

As threat grows from radicalised Europeans returning home from fighting in Syria, Lina Kolesnikova calls for closer intelligence sharing between member nations to help identify suspects

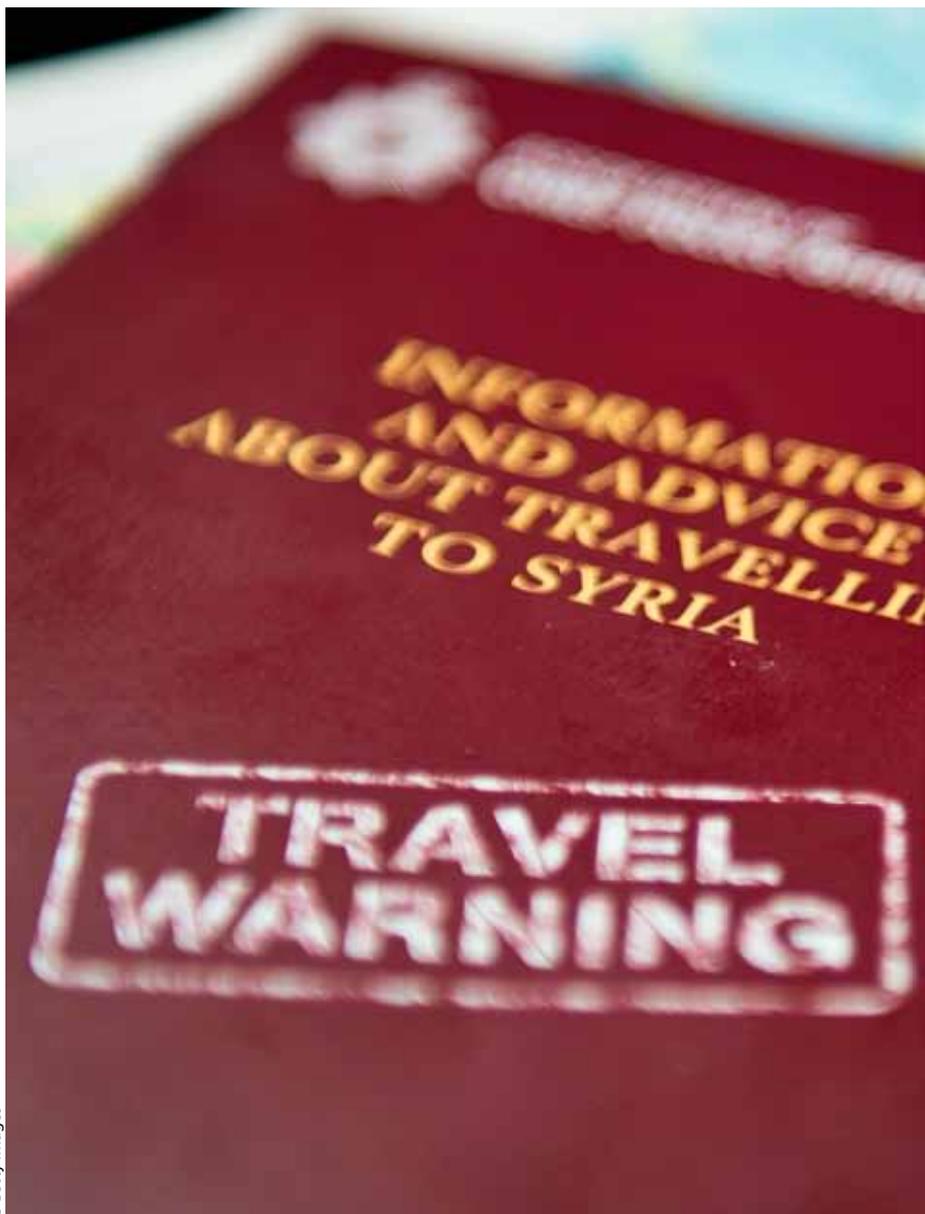
# THE MECCA OF RADICALI

**O**n 24 May 2014, a gunman shot dead two women and a man (they were an Israeli couple in their 50s, and a French female volunteer) at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. A fourth man, who was seriously wounded, died several days later in the emergency room. The attacker had arrived by car, got out, fired on people at the museum entrance, and returned to the vehicle that then sped away. He was recorded by the CCTV of the museum. The police revealed the record to wide public while asking for assistance in identifying the terrorist.

A week time after the attack, a suspect – 29-year-old Mehdi Nemmouche, originally from Roubaix on the Franco-Belgian border – was arrested at the Saint-Charles train station in Marseille, France. He arrived there by an overnight coach from Brussels. A Kalashnikov automatic rifle with Islamist markings, a revolver and ammunition similar to that used in the shootings were found in his luggage during a routine drugs check by the customs officers. Alongside the weapons was a white sheet emblazoned with the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, a jihadist group fighting in Syria and Iraq. French authorities also found press cuttings on the museum murders and a film for a miniature camera holding a record in which he appears to admit the attack. The Belgian federal prosecutor, Frédéric Van Leeuw, said it appeared the suspect had tried to film the killings but his camera had failed.

Mehdi Nemmouche is a convicted criminal with a troubled childhood who became a Syrian jihadist soon after he left prison in France in January 2013. He returned to Europe two months ago and is also believed to have spent some time in Britain. President Holland later pointed out that the suspect re-entered Europe through Germany and then moved on to Belgium. In France he was under close surveillance, however. This suggests that, despite the aired concern about militants originating from Europe and coming back after having fought in Syria, the actual control over the movement of such people is not there. This might mean that Europe-wide co-operation in following ex-Syrian fighters is inadequate or non-existent. Finding themselves under police surveillance in one EU country, terrorists may therefore try to carry out terrorist attacks in another EU country.

There are still many questions unanswered about the Brussels attack, including: whether the terrorist acted alone; whether he received his orders from a terrorist group or acted on his own initiative; and why he chose to travel by the Eurolines train from Amsterdam, which is routinely controlled for drugs. If his involvement in the Brussels attack



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is proven, Mehdi Nemmouche will be the first European jihadist volunteer in Syria to have committed an act of terrorism upon his return to Europe. This might mean that the worst European fears are coming true.

The attack in Brussels forced EU countries to pronounce loudly their concerns on a growing threat from EU citizens who, having travelled to conflict zones to engage in terrorist activity, now return to the European Union with a willingness to commit acts of terrorism. Europol has

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warned that EU citizens continue to travel to conflict zones to receive training in combat techniques and to engage in armed fighting.

Syria is a particular concern mentioned by politicians, law enforcement communities and the mass media. According to Jean-Louis Bruguiere, France's top anti-terrorist magistrate until 2007, Syria is the perfect terrain for the jihad, both because the Islamists are playing a leading role there, and because president Assad

presents a valuable target for Shiite extremists.

In last two years we have seen the appearance of new groups, either affiliated or non-affiliated with al-Qaeda, but with both terrorist intentions and capabilities, which may result in terrorist attacks on unexpected targets at unexpected times. US intelligence chief James R Clapper Jr insisted that the Syrian war had attracted about 7,000 foreign fighters from as many as 50 nations, and that at least one of the main jihadist groups in Syria aspires to carry out an attack in the United States or European countries. The movements of jihadists to and from Syria might be the largest migration of volunteer fighters since the Spanish Civil War drew tens of thousands of leftist international brigades to battle fascism in the 1930s. The numbers of EU citizens travelling to Syria in particular, including those intending to fight alongside al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, were already substantial and rising, and increased significantly in 2013 and in 2014. It seems likely that Syria will remain the destination of choice for the prospective fighters departing from the EU member states as long as the civil war there continues.

Syria is much easier to enter than Iraq or Afghanistan. The main routes go via Turkey and then across the border to Syria, or via Bulgaria. Turkey, which shares a 910-kilometer border with Syria, does not require visas for most Europeans, and receives almost 40 million tourists a year, making arrivals hard to track. Bulgaria also reported that some individuals travelling to Syria had interacted with Bulgarian criminals to acquire false identity documents for their journey to Syria. Other countries like Iran and in particular Iraq might alternative, though lower-scale, paths to Syria. One needs to pay special attention to Iraq, as many militant jihadist groups can travel from Syria to Iraq and back again.

The International Center for the Study of Radicalisation, a research institution partnered with London King's College, estimated that nearly 2,000 Western Europeans had travelled to Syria to fight and that the number was rising fast. Muslims originating from natively non-European communities, as well as people "newly converted to Islam", including European natives, are among the fighters.

French officials say 700 fighters travelled from France. French Interior Minister Manuel Valls asserted in June that returning fighters represent "the biggest threat that the country faces in the coming years". The UK, Ireland and France are among the EU countries estimated to have provided the highest numbers of fighters in Syria. Several hundred Belgians, Dutch and Scandinavians are also thought to be fighting, according to official figures. A minority of fighters are from Eastern Europe, including Albania, Bosnia and Serbia, and also from Australia and Canada. Russia is also anxious by rumours of significant number of Caucasians who went for Syria.

Thomas Hegghammer from Norwegian Defense Research organisation summed it up this way: "We can conclude... that the number of European foreign fighters in Syria is alarmingly high and historically unprecedented. Moreover, France, Germany and the UK may have the largest foreign fighter contingents in Syria, but Denmark, Norway, Belgium and Austria have contributed a much higher proportion of

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their population. Given that police resources are limited, these countries may have a larger problem on their hands than do their bigger European neighbours.”

Al-Qaeda and terrorist groups with similar mind-sets abroad continued to encourage self-organised attacks within the EU aiming for indiscriminate casualties. In 2010, an article in the *Jihadi Magazine*, “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom” invited and inspired terrorists to attempt smaller-scale attacks. Returnees might easily become perpetrators or organisers of such attacks. They also may set up new terrorist cells, becoming involved in financial and/or recruitment activities for the terrorist groups in the Middle East. They may become sleeper cells for al-Qaeda or other groups and networks. Last but not least, they may also become involved in criminal activities aiming at supporting terrorist groups.

Europe has to admit it knows little or nothing about what is going on in Syria, especially if compared to what it knew about Iraq and Afghanistan at the height of wars there. There are several major sources or paths to information that European countries may employ, but political agendas can make their use a remote possibility. Confrontation with Assad makes it difficult to receive information about Europeans from the Syrian secret services, which would otherwise be the best source of information. Levels of collaboration with Russia, which might have access and may benefit from Assad’s information, differ from one country to the other, but is certainly not at its high point. The same applies to Israel, which has its own interests and significant information sources in Syria. Turkey might also be in a source of some information.

It is beyond the existing capacity of European security services to monitor all people travelling to and returning from Syria around the clock. Therefore, there are two main points that European countries can act upon. First is the identification of people travelling to and from Syria, as well as people spotted there, and second is the identification and counter-efforts against radicalisation and its sources.

It appears there is no Europe-wide programme aimed at identifying people going to and from Syria, but individual

national programmes are being developed. For example, France launched a government-sponsored hotline for families to alert authorities about relatives at risk of going to Syria. More than 125 calls have been received so far. Similar efforts are thought to be ongoing in other countries as well. Such programs are clearly not enough, however. Getting information from the official services in Syria is unthinkable in the current climate but, as difficult as it can be in view of the current political climate, it might be more beneficial to organise information channels with secret services of Turkey, Israel and Russia.

Providing assistance to Turkish law enforcement and border control services with additional personnel, staff trainings and technology might be one of the easiest steps forwards. Discussing possible exchange of Syrian information via Russia on the identity of Europeans in Syria, including the provision of operative information such as names and photos, might prove to be an easier win-win option that many think of it, despite largely conflicting views on developments in Ukraine. The contacts, if established on the European level, might meet difficulties, but they might be feasible and more fruitful if initiated from the national level.

After the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London in the last decade, European law enforcement has paid a lot of attention to mosques as places where young people could be radicalised. But whatever degree of control the intelligence services have gained over what’s going on in mosques, this control has also proved insufficient. The latest research around Europe suggest that very often radicalisation happens in prisons and at places of youth gatherings (schools, sports clubs), as well as through social media. It is necessary to focus on stopping (future) recruitment at the initial stage – at the stage of ideological recruitment and radicalisation. Considering the high number of teenagers who have been recruited to go to Syria, work should be organised from the school-level up. Finally, any efforts will be useless if European countries do not establish an exchange of information on all suspects, at least among themselves. This might start with allowing designated police units access to the EU airline passenger details.

**Deadly skills: European fighters receive tactical training in Syria**

**Lina Kolesnikova is a Russian-born, Brussels-based Fellow of ICPEM. Lina provides consultancy in the area of security, risk and crisis management to number of organisations within both the private and public sectors. She is a member of the advisory board for Crisis Response Journal and CBRNE-Terrorism Newsletter.**