



A European Perspective on Counterterrorism

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Statement for the Record

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It is an honour and a pleasure to speak at the start of this important conference. Many thanks to the Washington Institute for inviting me, as a European friend of the United States, to present a European perspective on counterterrorism.

The Institute has chosen this topic following the Biden Administration's recalibration of America's global counterterrorism policy and a shift from military action to the use of civilian counterterrorism tools. This shift aligns the US more closely with the EU's approach to CT.

To be sure, the EU does recognise that military action is sometimes necessary to fight terrorist groups. Over the last twenty years, EU Member States have frequently supported American use of force to fight terrorist groups world-wide, politically and militarily. France has taken the lead in a military operation to fight terrorists in the Sahel region, with strong American support. Yet, the European Union and its Member States emphasise a preventive and law enforcement approach to counter terrorism across the globe.

I agree with President Biden that kinetic action should be an occasional last resort. Where there is no armed conflict, terrorists should be investigated and arrested by law enforcement, and then tried in a court of law, in full compliance with internationally recognised human rights standards. Violations of those standards do not just undermine our values, but they are also counter-productive from a CT perspective, as they will breed resentment against our democratic model of governance and feed terrorist propaganda.

As the terrorist threat grows more diverse, military force may become less effective in countering terrorism. Sophisticated weaponry and high-tech detection tools are useless when we are facing lone actors who prepare their attacks without any direct assistance from terrorist organisations. In fact, in the West, *none* of the terrorist attacks in the last five years were perpetrated by Daesh or al-Qaeda themselves. Lone actors or small unorganised groups, often inspired by Daesh or AQ, were responsible for each attack.

Moreover, prevention policies, law enforcement and judicial action are the only ways to fight the growing threat of right-wing violent extremism and terrorism. Right-wing extremists and terrorists are increasingly internationally connected, aggravating the threat they pose, but there are no global right-wing terrorist organisations to fight with force of arms.

Since 9/11, we have not been winning the fight against terrorism. Islamist extremist ideology remains strong and both the US and the EU need to do much more to curb its spread. It transforms societies; for example in the Sahel, it has a negative impact on fundamental rights, underpins movements such as the Taliban, and contributes to radicalisation.

EU Action

The European Union is eminently well-positioned to use its financial means and political leadership to combat terrorism with rule of law based approaches. This is where it is able to complement and reinforce the action taken by its Member States and strategic partners.

Let me highlight a number of the “non-kinetic tools” the EU is using to counter terrorism. At home, the EU is assisting its Member States in a vast array of policy areas, ranging from border security to the removal of terrorist content online. Its tools to prevent terrorism include the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which pools expertise from across the EU to assist practitioners, such as teachers, police officers, social workers and prison wardens, in dealing with instances of radicalisation they encounter in their daily work.

Externally, the Union leverages its very significant development assistance to help partner countries to prevent radicalisation and fight terrorism more effectively. According to the OECD, the EU institutions and Member States combined account for a majority of official development assistance worldwide, surpassing the United States by a wide margin. The EU institutions have, over the last five years, vastly expanded their assistance to enhance rule of law based counterterrorism and counter-radicalisation capacities. They are now funding external projects with a total budget of about 500 million euros. This in addition to the EU’s support to various forms of military action through the Africa Peace Facility, including the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the African Union mission in Somali and the Multinational Task-Force against Boko Haram.

Of the EU’s assistance to counter terrorism, prevention of radicalisation accounts for about 40%, covering a range of issues such as extremism among youths, empowering women, promoting community dialogue, strengthening local actors and working with media to foster resilience to radicalisation. Furthermore, about 25% of our external CT assistance is spent to strengthen the criminal justice response to counter terrorism, 15% to security sector reform, 8% to reinforce border security and another 8% to countering the financing of terrorism.

The development of the terrorist threat in Africa is particularly worrying, with ever-larger parts of the continent being destabilised by the presence of Daesh and AQ affiliated terrorist groups. Experts now use the expression “Africanisation of Jihad.” Hence, the EU focuses its CT assistance on Sub-Sahara Africa in addition to its own immediate neighbourhood.

Another continuing source of concern is the situation in the camps and prisons in north-eastern Syria where thousands of former Daesh fighters and their families are held. The humanitarian situation there is dire, and the control of the Kurdish militias sometimes tenuous. While there is an ongoing debate in Europe on repatriations, it should be noted that the majority in both camps and prisons are actually Syrian and Iraqi nationals. Radicalisation of youth could contribute to lasting destabilisation of the region and forms a ticking time bomb for our security. EU Member States encourage the EU to:

- step up its assistance to youth in rehabilitation centres and security custody
- improve humanitarian conditions in the camps
- increase psycho-social, educational and other support in the camps
- contribute to the decongestion by supporting reintegration of Syrian nationals in local communities in North-East Syria

- and buttress a possible future agreement between the Iraqi Government and the UN on repatriation and reintegration of Iraqis in their local communities.

This is in support of the work and objectives of the anti-Daesh coalition.

The European Union is also a staunch supporter, politically and financially, of the UN framework for counterterrorism. The UN does indispensable work, and support to the UN is a long-standing pillar of our international engagement to counter terrorism.

Looking Further Ahead

The EU has started to address Islamist extremist ideology with an evidence-based dialogue with partners in the Gulf who also want to turn the page and studies related to the spread of fundamentalist Islam in the Sahel, which now need to be followed up with action. As the US is also working on these issues, it would be important to join forces.

It would also be important to focus more on creating opportunities for youth. Inspired by the US Stevens initiative, the EU set up a virtual Erasmus programme allowing students from Europe and the MENA countries to follow classes together.

If there is one area in which urgent action is needed from the US and the EU, it is regarding the internet. It is beyond dispute, for instance, that in parts of the developing world, such as India, Myanmar and Ethiopia, hate speech and disinformation posted on Facebook has sparked communal violence which led to hundreds of casualties.

The EU has finally started to regulate social media, while the US Congress is also debating proposals to make social media companies accountable for harmful or illegal content. One thing is clear: social media are not mere platforms on which members the public can post content. Social media companies use algorithms to amplify, often extreme, postings at the expense of others, thus influencing the exercise of free speech. Hence, they are publishers rather than platforms. This should have consequences for the way in which society holds them to account.

To wrap up: the United States is the EU's most important external partner. The US and the EU have developed a deep and enduring cooperation on counterterrorism, including dialogue at all levels. This includes separate dialogues in the areas of homeland security (where right-wing extremism and terrorism have gained increasing prominence) and external affairs. The EU and the US also work closely together in the Global Coalition against Daesh, the Global Counterterrorism Taskforce and the Global Counter Terrorism Forum

Cooperation makes the US and the EU much stronger, not just because we exchange information and work together, but also because we inspire each other and learn from each other's successes and failures. In providing civilian assistance to partner countries across the globe, our tried and tested mechanisms for mutual cooperation enable us to supplement each other's activities. As the US focuses more on civilian assistance and non-kinetic CT tools under the Biden Administration, these synergies become even more important.