



Washington Institute of Near East Policy

Counter-Terrorism Lecture Series – Virtual Policy Forum

EUROPEAN COUNTERTERRORISM IN THE COVID ERA

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Statement for the Record

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in the Counter-Terrorism Lecture Series and exchange views with the participants on the current situation, our response and some of the challenges we face in the counter-terrorism domain in the European Union.

I will start with Europol's latest findings on the evolving terrorism threat, based on the latest European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT), which we published in June.

Of course, no discussion on trends would be complete without looking at the implications of COVID-19 for counter-terrorism.

Fortunately, overall numbers of terrorist attacks in the European Union have been decreasing over recent years.

Nonetheless, the terrorism situation has progressively become more complex and this development is even amplified by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, as I will explain a bit later.

The total number of terrorist attacks or plots in the European Union continued to decrease, amounting to 119 in 2019 (compared to 129 in 2018 and 205 in 2017), with roughly half of the EU Member States affected.

In addition, violent extremist activities are not always reflected in statistics, due to legal considerations determining the classification of incidents and differences in prosecution.

As in the past, numerically, ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism continues to be the most prevalent form of terrorist violence, accounting for almost half of all terrorist attacks in 2019.

However, ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorist attacks have decreased significantly over recent years.

The high share of foiled plots among jihadist and right-wing terrorist attacks should be noted.

In 2019, 14 jihadist attack plots were foiled, while 3 were completed and 4 failed. That means that in two thirds of cases in which jihadist perpetrators planned violent action in the EU, they were prevented from acting by security authorities.

In comparison, in 2017, the number of completed and failed attacks doubled that of disrupted plots. This may hopefully consolidate a trend initiated in 2018, which may reflect the constant work of law enforcement and counter-terrorist services to identify plots and attacks before they are launched.

Those attacks that took place (completed or failed) were mostly carried out by lone actors, showing the difficulty of disrupting attacks planned or carried out spontaneously by individuals without group affiliation.

For example, 7 jihadist terrorist attacks occurred in the EU in 2019, while 14 were thwarted. All but one of the completed attacks were carried out by lone actors, whereas most thwarted plots involved multiple suspects.

In completed attacks, the perpetrator predominantly used simple weapons, such as knives or firearms. All bomb plots either failed or were disrupted.

The situation in conflict areas outside Europe continued to influence the terrorism situation in Europe.

Hundreds of European citizens with links to the so-called Islamic State (IS) remain in Syria and Iraq.

IS lost its last enclave in Syria. The group, however, transitioned to a covert insurgent group operating in Syria and Iraq. It also maintained its global network of affiliates.

Al-Qaeda again displayed its intent and ambition to strike Western targets. At the same time, Al Qaeda's regional affiliates aim to integrate and coordinate with populations and armed factions in conflict areas.

We observe some striking similarities between the RWE on-line scene and jihadist online action:

Over the past years, we have seen the effect of online calls by IS and al-Qaeda on their supporters to perpetrate attacks in Europe and other Western countries with no or minimal support from the organisation.

The trend that calls for attacks in the West are issued increasingly by supporters of these organisations, rather than the central leadership, continued in 2019.

We now see a similar phenomenon on the right-wing scene, with online communities instigating hatred and calling on their members to take action.

While jihadists praise the perpetrators of lone actor attacks as "martyrs", right-wing attackers are praised as "saints". The number of people killed in attacks is sometimes cited as their "scores", as if they were playing computer games.

In 2019, we have witnessed a global wave of right-wing attacks that were all linked to these online communities.

The attack in Christchurch (New Zealand) in March 2019 served as inspiration for at least four other attacks in which the perpetrators referred to Christchurch, tried to copy the modus operandi, published manifestoes and tried to videotape their attacks.

To summarise on the evolution of the terrorism threat:

As I have already mentioned, what we have observed is that the terrorism situation has become increasingly complex.

In the early 2000s, the main terrorism threat arguably came from more or less clearly defined terrorist organisations, acting on a more or less coherent ideological basis. At present, the picture is much more diverse.

The attacks and plots we have seen recently in the jihadist domain are a mix of lone actor attacks, small self-organised groups but also plots hatched or instigated from abroad.

The jihadist scene in Europe is composed of a range of different types of people. On one extreme of the spectrum, there are individuals driven by ideology, a sort of jihadist intellectuals.

On the other extreme, there are radicalised people who have an urge to join the armed struggle. These will seek to join any group that offers an opportunity.

Between these two extremes, we find:

- radicalised communities living in close vicinity;

- small trans-regional networks formed via online contacts;

- networks built on family ties;

- but also loners exclusively active online.

IS and al-Qaeda remain important brands. However, they can only count on certain sections of the spectrum to follow them unconditionally and exclusively.

Behaviour is increasingly dependent on individual dispositions and the dynamics of localised groups and networks.

If we are to talk about Covid-19, we must do so against the background of this increasingly complex situation and the ever more granular response needed.

It seems safe to assume that the containment measures taken hamper the activity of terrorist networks (greater difficulties in procurement and training opportunities, but also in identifying suitable targets...).

My fear is however that the developments in terrorism that we have observed over recent years will have accelerated, once we overcome the pandemic.

People are forced to spend more time at home. They are likely to spend increased time online, where they are more likely to be exposed to extremist content.

In general, the propaganda of the various scenes has addressed the COVID pandemic, trying to capitalise from it.

Extremists of all ideological orientations are using the pandemic to propagate misinformation and perceived societal division.

Jihadist terrorists try to portray the pandemic as a punishment from God to weaken Islam's enemies and encourage their followers to take advantage of the situation to perpetrate attacks.

Right-wing extremists blame the emergence and the spread of the pandemic on foreigners and minorities and suggest using the virus to voluntarily infect minorities.

Also the idea that the disease is an invention by the elite to control the population has been promoted among right-wing extremists. They are joined by anti-vaccination activists.

New conspiracy theories have also been observed, such as the one linking the Covid-19 pandemic to the installation of the 5G technology.

There have been arson attacks against antennas in various European countries. These attacks have been supported by propaganda coming from both the right-wing and left-wing extremists.

The economic crisis caused by the pandemic will probably lead to higher unemployment, lower salaries and increasing anti-government sentiments in some sections of society.

These developments have the potential to fuel the radicalisation of some individuals, regardless of their ideological persuasion.

Now to my next point on the response and CT cooperation:

Counter-terrorism is one of the most difficult topics I have to speak on as Head of the Operations Directorate at Europol, as it concerns human lives.

When reporting on counter-terrorism efforts, we need to look back at several crucial events:

9/11 attacks in 2001;

Madrid and London bombings, in 2004 and 2005 respectively; and

Paris and Brussels attacks in 2015 and 2016.

If we look at the situation 4-5 years ago, progress had already been made since 9/11 in developing counter-terrorism legislation and tools at EU level, but the picture was still highly fragmented.

The reinforcement and better use of Europol was part of a long series of debates and policy documents calling for the setting up of the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC), in January 2016, building on existing Europol capabilities and aiming to provide:

An information hub for CT;

Effective operational support;

Proactive mitigation of the use of social media for radicalisation purposes; and

A central strategic support capability.

I truly believe that the launch of the European Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC) marked a new era in counterterrorism cooperation in Europe.

Since then, efforts have been made at all levels to improve the intelligence picture as much as possible.

Maximising operational, technical and overall information exchange capabilities and ensuring added value for EU Member States and third party partners remains our main goal.

Let me briefly highlight some of our operational and policy objectives in this area:

We will continue working on enhancing our intelligence gathering through coherent outreach activities;

We will look at how to add more value to the data we hold;

We will, to the best of our ability, accommodate the requests from EU Member States for new operational products and services and ensure their sustainability.

Reinforcing our analysis capacity is one of Europol's top priorities.

Another key area Europol has been actively working on is Information Management.

Technology has a big impact on the development of crime. At the same time, new technologies also present new opportunities for law enforcement and the Europol Innovation Lab will help them to make the most of these opportunities.

Most recently, the key role of Europol in supporting national initiatives was highlighted in the discussions with EU Member States on COVID-19 crime threats and law enforcement responses.

Through a sudden shift to digital working environments, it became clear that international police cooperation should rely on increased connectivity and that new technical solutions are needed to enable secure, real-time exchange of information between law enforcement agencies at national level but also cross-border.

We need to use the lessons learnt from this crisis to accelerate digital transformation and modernise law enforcement cooperation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have produced some good results in the past years. But as our operational response has evolved so has the threat, too.

A robust response to the evolving, fluid and complex terrorist threat calls for consolidation of established cooperation, full use of available tools and platforms, and maximising new opportunities for cooperation.

There is also a renewed political mandate to do so, through the new EU Security Union Strategy for the period 2020 to 2025.

Protecting Europeans from terrorism and organised crime is one of the 4 strategic priorities for action at EU level.

International cooperation is rightly identified as key in the fight against terrorism.

The added value of international cooperation on security matters is something we witness every day in our work.

Our cooperation with the US authorities, and in particular the US FBI, is crucial in counter-terrorism. The consolidation of existing partnerships, and I need to also mention Interpol, as well as nurturing relations with new partners is at the centre of our outreach efforts.

Several other areas will receive special attention in the EU, such as: tackling the misuse of drones, access to digital evidence, trade of illegal firearms, balanced solutions to the challenges posed by encryption, cooperation with the private sector, and countering illegal content online. This is my final point, strongly linked to the previous one.

The EU Internet Referral Unit in Europol plays and will continue to play a crucial role in monitoring the activity of terrorist groups online and the action taken by platforms, as well as in further developing the EU Crisis response Protocol.

Engagement with international partners is again crucial in tackling these challenges at global level. I am confident that the newly established Global Internet Forum to Counter-Terrorism (GIFCT) Working Group on crisis response, co-chaired by the EU (Europol together with the EU Commission) and Microsoft will effectively complement the engagement in the framework of the EU Internet Forum.

Thank you very much for your attention. I am happy to take questions.