

HCSS Security

## The Blind Eye Turned to the Far-right

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## Introduction – The Rise of Terrorism from the Far-right

The number of terrorist attacks from the far-right has increased considerably in the United States (US) and Europe over the last decade (See Figure 1), as indicated by data collected by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START).<sup>i</sup> For a long time, this matter has been neglected by scholars, policymakers, legislators, and security forces and a much stronger, almost singular focus been put on Islamist terrorism.<sup>ii</sup> Even though awareness around the phenomenon is gradually rising, it is important to explore this long-time negligence and its consequences. To this end, this snapshot examines the US’ and Europe’s prevalent bias in framing the issue of terrorism in diverging ways: securitizing one (Islamist terrorism) but neglecting the other (far-right terrorism) by weighing trends of the past ten years against measures taken, including respective legislative differences and definitions as well as conviction and prosecution rates.

Terrorist incidents by ideology in the US & Europe

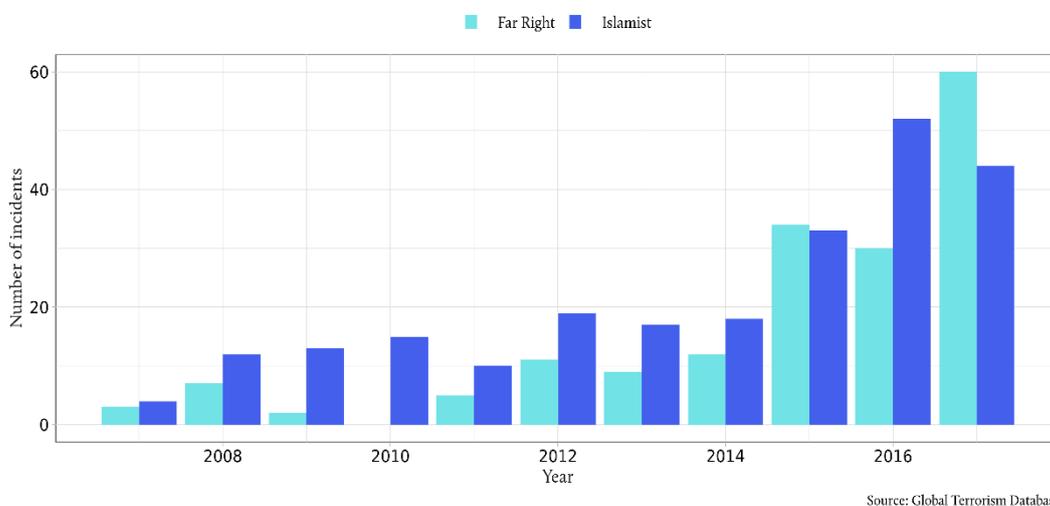


Figure 1: Terrorist incidents by ideology (Islamist and far-right) in the US & Europe from 2007-2017<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> \* Data on Europe is comprised of the Global Terrorism Database’s (GTD) predefined regional sets of Western Europe (Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Gibraltar, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Vatican City) and Eastern Europe (Albania, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Czechoslovakia, East Germany (GDR), Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Montenegro, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Soviet Union, Ukraine, Yugoslavia).

\*\* All graphs in this report display only the number of terrorist attacks and fatalities attributable to Islamist and far-right terrorism (as filtered by HCSS from the GTD). Other sub-types (such as left wing, anti-abortion or anarchist terrorism) are not included in our visualizations given their analytical irrelevance here.

\*\*\* Given that the GTD does not provide for an ideological categorization of its recorded terrorist incidents, HCSS selected for Islamist and far-right terrorism by manually identifying which of the perpetrator groups (as identified

## Terrorism – A Complex and Contested Concept

Despite many complexities and subjectivity surrounding the subject matter of terrorism, some core features are commonly used to define the phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Thus, terrorism can be defined as acts that are:

- a) politically motivated (with the intent of achieving a political aim);
- b) violent or threatening the use of violence;
- c) intended to instilling fear amongst a wider audience beyond the immediate target; and
- d) planned, calculated, and systematic.<sup>iii</sup>

This snapshot comparatively assesses the two subtypes of Islamist and far-right terrorism. The former is defined here as terrorist acts committed out of a religious, Islamist motivation or otherwise claimed by an organization that has explicitly articulated an Islamist ideology.<sup>iv</sup> Far-right terrorism is defined as terrorist acts motivated by beliefs falling into the wider spectrum of right-wing ideologies which comprise cultural nationalism, racist nationalism, and ethnic nationalism.<sup>3 v</sup>

## The Securitization of Terrorism and Bias towards Islamism

Statistically speaking, terrorism receives far more (media) attention than is appropriate for its share of fatalities or frequency.<sup>vi</sup> In 2017, only 0.05% of all deaths in the US were reported to be terrorism-related, even though the phenomenon received far more media coverage than other causes of deaths.<sup>vii</sup> Despite this small share, terrorism is considered one of the most disruptive threats of our era. This is related to the fact that governments securitize certain issues such as terrorism by framing them as existential threats to an audience in order to justify setting in place extraordinary measures – outside of normal legal practices and rights afforded to

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under 'gname' in the GTD) fall into each category. One limitation of this approach is that perpetrator groups identified as 'unknown' in the GTD do not feature in HCSS' categorization, potentially distorting the data sample. However, this methodology gets closest to an ideological classification of terrorist incidents in the examined countries. To date, there exists no comprehensive dataset providing such an overview.

<sup>2</sup> Given that terrorism changes over time and can involve various political agendas, actors and discourses, it is a complex phenomenon on which no consensus definition has been found yet. Rather, subjectivity influences whether an act will be considered terrorism or rather a legitimate quest for liberation or freedom.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note here that these three categories of far-right terrorism constitute ideal types that do not represent the entire ideological spectrum and nuances, which are much more varied and complex. Both radical motivations (i.e., seeking to replace 'liberal elites' while maintaining the bounds of democracy) and extremist ones (i.e., rejecting and seeking to replace the democratic order altogether) pertain to these ideal types of far-right ideologies.

citizens – to resolve them (e.g., the declaration of a state of emergency or the temporary suspension of civil rights).<sup>4</sup> <sup>viii</sup> Such framing goes hand in hand with extensive media coverage of (predominantly) the worst and deadliest terrorist attacks, exacerbating public fear and justifying certain counter-measures.<sup>ix</sup> Consequently, counter-terrorism policy usually rests on exceptional measures that can disrupt people’s daily lives and at times even interfere with their human rights.<sup>x</sup> In some cases, such means can even become normalized, e.g., through gradually extending a country’s emergency status for months or years, or an enhanced and consolidated surveillance culture.<sup>xi</sup>

Moreover, there is a great disparity between how different types of terrorism are framed, covered, and treated.<sup>xii</sup> According to research undertaken by Kearns, Betus and Lemieux, terrorist attacks by Muslim perpetrators receive 357% more press coverage in the US than those committed by non-Muslims, even though far-right perpetrators have been responsible for almost twice as many attacks between 2008 and 2016.<sup>xiii</sup> Such unbalanced representations shape public opinion and perceptions, and thereby also impact the forming of national policies.<sup>xiv</sup> These findings are further underscored when evaluating the diverging legislations and conviction rates of Islamist and far-right terrorists in light of recent trends in the US and Western Europe (WE).

## United States

Over the past decade, the number of far-right attacks in the US rose from no reported incidents to 28 – almost five times as many incidents as those related to Islamist terrorism in 2017 (Figure 2). Even though the number of fatalities resulting from far-right attacks is still relatively low (particularly in comparison to fatalities resulting from Islamist attacks), it is also clearly increasing – having risen by 14 reported fatalities over the past decade (Figure 2). It would logically follow that resources and attention increasingly be devoted to this group as well, however, current anti-terrorism legislation and conviction rates clash with this reasoning.

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<sup>4</sup> Other actors can perform securitization acts, e.g., by flagging issues in the media and portraying them as existential threats. However, for securitization acts to be successful, they must be elevated into the sphere of public concern and policymaking so resources will be allocated and corresponding extraordinary measures will be enforced. Hence, it is ultimately governmental actors holding sufficient (political) clout to securitize a problem successfully, whereas other actors (media, NGOs, etc.) can solely draw attention to the matter and contribute to securitizing a problem via its framing.

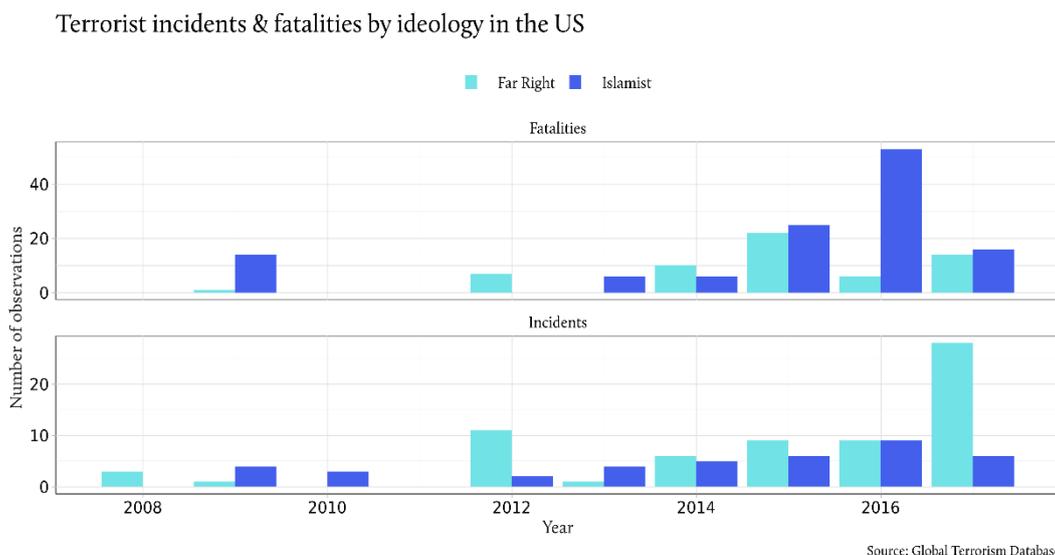


Figure 2: Terrorist fatalities and incidents by ideology (Islamist and far-right) in the US from 2007-2017

Legally speaking, the US distinguishes between domestic and international terrorism, which has practical implications for dealing with terrorist acts and convicting their perpetrators, but also for the way in which terrorism is framed and perceived by the public. While international terrorism is defined as an act being “inspired by or associated with designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations (state-sponsored),”<sup>xv</sup> domestic terrorism must be inspired by US-based movements of “extremist ideologies of a political, religious, social, racial or environmental nature.”<sup>xvi</sup> However, many such organizations incentivizing terrorism are not officially designated domestic terrorist organizations. Rather, their views and propaganda are classified as hate speech.<sup>5 xvii</sup> The bar to be charged with domestic terrorism is thus rendered considerably higher than with international terrorism, as the former clashes with the US’ First Amendment rights permitting free speech (including hate speech) and freedom to engage with other radicals, complicating conviction with domestic terrorism.<sup>xviii</sup> Consequently, significantly less individuals have been charged with domestic terrorism than were prosecuted for it. Between 2001 and 2019, 268 far-right perpetrators matching the legal definition of domestic terrorism were prosecuted (as opposed to 906 prosecutions of alleged Islamist offenders), yet only 34 of these ended up being charged under anti-terrorism laws (Figure 3).<sup>xix</sup> The same anti-terrorism laws were brought against more than 500 alleged international

<sup>5</sup> Naturally, this means that some organizations will also not feature in the GTD data used for this snapshot and, consequently, that the corresponding far-right category identified by HCSS might be underrepresented.

terrorist perpetrators, stressing the bias towards Islamist terrorism as opposed to the far-right in being charged and identified under anti-terrorism legislation.<sup>xx</sup> In consequence, (far-right) individuals having committed domestic terrorist acts are rather often charged with petty crimes, e.g., under drug or gun laws.<sup>xxi</sup> While this practice might constitute an effective and perhaps currently the only way to hold these individuals accountable, the failure to prosecute them under anti-terrorism laws downplays their acts' gravity by negating and/or ignoring their terrorist nature. Moreover, it underscores the lack of an adequate legal threshold for domestic terrorism.

Charges brought against individuals matching the criteria of domestic terrorism

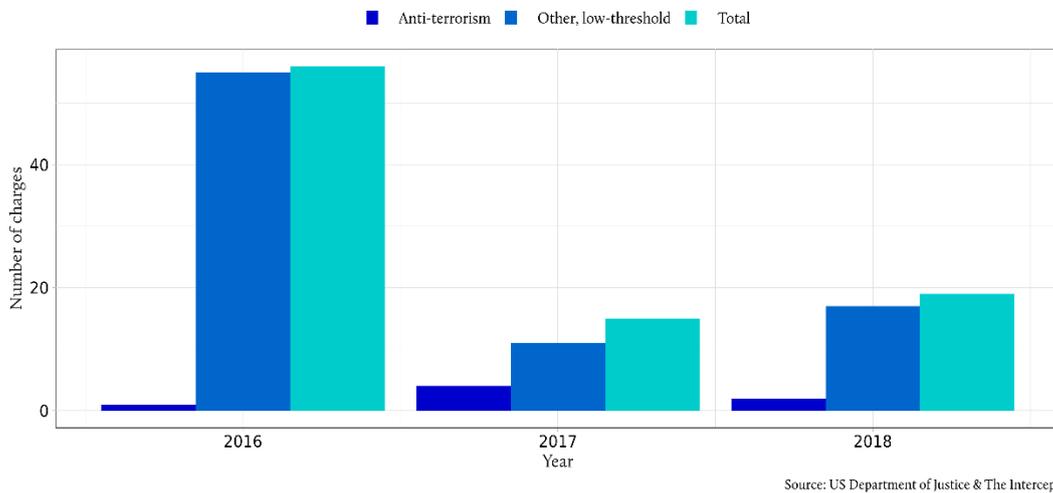


Figure 3: Charges brought against individuals matching the criteria of domestic terrorism in the US

## Europe

GTD data shows that in Europe, far-right terrorist attacks are also on the rise, having more than ten-folded over the past decade and even starting to outnumber Islamist terrorism both in terms of occurrence and fatalities (Figure 4). As in the US, this trend is disproportionate to the available means or measures taken on the matter.

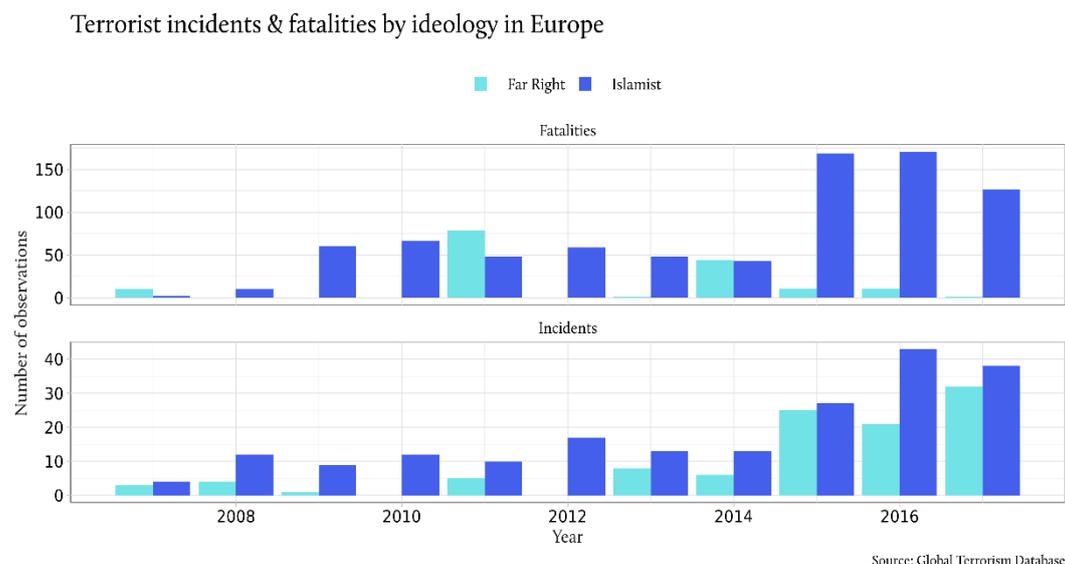


Figure 4: Terrorist fatalities and incidents by ideology (Islamist and far-right) in Europe from 2007-2017

One crucial aspect to highlight is the definitional overlap between far-right terrorism and hate crimes in many European countries, which can make it hard to distinguish one from the other in legal terms and thus, register or convict them accordingly.<sup>xxii</sup> Similar to many incidents of far-right terrorism, hate crimes are “violence and offences motivated by racism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, or by bias against a person’s disability, sexual orientation or gender identity.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Key differences lie in hate crimes being more spontaneous (although terrorist attacks are increasingly spontaneous in nature, making a distinction towards hate crimes even harder), not intended to spread a wider message, and sometimes not even crossing the threshold of physical violence.<sup>xxiv</sup> National legislation on hate crime also varies considerably throughout Europe.<sup>xxv</sup> Consequently, far-right terrorism, if handled instead as a hate crime, is likely to be underrepresented and therefore undervalued. This is also reflected in the number of arrests and convictions relating to far-right terrorism, which are significantly lower than those relating to Islamist arrests and convictions (Figures 5 and 6).<sup>6</sup> On top of this, the overall conviction rate (relating to the number of all arrests) has also been higher amongst Jihadist terrorist perpetrators than

<sup>6</sup> The numbers of arrests and convictions relating to Jihadist terrorism are (in total terms) much higher due to the conflict in Syria and Iraq (refugee influx; large scale Islamist terrorist attacks; returnees; terrorist financing; lower threshold for dissemination of terrorist propaganda). These numbers are still relevant, however, as they speak to the corresponding securitization (incl. a high number of arrests and convictions) of potential Islamist perpetrators of terrorism in Europe. In relative terms, these numbers are important given that they also reveal higher conviction rates (out of arrests) of Islamist than of far-right perpetrators.

amongst far-right ones which is indicative of a stronger policing focus on Islamist than on far-right terrorism.<sup>7</sup>

Terrorist convictions in the EU by ideology

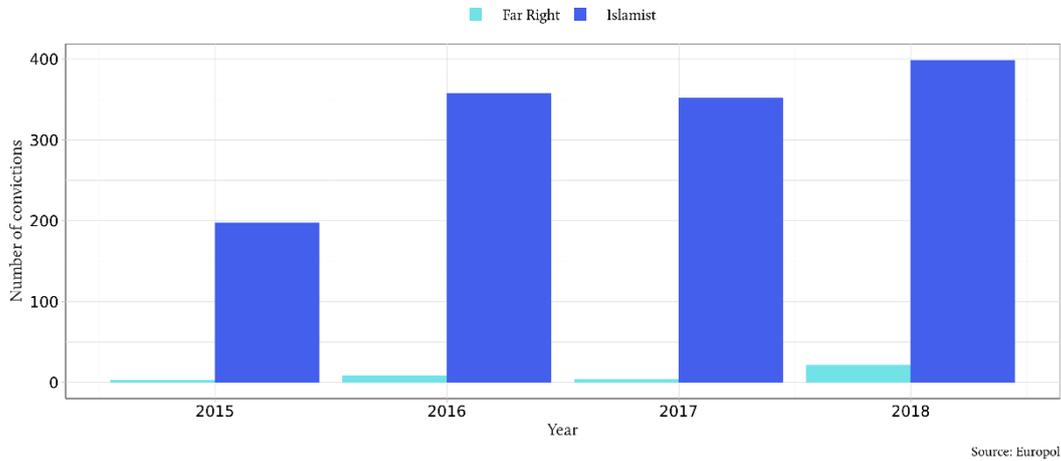


Figure 5: Terrorist arrests in the EU by ideology (Islamist and far-right) from 2015-2018

Terrorist arrests in the EU by ideology

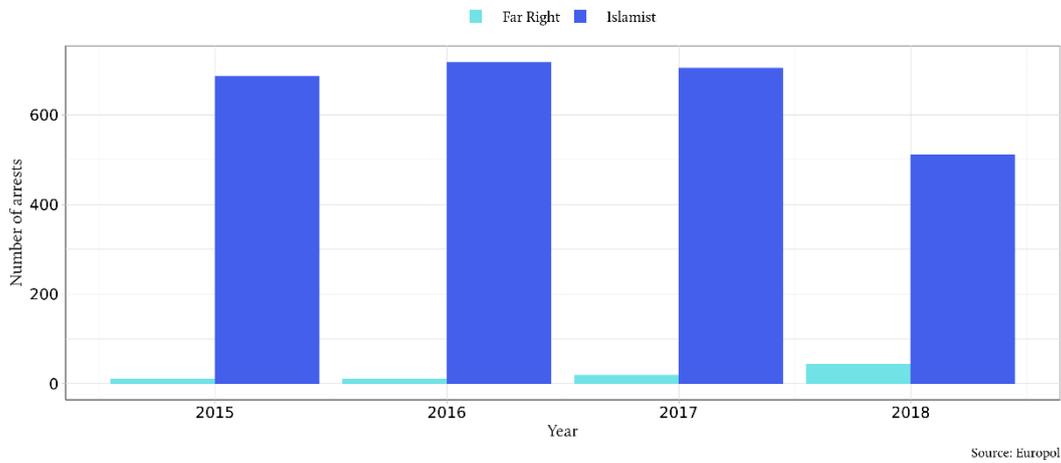


Figure 6: Terrorist convictions in the EU by ideology (Islamist and far-right) from 2015-2018

<sup>7</sup> The conviction rates amongst Jihadist perpetrators was 29% in 2015, 50% in 2016 and 2017 and 78% in 2018. Conviction rates amongst the far-right were 27% in 2015, 75% in 2016, 20% in 2017 and 50% in 2019.

## Final Remarks

This snapshot has outlined how, even though terrorism from the far-right is gradually increasing in the US and Europe, both regions lack effective and adequate legal tools for holding perpetrators accountable. Instead, Islamist terrorism is framed and prosecuted in a much more extensive way. The conjunction of this bias and recent rise in far-right terrorism raises important policy considerations for the future.

Overall, it is vital to acknowledge the threat stemming from the far-right for what it is and designating it as such. However, it is equally important not to fall into the securitization trap in this context as well and focus too much on far-right terrorism. Rather, a proportionate and realistic focus should be adopted by governments, security forces, and scholars. This could start with gaining a solid understanding of different terrorist threats' gravity and extent. Moreover, what are apparently politicized double standards must be overcome by diminishing discrepancies or stigmatization in existing anti-terrorism legislation, in order to hold perpetrators of terrorist violence accountable – irrespective of any specific ideology. Thereby, governments can build towards more comprehensive anti-terrorism legislation, able to actively look out for and address new, upcoming terrorist threats (including those driven by other groups or ideologies). Such approaches would also diminish unclear and disproportionate framing of terrorist threats that was outlined above. For example, European countries could work towards more clarification in the legal separation between hate crimes and terrorist violence, while the US' current counter-terrorism legislation needs reforming in order to allow for an adequate designation or identification of domestic terrorist threats on a more equal footing with international terrorism.

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