

EU takes terrorism to task with three-pronged strategy

Written by Jamie Shea on 8 October 2018 in Opinion
Opinion

With the threat of terrorism now an ever-present reality, the EU has devised a three-point plan to thwart potential terrorists and improve infrastructure in cities if the worst should happen.



Jamie Shea | *Photo credit: Friends of Europe*

Threats used to be things that we could easily identify and measure. They came in large, bulky forms like armies massing along our borders, or missiles pointed at our capitals.

If conflicts arose, they were usually preceded by gradual military build-ups, prolonged international crises and ample warning signs, if we only chose to read them properly.

Yet a feature of the 21st century is hybrid warfare where the aggressor strikes without warning inside our borders first and aims for softer targets whose almost infinite number (a crowd at a concert, people sitting at a café terrace, or a bank payment system) make it almost impossible to defend.

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These attacks may not achieve the strategic impact of a conventional military strike, but cumulatively they spread fear, inhibit our freedom of movement, polarise our societies and cause us to lose faith in our governments' ability to protect us.

A small investment of time and resources can have a disproportionately large impact, and the ramification of such small-scale attacks that undermine our social cohesion is tantamount to death by a thousand cuts.

"The internet has played a key role as a cheap, easily-used and universal platform for spreading jihadist propaganda and for identifying, recruiting and indoctrinating future terrorists"

AN EVER-PRESENT THREAT

Terrorism now appears to be an enduring reality for EU citizens. In 2017, 16 significant attacks took place in the EU against eight member states. In France, the police detained 621 people suspected of links to terrorism, and in Germany as many as 1,100.

At the same time, of the 4,500-5,000 foreign fighters who left EU countries to fight with ISIL in Syria and Iraq, as many as 2,000-2,500 have either returned to Europe or are trying to return.

This will increase the risk level and put additional burdens on the intelligence services and police to monitor the most radical, battle-hardened individuals. Having said that, the new trend in terrorism is the home-grown terrorist who causes mayhem with almost no organization or financing: with a rented car or truck, a stolen gun or just an ordinary kitchen knife.

Given this more diffuse and less predictable type of terrorism, it comes as no surprise that the EU has been raising its game to better confront terrorists along the entire spectrum along which they operate.

This strategy consists of three parts: to close down the space in which terrorists recruit, train, organise and move; to build resilience to attacks; and to tackle the radicalisation and online terrorist content that fuels extremism.

COOPERATION IS KEY

The first part of the strategy involves the EU making it harder for terrorists to travel and have access

to money, firearms and explosives.

Security at external borders has been stepped up so that EU border officials have a better idea of who is coming into the EU, and European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, has proposed an increase of 10,000 border guards within Frontex, the EU's border and coastguard agency.

"After the 2015 ISIL attacks in Paris, France invoked Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty for the first time, which provides for mutual assistance among EU member states in response to an attack or major security incident"

The Schengen database has become a key asset for the exchange of information, and a Passenger Name Recognition system (PNR) has been adopted in the EU, which facilitates more EU-wide cooperation on biometric data. This system is soon to become an ETIAS arrangement, which is modelled on the United States' ESTA pre-travel authorisation scheme.

Europol's Counter-Terrorism Centre has also become a key hub for cooperation between security and police forces - for example, in the area of stolen or falsified identity documents, as terrorists often assume multiple aliases. EU countries have also introduced laws that make it an offence to travel to terrorist areas.

On the second part of the strategy, resilience to attacks, the EU has provided funding to cities to improve infrastructure to make it harder for terrorists to attack public spaces and events. These cities have built up a so-called High Risk Security network, where mayors and police chiefs can exchange best practices and lessons learned in responding to and recovering from terrorist attacks.

Private-public sector partnerships at the local level are facilitating a faster exchange of information, for instance when individuals with fake identity or credit cards try to rent trucks from car hire companies - a lesson from the terrorist attacks in Nice and Berlin.

RADICALISATION ON THE RADAR

The third and final element of the strategy concerns de-radicalisation and countering violent extremism.

In this regard the internet has played a key role as a cheap, easily-used and universal platform for spreading jihadist propaganda and for identifying, recruiting and indoctrinating future terrorists. The EU has worked actively with internet service providers and social media companies to remove jihadist videos and sites more quickly.

The Europol Internet Referral Unit offers EU citizens the support of law enforcement in encouraging companies to act quickly in response to individual petitions. However, de-radicalisation initiatives cannot succeed if they are limited to EU territory.

The biggest majority of terrorists are radicalised in other places, particularly in war zones or countries stricken by conflict, poor governance and social and ethnic disputes.

That is why the EU is putting capacity-building at the top of its agenda. In 2017, the EU conducted 600 projects with partner countries to improve security forces training and work on job creation, education and community resilience programmes that are vital if we are to reduce the lure of terrorism.

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which provides for mutual assistance among EU member states in response to an attack or major security incident.

This is a timely reminder that the EU, which protects our citizens, requires an ever-closer cooperation among member state governments and societies in anticipating, preventing, containing and recovering not just terrorism, but all of the threats that can affect our daily lives and freedoms.

About the author

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