# Three years after the Brussels attacks:
# No quick fix to counter terrorism and radicalisation

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## BACKGROUND – LEARNING THE HARD WAY

The fight against terrorism has historically been a member state competence. Prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism was not carried out within the EU's institutional framework. In response to the London bombings of 7 July 2005, the United Kingdom (UK), which was then holding the Presidency of the EU Council, drafted what would ultimately become the "European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy", adopted in December 2005.[1]

The strategy has four pillars: prevent, protect, pursue and respond. Across these pillars, the strategy recognises the importance of cooperation between member states as well as with third countries and international institutions.

Since then, Europe has been the victim of several devastating terrorist attacks. While some were intricate, planned and executed by organised terrorist cells, others were lone-wolf attacks. They represented a wake-up call for Europe, revealing the existence of dormant cells and individuals silently nurturing a hatred against our system and its values, and ready to act in the presence of the right triggers.

The attacks also exposed a number a deficiencies in EU counter-terrorism policy. This included a lack of information and intelligence sharing across member states. However, possibly the greatest shortcoming was the lack of investment in preventative measures to stop vulnerable individuals from becoming radicalised in the first place. Building up the resilience of communities and the capacities of local actors and groups within communities to fight radicalisation, along with working with role models who are admired and taken seriously by people, particularly youth, is crucial.

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Since the 2016 Brussels attacks, threat awareness has increased across the board; many important steps have been taken, and new measures implemented, including in the field of prevention. Furthermore, there has been a shift away from hard security measures to a more holistic approach to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable communities and work with grassroots organisations and frontline practitioners. The internal-external nexus has also been given more prominence, not least as a consequence of the security threat posed by returning foreign fighters, as some 5.000 Europeans travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for the so-called Islamic State (ISIS).[2] The EU is strengthening counter-terrorism cooperation with many countries in its neighbourhood, including the Western Balkans, Turkey and North Africa.

## STATE OF PLAY – NO SILVER BULLET

There is no silver bullet against radicalisation and terrorism. However, since 2016 several measures have been adopted, at the EU level, to address the hard security element of the terrorist threat.

### Intelligence sharing

The interoperability of EU member state databases and intelligence sharing is crucial for increasing EU security. A spring 2016 European Commission report identified gaps and shortcomings.[3] Since then, the EU has made good progress.

A new directive has reinforced anti-terrorism efforts by criminalising travelling within, outside or to the EU for terrorist purposes, as well as the facilitation of such travel, the collecting of funds to be used for terrorist activities, and receiving or carrying out terrorist training.[4] To disrupt access to financial resources used for terrorist activities, recent legislation has established tougher rules and improved cross-border cooperation against money laundering.[5]

Stricter controls are now in place regarding the movement of people both from outside and within the Schengen area, thanks to a strengthened Schengen Information System[6] and an easier exchange of data regarding airlines passengers (EU Passenger Name Record directive).[7] Europol's European Counter Terrorism Centre also plays an important role. A recent regulation has improved cooperation between Europol and member states in the fight against terrorism, including in the crucial aspect of intelligence exchange.[8]

It was the 2015 Paris attacks that instigated this sharp increase in data sharing, as most member states were reluctant to exchange sensitive information, or had a preference for doing so bilaterally.

### Prevention

While these counter-terrorism efforts are essential, one must also take into consideration a plain fact: security and judicial apparatuses have no resources to monitor and counter each and every potential threat, no matter the legislative facilitations. It is therefore crucial to invest in prevention – that is, intervene before the radicalisation process happens in the first place.

The EU can make a significant contribution in this respect, in terms of material resources, research and coordination. In the last few years, the EU has consistently reinforced its counter-radicalisation strategy.

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Centre of Excellence was established in October 2015 by the European Commission. It acts as a coordination centre for RAN activities and as an information hub for the EU and member states on counter-radicalisation. It involves more than 2.400 frontline practitioners, community police, and prison and probation officers. Bringing frontline practitioners together is crucially important for an exchange of expertise, experiences and good and bad practices.

The Commission has also set up a High-Level Expert Group on radicalisation, composed of experts from EU institutions and member states, with the aim of improving cooperation and further developing EU prevention policies. Furthermore, funding for education has been channelled through the Erasmus+ programme to improve young people's resilience to radicalisation.

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### Defeating online radicalisation

A strong focus has also been placed on tackling online radicalisation. The proliferation of extremist, jihadist and violence-inciting websites, blogs and social media platforms is a major concern. According to Julian King, EU Commissioner for the Security Union, there remain up to 400 online platforms hosting terrorist content, despite efforts to crackdown on this phenomena.[9] Terrorists are using new technological tools to organise themselves and to publish their ideas, while the internet and social media platforms have been a key tool for terrorist groups to groom, radicalise and recruit supporters, including children. This phenomenon has contributed to, in particular, the rise in lone-wolf terrorist attacks.[10]

In September 2018, the Commission proposed a regulation on preventing the dissemination of terrorist content online.[11] All internet platforms wanting to offer their services in the EU will be subject to clear rules and will be required to take proactive measures to prevent the dissemination of terrorist content, as defined in the recently adopted Directive on Combating Terrorism.[12] The Commission is further asking member states to establish dedicated law enforcement agencies to issue removal orders.

The regulation is the latest and most far-reaching of a long series of EU initiatives to regulate and restrict various types of online content, both legal and illegal. The establishment of the 'Databases of Hashes' in 2017 was also an important step. This instrument is based upon the detection efforts carried out by Europol's Internet Referral Unit (IRU), and prevents content published on one platform from reappearing on a different one. The IRU works with some 150 platforms to tackle the dissemination of online terrorist content. According to Europol, on average, the content flagged for referrals has been removed in 86% of the cases.[13]

Last but not least, the Commission has devoted EUR 6 million to online counter-narrative campaigns through the Civil Society Empowerment Programme.[14]

### Strengthened external cooperation

Strengthening ties with partner countries, particularly in the EU's southern neighbourhood, Turkey and the

Western Balkans, has also become an important part of the EU's counter-terrorism policy. The June 2017 European Council Conclusions emphasised the need to reinforce the Union's counter-terrorism structures, embed the internal-external nexus in EU policies and strengthen cooperation with affected countries around Europe and with strategic partners.[15]

In 2016, EU leaders appointed counter-terrorism experts in some EU delegations including in Turkey, North Africa, the Middle East, the Western Balkans, and Sub-Saharan Africa. An important part of their mandate is to work with local authorities and contribute to joint counter-terrorism efforts.

Cooperation *vis-à-vis* returning foreign fighters and their families has been important. Of the thousands of EU nationals that travelled to Syria and Iraq, it has been estimated that around 30% have already returned to their home countries. In June 2013, the Council agreed on a series of measures to support member states' efforts to tackle returning foreign fighters, including strengthening cooperation with third countries.[16]

The EU furthermore finances different counter-terrorism initiatives, including capacity building, security sector reform, and provides financial support for the implementation of national counter-terrorism strategies in a number of partner countries. Many of these national strategies have been influenced by the Union's counter-terrorism strategy, demonstrating an endorsement of the EU approach.[17]

The EU has also developed counter-terrorism action plans with many of the countries, which have led to improvement in coordination, monitoring and evaluation. However, the depth of cooperation varies from case to case. The Western Balkans has been a particularly important region and the EU launched a 'Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism Initiative' in 2015[18], which coordinates EU, international and regional efforts in the CT field.

## PROSPECTS – MANY CHALLENGES REMAIN

Today, Europe is better equipped than it was three years ago to deal with the challenges of radicalisation and terrorism. Many obstacles, such as a reluctance to share intelligence, have been reduced. Nevertheless, while the EU's counter-terrorism efforts are commendable, they have, to a large extent, been crisis-driven – reactive rather than proactive – although this is gradually changing. But serious challenges remain, requiring important action in many domains.

### Dealing with returning/captured foreign fighters

While important measures have been adopted related to returning foreign fighters, including increased information exchange on identification and the detection of suspicious travel, significant challenges remain. For example, gathering legal evidence to support prosecutions and proving specific actions on the battlefield can be very difficult.

This, along with political and security concerns, has made EU member states reluctant to repatriate captured foreign nationals. Thousands of fighters, women and children are in the custody of the US-backed Syrian Defense Forces in Syria. However, there are increased calls for Europeans to take their nationals back, including from US President Donald Trump.

While many in Europe would prefer to leave their nationals in Syria and Iraq, this is not a solution. Prison camps are hotbeds for the further spreading of extremist ideologies. This was the experience of Camp Bucca in Iraq. Nine members of ISIS top command, including the group's leader Ebubekir Baghdadi, did time at the prison, radicalising hundreds of other inmates.[19] Furthermore, with the planned US withdrawal from Syria, camps are likely to collapse. This risks fighters making their own way back home which poses a serious security/terrorist threat.

Organised repatriation, beginning with children and women is necessary. An international tribunal, along the lines of those set up to investigate the atrocities in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, should be created to trial (former) ISIS fighters.

### Radicalisation in prisons

Radicalisation in European prisons is also highly problematic for some member states, including Belgium and France. Two terrorist attacks carried out in 2018 (Liège and Strasbourg) were executed by individuals radicalised in prison. Many prisons are not sufficiently equipped to hold jihadists and fully prevent them spreading extremist ideology and searching out vulnerable individuals to groom. Prison staff lack sufficient training as well. Capacity building and exchanging best practices is crucial, including in programmes focused on disengagement, de-radicalisation and reintegration. This requires greater support and funding for frontline practitioners working in prisons.

While cooperation between police forces and intelligence services has increased, there is presently no system in place to exchange information between prison and probation services. Where there is a record or a risk of radicalisation and terrorism, law enforcement and intelligence officials across the EU need to be updated on prisoners' profiles and activities while incarcerated, so they can be ready when they are released.

### Little impact evaluation

While the EU has developed numerous issue-specific policies and programmes, there is significant overlap. Results are mixed. A better monitoring and evaluation of policy impact is needed.

This has been confirmed by the European Court of Auditors (ECA), which in its Special Report on the Commission's Response to Radicalisation that Leads to Terrorism, draws a picture of mostly uncoordinated action, which does not fully map EU and national practices in this domain. The ECA also points out the insufficient qualitative evaluation of counter-radicalisation programmes.[20]

A study conducted in the framework of the EU-funded IMPACT project[21], devoted to assessing the "methodology used in evaluating effects of preventive and de-radicalisation interventions", found that the vast majority of actions in this domain did not include any empirical collection of qualitative and quantitative data to assess impact. In half of the cases, not even a theoretical framework was provided, and the interventions were merely described in anecdotal terms.[22]

## Need for conceptual clarity to lead action on radicalisation

External experts have failed to facilitate the Commission's efforts. Indeed, the scholarly work consulted to acquire an operational understanding of the phenomenon of radicalisation has "reproduced the discord prevalent in the academic literature rather than facilitated a shared understanding".[23] Consequently, "the very existence and nature of the problem and the objectives to be pursued were continually contested".[24]

However, if there is no clarity about what is "radical" and about the means used by radicals to spread their narrative, there can be no clarity on how to fight the phenomenon, with which partners, and towards which goals – nor how to measure success or failure.

The ideological element of radicalisation also needs to be further addressed. The root of the problem is the existence of extremist, totalitarian ideologies. While in literature there is no universally accepted definition of radicalisation, the definition provided by the Commission's DG Home provides a good starting point in an EU context, describing radicalisation as a "complex phenomenon of people embracing radical ideology that could lead to the commitment of terrorist acts."[25]

Based on this definition, two key elements emerge: first of all, ideology as the main driver of radicalisation; and second, the fact that such an ideology does not need to necessarily entail violence to be radical, as long as it is susceptible, because of the narrative it promotes, to lead to violence.

Therefore, it is important to further develop effective counter-narratives to extremist ideologies and methods, and to effectively communicate them – for example through popular role models, such as rappers and footballers. Prevention should be at the main focus of the EU's efforts, including providing financial support to organisations working on the frontline, especially the teachers and youth workers who work with minors. Early detection is key. Boosting support for trained frontline workers to detect the first signs of radicalisation is crucial. A multi-dimensional, joined-up, societal approach with a strong focus on long-term prevention is essential.

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