

## COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

### Terror Targets in the West: Where and Why

How do terrorists select their targets? The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) has analyzed attacks carried out by [al-Qaeda](#) and [ISIS](#) operatives in the United States, Europe, and Australia. CEP's report—*Terror Targets in the West: Where and Why*—explores the ideological and tactical rationale for selecting targets to attack.

#### *Key Findings*

- Common al-Qaeda and ISIS targets in the West include **airports** and **airplanes**; **cartoonists** who have drawn the Islamic prophet Muhammad; **public spaces** and **transportation** infrastructure; **Jewish** and **Christian** institutions and individuals; **law enforcement** personnel; and **military** installations and personnel
- Al-Qaeda may be more likely to target **civilians** in a country that is **military involved in the Middle East**, whereas ISIS is eager to direct and inspire attacks against **civilians in any Western country—regardless of the country's policies**.
- Al-Qaeda justifies its **targeting and weaponization of airplanes** by likening airplanes to **catapults**. Al-Qaeda leader **Ayman al-Zawahiri** cites an example in Islamic historiography in which Muslim armies laid siege to enemy villages with catapults—indiscriminate weapons unable to distinguish between civilians and enemy soldiers.
- Al-Qaeda has inferred that **targeting a cartoonist** who has drawn the Islamic prophet Muhammad is a “**greater cause than fighting for Palestine, Afghanistan, or Iraq**.”
- While claiming responsibility for an attack against law enforcement, ISIS has referred to policemen as the “**protectors of the crusaders**.”
- At least **two** American jihadists claimed to have preemptively protected Muslims in the Middle East by targeting U.S. troops—set to be deployed in the Middle East—at U.S. military installations.

#### **Executive Summary**

In the May 2016 issue of its English-language magazine *Inspire*, al-Qaeda called on lone wolves in the West to “strive hard in choosing a target, laying a plan and [taking] all the possible precautions and security measures....” ISIS's leaders, meanwhile, have instructed followers to attack civilians and other targets in the West. But why do al-Qaeda and ISIS select the targets that they do? (Sources: [Inspire](#), p. 44, [Long War Journal](#), [Reuters](#))

In Middle Eastern warzones, anything and everything might be a target. Mosques, busy streets, buildings, and small villages are regularly subjected to attacks. And yet ISIS and al-Qaeda attacks in the West—smaller in number and meticulously covered and analyzed by international media—appear to be targeted against specific symbolic locations.

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Attacks carried out by al-Qaeda and ISIS’s operatives and lone-wolf supporters have been directed at airplanes and airports, military targets, law enforcement, and transportation systems such as buses and trains. Cafes, clubs, concerts, and sporting events that draw large crowds are also common targets. Both terrorist groups have also attempted and carried out attacks on cartoonists that have drawn the Islamic prophet Muhammad, as well as Jewish and Christian institutions and individuals in the West.

Counterterrorism analysts have posited that terrorist groups seek to attack symbolic targets—such as airports, famous landmarks, and other status symbols—in order to attract attention and spread panic and fear. According to terrorism analyst Jessica Stern, terrorists seek “to hit targets that will make us maximally afraid, and inflict the maximum amount of humiliation.” In addition to prioritizing symbolic targets, CEP has found that terrorists select targets that allow them to inflict a high number of casualties—such as clubs, cafes, and sporting events—while still remaining operationally feasible. In al-Qaeda’s spring 2016 issue of *Inspire*, the terror group called on lone wolves to consider the “security and fortification” of a targeted area before carrying out an attack which, as al-Qaeda notes, “ranges from place to place.” (Sources: [NPR](#), [Inspire](#), p. 69)

This report seeks to highlight not only the tactical considerations for terrorist targets, but the ideological justifications as well. Analyzing al-Qaeda and ISIS’s previous attacks in North America, Western Europe, and Australia, this report indicates the terrorists’ theological and strategic justifications for specific target types, as stated in the groups’ online magazines: al-Qaeda’s *Inspire* and ISIS’s *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. The report also draws on the groups’ justifications from their official statements, as well as from specialized online releases and other primary sources.

By analyzing the terrorists’ justifications and preferences for attacking specific locations, CEP aims to expose the prevalence of common target types, and to further reveal the terrorists’ dangerous underlying ideology fueling their target selections.

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## Airports and Airplanes as Targets

Since the late 1960s, terrorists have hijacked commercial airliners in pursuit of their political and ideological objectives. The tactic was popularized by Palestinian terror groups—including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Abu Nidal Organization—who used airplane hijackings in order to publicize Palestinian grievances and gain worldwide coverage for their cause. They also sought to secure the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel and Western governments. (Sources: [Haaretz](#), [The Palestine Liberation Organization](#), p. 137, [Britannica](#), [RAND](#), [BBC News](#))

In 1968, in the first-ever terrorist hijacking, the then-relatively-unknown PFLP targeted an Israeli El Al airliner en route from Rome to Tel Aviv and diverted it to Algeria. The terrorists took 12 hostages and released them after 40 days in exchange for 16 Arab prisoners. The “success” of the operation—measured in prolonged media coverage and a prisoner release—inspired Palestinian terrorists to carry out more than a dozen hostage operations over the next four years. (Sources: [Council on Foreign Relations](#), [BBC News](#), [New York Times](#), [International Encyclopedia of Terrorism](#), p. 233, [RAND](#))

The tactic of airplane hijackings was emulated by Islamist terror groups in the following decades. In 1985, for example, Hezbollah insurgents hijacked a flight from Cairo to San Diego, demanding the release of hundreds of Shiite prisoners from Israeli custody. In December 1994, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA)—an Islamist insurgent group from Algeria—seized an airplane from Algiers and flew it to Marseille, demanding that it be filled with 27 tons of fuel before continuing onto Paris. Authorities later determined that the group had either planned to explode the plane over Paris or fly it into the Eiffel Tower. (Sources: [TIME](#), [Haaretz](#), [Council on Foreign Relations](#), [New York Times](#), [APH](#), [Time](#))

Terrorists choose to attack airports and airplanes because they seek to “cause as much havoc as possible to as many people [as possible] by the cheapest of means,” according to Diego Gambetta, Professor of Sociology at the University of Oxford. According to Gambetta, “crashing a plane fits this double aim very well.” Security analyst Brian Michael Jenkins has said that attacks on airliners give terrorists “the symbolic value they seek” by creating local alarm, and “guarantee[ing] the attention of the international news media.” (Sources: [Guardian](#), [CNN](#))

Jenkins’s explanation has proved true. In October 2015, ISIS drew round-the-clock media attention when it downed a Russian passenger plane over the Sinai Peninsula. “[The passengers] were all killed, thanks be to God,” the militants wrote in a statement claiming responsibility. On

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March 22, 2016, three ISIS suicide bombers targeted Brussels' Zaventem airport—as well as the city's metro—killing 32 people and wounding 270. When claiming responsibility for the bombings, ISIS's Amaq news agency wrote that its so-called “soldiers” had targeted “specially selected locations” in “crusader Belgium,” but gave no further clues as to the justification of the target types. In June 2016, three suicide bombers—reportedly dispatched by ISIS—killed 45 people and wounded more than 230 at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Heavy](#), [Agence France-Presse](#), [Telegraph](#), [New York Times](#), [Heavy](#), [NBC](#), [CNN](#))

Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, al-Qaeda has carried out numerous airplane hijacking attempts in the West. Just three months after 9/11, British-born al-Qaeda operative and would-be suicide bomber [Richard Reid](#) failed to detonate a bomb hidden in his shoe while on American Airlines Flight 63 from Paris to Miami. On Christmas Day in 2009, Nigerian national [Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab](#)—dispatched by [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula \(AQAP\)](#)—attempted to set off explosives in his underwear on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit, Michigan. In 2014, in its English-language magazine *Inspire*, al-Qaeda described Northwest Airlines Flight 253 as an “indirect economic target,” and claimed that the economic consequences of the attack, despite its failure, were “enormous due to extra security measures” implemented by the West. Indeed, al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks were the first and only major terror attack in which airplanes were successfully weaponized. (Sources: [Telegraph](#), [U.S. Department of Justice](#), [BBC News](#), [Inspire](#), p. 64)

### *Case Study: 9/11 Attacks*

On the morning of September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda operatives took control of four commercial airliners and flew them into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, killing nearly 3,000 civilians. Al-Qaeda viewed the World Trade Center—a symbolic landmark and seat of economic power—as a direct economic target. The World Trade Center “contained hundreds of companies and capitalists... the gross loss which the government confesses is about two trillion dollars. So the main goal of the operation was economy hemorrhage,” al-Qaeda wrote in *Inspire* in 2014. The Pentagon was also a direct military target for the terror group. (Sources: [LA Times](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Inspire](#), p. 62-64, [Inspire](#), p. 45)

Al-Qaeda has used religious ideology to justify its weaponization of airplanes, according to Professors Quintan Wiktorowicz and John Kaltner at Rhodes College. Various al-Qaeda clerics have reportedly referenced a story in which the Islamic prophet Muhammad permitted Islamic soldiers to use a catapult to siege the village of Taif, even though he knew the attack would kill civilians. Al-Qaeda “likens the catapult... to the planes used in the September 11 attacks,” according to Wiktorowicz and Kaltner. (Source: [Middle East Policy](#), p. 89)

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Current al-Qaeda Emir [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) also referenced the use of catapults in his book *Exoneration*, written in 2008, in which he sought to legitimize the use of weapons that fail to distinguish between civilians and military personnel. In supporting his argument for what he referred to as “general destruction,” Zawahiri wrote:

“It is known that a catapult cannot differentiate among those whom it hits. It might hit those so-called innocent people. Yet the Muslim custom in their wars was to use catapults.”

Zawahiri further cited a quote from a Sheikh named Husayn Umar Ibn Mahfuz, who directly likened catapults to “attack by war planes.” (Sources: [Federation of American Scientists](#), pp. 39, 170, [Harvard Kennedy School](#))

Al-Qaeda remains committed to targeting civilian aircraft as evidenced by its winter 2014 issue of *Inspire*, in which the group stated its four primary goals for carrying out such an attack. First, al-Qaeda seeks to cause economic “hemorrhage,” or drainage, of the target county. By attacking a civilian airplane, al-Qaeda argues, the country will respond by increasing security measures, and its citizens will likely refrain from taking air transportation—all resulting in economic loss. Second, al-Qaeda seeks to expose “the government’s weakness by defeating it in the ‘Intelligence War’”—by proving that it can outsmart the target country and successfully hijack its airliner. Third, the terror group seeks to create “an atmosphere of fear and terror,” which, finally, will lead to “tension between the government and its people.” This tension, according to al-Qaeda, will give the “indication that the War against the Mujahideen [holy warriors] is hopeless.” ([Inspire](#), p. 64)

### Cartoon-Related Targets

Islamic extremists have for years targeted cartoonists who have drawn the Islamic prophet Muhammad, an act which some consider blasphemous and contrary to the tenets of Islam. Violence against such cartoonists can be traced back to September 2005, when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published a series of cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet. The Norwegian newspaper *Magazinet* republished the cartoons shortly thereafter. Protests spread across the Middle East within months, and Danish and Norwegian embassies were attacked in February 2006. Soon after, French satire magazine *Charlie Hebdo* republished the cartoons. (Sources: [TIME](#), [Telegraph](#))

In the subsequent years, jihadists have issued threats and carried out attacks against such cartoonists. In early 2008, a Somali man with Danish residence attacked the house of Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard—the illustrator of the original Muhammad cartoons published in *Jyllands-Posten*—in an attempt to take his life. In March 2008, Osama bin Laden threatened the

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European Union over printing the cartoons. In an audio recording, bin Laden warned, “Your publications of these drawings—part of a new crusade in which the Pope of the Vatican had a significant role—is a confirmation from you that the war continues.” In 2009, American citizen [Colleen LaRose](#)—calling herself “Jihad Jane”—pled guilty to traveling to Europe in an attempt to participate in an al-Qaeda plot to murder Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks, who had drawn cartoons of Muhammad. In early 2010, Virginia- and New York-based extremists [Zachary Chesser](#) and [Jesse Morton](#) made online death threats to the creators of *South Park*, a cartoon series that, in one episode, depicted Muhammad in a bear costume. To justify the killing of the *South Park* writers, Chesser and Morton posted to their website videos of multiple lectures by Anwar al-Awlaki in which the cleric argued that those who insult Muhammad are deserving of death. Both men later pled guilty to terrorism-related charges, including communicating threats. (Sources: [PET](#), [Guardian](#), [Al Arabiya](#), [Reuters](#), [FBI](#), [FBI](#), [CBS News](#))

In the summer of 2010, following years of plots against cartoonists, al-Qaeda stoked the flames by urging lone wolves to “target the Americans” for the “heinous crimes [of] the cartoons of the Messenger.” In its first issue of *Inspire*, Al-Qaeda further inferred that killing a cartoonist who had drawn the prophet Muhammad would be a “greater cause than fighting for Palestine, Afghanistan or Iraq.” (Source: [Inspire](#), pp. 17, 28)

ISIS has also targeted cartoonists who have drawn Muhammad. In May 2015, the group claimed responsibility for its first attack on American soil after two American gunmen—[Nadir Soofi](#) and [Elton Simpson](#)—targeted an event hosted by the American Freedom Defense Initiative in Garland, Texas. The event showcased cartoons of Muhammad and offered a top prize of \$10,000. A security guard killed both perpetrators before they were able to attack the event. In its claim of responsibility, ISIS wrote that “Two of the soldiers of the caliphate executed an attack on an art exhibit in Garland, Texas, and this exhibit was portraying negative pictures of the Prophet Mohammad.” (Sources: [TIME](#), [Telegraph](#), [International Business Times](#))

#### *Case Study: Charlie Hebdo Attack*

In January 2015, AQAP operatives armed with automatic rifles stormed the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and killed 12 people, six of whom were cartoonists. *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical magazine, had previously published cartoons depicting Muhammad. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack, writing that the group’s central leadership had selected a “particular target - in this case, caricature artists defaming the religion and Prophet Muhammad.” Al-Qaeda claimed that the attacks had “[forced] the magazine to halt distribution of offensive drawings of the Prophets.” Soon after the attacks, *Charlie Hebdo*’s editor said that the newspaper would stop publishing cartoons of Muhammad, saying, “We’ve done our job. We have defended the right to caricature.” (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Inspire](#), p. 40, [Inspire](#), p. 53, [Washington Post](#), [Deutsche Welle](#))

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In its spring 2016 issue of *Inspire*, al-Qaeda wrote that the *Charlie Hebdo* offices were targeted in order to send a message to the “publishing company itself, because it was a platform for the insults, the caricature cartoonists and their offensive policies.” According to al-Qaeda, *Charlie Hebdo* staff were “among the worst offenders of the prophet and Islam in our time.” (Sources: [Inspire](#), p. 69, [Inspire](#), p. 4)

### Public Spaces and Transport

Al-Qaeda and ISIS’s operatives and lone wolves have long targeted crowded areas in the West in an effort to maximize civilian casualties. Such targets have included cafes, clubs, concerts, malls, sporting events, and transportation systems such as busses and metros. While both al-Qaeda and ISIS seek to exact revenge on the countries fighting them, ISIS targets Western civilians primarily in order to kill the “disbelievers” until they “submit to the authority of Islam,” as proclaimed in the fifteenth issue of *Dabiq*. (Source: [Dabiq](#), p. 31)

Al-Qaeda has largely justified its killing of civilians as retribution for Western intervention in Muslim lands. In a letter to the West in 2002, Osama bin Laden wrote that “...anyone who kills our civilians, then we are going to kill their civilians.” The al-Qaeda founder also argued that civilians in the West are culpable of offences—such as electing political leaders who carry out interventions in Muslim lands—and are thus deserving of death. Bin Laden explained: “It is a fundamental principle of any democracy that the people choose their leaders, and as such, approve and are party to the actions of their elected leaders...This is why the American people are not innocent. The American people are active members in all these crimes.” (Sources: [Guardian](#), Alex J. Bellamy, *Massacres and Morality*, p. 359)

These rationalizations echo one of bin Laden’s first fatwas, issued in 1998. He wrote, “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it...” The following year, in an interview with *Esquire* magazine, bin Laden reiterated his point: “[Al-Qaeda does] not differentiate between those [Americans] dressed in military uniforms and civilians; they are all targets....” (Sources: [Federation of American Scientists](#), [Esquire](#))

More recently, in the spring 2016 issue of *Inspire*, al-Qaeda laid out its justification for killing Western civilians. While claiming that the death of civilians is not the group’s priority, al-Qaeda wrote that killing non-combatants would raise awareness of the target population as to “their governments crimes [sic];” punish the politicians who perpetrate those “crimes;” and “[cut] the hands” of those waging wars in Muslim countries. The group further justified its practice of killing civilians by writing: “tit for tat is a fair game... They drop hellfires, we start wildfires.” (Source: [Inspire](#), p. 45)

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Al-Qaeda's attacks in the West have predominantly targeted civilians. From the group's abandoned plot to release cyanide in the New York subway system in 2003, to the thwarted plot in 2006 to bomb the PATH commuter train connecting New York and New Jersey, al-Qaeda has apparently sought to maximize civilian casualties. In addition, al-Qaeda's successful largescale attacks in the West—including the Madrid bombings in 2004 and the London bombings in 2005—have also apparently followed bin Laden's edict to exact revenge for Western intervention. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), [Inspire](#), p. 45, [Inspire](#))

The Madrid attacks in March 2004 are a prime example in which al-Qaeda chose its target—the city's commuter train—in an apparent effort to maximize civilian casualties. In the early morning of March 11, coordinated bombings on four commuter trains killed 191 people and injured more than 1,800 others. In so doing, al-Qaeda sought to punish the Spanish government and its citizens for Spain's participation in the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq. The group swiftly claimed responsibility for the bombings, writing that the attacks were in response to Spain's "collaboration with [U.S. President George] Bush and his allies." One month after the bombings, bin Laden issued a message to the West at large, saying, "What happened on 11 September [2001] and 11 March [the Madrid train bombings] is your commodity that was returned to you." (Sources: [CNN](#), [BBC News](#), [BBC News](#))

The month following the bombings, newly appointed Spanish Prime Minister and strident war opponent Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero pulled Spanish troops out of Iraq. Zapatero anticipated that the United Nations would fail to take over postwar occupation in June, a condition he had previously demanded in order to stay in the war. Analysts decried Zapatero's move, labeling it a win for al-Qaeda. Then-Sen. John Warner, R-Virginia, said, "I hope al Qaeda does not misinterpret this." (Sources: [CNN](#), [NBC News](#), [Heritage](#))

Al-Qaeda sought to send a similar message to England when it carried out the London bombings the following year. On July 7, 2005, al-Qaeda operatives targeted civilians on three subways and one bus in an attack that left 52 people dead. In its claim of responsibility, al-Qaeda wrote that it had targeted the "British Zionist Crusader government," and that the group had "repeatedly warned the British Government and people." Unlike the Spanish government, the British government did not pull its troops from Iraq following the attack. The United Kingdom carried out combat operations in Iraq until 2009, and officially withdrew forces from Iraq in 2011. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [BBC News](#), [BBC News](#), [Metro](#))

While al-Qaeda targets Western civilians for a number of ideological and strategic reasons, ISIS's justification for targeting those individuals may be more straightforward. Unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS targets Western civilians primarily because they deem those civilians to be *kuffar*. While ISIS has other political motives similar to al-Qaeda—such as seeking revenge for Western



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intervention—ISIS has openly claimed to kill Western civilians because they hold that Muslims have been commanded to fight the “disbelievers” until they submit to Islam. (Source: [Dabiq](#), p. 31)

In its July 2016 issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS wrote that the group despises and fights Westerners “first and foremost because you are disbelievers; you reject the oneness of Allah...” In one article, titled “Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You,” ISIS clarified that “even if” the Western countries ended their military campaigns against ISIS, the terror group would only enact a short-term ceasefire “to focus on the closer and more immediate threats, before eventually resuming our campaigns against you.” (Source: [Dabiq](#), p. 31)

While ISIS seeks to kill “disbelievers” in every country around the world, the group’s late spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani also called on Muslims to kill the citizens of those countries participating in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS. In his September 2014 speech “Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful,” Adnani declared, “If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be.” In September 2016, in claiming responsibility for a stabbing spree in St. Cloud, Minnesota, carried out by American citizen [Dahir Adan](#), ISIS said that Adan had “carried out the operation in response to the [call to attack] citizens of countries belonging to the [international] coalition [against ISIS].” (Sources: [Long War Journal](#), [Star Tribune](#))

By targeting citizens of coalition countries, ISIS may be seeking to avenge its operatives killed in coalition airstrikes. Although the terror group seeks to ultimately goad Western armies into an apocalyptic battle in Dabiq, in the near term ISIS may be seeking to simply drive coalition militaries from its territory so the caliphate can regroup, re-organize, and expand. (Source: [Long War Journal](#))

ISIS has prioritized the killing of civilians both in the territories it controls and the territories it does not. The terror group’s operatives and lone wolves have carried out attacks against civilians in a number of Western countries, most notably in France, Belgium, Germany, and the United States. (Source: [New York Times](#))

ISIS carried out a large-scale attack in Paris in November 2015 in an apparent attempt to murder civilians and target a country participating in the U.S.-led coalition. On the evening of November 13, 2015, eight ISIS operatives used suicide bombs and assault rifles to target numerous crowded, enclosed areas in Paris and its environs, including a football match at the Stade de France, multiple cafes, and a concert at the Bataclan theater. The attack left 130 people dead and more than 350 wounded. In its claim of responsibility—released on Twitter and Telegram—ISIS

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referred to France as the “capital of prostitution of obscenity,” and wrote that the targets had been “accurately chosen.” (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Sun](#), [SITE Intelligence](#))

ISIS also lauded the attacks on the Bataclan theater, where “hundreds of apostates had gathered in a profligate prostitution party.” Also in reference to the Bataclan, in its 12<sup>th</sup> issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS wrote that the theater had been filled with “hundreds of French mushrikīn [polytheists].” Indeed, by all accounts, ISIS appears to have targeted such crowded locations in an attempt to maximize civilian casualties and punish France for its airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. (Sources: [SITE Intelligence](#), *Dabiq*, p. 28)

In March 2016, four months after the Paris attacks, three ISIS suicide bombers targeted Brussels’ Zaventem airport and Maelbeek metro station, killing 32 people and injuring hundreds more. The attack began at the airport at approximately 7:00 GMT, when two bombers struck at Zaventem airport, immediately killing 11 people. Approximately one hour later, the third bomber struck the middle car of a three-car train running through the Maelbeek metro station, near the city’s center. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Independent](#))

Following the attacks, New York City’s transportation commissioner Polly Trottenberg warned that terrorists target transportation systems because “[that’s] where a lot of people are congregating...they make targets.” Alongside its claim of responsibility for the Brussels bombings, ISIS released an addendum justifying the killing of civilians in both the Brussels attack and the November 2015 Paris massacre. In the addendum, ISIS cited numerous Quranic verses that it claimed support its targeting of civilians, writing that “we want to make it clear to all that what makes the kafir’s [nonbelievers’] blood permissible [sic] to spill is not him fighting the Muslims, rather it is his ‘KUFRA’ that necessitates his killing.” In other words, ISIS views all nonbelievers as legitimate targets, whether or not they are directly involved in “fighting the Muslims.” Indeed, at the time of Brussels attack, Belgium was not a participant in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS. The country joined the coalition in May 2016. (Sources: [Politico](#), [Heavy](#), [International Business Times](#))

ISIS’s call to kill civilians was answered again on July 14, 2016, when Tunisian-born Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel drove a 19-ton refrigerated truck into a crowd of people celebrating Bastille Day in Nice, France, killing 84 people and wounding over 300 more. Calling Lahouaiej-Bouhlel “one of the soldiers of the Islamic State,” ISIS claimed that the attack was carried out “in response to calls to target nationals of states that are part of the coalition fighting [ISIS].” One day later, al-Qaeda’s *Inspire* published a special release on the attack. Without mentioning ISIS, al-Qaeda lauded the attack as an “Inghimaasi (plunging deep into enemy lines) operation,” and described Lahouaiej-Bouhlel as a “[hero] of Lone Jihad.” With regard to the specific target—the Promenade des Anglais, a long stretch of road—the militants wrote that “this was not randomly

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selected. He chose a place where there were huge crowds of people existed [sic].” (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Guardian](#), [Inspire](#))

The release also mentioned the specific timing of the attack: “As for his choice on the day of the operation - Bastille Day - a day where many citizens flock to the streets thus giving him a wide range of targets.” Targeting the city of Nice in particular was “appropriate,” according to al-Qaeda, as Nice is “known for its racist views and right wing extremism,” as well as what al-Qaeda claims is Nice’s enmity toward Muslims. The attack came two years after al-Qaeda had itself called for attacks on French Bastille Day military parades, in the group’s spring 2014 issue of *Inspire*. Nearly six years before the Nice attack, al-Qaeda had urged followers to use a truck to “inflict maximum carnage.” In its October 2010 issue of *Inspire*, the group explicitly wrote that attackers should “[g]o for the most crow[d]ed location” and “pick up as much speed as you can” in order “strike as many people as possible”—recommending a 4WD pickup truck as a suitable weapon. The group wrote: “In fact if you can get through to ‘pedestrian only’ locations that exist in some downtown (city center) areas, that would be fabulous.” (Sources: [Inspire](#), [Inspire](#), p. 71, [Inspire](#), p. 54)

The July 2016 Bastille Day attack was followed by a similar attack in Berlin in December of that year. On December 19, 2016, Tunisian-born Anis Amri plowed a truck into a crowd of people at a Christmas market in Breitscheidplatz, a major public square in Berlin near the landmark Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. The attack killed 12 people and injured 48 others. Witnesses say that Amri jumped the sidewalk and careened into the crowd of market-goers at an estimated 40 miles per hour. One of the attack’s victims, a Polish man, was found stabbed and shot to death in the truck’s passenger seat. ISIS swiftly claimed responsibility for the attack, calling Amri a “soldier” of the Islamic State. In its January 2017, issue of its *Rumiyah* magazine, ISIS wrote that Amri had acted “in response to the Islamic State’s call to target the citizens of nations involved in the Crusader coalition, which is killing Muslims.” Previously, in its November 2016 issues of *Rumiyah*, ISIS had instructed followers to carry out vehicular attacks that would target “large outdoor conventions and celebrations, pedestrian-congested streets, outdoor markets, festivals, parades[, and] political rallies.” (Sources: [Guardian](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Rumiyah](#), p. 41, [Rumiyah](#), p. 11-12)

*Case Study: Boston Marathon Bombings*

On April 15, 2013, brothers Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev detonated two homemade pressure cooker bombs at the crowded finish line of the Boston marathon in Massachusetts. The explosions left three people dead and more than 250 wounded, 17 of whom lost limbs as a result of the attacks. (Sources: [Boston Globe](#), [New York Times](#))

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Al-Qaeda praised the Boston bombings in its May 30, 2013, issue of *Inspire*. The magazine quoted U.S. Representative Bill Keating (D-Mass.) as saying, “[the Tsarnaev brothers] chose symbolic targets...the oldest marathon that brings people together from all around the world...” Lending further explanation regarding the choice of location, al-Qaeda wrote that the brothers’ targeting of Boston was “appropriate” due to the city’s relative insignificance in comparison to New York, which has been “under an intensive security surveillance since September 11.” The bombers targeted Copley Square, “the substantial heart of Boston center,” according to al-Qaeda. (Source: [Inspire](#), p. 21)

In a manifesto scrawled on the inside of the boat where Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was found by police, the terrorist gave his own explanation for the attack, writing that “the U.S. Government is killing our innocent civilians but most of you already know that.” The brothers had initially planned to target a Fourth of July celebration, but, according to Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, chose the well-known marathon as a “target of opportunity” after they completed their bomb-making faster than expected. (Sources: [Boston Globe](#), [Runner’s World](#), [Boston Globe](#))

After the Boston Marathon bombings, al-Qaeda urged American jihadists to carry out more attacks, specifically naming the “New York City Subway or any other soft target” as ideal choices. (Source: [Inspire](#), p. 31)

### Jewish and Christian Institutions and Individuals

While ISIS systematically persecutes and murders religious minorities in the territory it controls, both ISIS and al-Qaeda have specifically targeted Christians and Jews in Western countries. In 2009, al-Qaeda’s then-second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri urged Muslims to “strike the interests of the enemies of Islam—namely, the Christians and the Jews—wherever and by whatever means you can.” In its first issue of *Inspire*, released in the summer of 2010, al-Qaeda wrote that “The Jews and Christians have dishonored the Muslims, desecrated our holy places, and cursed the beloved Prophet.” More recently, in the spring of 2016, al-Qaeda urged lone wolf attacks against Jews in particular, writing, “How many Jews are there in America, Europe and other kufr [nonbelieving] countries! So take matters in [to your own] hand[s]...” (Sources: [ADL](#), [Inspire](#), p. 33, [Inspire](#), p. 37)

The spring 2016 call to violence followed multiple attempted or successful attacks against Jewish targets by al-Qaeda operatives. Since the early 2000s, al-Qaeda has carried out high-profile attacks on Jewish institutions throughout the Middle East, including the April 2002 attack on the El Ghriba Synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, as well as the suicide car bombings of two synagogues in Istanbul, Turkey, in November 2003. In 2005, al-Qaeda operative Andrew Rowe—a convert to Islam from west London—was sentenced to 15 years in prison after he was found to possess instructions on firing mortars, as well as audio cassettes of sermons requiring

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followers to wage jihad against the “unjust Christians and aggressive Jews.” (Sources: [BBC News](#), [BBC News](#), [JCPA](#), [BBC News](#))

ISIS has also carried out multiple attacks on Jewish targets. In May 2014, former ISIS fighter Mehdi Nemmouche, a Frenchman of Algerian origin, opened fire at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels, killing four people. In January 2015, directly following the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, ISIS-aligned French citizen Amedy Coulibaly raided a kosher supermarket in Paris and killed four people—all of them Jews—after taking multiple people hostage. In the following days, ISIS claimed that its “soldier,” Coulibaly, had “executed five Jews,” and French President François Hollande referred to the attack as an “appalling act of anti-Semitism.” (Sources: [BBC News](#), [New York Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [French Embassy in Washington, D.C.](#))

ISIS attacks on Jewish targets continued throughout 2015 and into 2016. In October 2015, an American ISIS supporter told an undercover FBI agent that he wanted to attack the Jewish Community Center in Tucson, Arizona. ISIS-linked operatives stabbed Jewish school teachers in Marseilles in two separate incidents in November 2015 and January 2016, respectively. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Guardian](#), [Times of Israel](#))

ISIS operatives have also carried out attacks targeting churches. In April 2015, French authorities arrested Algerian national Sid Ahmed Ghلام for allegedly planning to attack a church in Villejuif, south of Paris. One of Ghلام’s contacts in Syria had reportedly urged him to attack churches in France. In July 2016, two self-proclaimed “soldiers of ISIS” stormed a church in northern France, took nuns as hostages, and slit the throat of the 85-year-old priest. (Sources: [Guardian](#), [BBC News](#), [Washington Post](#))

ISIS’s propaganda regularly features anti-Semitic and anti-Christian content. A video released in June 2014 by ISIS’s Al-Hayat media department featured a nasheed (Islamic chant) with the lyric, “Wherever our war goes, Jewish rabbis are humiliated... Break the crosses [of Christians] and destroy the lineage of the grandsons of monkeys [Jews].” In its second issue of *Inspire*, al-Qaeda explained the Islamic concept of *jizyah*, a tax historically imposed on some groups of non-Muslims, including Christians and Jews, by some Islamic rulers. Al-Qaeda wrote, “...Jews and the Christians... were allowed to retain their religious practices as long as they paid the jizyah in a state of humility.” However, the Jews and Christians “were made to know that their religious practices were false, that Islam does not approve of either Judaism or Christianity, and that they are considered to be misguided and are destined to Hellfire.” (Sources: [MEMRI](#), [Inspire](#), p. 38)

### Law Enforcement Targets

For years, al-Qaeda has urged attacks against police officers in the West, describing them as relatively easy targets from a tactical standpoint. “US, UK and French police force [sic] cannot

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withstand a bang of a grenade, let alone a full car bomb blast,” wrote the author, dubbed “AQ Chef,” in *Inspire*’s spring 2014 issue. (Source: [Inspire](#), p. 71)

In the next issue of *Inspire*, one article praised a November 2014 attack carried out by a self-radicalized convert to Islam. The convert, Zale H. Thompson, had assaulted five police officers with an ax in Queens, New York. “The operation was splendid,” wrote AQ Chef. “It had great symbolic importance: We will fight you even with hatchets and knives.” (Sources: [CNN](#), [Inspire](#), p. 21)

ISIS, too, has highlighted the symbolic importance of targeting police. The group described police officers as “the protectors of the crusaders,” while claiming responsibility for the murder of a Saudi policeman in April 2016. The group also called for attacks against American police in kill lists released in both March and June of 2016. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [CNN](#), [Vocativ](#))

Both al-Qaeda’s and ISIS’s calls to target police officers appear to be working. In June 2016, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point calculated that the 47 jihadist-inspired attacks that occurred in the West between 2012 and 2016 contained a higher percentage of attacks targeting police officers than the 26 incidents of jihadist-inspired violence in the West from 2001 to 2011. (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#))

In April 2015, the FBI arrested two young American women with sympathies for both ISIS and al-Qaeda. New York-based extremists [Noelle Velentzas](#) and [Asia Siddiqui](#) had reportedly sought to build a weapon of mass destruction, and were allegedly planning to attack policemen and a heavily-populated funeral for a fallen police officer. Two months later, in early June 2015, Massachusetts-based extremist [Usaamah Abdullah Rahim](#) expressed to his cousin his desire to kill police officers, whom he referred to as “those boys in blue.” Hours later, Rahim was shot and killed by Massachusetts police while approaching the officers with a large hunting knife. Rahim had been in contact with now-deceased ISIS operative [Junaid Hussain](#), who had ordered Rahim to kill anti-Islam activist Pamela Geller during the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend. Rahim, however, chose to target police officers in early June so that he could “meet Allah [sooner],” as he told his co-conspirator. (Sources: [NY Daily News](#), [U.S. Department of Justice](#), pp. 4-5)

The ISIS-inspired attack on Massachusetts police was not without precedent. In September 2014, Australian teenager Numan Haider stabbed two Australian law enforcement personnel as they interviewed him about his suspected affiliation with ISIS. Haider had previously posted photos and comments on Facebook in support of the terror group, and had written that he was sending a “message” to the Australian Federal Police and Australian Security Intelligence Organisation because they were “declaring war on Islam and Muslims.” In June 2016, ISIS claimed responsibility for the stabbing of a French police captain and his wife in a town northwest of Paris. In a matter-of-fact statement, the terror group reported that an “Islamic state fighter [had

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killed the] deputy chief of the police station...and his wife with blade weapons.” (Sources: [Age](#), [New York Times](#))

## Military Installations and Personnel

Individuals acting on behalf of ISIS and al-Qaeda have attacked military targets in the West—including army posts, recruitment centers, and navy reserve centers—in an attempt to kill soldiers. Most notably, in November 2009 Maj. [Nidal Hasan](#) shot and killed 13 U.S. soldiers at the Fort Hood military post near Killeen, Texas. He reportedly killed the soldiers in an effort to preemptively protect Taliban soldiers in Afghanistan, where many of the troops were set to deploy. (Source: [New York Times](#))

Since then, al-Qaeda and ISIS have repeatedly called on their followers to attack military installations in the West. In an August 2014 pamphlet titled “Palestine: Betrayal of Guilty Conscience,” al-Qaeda urged lone wolves to target “military barracks” in countries that “support and provide for the [Jews].” The group named three military academies in Georgia, Colorado, and California, respectively, as well as a military academy in Camberley, England, as “examples of targets.” In January 2015, ISIS released a video on Twitter urging lone wolves to carry out attacks on Western military targets and personnel. During Ramadan in 2016, now-deceased ISIS spokesman [Abu Muhammad al-Adnani](#) directed lone wolves to target military targets in the United States and Europe. (Sources: [Palestine: Betrayal of Guilty Conscience](#), p. 20, 37, [CBS News](#), [Reuters](#))

The shooting at Fort Hood inspired [John T. Booker](#), a U.S. citizen and ISIS sympathizer who in April 2015 attempted to set off what he thought was a 1,000-pound car bomb outside the Fort Riley army installation in Kansas. In March 2014, in an interview with the FBI, Booker said that he had enlisted in the U.S. Army in order to carry out an insider attack like that of Hasan’s. He later told an undercover FBI agent that he wished to target a U.S. Army base with guns and a grenade, and that such an act is permitted under Islam because the Quran tells you to “kill your enemies wherever you are,” according to the criminal complaint filed against him. Booker also revealed to the agent his plan to capture a high-ranking military officer and film him saying that ISIS was in the United States so that “kuffars [nonbelievers] will be afraid.” In February 2016, Booker pled guilty to one count of attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction and one count of attempting to destroy government property with an explosive device. (Sources: [U.S. Department of Justice](#), pp. 4-7, [CBS News](#), [FOX 4 News](#))

In July 2015, three months after Booker’s arrest, U.S. extremist Mohammad Abdulazez opened fire at a military recruitment center and a Navy reserve center in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Abdulazez killed four U.S. marines and one sailor before he was shot dead by police. Days before the shooting, Abdulazez had lamented in a blog post that “life is short and bitter,” and

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that Muslims should not allow “the opportunity to submit to Allah... [to] pass you by.” A search of Abdulazeez’s house revealed CDs of lectures by deceased AQAP cleric [Anwar al-Awlaki](#), who had called on al-Qaeda sympathizers to target soldiers in America. For example, in the spring 2011 Issue of *Inspire*, Awlaki wrote that “...killing 10 soldiers in America for example, is much more effective than killing 100 apostates in the Yemeni military.” He specifically called on lone wolves to kill “army recruiting center[s].” (Sources: [CNN](#), [New York Times](#), [NBC](#), [Inspire](#), p. 11)

Indeed, al-Qaeda and ISIS may choose to target Western military installations due to the fact that both groups—according to Jordanian journalist Fouad Hussein as well as ISIS’s magazines, videos, and speeches—seek to ultimately provoke Western armies into fighting a final battle. Al-Qaeda ideologues reportedly believe that this battle will lead to a global caliphate, whereas ISIS prophesizes that it will precede the apocalypse. (Sources: [New Yorker](#), [Spiegel Online](#), [Long War Journal](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Brookings](#), [Atlantic](#), [CBS News](#))

Al-Qaeda’s master plan, according to Fouad Hussein, includes luring Western militaries into a war of attrition in Muslim countries. Hussein interviewed top al-Qaeda leaders in the 1990s and later authored the book *Al-Zarqawi: The Second Generation of Al Qaeda*, which, according to author Lawrence Wright, is “perhaps the most definitive outline of Al Qaeda’s master plan.” According to Hussein, al-Qaeda ideologues believe that a war of attrition in Muslim lands will “awaken” a domestic Muslim insurgency. The group’s master plan reportedly began with the 9/11 attacks, and—according to al-Qaeda ideologues—will last until 2020, when a period of “total confrontation” between Muslims and non-Muslims will lead to the group’s victory and bring about a global caliphate. (Sources: [New Yorker](#), [Spiegel Online](#), [Long War Journal](#))

ISIS, having already declared a caliphate, seeks to eventually lure Western militaries to the Syrian town of Dabiq, where, according to Islamic prophecy, those militaries will prepare for and fight one of the final battles against the mujahideen. ISIS’s aptly-named *Dabiq* magazine regularly quotes deceased al-Qaeda in Iraq leader [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#) as saying: “The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah’s permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dābiq.” In the November 2014 ISIS video depicting American hostage Peter Kassig’s death, a militant warned, “Here we are, burying the first American crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive.” In December 2015, ISIS released an audio recording of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in which the emir referenced the final battle in Dabiq: “They know what await[s] them in Dabiq and Ghouta ... it’s defeat and destruction. They know it’s the final battle, and subsequently we will conquer them when they no longer could conquer us ... and Islam anew prevails over the world until the end of time.” (Sources: [Wall Street Journal](#), [Brookings](#), [Atlantic](#), [Dabiq](#), p. 2, [Dabiq](#), p. 2, [CBS News](#))



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Al-Qaeda and ISIS may continue to urge lone wolf attacks on Western military bases and personnel for a number of reasons, including their patent hatred of Western society and values, and of the ‘crusader’ armies that uphold those values. Ultimately, however, both groups envision a final encounter with these Western militaries, and may be simply stoking the flames in preparation for the big battle.

*Case Study: Fort Hood Shooting*

On November 5, 2009, [Nidal Hasan](#), a U.S. Army Major and psychiatrist at the Fort Hood military post near Killeen, Texas, opened fire inside the base’s medical center, killing 13 soldiers and wounding 32 more. Hasan reportedly shouted “Allahu Akhbar” (God is great), while firing in a “fanlike motion” throughout the room, according to witness reports. During his trial, Hasan told the courtroom that as member of America’s military, he realized he was on the “wrong side of America’s war” and that he had decided to “switch sides.” According to Hasan, he had targeted U.S. troops to preemptively protect Taliban soldiers and other Muslims in Afghanistan, where many of the soldiers he killed were set to deploy. According to lead prosecutor Col. Michael Mulligan, Hasan believed “that he had a jihad duty to kill as many soldiers as possible.” In choosing to target the military personnel, Hasan believed that “Muslims should stand up and fight the aggressor,” according to Col Terry Lee, a retired official who worked alongside Hasan on the military base. (Sources: [Huffington Post](#), [Statesman](#), [CS Monitor](#), [New York Times](#), [CNN](#), [Telegraph](#))

Hasan began sending emails to AQAP cleric Anwar al-Awlaki nearly a year before the Fort Hood shooting. In his first email to Awlaki, dated December 17, 2008, Hasan asked the cleric to “make some general comments about Muslims in the u.s. [sic] military.” He further sought to gauge the cleric’s level of support for the murder of U.S. soldiers by inquiring about the case of Hasan Akbar, an Army sergeant and convert to Islam who in 2003 murdered two fellow soldiers at a military command center in Kuwait in order to stop U.S. troops from killing Muslims overseas. Hasan asked if Awlaki would consider Akbar, or other soldiers who had “committed such acts with the goal of helping Muslims/Islam [who are] fighting Jihad,” as “shaheeds” (martyrs) upon their death. (Sources: [Fox News](#), [IntelWire](#), [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#))

In all, Hasan sent 14 emails to Awlaki, dated from December 2008 to June 2009. Awlaki replied twice to Hasan’s emails. Though he did not directly answer Hasan’s question regarding the targeting of U.S. soldiers, Awlaki wrote, “May Allah assist you in your efforts.” Following the shooting, al-Awlaki told Al Jazeera: “Nidal Hasan is a hero. He is a man of conscience who could not bear living the contradiction of being a Muslim and serving in an army that is fighting against his own people.” In the first issue of al-Qaeda’s *Inspire*, released in the summer of 2010, an article referred to Hasan as a “heroic mujahid brother” and urged lone wolves to follow his

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example in “stand[ing] up and kill[ing] all the crusaders by all means available to him.” (Sources: [IntelWire](#), [BBC News](#), [Inspire](#), p. 5)

### Conclusion

Targets chosen by al-Qaeda and ISIS operatives reveal much about the groups’ underlying ideology and strategic choices. Among the values held by these groups and evidenced by their target choices are the groups’ disregard for civilian life, their desire to seek revenge for Western military intervention, and their motivation to economically weaken the target country. As a result, al-Qaeda and ISIS have regularly targeted airplanes and airports, military and police installations and personnel, public spaces and transportation infrastructure, and Jewish and Christian institutions and individuals. Cartoonists who have drawn the Islamic prophet Muhammad have also been a common target choice for al-Qaeda and ISIS terrorists.

While there is overlap between how the groups justify their efforts, ISIS appears less concerned with providing ideological reasoning for the methods of its terror. While al-Qaeda has produced manifold theological and tactical justifications for its violence, ISIS has reiterated that its primary goal is to kill *kuffar*, and may be more likely to carry out randomized, wanton violence. This pattern also holds true in the Middle East, where ISIS has slaughtered minorities—including Shiite Muslims and Yazidis—en masse, while al-Qaeda leaders have emphasized attacking the West rather than engaging in local, sectarian warfare. (Source: [Wilson Center](#))

In their justification of the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda ideologues liken airplanes to catapults—unable to distinguish between civilians and soldiers—which the prophet Muhammad permitted Islamic soldiers to use against enemy villages. From a strategic standpoint, al-Qaeda has also sought to attack airports and airplanes in a declared effort to wreak economic havoc on the country in which the attack takes place. Al-Qaeda and ISIS’s lone wolves have also targeted soldiers at military installations throughout America. At least twice, American jihadists have waged these attacks in an attempt to protect Muslims in the Middle East from death at the hands of those U.S. soldiers. Law enforcement personnel, referred to by ISIS as the “protectors of the Crusaders,” are increasingly common targets in the West, according to a report released by the Combating Terrorism Center in June 2016. Al-Qaeda has also highlighted the tactical ease of targeting western police forces, who “cannot withstand a bang of a grenade, let alone a full car blast.” (Sources: [Middle East Policy](#), p. 89, [Inspire](#), p. 64, [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [Combating Terrorism Center](#), [Inspire](#), p. 71)

Both al-Qaeda and ISIS’s leaders have commanded followers to kill civilians in the West—making crowded areas such as cafes, concerts, public transportation systems, and sporting events popular locations for attacks. With regard to cartoon-related targets, al-Qaeda- and ISIS-tied extremists have sought to target cartoonists that have depicted the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

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Al-Qaeda wrote in 2010 that defending Muhammad—including by killing those who have drawn him—was a “greater cause” than fighting in Palestine, Afghanistan, or Iraq. Both groups have also targeted Jewish and Christian institutions and individuals in the West—a theme that is indicative of the groups’ deep-seated hatred of both religions. (Sources: [Heavy](#), [Wilson Center](#), [Inspire](#), p. 28)

As al-Qaeda- and ISIS-linked plots and attacks grow in number and frequency in the West, the groups’ preference for certain target types has become at once increasingly apparent and relevant. Continued high-level security of these locations—as well as familiarity with jihadists’ ideological and tactical reasoning when choosing their targets—remains crucial in order to both thwart and suppress future attacks. It is for this reason that CEP has outlined the groups’ common target choices and corresponding ideological interpretations in its report *Terror Targets in the West: Where and Why*. (Source: [Combating Terrorism Center](#))