

## *Finland: Extremism and Terrorism*

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On August 18, 2017, police shot and arrested a Moroccan asylum-seeker Abderrahman Mechkah, who killed two women and wounded eight other people during a stabbing spree in the Finnish city of Turku. Police say Mechkah specifically targeted women during what authorities labeled Finland's first terrorism-related attack. No foreign terror group immediately claimed responsibility. (Sources: [Independent](#), [Reuters](#), [CNN](#), [Associated Press](#), [Reuters](#))

In June 2017, the Finnish Security Intelligence Service reported that ISIS now posed a threat to Finland as it no longer viewed the country as neutral. In November 2016, Finnish officials revealed that approximately 80 Finnish foreign fighters had traveled to fight alongside extremist groups in Syria and Iraq. That month, an unidentified Finnish foreign fighter carried out a suicide bombing in Iraq, though details of the attack—including which group it was carried out on behalf of—were not released. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [Finnish Security Intelligence Service](#), [Finland Today](#))

### **Overview**

According to the Finnish Security Intelligence Service (Supo), radical Islamists pose the greatest current threat to Finland. In mid-2016, a spokesman for the Finnish Ministry of the Interior warned that the terrorism threat had grown in Finland “due to an increase in the number of people who are interested in extremist groups and the recruitment of such people to radical activism.” Since the turn of the century, Finland has suffered two major lone wolf attacks—at a high school and a shopping center—which together killed 15 and injured hundreds. (Sources: [Helsinki Times](#), [Helsinki Times](#))

A third similar attack was thwarted in March 2014, when Finnish authorities discovered a plot to commit a violent attack at the University of Helsinki. Two 24-year-olds, a male and a female, were found guilty of conspiracy to murder by the District Court of Helsinki and sentenced to three years in prison. They were allegedly inspired by the Boston Marathon bombings of April 2013. Finland experienced its first terrorism-related attack in August 2017, when a Moroccan asylum-seeker stabbed two women to death and wounded eight other people in Turku. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [Helsinki Times](#))

As Middle Eastern refugees pour into Europe, governments have been increasingly concerned with security and integration issues. In 2016 alone, Finland [received](#) more than 65,000 applications for asylum from Middle Eastern refugees, most of who were Iraqi. In December 2015, Finnish Interior Minister Petteri Orpo [warned](#) that some 300 asylum-seekers in Finland had links to terrorism, and that they were “being followed closely.” This came after Finnish authorities [arrested](#) Iraqi twin brothers believed to be members of [ISIS](#). According to authorities, the brothers had shot 11 unarmed prisoners in part of an ISIS massacre near Tikrit, Iraq, in June 2014. The men had been in Finland since September 2015.

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In January 2016, reports emerged of neo-Nazis patrolling the streets in order to “protect” against what they referred to as “Islamic intruders.” The individuals identified themselves as the “Soldiers of Odin,” in reference to a Norse god. Interior Minister Petteri Orpo warned that “There are extremist features to carrying out street patrols. It does not increase security.” (Sources: [Agence France-Presse](#), [Reuters](#))

After each parliamentary election, the Finnish government launches a new Internal Security Programme (ISP), an initiative that seeks to counter a wide range of domestic threats including terrorism. In January 2014, the government introduced The Police Act and The Coercive Measures Act, both of which grant security personnel investigative and undercover measures including surveillance and data acquisition, as well as the authority to issue detentions, travel bans, and the freezing of property. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#), [Ministry of the Interior](#))

Finland is a member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental organization that works to combat the financing of terrorism. In 2013, the FATF recognized that Finland had made “[significant progress](#)” in combating terrorism financing, and removed the country from its regular follow-up list. (Source: [Council of Europe](#))

Internationally, Finland participates in numerous U.N. peacekeeping operations, including in Liberia, Lebanon, Mali, India, and Pakistan. In the international coalition against [ISIS](#), Finland has filled a humanitarian role since September 2015 while declining to engage militarily. (Sources: [Yle Uutiset](#), [Foreign Policy](#))

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### **Radicalization and Foreign Fighters**

As of November 2016, at least 80 foreign fighters have traveled from Finland to join the fighting in Syria and Iraq. It is believed that more than 25 fighters have returned to Finland. In November 2016, an unidentified Finnish foreign fighter carried out a suicide bombing in Iraq, though details of the attack—including which group it was carried out on behalf of—were not released. (Sources: [Helsinki Times](#), [Finland Today](#))

CNN noted in September 2014 that the number of Finnish foreign fighters is small compared to other countries where thousands have left. Yet in relative terms, Finland joins Ireland as the two countries with the greatest proportion of Muslims who have gone to fight in Syria. Hundreds of citizens from the Nordic countries “may have gone to Iraq or Syria to receive militant training,” as reported in a July 2015 Reuters article. (Source: [CNN](#))

Regarding recruitment, Finnish Security Intelligence Service (Supo) Communications Director Jyri Rantala says, “The location [of efforts to recruit] is not important. The recruitment activities are not organized by the management of the mosque or shopping centre. Instead, like-minded people discuss it with each other.” (Source: [Helsinki Times](#))

We have more of those high risk individuals, they have more contact to extremist ideologies and extremist actions... They have been there, received training. Former Interior Minister Päivi Räsänen

Finnish authorities have also considered the possibility of instating an official in Turkey in order to collect intelligence on and curb the flow of foreign fighters. Turkey remains the most popular route of transit for prospective jihadists despite efforts during 2015 to shore up its border with Syria. Supo has stressed that Finland-based jihadist recruitment efforts are “only loosely organized” and is more concerned with “recruitment propaganda both Finnish and foreign nationals may encounter on social media and video hosting platforms.” (Source: [Helsinki Times](#))

Supo raised the terrorism threat assessment risk in summer 2014. Explaining the increase, then-Interior Minister Päivi Räsänen said, “We have more of those high risk individuals, they have more contact to extremist ideologies and extremist actions... They have been there, received training.” Räsänen also claimed that [ISIS](#) was recruiting in Finland, highlighting the important role that social media has played in the process. (Sources: [YLE](#), [YLE](#))

On October 9, 2014, Finland’s National Bureau of Investigation requested the arrest of three Finnish nationals suspected of “murder for terrorist purposes... the first arrests of their kind in any Nordic country.” The men, along with a fourth individual, were all convicted and handed suspended prison sentences. (Source: [Wall Street Journal](#))

According to the Finnish Ministry of the Interior, recruitment to far-right neo-Nazi groups occurs among “asocial young people who have grown up in an insecure environment,” who often have histories of drug and alcohol abuse. By contrast, older people drawn from the middle classes are increasingly forming the ranks of the far-right anti-immigration Finnish Resistance Movement (Suomen Vastarintaliike SVL), reflecting “prejudice against foreigners in society.” (Source: [Finnish Ministry of the Interior](#))

In 2016, Finland [received](#) more than 65,000 applications for asylum from Middle Eastern refugees, most of who were Iraqi. This number spiked from 32,000 in 2015. In response to the growing number of foreigners in the country, several Finnish towns saw gangs of neo-Nazis begin to “guard” the city against what they referred to as “Islamic intruders.” The Finnish Interior Minister Petteri Orpo warned that the gangs were comprised of “extremist features” and that they did “not increase security.” The group members have largely identified themselves as “Soldiers of Odin,” named after a Norse god, and have appeared in towns that have opened reception centers for refugees. Soldiers of Odin is believed to have 500 supporters throughout Finland. (Sources: [Agence France-Presse](#), [Reuters](#), [Maahanmuuttovirasto](#))

### *Foreign Fighter Cases*

Finnish and Western media have closely followed a few individuals who left Finland to fight alongside extremist groups in Iraq and Syria. Among them are “Abu Anas al-Finlandi,” “Rami,” “Muhammad,” and “Marwan.” Al-Finlandi was a Finnish convert to Islam believed to be from the Helsinki area. He traveled to Syria in late 2013 via Turkey and settled in Aleppo. He fought with ISIS in Syria where he died—around age 21—in combat with the Free Syrian Army in February 2014. (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#), [Jihadology](#), [Helsingin Sanomat](#))

“Rami,” a Finnish citizen born and raised in Finland, traveled to southern Turkey in July 2013 to apparently continue his *hijrah*, or migration, to

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Syria. It has not been confirmed if he ever entered Syria, although his mother believes Rami traveled there. In early 2013, Rami spoke to his local imam about traveling to Syria. The imam urged him not to go, leading Rami to switch mosques before his ultimate departure to Turkey. When he left, he cleaned his room completely and deleted any digital evidence that would enable security authorities to track him. (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#), [Jihadology](#), [HS](#))

The Finnish-Somali foreign fighter “Muhammad” lived in Espoo, Finland, before traveling to Turkey and then northern Syria to fight alongside ISIS in December 2012. Known only as “Muhammad” by Finnish media, he moved to Finland from Somalia with his family in 1993 when he was 2 years old. Before leaving for Syria, he studied at a Finnish vocational school. It is unclear if he graduated. In 2013, the Middle East Media Research Institute reported that a young Finnish fighter named Abu Mansour led a question-and-answer session on his decision to travel to Syria. The session was held in a public square in Raqqa, Syria, and was filmed and disseminated to attract Western recruits. In the video, he stated that he had traveled to Syria after witnessing Muslims being killed by Bashar al-Assad’s regime, and that his goal was to “bring back the caliphate.” According to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Muhammad and Abu Mansour are likely the same person because they have the same appearance, motivations, and allegiances. (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#), [Jihadology](#), [HS](#))

“Marwan,” a Finnish convert to Islam, went to Syria in the summer of 2012 to fight with an unidentified rebel unit against Assad’s army. He reportedly died in fighting between rebels and Assad forces in June 2013. His wife, who had accompanied him to Syria, gave birth to their child two weeks before Marwan’s death. Marwan appears to be Facebook “friends” with two other Finnish jihadists, “Muhammad” and “Abu Anas al-Finlandi,” although his account has been inactive since April 2013. (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#), [Jihadology](#), [YLE](#))

### **Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents**

#### *Turku Stabbings: Finland’s First Terror Attack*

On August 18, 2017, Abderrahman Mechkah, an 18-year-old Moroccan asylum-seeker, began stabbing people in the city of Turku, killing two women and wounding six other women. Two men were also wounded trying to stop the attack. Police shot Mechkah in the leg and arrested him. According to police, Mechkah specifically targeted women in what authorities called Finland’s first terrorism-related attack. Mechkah had reportedly been denied asylum. Police did not immediately link to the attack to his asylum application, acknowledging only that Mechkah was involved in the asylum process.

Within 24 hours, police arrested four other Moroccan suspects and issued an international arrest warrant for another. No foreign terror group immediately claimed responsibility. (Sources: [Independent](#), [New York Times](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [CNN](#), [Associated Press](#), [Reuters](#))

Mechkah arrived in Finland in 2016 from Germany. The Finnish Interior Minister said that he had been denied asylum because Morocco is not a conflict zone. The Finnish Security Intelligence Service (SUPO) reported that a local police department had received a tip at the beginning of 2017 that Mechkah had become “radicalized and interested in extremist thinking.” The police department passed the information to Supo, but the agency did not prioritize the lead because there was no specific threat, according to the agency. (Source: [New York Times](#))

#### *Finnish Former Foreign Fighters*

In December 2015, Finnish authorities arrested twin Iraqi brothers suspected of partaking in ISIS wartime atrocities in Iraq in June 2014. The brothers, who had lived in Finland since September 2015, were arrested after an influx of Middle Eastern refugees into Europe prompted widespread concern over integration and security.

In October 2014, Finnish authorities arrested three men in connection with aiding the terrorist group [al-Shabab](#). A fourth suspect was later arrested. The charges against the men—all Finns of Somali origins—included terrorist funding, recruitment, kidnapping, and intention to commit terrorist acts. In Finland’s first ever terrorism-law case, the men were given suspended sentences by the Helsinki district court in November 2014. Three were handed five-month suspended sentences for financing terrorism. The fourth was convicted of terrorist financing, recruitment, and planning to commit terrorist acts, and received a suspended prison sentence of one year and four months. (Sources: [Finland Times](#), [YLE](#))

- **October 1, 2019:** A man armed with a sword, attacks students at a vocational college in Kuopio, eastern Finland. The attack kills one and injures nine others. Finnish forces apprehend the assailant and have yet to determine the attacker’s motive. Source: [France 24](#)
- **August 18, 2017:** Abderrahman Mechkah, an 18-year-old Moroccan asylum-seeker, begins stabbing people in the city of Turku, killing two

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women and wounding eight other people.

Police shoot Mechkah in the leg and arrest him. No foreign terror group immediately claims responsibility. Sources: [Independent](#), [New York Times](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [CNN](#), [Associated Press](#), [Reuters](#)

- **June 19, 2017:** Finnish police raise the terrorism threat level after suspecting a possible terror attack on a popular church in Helsinki and conduct several patrols throughout the day.  
By June 20, the National Bureau of Investigation stated that the counter-terror operation was over. Source: [Reuters](#)
- **November 1, 2016:** An unidentified Finnish foreign fighter carries out a suicide bombing in Iraq, though it is unclear for which group.  
Source: [Finland Today](#)
- **December 8, 2015:** Finnish police arrest twin Iraqi brothers suspected of previously fighting for ISIS in Iraq.  
According to authorities, the brothers had shot 11 unarmed prisoners on behalf of ISIS in Iraq in June 2014. The men were asylum seekers in Finland and had been in the country since September 2015. Source: [New York Times](#)
- **October 9, 2014:** Finland's National Bureau of Investigation requests the arrest of three Finnish nationals suspected of "murder for terrorist purposes... the first arrests of their kind in any Nordic country."  
Source: [Wall Street Journal](#)
- **November 7, 2007:** Eighteen-year old Pekka-Erik Auvinen kills eight people at Jokela High School in Jokela in Tuusula, southern Finland. According to his "manifesto," his motivation was contempt for humanity. Auvinen shoots and kills himself on the same day. Source: [Washington Post](#)
- **October 11, 2002:** Seven people are killed and 166 injured in a bomb attack at the Myyrmanni shopping mall in Myyrmaki, Vanta, in Greater Helsinki.  
The perpetrator is Petri Erkki Tapio Gerdt, a 19-year-old chemical engineering student and active member of an online forum for amateur chemists. Gerdt is killed in the explosion. His motive remains unclear. Source: [New York Times](#)

## **Domestic Counter-Extremism**

### *Government Programs*

With each term of office, the Finnish government launches a new Internal Security Programme (ISP), an initiative that seeks to counter a wide range of internal threats including terrorism. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#), [Ministry of the Interior](#))

The First ISP (2004-2007) defined the country's goals for internal security and strengthened cooperation between public authorities in an effort to increase their efficacy. The Second ISP (2008-2011) was designed to thwart the threat posed by a variety of social issues including school shootings, cybercrime, terrorism, and violent radicalization. The Third ISP (2012-2015), dubbed "A Safer Tomorrow," continued the work of the first two ISP's and specifically targeted violent extremism. "A Safer Tomorrow" was comprised of 64 safety-improvement measures from a variety of expert working groups and Finland's first "[Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism](#)," a plan designed to "prevent and combat violent acts justified by extremist ideas and ideologies." The National Network for Countering Violent Extremism was established to oversee the direct implementation of the Action Plan's measures. The Third ISP expired in June 2015. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#), [Ministry of the Interior](#), [Ministry of the Interior](#))

### *Legislation*

Terrorist offences are codified in [Finland's Criminal Code](#) under chapter 34(a). The chapter details the specific offences, including preparation of a terrorist act, promotion or direction of a terrorist group, provision of training, and recruitment to and financing of terrorism.

The Police Act (872/2011) and The Coercive Measures Act (806/2011) were introduced in January 2014. The Police Act allows the use of undercover measures to investigate suspected offences including undercover transactions, technical surveillance, and data acquisition including telecommunications interception and monitoring. The Coercive Measures Act permits certain coercive measures such as arrest, detention, travel bans, restraint orders, seizure and search, and the freezing of property. Personnel carrying out undercover activities are not required to receive court authorization before carrying out their activities. Both Acts were introduced to bolster the authorities' investigation measures into criminal and terrorist offences. (Source: [Council of Europe](#))

### *Security Agencies*

Finnish Security Intelligence Service (Supo) is a national police unit under the Ministry of the Interior. It is the main authority responsible for

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counterterrorism and counter-espionage operations. Supo collects sensitive intelligence information with both human and technical resources. Supo is then responsible for analyzing the information and predicting emerging threats. Supo's values are legality, reliability and quality, and it works to communicate with the media and public about its tasks. (Sources: [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#), [Council of Europe](#))

Because nearly all potential terrorist targets are located in Finland's capital Helsinki, the Helsinki District Police are responsible for the physical protection of the city's targets. The Helsinki District Police oversees two specialized units: one trained in responding to terrorist attacks, and one trained in the diffusion of explosives. (Source: [Council of Europe](#))

### *Combating Terrorist Financing*

[Finland's Criminal Code](#) codifies the financing of terrorism in Chapter 34(a), section 5. An individual convicted of attempting to finance or financing terrorism may face imprisonment for at the least four months and at the most eight years. (Source: [Ministry of Justice, Finland](#))

The Finnish government ratified The Act on Preventing and Detecting Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in August 2008. The act aims to put into practice the obligations detailed in the European Parliament and European Council's Directives of 2005 on the prevention of money laundering and terrorism financing. The Act also aims to cover recommendations posed by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental organization that works to combat the financing of terrorism. The FATF has [recommended](#) the adoption of various measures including the criminalization of terrorist financing, the freezing of terrorist assets, and policies designed to ensure that terrorists cannot exploit non-governmental organizations. (Source: [FATF](#))

In 2013, the FATF recognized that Finland had made "[significant progress](#)" in combating terrorism financing, and removed the country from its regular follow-up list. (Source: [FATF](#))

### *Repatriating Foreign Fighters*

Finland has one of the highest per capita rates of Muslims per population joining ISIS in the world. By August 2015, at least 70 Finnish citizens traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS or another radical opposition group. However, following the territorial defeat of ISIS in March 2019, the Finnish government is currently facing new challenges of repatriating Finnish foreign fighters. According to a 2019 report by the Ministry of the Interior, many of the foreign terrorist fighters who have returned have committed to disengaging from violent action, but their fundamental ideologies remain intact. As of June 2020, the Finnish government estimates that there are about 11 women and 30 children being held at the Syrian Defense Forces-operated al-Hol camp. Although Finland began communicating with the SDF in September 2019, the Finnish government has yet to determine the necessary protocol and policies to repatriate the detainees at al-Hol given complications that have arose following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Sources: [Modern Diplomacy](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Ministry of the Interior](#))

## **International Counter-Extremism**

### *Military Endeavors*

Finnish military personnel are currently [participating](#) in multiple U.N. peacekeeping missions, including but not limited to [UNMOGIP](#) in India and Pakistan, [UNMIL](#) in Liberia, [UNIFIL](#) in Lebanon, and [MINUSMA](#) in Mali. (Source: [Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland](#))

### *ISIS*

In September 2015, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö announced Finland's participation in the international efforts to combat ISIS. Finland delivers humanitarian aid, and refuses to fill a military or combative role. The Finnish Minister of Foreign Affairs Timo Soini [has said](#) that his country will "concentrate on delivering humanitarian aid to people in desperate need." (Sources: [YLE](#), [Foreign Policy](#))

### *Diplomatic and Financial Endeavors*

Finland participates in counterterrorism action within the framework of the U.N., the European Union, NATO, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Though it is not a NATO member, Finland partakes in NATO's Partnership for

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Peace Program (PfP), a bilateral cooperation program between individual Euro-Atlantic countries and NATO. Finland also participates in NATO's [Civil Emergency Planning](#), which analyses the use of civil resources in emergencies. (Source: [Council of Europe](#))

Supo, the Finnish Security Intelligence Service, is a member of the Counter Terrorist Group (CTG), a group of Western European security services launched in 2001. Supo also belongs to the Police Working Group on Terrorism (PWGT), which champions police cooperation in the field of counterterrorism. (Source: [Finnish Security Intelligence Service](#))

In January 2014, the Nordic nations—including Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—announced the establishment of a Nordic network for the prevention of extremism. In January 2015, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway signed into the [Nordic Network for the Prevention of Extremism](#). The “cooperation agreement” exists to promote knowledge sharing and joint policies regarding the prevention of extremism, as well as the development of relevant approaches, resources, and interventions. (Source: [Ministry of the Interior](#))

### **Public Opinion**

A December 2016 Ministry of Defense poll found that 64 percent of Fins held a positive view toward military cooperation with the United States, while 30 percent viewed such cooperation negatively. (Source: [Ministry of Defense](#))

A [September 2014 poll](#) profiling seven European countries found that 55 percent of Fins approved of U.S. airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq, while only 18 percent disapproved. Conversely, 50 percent disapproved of the possibility of Finland partaking in airstrikes against ISIS, while only 26 percent approved.

A public opinion survey published in March 2014 found that 53 percent of the Finnish population supported EU defense policies, and that a minority of 32 percent believed membership in NATO will increase Finland's security.

An earlier survey found that 69 percent of the Finnish population is concerned about international terrorism, while only 38 percent is concerned about an act of terror inside Finland. The survey also found that 58 percent of Fins are concerned with developments in the Middle East, and 45 percent are concerned about Syria. According to Kari Möttölä at the University of Helsinki's Network for European Studies, “Foreign, security and defence policies continue to entertain wide and relatively stable support in the [Finnish] parliamentary and public opinion.” (Sources: [Network for European Studies](#), [Finnish Social Science Data Archive](#))