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NOTE

From: EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator
To: Delegations
Subject: Afghanistan: Counter-Terrorism Action Plan

The Council of the EU (“Justice and Home Affairs”) stated on 31 August 2021: “The EU and its Member States will do their utmost to ensure that the situation in Afghanistan does not lead to new security threats for EU citizens.” This Counter-Terrorism Action Plan identifies areas of action where the EU and Member States could prepare and mobilize existing instruments in a timely fashion to anticipate and address possible terrorism risks to EU internal security stemming from Taliban’s takeover of power in Afghanistan.

The Counter-Terrorism Action Plan has been elaborated in coordination with the Commission services, the EEAS, the Presidency and relevant EU JHA agencies. It sets out 22 recommendations for action, divided into four areas: I. security checks – prevent infiltration; II. strategic intelligence/foresight: avoid that Afghanistan becomes a safe haven for terrorist organisations; III. monitor and counter propaganda and mobilisation of the Jihadi eco-system; IV. tackling organised crime as a source of terrorist financing.

Close cooperation with international partners will be key in all these areas. The Counter-Terrorism Action Plan will be reviewed after six months.

I. Security checks: prevent infiltration of Jihadists into the EU

It is important that **timely, uniform, and enhanced security checks** are performed at the EU's external borders and during the asylum adjudication process, in order to effectively identify those, who might pose a risk to EU internal security, and avoid infiltration of Jihadists into the EU. Information needs to be shared in a timely and coordinated manner in order to avoid any gaps in sharing terrorism-related information on an individual between relevant competent national authorities. All existing terrorism-related information on a person should be taken into account.

Recommendations for action:

1. Competent authorities of Member States to **check systematically** biographical and biometrical data of Afghani nationals or presumed Afghans or other nationals coming from Afghanistan and arriving at the EU's external borders¹, against all the relevant databases (SIS, Eurodac (check and registration), Europol systems and databases, ECRIS-TCN, VIS, Interpol databases) in line with the legal requirements for such searches. Based on relevant information in the police databases of Member States Prüm could be also consulted. For NATO members, checking NATO databases, in particular the BICES database with battlefield information from Afghanistan, would be important.
2. **Competent authorities of the Member States to exchange information**, and invest the necessary resources to detect, monitor and intercept possible jihadists with regard to all arrivals in the EU² of Afghan citizens or persons originating from Afghanistan, as was done for possible foreign terrorist fighters travelling to and from Syria and Iraq. Europol should be associated in this process. This would also help to address the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters traveling from Afghanistan³.

¹ Including those who have been evacuated to the EU

² Including those who have been evacuated to the EU

³ "The Monitoring Team continues to estimate the number of foreign terrorist fighters to be approximately between 8.000 and 10.000, mainly from Central Asia, the north Caucasus region of the Russian Federation, Pakistan and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China, among others. Although the majority are affiliated foremost with the Taliban, many also support Al-Qaida. Others are allied with ISIL or have ISIL sympathies." UN Report S/2021/486

3. To enable a common approach for enhanced security checks, COSI to develop a **protocol** setting up a uniform three level procedure. Within this protocol, EU agencies (Europol, Frontex) shall assist, within their respective mandates, competent national authorities, notably by deploying relevant experts and making available interpreters, devices and tools to facilitate quick and direct access to specific databases.
4. **Europol, Frontex and EASO** to start preparing the logistics for a possible deployment for, inter alia, screening, de-briefing and finger-printing at the EU's external borders, so that deployment could be done quickly, as necessary in case of large number of arrivals resulting from the situation in Afghanistan. Europol, in collaboration with the other agencies as appropriate, to start training guest officers who could be quickly deployed at the external border for second-line security checks as necessary. Interpreters with the relevant languages (Pashtu/Dari) could already be identified and preparations be made to enable rapid engagement of such services, recruitments be prepared⁴, subject to the procedures and requirements of the respective agencies' mandates.
5. In order to more effectively check persons evacuated from Afghanistan and detect individuals from Afghanistan at the EU's external borders who might pose a threat to EU's internal security, it is crucial that updated **battlefield information** is available to the competent national authorities and Europol, including during the enhanced security check. The US government and Member States, as well as Europol and Eurojust, have established contacts, channels and procedures for the sharing of battlefield information, including from Afghanistan. It remains essential to close gaps and ensure the best possible availability of all relevant battlefield information from Afghanistan. The cooperation with the US government should be reinforced to share with Europol and Member States updated battlefield information collected in Afghanistan such as fingerprints found on explosive devices or biometrical data of fighters detained in Afghan prisons and who have been released by the Taliban. This should be done also with a view to insertion into the Schengen Information System (SIS) according to the process endorsed by COSI⁵, if the datasets are of sufficient quality and include the necessary alphanumeric data⁶.

⁴ E.g. from qualified security screened Afghan citizens who have been evacuated to Europe and have already worked for the EU or Member States in Afghanistan

⁵ "Defining a process for evaluating and possibly entering information from third countries on suspected Foreign Terrorist Fighters in the Schengen Information System", doc. 13037/20. This

6. Security checks concerning **Afghan citizens evacuated by the US** to the Western Balkans are equally relevant for EU security. Clarity from the US government should be sought on envisaged security screening process before onward travel to the US for the Afghan citizens that the US has placed in transit in the EU and the Western Balkans, e.g. applicable procedures, timelines, follow up process for rejected demands for visa for entry into the US. Moreover, US assistance is key for screening of Afghan citizens, who are in US bases in the EU, but have requested asylum in EU Member States.
7. A reflection is needed on how to deal with Afghan citizens or other nationals originating from Afghanistan that have reached the EU (e.g. via evacuation flights) and for whom **there are indications that they pose a security threat**. The sharing of relevant information, where possible including battlefield information, to allow for a prosecution of these individuals should be explored. Eurojust should support Member States with regard to such prosecutions. EASO is supporting asylum administrations with the detection of applicants to whom one of the exclusion clauses may be applicable through trainings and country specific tools, including on Afghanistan⁷. Guidance on the application of the exclusion grounds with regard to applicants from Afghanistan (including e.g. possible jihadists) is also available in the EASO Country Guidance on Afghanistan.

process would be also applicable for handling the information from third countries for terrorist suspects from Afghanistan.

⁶ When the new SIS will be operational (beginning of 2022), it will be possible to enter alerts containing only fingerprint data.

⁷ EASO country of origin information reports provide general background information and specific information on actors in the conflict.

II. Strategic intelligence/foresight: avoid that Afghanistan becomes a safe haven for terrorist organisations

The risk that the Taliban maintains its close ties with Al Qaida⁸ and allows its presence in Afghanistan should be closely monitored and regularly assessed. Even if Al Qaida lay low for a while, and does not perpetrate external action that can be directly attributed to its presence in Afghanistan, Al Qaida would still have a safe haven, time to rebuild its headquarters, and possibility to guide its affiliates. The continued activities in Afghanistan of ISIS Khorasan (IS-K) should also be monitored. It will be a major challenge to obtain solid and reliable intelligence on the activities of terrorist groups and their affiliates without presence on the ground in Afghanistan.

Recommendations for action:

8. Member States to share via EU INTCEN **strategic intelligence on the terrorist threat** resulting from developments in Afghanistan. INTCEN should ensure intensified reporting to assess the presence and activities of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, as well as their financing, and presence of foreign terrorist fighters. Europol should be encouraged to support the national authorities of the Member States to monitor terrorist travels between the EU and Afghanistan. Procedures and mechanisms to bring together all relevant actors in order to secure a real-time, comprehensive and coordinated EU response need to be ensured. Strategic information sharing with trusted third-country partners, notably the US, should be further enhanced.
9. Europol could be supported to staff its **EU Internet Referral Unit** with Pashtu/Dari/Urdu/Farsi speakers, a specialized skillset currently not available at Europol, in order to monitor social networks and other sources, including related to possible calls for jihadist travel movements to and from Afghanistan. The establishment of an **EU-level pool of security-vetted language specialists** (including evacuated former staff of the EU Delegation in Kabul and similar local staff) could be considered to facilitate recruitment of such skillsets for EU JHA agencies.

⁸ According to the UN (Report to the UN Security Council by the Sanctions Monitoring Team of 1 June 2021, Doc S/2021/486) since the signing of the agreement in February 2020, Taliban has maintained its close ties with Al Qaida, and continued to allow Al Qaida's presence in Afghanistan.

10. The EU to seek **strengthening dialogue, strategic information exchange, and enhanced interaction** with some of the countries neighbouring Afghanistan, as well as with countries in the region and globally with access to information on Afghanistan. Full use to be made of the ‘regional political platform’, to be established by EEAS as an outcome of the Gymnich meeting on 3 September 2021. Moreover, existing instruments to be applied, such as EU’s Counter-Terrorism Dialogues with countries in the region, as appropriate underpinned by increased mobilization of the EU’s CT capacity building tools, and EU’s network of Counter-Terrorism Experts at selected EU Delegations. Posting of additional EU CT Experts to EU Delegations in the region to be explored⁹.
11. The UN system and other **multilateral channels** could be an important source of information. The EU and Member States to continue to support the high-quality UN reporting on the presence and actions of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, and to supply relevant information to UNOCT, UN CTED and the UN Security Council’s Committee pursuant to resolution 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning ISIL (Daesh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities. The EU also to engage politically and seek information through the Global Coalition against Da’esh and the Global Counter- Terrorism Forum. Moreover, the EU to engage with the G7 for information exchange, which has started to map security equipment left behind in Afghanistan. Further cooperation with NATO could be explored.
12. The EU and Member states to consider and explore with international partners how clear and non-negotiable demands for **denying terrorist groups safe havens on Afghan soil** can be made most effectively to the Taliban, and how potential agreements could be monitored. Without pre-empting the debate on the recognition of the Taliban government and resumption of development assistance, addressing the safe haven issue needs to be part of the considerations.

⁹ In the region, currently, there are EU CT expert positions in Pakistan and in Kyrgyzstan for Central Asia.

III. Monitor and counter propaganda and mobilisation of the Jihadi eco-system

The Taliban takeover has provided a propaganda victory, mobilizing impact, and support beyond Afghan audiences to Jihadist and Islamist extremists globally, including in Europe. Developments in Afghanistan highlight the importance of countering the spread of extremist Islamist ideology internationally.

Recommendations for action

13. The EU INTCEN, the EU Internet Referral Unit at Europol and the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) to **monitor and provide analysis** of the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan with regard to the global Islamist extremist and Jihadist propaganda scene, including Afghan diasporas and Muslims in Europe. The Taliban, as well as Al Qaida headquarters and affiliates might operate strategic communication campaigns to develop and spread Islamist extremist narratives, which need to be monitored. This includes promotion of the Taliban's policy towards women and girls, which may have negative impacts in Europe. Monitoring should also cover possible right-wing and left-wing extremist discourse in reaction to developments in the wake of the Taliban takeover.
14. Impact analysis, counter-narratives and preventive measures, including by the RAN, to be considered. Policy support to continue to Member States developing their **strategic communication** capabilities and raising awareness of communication challenges. Strategic communications and counter-narrative projects in the region to be considered.

15. Afghans, in particular the Taliban, have for decades been exposed to externally supported spread of extremist Islamist ideology. Analyzing and **preventing the spread and influence of Islamist extremist ideology in the region and globally** needs a stronger integration into EU foreign policy, accompanied by an in-depth reflection on how to counter it. The EU's continued engagement with Saudi Arabia on the reduction of the Islamist extremist proselytization can inform this effort. Similar dialogues, including back-to-back with regular counter terrorism dialogues, could be initiated with countries from where sources are promoting extremist Islamist ideology internationally. The issue can also be part of the dialogue with regional organizations. The relevant Council Working Groups should reflect on the follow up to the two recent studies issued by Commission services on the spread of fundamentalist Islam/Salafism in the Sahel and West Africa. Utmost importance must be given to strengthening reporting by EUDELS and Counter-Terrorism Experts, integration as appropriate into development assistance programming and cooperation with relevant CSDP missions in the region as appropriate, as well as consideration of further expert studies to solidify informed decision making.

IV. Tackling organised crime as a source for terrorist financing

The Taliban are thought to have been controlling most of the opium production and poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, a business considered to be one of their main sources of income, as well as having been involved in the production or trafficking of synthetic drugs. The increase in opium production in Afghanistan directly influences heroin availability on EU markets where heroin arrives mainly via the Balkan route, but more recently, also through the Southern route, via Southern Africa¹⁰. The extraction of ephedrine¹¹ and the production of methamphetamine in Afghanistan have been rapidly expanding in the last years¹², with emerging evidence that they are used by Taliban groups to fund their activities.¹³

Weaponry seized by the Taliban after the withdrawal of U.S. and allied troops, and taken from Afghan security forces, may be traded to gain funding, or used to support terrorist cells operating in Afghanistan and beyond, for attacks against Western targets. As in Syria and Iraq, terrorists may either destroy antiquities for propaganda purposes or traffic them for financial purposes. To prevent an increase in the financing of terrorist groups connected to Afghanistan and the Taliban, all possible revenues related to trafficking activities should be tackled.

Recommendations for action:

16. **Europol** to monitor and assess the potential impact and evolution of the crime threats from Afghanistan on EU security and develop enhanced real-time intelligence picture.

¹⁰ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) 2019, EU Drugs Markets Report 2019, accessible at https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/eu-drug-markets-report-2019_en

¹¹ Afghanistan has been reported in connection to a new method for extraction of the methamphetamine precursor, ephedrine, from the ephedra plant growing in the mountainous regions of the country.

¹² Even if it appears that the impact of EU markets was limited until now, it is likely that Taliban will capitalise on this business opportunity.

¹³ Emerging evidence of Afghanistan's role as a producer and supplier of ephedrine and methamphetamine <https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/13410/emcdda-methamphetamine-in-Afghanistan-report.pdf>

17. As part of its reporting on Afghanistan-related terrorist threats, EU **INTCEN** to continue reporting on the terror-related organised crime related issues. More specifically, **exchange of information and intelligence** should be enhanced, also with trusted third countries, on weaponry, military and specific equipment left behind, which risk being used by terrorist groups in attacks, including in Europe.
18. **Drugs trafficking:** Europol and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), in cooperation with other stakeholders such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), countries from the region and other international partners, to assess the implications of developments in Afghanistan on drug production and trafficking, and to explore potential short-to mid-term scenarios. This assessment should identify how to enhance monitoring capacity to support and step up preparedness and possible responses to future changes and challenges in Afghanistan and the region and analyse links with criminal networks, and how this potentially enables terrorist activity. This assessment should in particular take into account the production and trafficking of opiates, cannabis and methamphetamines and as well as trafficking of precursors towards the region. It will be important to ensure a clear mandate and sufficient resources for the EMCDDA to carry out this activity, notably in view of the planned revision of its mandate. Specific attention should continue to be given to Afghanistan and neighbouring countries in EMPACT¹⁴ operational activities addressing production and trafficking of drugs, in particular in the context of the ongoing preparation of the 2022 operational action plans. Stepping up EU support to strengthen border security in the region, such as the Border Management Programme in Central Asia and Afghanistan (BOMCA) initiative, should also be explored.

¹⁴ EMPACT is European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Crime Threats. EMPACT tackles the most important threats posed by organised and serious international crime affecting the EU. In May 2021 the EU adopted 10 EMPACT priorities (e.g. drugs and firearms trafficking and organised property crime) to be implemented between 2022 and 2025

19. **The EU** should call on Afghanistan to respect its obligations under the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, notably concerning opium poppy cultivation, and the UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances¹⁵. Without pre-empting the debate on the recognition of the Taliban government and resumption of development assistance, an **effective ban on poppy cultivation and trafficking of opiates and synthetic drugs** in accordance with the relevant UN conventions and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights should be part of the considerations. Relevant Commission services should consider providing support to alternative development measures to ensure livelihoods of farmers, possibly in cooperation with national and international stakeholders, which have expertise in this area. Assistance through NGOs and the UN could be options to explore.
20. **Firearms trafficking:** So far, Afghanistan has not been a source country for firearms trafficking. Firearms are trafficked into the EU mainly from the Western Balkans. A potential traffic of firearms from Afghanistan into the EU is likely to pass through the South-East Europe route. To reduce the possibility of a medium-term risk of trafficking of weapons from Afghanistan into the EU, the implementation of 2020-2025 EU action plan on firearms trafficking is key, given that it includes both the EU and South-East Europe partners (Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine). Operational actions involving the Western Balkans should be prioritised and strengthened through the relevant EMPACT operational action plans, e.g. Firearms trafficking, High Risk Criminal Networks to tackle the illicit traffic of firearms parts. Europol to monitor online distribution of firearms or components thereof. Cooperation with US and fast parcel companies should be reinforced in this context to increase detection. FRONTEX and CEPOL should increase training on firearms detection for border and coast guards, law enforcement and customs. The recently developed Frontex Handbook on detection of firearms should be a key tool for frontline officers, especially border guards and customs.

¹⁵ The relevant UN conventions are: The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, as amended by the 1972 Protocol, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances and the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.

21. **Trafficking of antiquities:** Monitoring and comprehensive risk assessment on trafficking of cultural goods from Afghanistan to be carried out by Europol, combined as appropriate with operational actions via EMPACT, such as operation Pandora. This could be included in the 2022 EMPACT Operational Action Plan on organised property crime. The Commission to consider, in cooperation with Interpol, UNESCO, World Customs Organisation (WCO), UNODC and the International Council of Museums (ICOM), to issue a specific new alert to the art market and border management authorities to be vigilant and exert enhanced due diligence with regard to cultural goods from Afghanistan. The Commission could consider launching projects to digitize the already circulating Afghan cultural artefacts present in Europe and possibly other countries to support detection of stolen artefacts from Afghanistan. A comprehensive and temporary ban on imports of cultural goods from Afghanistan could be explored. A rapid reaction system to put in place immediate measures could be developed by the Commission in the context of the upcoming action plan on trafficking of cultural goods. Where necessary, legal instruments could be considered.
22. An Afghanistan focus could also be considered to be added to the **EMPACT criminal finances and money laundering priority** with its horizontal and cross-cutting dimension. Regarding Afghanistan's future policies and practices on anti-money laundering and countering financing of terrorism, the EU to analyse these issues in connection with its 'high risk third country list' for money laundering and terrorist financing, as well as to raise the issue in a FATF (Financial Action Task Force) context.
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