealing aspects that prevention and counterterrorism efforts should focus on. There are several notable age-driven differences, mainly related to citizenship, migration status, and criminal records. At the same time, age appears to have no impact on the number of converts, mentally ill individuals, and authorities’ knowledge of radicalization processes among the suspects of foiled plots. These latter features are rare among adult suspects, too.

Table 6: Profiles of individuals in foiled plots involving minors versus adults only

Profiles	Minor suspects of foiled plots	Adult suspects of foiled plots	Difference (%)
Criminal record	0%	16.3%	-16.3%
Known to authorities	20%	25.6%	-5.6%
Convert	9.3%	3.5%	+5.8%
Mental health issues	0%	2.6%	-2.6%
Asylum seeker	3.3%	27.9%	-24.9%
E.U. citizen	45.5%	21.4%	+24.1%

No minor involved in a foiled plot in Europe over the time period of study had a criminal history before being arrested on suspicion of planning an attack,ⁿ compared to about every sixth plot by adults involving at least one individual with a past conviction.^o The terror-crime nexus has been a key factor in European jihadism throughout the past decade, with almost every other attack perpetrator having had a criminal record already before carrying out an attack.³¹

Somewhat contradicting the high interception rate of plots involving minors, authorities do not seem to be aware of most underage suspects’ radicalization prior to their arrests for planning an attack. The contrast to adult plotters is minimal, however.

Converts have not played a considerable role in the latest wave of European jihadism since 2014.³² With the recent emergence of youth radicalization, however, authorities have highlighted troubling developments of young radicals proselytizing among peers in schools and online, raising the question of whether this turns into some of the converts getting involved in plotting. The data used for this study does not support these concerns, with less than every 10th underage suspect being a convert.

Only two suspects^p were reported to struggle with a psychological

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condition, both being over 18.^q Mental health has been a major factor for the past decade of European jihadism, prompting experts and authorities alike to dedicate significant resources to studying and addressing the issue in the context of radicalization.^r This trend, however, appears to be waning in recent years,³³ as also shown by the data on plotters compiled by the author.

Residence status and country of origin are further clues about the nature of the recent surge in jihadism in Europe, though open-source data on this aspect may be affected by under-reporting. In the context of youth radicalization, whether the recent surge of minors involved in plotting in Europe is driven by failed integration efforts for young people who recently arrived to Europe also has major policy implications. Based on the sample, however, underage suspects are highly unlikely to be asylum seekers. This also sets them apart from adult suspects of foiled plots, every fourth of whom was seeking asylum in Europe.

The suspects’ country of origin also points toward youth radicalization being more of a homegrown than an imported issue, particularly compared to adults. While there are notable gaps in the data on suspects’ citizenship, minor plotters are more likely to be E.U. citizens than third-country nationals. In particular, 18.2% were Germans, 11.3% were Austrians, 11.3% Moroccans, followed by Russians (9.1%, mainly ethnic Chechens) and French (9.1%). Notably, nationals of German-speaking countries (Austrians, Germans, Swiss) account for 31.8% of underage suspects. While exact figures are not available, several of these minor terrorism suspects were reportedly second- or third-generation immigrants in E.U. countries. This points toward challenges related to integration, and places some burden on European countries to prevent or at least detect and proactively interrupt such cases of radicalization. In comparison, adult plotters were twice as likely to be third-country nationals than E.U. citizens, with the largest groups among them being Russians (10.3%, mainly ethnic Chechens) and Tajiks (7.7%).

Unique Features of Minor Plotters

The difference in interception rates clearly suggests that age is

n The dataset used for this article largely relies on open-source reporting including on the criminal history of suspects. Legal frameworks on disclosing the criminal record of minors differ across European countries. However, in the context of terrorism-related cases, authorities often mention if a suspect—regardless of age—was previously known to law enforcement for prior offenses.

o Perpetrators of successful attacks in Europe in the covered time frame have a significantly higher rate of having a prior criminal record, with nine out of 21 perpetrators (42.9%) reportedly having been convicted of a criminal offense.

p The share of mental health conditions among perpetrators of successful attacks is notably higher, with seven out of 21 perpetrators reportedly having mental health issues.

q While disclosing underage suspects’ mental health-related records might also be affected by the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and domestic legislation, in the author’s experience, authorities in the covered European countries tend to mention any such suspicions or the lack thereof.

r For instance, the EU’s Radicalisation Awareness Network had a separate working group for the mental health-terror nexus. Based on the author’s previous research, almost every third attacker in Europe since 2014 was reported to have struggled with mental health. See Erik Hacker, “Jihadi Attacks in Europe. Trends and Features 2014-2022,” SCENOR, April 2023.

a crucial predictive factor for a plot succeeding or failing, given that young jihadis in Europe have been significantly less capable of executing terror attacks. Their weapon selection leaning more toward easily accessible dual-use tools instead of sophisticated weapons also hints at the lack of capabilities.

The features of minor plotters mostly resemble that of adult plotters, though in a few characteristics, there are notable differences with considerable implications for counterterrorism and violence prevention. Underage suspects appear to be more likely to be homegrown (with the three German-speaking countries' citizens accounting for 31.8% of the underage suspects in the dataset), and are highly unlikely to be asylum seekers. The integration of underage refugees is thus not a key driver behind the recent surge, supporting earlier findings that they are not more vulnerable to being radicalized and mobilized.³⁴

However, the fact that many from the recent wave of minor plotters come from second- or third-generation immigrant families suggests that multigenerational integration remains a challenge. Schools thus become a central venue for both prevention work and intelligence gathering, raising several delicate legal and ethical issues, including limitations on collecting minors' personal data under the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the risk of securitizing students' learning environments, and the potential for overreaching teachers' mandates. Austria in particular, but France, too, appears to have a major issue with underage terror suspects, warranting further analysis to determine the root causes behind this development.

Underage suspects' countries of origin may also explain why—despite concerns about the group—ISK appears to be less popular among minor terrorism suspects in Europe. ISK's propaganda is particularly tailored to the Central Asian diaspora,³⁵ yet seems to struggle to gain traction among young Tajiks, Turkmen, and Uzbeks in Europe, contrary to Central Asia.³⁶ In fact, most of the adult Central Asian plotters just recently entered Europe, unlike underage plotters who are more likely to be born and raised in Europe. This finding strongly suggests that ISK has failed to capitalize on the opportunity of increased radicalization among minors in Europe so far, indicating that its messaging or digital products are either not appealing to European youth or do not reach youth—and especially the Central Asian diaspora—in Europe.

Related to this finding, minors are also unlikely to have contact with cyber coaches of the Islamic State and its affiliates. The data compiled by the author does not show that minors are overly prone to being recruited online by coaches under the virtual planner model. This confirms Ayad's findings that much of the propaganda relevant to youth is made and circulated by fellow teenagers, instead of Islamic State members.³⁷ It is also closely related to the previous point about ISK's apparent lack of appeal to minor terrorism suspects in Europe. Language barriers are more likely to exist among younger people, and potential intergenerational differences (attitudes on authority, cultural cues) might also be a factor for the low number of cyber-coached plots by minors. These factors can make it harder for virtual planners to find and/or convince individuals to mobilize.

However, the low rate of cyber-coached underage plotters as reflected in the author's dataset may also indicate a conscious decision by terrorist organizations to prioritize approaching adults over minors, either based on negative experiences in the past or due to assumed reliability and capability issues. As a further counterterrorism implication, this may reduce authorities'

opportunities to utilize signals intelligence (SIGINT) to exploit known cyber coaches' footprints in order to intercept plots by minors.

Counterterrorism Implications

The largest contrast to adult Islamist terrorism suspects appears to be minors' poor operational security, explaining why most of them failed unlike those above the age of 18. Likely attributable to their inexperience, young suspects seem to be more likely to look for advice online on target selection and weapon acquisition, resulting in them getting caught. This is an interesting dynamic as the data compiled by the author highlights how plots involving minors in Europe are generally less ambitious when it comes to weapon selection.

Still, even if a suspect's online activities are monitored, it is increasingly challenging to decide when to intervene. With the rising integration of online youth subcultures into jihadi spaces,³⁸ and the accompanying sarcasm and jokes, assessing the intent and mobilization of suspects becomes more challenging. Interventions that take place too early can lead to prosecutors not having enough evidence to charge or successfully prosecute the suspect, while also tipping off the suspect that their online posts are being watched, potentially triggering an attack. Most European legislation sets high bars for minors to be convicted in general, thus authorities tend to wait longer to gather evidence that is more likely to secure a sentence.³⁹ However, there is always an inherent risk given the dominant *modus operandi*: Any unpredictable trigger could lead to an immediate, spontaneous attack with an easily accessible weapon, such as a knife or a vehicle.⁴⁰

The European Union's criminal justice policy prioritizes alternative measures to detention in general.⁴¹ For terror suspects in particular, incarceration may exacerbate radicalization, though data on prisons' impact on minors is strongly limited, besides anecdotal evidence.⁴² Reviews on the general prison population suggest that prisons can be hotbeds of radicalization⁴² due to networking with other radicals. They can also fuel grievances against the state and make individuals more vulnerable to radicalization by isolating them from previous social circles while also making employment challenging due to stigmatization.⁴³ On the other hand, disengagement from radical environments can also be an opportunity, and juvenile facilities tend to focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society, thereby potentially limiting these concerns. Another option is to involve deradicalization services, but some suspects may be too far down the radicalization process, and participation in such initiatives is voluntary unless mandated by a court order.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The data presented in this article suggests that current counterterrorism approaches have been highly effective against radicalized minors in Europe, who appear to lack the ability to translate intent to conduct a terror attack into successful attacks. Underage terror suspects' extensive digital footprint and their

s The case of the Austrian Lorenz K. demonstrates the radicalization risks of minors' incarceration. He was first incarcerated as a minor for membership in a terrorist organization. While in prison, he expanded his network of radicalized individuals and Islamic State supporters, and continued to commit terror-related offenses in detention (e.g., recruiting and instructing individuals online to conduct attacks).

seemingly weak or absent ties to formal terror groups and cyber coaches have likely contributed to the high failure rate of minors' plots in Europe in recent years.

To capitalize on the early-detection opportunities afforded by the digital behavior of radicalized youth, intelligence agencies should strengthen OSINT capabilities in both personnel and technical domains by expanding the monitoring of online platforms, particularly those popular among young Islamic State supporters, such as TikTok, Pinterest, and Instagram.⁴⁵

However, recent increases in propaganda around operational security by the Islamic State and its ecosystem of unofficial supporter outlets,^t advising followers on how to evade authorities online,⁴⁶ may change the course of this trend. Although the Islamic State and its affiliates have recently focused on inspired attacks

^t The unofficial ISK-supporter outlet Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production has launched its own series on this topic in its monthly magazine Voice of Khurasan under the title "Light of Darkness."

in Europe with little operational involvement, these indicators suggest that the group has recognized the importance of OPSEC for its young European supporters. Potential platform migration, particularly to more secretive and encrypted outlets, mirrors past innovation patterns in reaction to counterterrorism pressure⁴⁷ and could reduce the effectiveness of current counterterrorism measures focusing on easily accessible online platforms.

Barring online activities, the typical profile of underage terror suspects limits early-detection opportunities. Based on the dataset compiled by the author, radicalized minors in Europe tend to lack a criminal record or recognized mental health conditions, and have limited connections to formal terror organizations. To stay ahead of this threat and proactively bridge potential intelligence gaps, OSINT efforts should also be complemented by offline counterterrorism measures in preparation for potential changes in young suspects' digital behavior. Schools and sports associations are well-positioned to contribute to the identification of early signs of radicalization among minors and help facilitate targeted radicalization prevention pathways. **CTC**

Citations

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