

Europol and the EU Threat Picture: Developing a Global Response

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Wil van Gemert has served as deputy executive director and head of the Operations Directorate at Europol since 2014.



Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Counterterrorism Lecture Series \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series)

or see Part 1: [Taking the Fight to ISIL: Operationalizing CT Lines of Effort Against the Islamic State Group\(/policy-analysis/taking-fight-isil-operationalizing-ct-lines-effort-against-islamic-state-group\)](/policy-analysis/taking-fight-isil-operationalizing-ct-lines-effort-against-islamic-state-group)

Read a statement for the record by Europol's deputy executive director, who addresses the EU's evolving approach to global jihadists and homegrown terrorists.

On March 21, senior Europol official Wil van Gemert was scheduled to address The Washington Institute's long-running Stein Counterterrorism Lecture Series. The event was cancelled due to inclement weather, but the following is his prepared statement for the record.

Europe is facing its most serious terrorist threat in generations. We saw twenty-four jihadist attacks in 2017, very different from what witnessed in the past: diversification in the range of perpetrators (radicalisation of youths becoming one of the most important threats of jihadist terrorism, but also lone wolf attackers not associated with any particular group); an increased international dimension, with attackers forming a network in multiple EU Member States (e.g., Paris, Brussels, Barcelona); diversification in modus operandi, with indiscriminate killings rising, and attacks requiring little preparation and using accessible means (e.g., vehicles, knives—hard to foresee or prevent); and intense, professional use of social media for both communication within the network and recruitment and radicalisation. Security threats have become more international, more tech-enabled, and more interconnected.

Dynamics of the threat: from returning foreign fighters to home-grown lone actors

In the past three years, the EU has been confronted with carefully planned attacks carried out by networked groups partially composed of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), but increasingly with attacks perpetrated by a single person who had never been to the conflict areas—most of the time an EU national or resident for several years. A substantial

number of the perpetrators, one way or another, were known to police but not considered to be an immediate terrorist threat, with minor criminal records unrelated to terrorism.

The attacks followed roughly the same three patterns:

- Indiscriminate killings targeting as many people as possible with weapons not requiring special skills or preparation (London, March and June 2017; Barcelona, August 2017).
- Attacks on symbols of Western lifestyle condemned by jihadist ideologists as morally corrupt, such as concert venues and nightclubs (Manchester, May 2017).
- Attacks on symbols of authority such as police and military officers (Paris, February, June, and August 2017).

The evolution of the terrorist threat since 2014 is closely linked to the rise and fall of the so-called Islamic State (IS). It can roughly be divided into three phases: (1) major flows of FTFs to conflict zones and large-scale attacks coordinated by these networks, supported by IS "HQ"; (2) Disruption/prevention of travel to conflict zones and smaller-scale attacks by home-grown radicals; and (3) IS losing territory in Syria/Iraq and adapting its tactical response: namely, a change in propaganda to encourage radicalised individuals to carry out attacks wherever they live instead of travelling to conflict zones.

The exact number of returning FTFs is difficult to confirm but is generally believed to be lower than expected. However, it only takes one or perhaps a few FTFs with the intentions and capabilities to conduct an attack to pose a serious threat. That said, attacks carried out in 2017 seem to have primarily been perpetrated by self-organised individuals inspired by IS ideology without links to the group or any other organization.

These terrorists, operating alone or, in some cases, with one or two accomplices, are either inspired single-actor terrorists, remotely directed single-actor terrorists, or remotely directed and facilitated single-actor terrorists. Radicalisation of single-actor terrorists makes detection extremely challenging.

How can Europol support the efforts of EU countries in their fight against the globalised terror threat?

The series of terrorist attacks since 2015 led to a completely different perception of the threat in Europe. They also spurred an unprecedented boost in cooperation among EU Member States and partners, as well as in the support they are requesting from Europol.

The creation of the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) in January 2016 was a major policy statement. For the first time in the EU counter terrorism security policy context, it has been recognised that a cornerstone for cooperation at the EU level, represented by the ECTC, was necessary to support national counter terrorism efforts.

What does Europol have to offer? Europol is the only institution that connects the dots EU-wide, that maps the threat EU-wide, backed by a range of modern tools and capabilities: an information hub for counter terrorism, with unique information and intelligence sharing capabilities for law enforcement authorities in EU Member States and beyond; effective operational support, coordination, and expertise for Member States' investigations, by developing and deploying a comprehensive portfolio of support services; proactive mitigation of the use of social media for radicalisation purposes, through terrorist and violent extremist propaganda, as well as support to operational analysis; a central strategic support capability to identify European-wide counter terrorism implications and promote outreach with relevant (international) partners.

Key principles guide the operational support we provide: flexibility, complementarity, tailor-made support, and applying the safest data protection safeguards.

The amount of information on terrorism exchanged through Europol tripled compared to two years ago. The game changer for ECTC's growing involvement in Member States' counter terrorism operations was the decision by French authorities in 2015 to share with Europol all investigative files from the Paris attacks, via Task force

Fraternite, as we call the group of experts working on the French and later the Brussels case. Building on the experience of Fraternite, an established "Joint Liaison Team" allows close day-to-day cooperation between Europol CT Specialists and Analysts and dedicated CT officers from the participating countries, resulting in the closest-ever multilateral CT cooperation.

Finally, Europol profits from a unique setup: hosting the ECTC at Europol, together with the European Serious and Organised Crime Centre and the European Cybercrime Centre. This provides a response to an increasing need for linking investigation in organised crime and counter terrorism due to the growing connections between the two worlds. And these links are real: we see the merging of social networks, environments, or milieus of criminals and terrorists. Many recent perpetrators have a history in a variety of serious and organised crimes (drugs, document fraud, firearms trafficking, etc.), illustrated by the fact that several hundred individuals included in Europol's databases have been reported to the agency for both terrorism-related offenses and involvement in serious and/or organised crime.

Also, Europol's cooperation with key international partners, in particular the United States, has been outstanding, the United States being one of the key providers of information on FTFs.

Challenges

A lot has been achieved already. But of course a lot can still be done to integrate and coordinate international efforts in CT. What should be clear is that individual nations cannot tackle complex and interdependent criminal and terrorist threats alone. There is a strategic imperative for international cooperation. Multilateral channels like Europol provide numerous benefits in the globalised threat setting and complement the important bilateral cooperation between nation states.

One key area for the coming years—regarding both the EU internally and transatlantic cooperation—is moving the focus from collecting to connecting information. Information sharing is often only the start of cooperation. The real challenge is to build on this information exchange by developing proper transnational operations and by jointly working cases. This requires a lot of trust. But despite the sensitivities in the CT field, this trust is developing, and we saw some excellent examples of CT operations jointly supported by the United States, EU MS, and Europol in 2017. This is the direction we need to be heading.

Wil van Gemert has served as deputy executive director and head of the Operations Directorate at Europol since May 1, 2014. He manages a department of specialists dealing with serious and organized crime, as well as terrorism and cybercrime. Previously, he held a number of positions in basic policing, financial investigation, policy support, and combating fraud at the National Police Agency, Dutch National Intelligence Service, INTERPOL, and Europol. ❖

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