**Peter Nesser, Islamist Terrorism in Europe. A History**  

*Reviewed by Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet*  
Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-La-Neuve

With *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* Peter Nesser seeks to offer a comprehensive and detailed account of the historical evolution of jihadism in Western Europe from the early 1990s until 2015. In nine dense chapters, Nesser aims to unravel the dynamics that explain how and when militant jihadi cells nestled into cities across Europe and unleashed brutal attacks on European soil. The author endeavours to show that jihadi terrorism in Europe is intrinsically linked to armed organisations such as Al Qaida, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS/IS) and their affiliates, whether at the ideological or operational levels. Central to the argument is how entrepreneurial jihad-veterans – sharpened and battle-hardened in various training camps and in war-torn areas around the world – have been critical in the conception and spread of violence across Europe.

In the first chapter, “From Afghanistan to Europe”, the reader is given a convincing summary of the literature dedicated to the origins of jihadi militancy within the Afghan-Arab foreign fighter movement in the late 1970s, the genesis of Al-Qaida, and how it begets the production of a particular Salafi-jihadi ideological discourse. Central to this chapter is how Europe, once considered as a safe haven “functioning as a rear base for national struggles” (p. 36), became the locus of a battleground. The transformation of Europe into a target did not come without a number of fierce ideological disputes among jihadist ranks. While examining the situation, Nesser notes that “radical preachers and recruiters in Europe openly and fiercely justified jihad in Muslim countries, but their stance on attacks in the West was more ambiguous” (p. 47). Chapter Two, “Scope and Modus Operandi”, lays out the broad features of how jihadists have operated in Europe. Nesser examines the evolution of the 151 attempted and executed attacks in Europe between 1994 and 2015, the types of weapons used, their alleged and confirmed targets and how these plots were funded. He underlines that “most jihadi plots in Europe involved people who had trained or fought in conflict zones” (p. 65). These two first chapters constitute the backbone of the subsequent chapters arranged in chronological order. Chapters Three to Nine cover the period from the Air France hijack in 1994 and the subsequent Armed Islamic Group’s bombing campaign in France to the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015. They are divided in three main sections, reflecting upon the ideological and operational changes among jihadi groups and cells’ modus vivendi and operandi in Europe.
The first section (chapters Three and Four) explores the period prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Chapter Three, “The Algeria factor”, focuses on the internal wars that were brewing among Algerian Islamist groups in the late 1980s, which eventually led to a series of attacks in France perpetrated by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in 1995. Nesser notes that the fact that the head of the GIA Djamel Zitouni “was recruited and socialised by people with foreign fighter experience, who saw the national Algerian struggle as part of something wider, may have affected his decision to strike the French at home” (p. 73). If these first jihadi attacks in Europe were ordered from Algeria to further GIA’s objectives at home, Nesser considers them as proof of the “emerging global Jihad” (p. 83). Chapter Four “Towards Global Jihad in Europe (2000–3)”, is dedicated to a series of foiled plots in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom between 2000 and 2002. Nesser examines each of these attacks and although most of the plots them were primarily aimed at the USA and Russia rather than European countries, he concludes that each cell involved in these attempts were part of “Al-Qaida’s effort to ignite global Jihad” (p. 127).

The second section (chapters Five to Seven) starts on the premise of a transnationalisation of violence and a radical change of perception of Europe by Islamist militants. Chapter Five, “The Iraq Effect (2003–5)”, is dedicated to the Iraq war and its effects upon European countries. The invasion of Iraq and the subsequent war triggered an important ideological and operational shift from seeing Europe as a support base to that of a target of retaliatory attacks. While examining the Madrid Bombings in March 2004 and the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam in November the same year, the author underlines how “the Iraq war was a catalyst for a new generation of jihadists in Europe, composed of people born and raised in the region who had little experience of armed struggles” (p. 130). The discussion on how the attacks were planned and executed, on the one hand, and the preeminent role of senior activists, on the other, are described in full length. In the following chapter dedicated to the period of 2004–6, “The Pakistan Axis”, the author explores the ideological rationale behind the 2005 London attacks and stresses the importance of the Pakistan-United Kingdom connection in the promotion and expansion of Al-Muhajiroun in particular and of Al-Qaeda’s scenario of global jihad in Europe more broadly (p. 164). In Chapter Seven, “The Northern Front”, Nesser underlines the disastrous effect of the publication of twelve cartoons of the Prophet by the Danish Newspapers Jyllands-Posten in September 2005: “for many jihadis, the Muhammad cartoons were seen as the last straw, which in addition to military campaigns in Muslim lands and the arrest of Islamists, had invalidated the covenant of security and legitimised attacks in Europe by European Muslims” (p. 202). Nesser exposes what is known about the 2005 Glostrup cell and the alleged 2007 bomb plot in Denmark, the attempted 2006 bomb plot, and the 2007 Sauerland cell in Germany.

In the final section, Chapters Eight and Nine, the author outlines a number of plots in Europe during the 2008–10 period, before exploring the impact of the death of Bin Laden, the Arab Spring, and the implosion of Syria, on jihadist militancy in Europe. In Chapter Eight, “Decentralization (2008–11)”, Nesser underlines how “the death of Bin Laden and the Arab Spring led to disarray, internal conflict and competition among jihadis on the one hand, and open new fronts and possibilities on the other” (p. 264). In the final chapter, Nesser analyses the period from 2011 to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015. While Nesser reminds his reader that Al-Qaida was “still in the game” (p. 275), the civil war in Syria that gave rise to IS, and the attacks in Paris
in January and November 2015, together heralded the beginning of a new wave of violence. The chapter ends with a series of assertive policy recommendations on the need to strengthen intelligence capacities and de-radicalisation programmes.

Considering the vast array of literature competing to map out the rise of militant Islamism across Europe, Nesser’s *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* deserves to be noticed for assembling such an amount of detailed information on several executed and foiled attacks that would otherwise have been located in scattered publications not always easily accessible to a wider public. However, Nesser’s volume might not be the easiest read for someone who seeks an explanation of Islam militancy, but who would have a limited prior knowledge of the European jihadi’s “who’s who”. While compiling so many news media accounts, government and policy reports on executed and foiled attacks and their perpetrators in different languages should be praised, one could wonder if it is sufficient in its provision of a comprehensive understanding of jihadist militancy. How is jihadi militancy performed, received and portrayed in the sources mobilised in the present volume? Inevitably, disdainful narratives and implicit or explicit assumptions about violence are conveyed in these sources. Unfortunately, these questions and the inherent epistemological and methodological issues at stake are not thoroughly discussed in this volume. Furthermore, the profusion of information gathered does not always lead to a careful and considered view and the author tends to veer off course to a more anxious and threatening position about the future and to deploy overly pithy sentences such as “Muslim’s love for their Prophet is difficult for Westerners to grasp, and may be compared to anybody’s love for close kin and children” (p. 245).

Key to the argument deployed in this volume is the important role of senior activists in the spread of jihadism across Europe and their higher degree of commitment and conscientiousness when compared to the foot-soldiers (“misfits” and “drifters” in the author’s terms). The author’s efforts in surveying the social backgrounds, personal characteristics and roles played by the different perpetrators of foiled and executed attacks and his attempt to categorise them cannot be denied. The distinction drawn between the *entrepreneurs*, the *protégés*, the *misfits* and the *drifters* could lead to an interesting debate on what should be a comprehensive relational and dynamic explanatory model of political violence, weaving together environmental conditions, group dynamics and organisational behaviours with individual impetuses and motives. Unfortunately, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* is more attuned to a static and mechanical understanding of radicalisation rather than a relational and dynamic one, i.e. an extremist discourse does not necessarily produce a vehement actor prepared to commit a violent action. Equally, someone seeking a more theoretically informed argument on militant entrepreneurship, or resource mobilisation, would be disappointed. But perhaps, the most striking point would be the fact that *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* does not entirely escape the limits imposed upon us by the classic yet somewhat abridged question asked by Gurr: *why men rebel*? The accounting for and explanation of radical, revolting and sometimes disgusting actions should come with an even more interesting question about social conformity. Is not the ultimate question actually “why very few people rebel”? Overall, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* exemplifies how difficult it is when presenting an argument

---

on such a sensitive issue to steer a middle course between an appropriate level of empirical evidence and a necessary rigorous conceptual analysis.