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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Delegations
No. prev. doc.:	12866/20
Subject:	EU Threat Assessment in the field of counterterrorism: recommendations

To better anticipate possible threats, the Terrorism Working Party (TWP) is tasked, if required by changes to the terrorist threat picture, to prepare a set of conclusions and policy recommendations or to adjust the existing recommendations, on the basis of the six monthly report/assessments from Europol and INTCEN regarding the terrorism threat to the EU. The current reports cover the period from July to December 2020.

The findings of the INTCEN report were presented at the informal videoconference of the TWP on 16 March 2021 in an abridged, unclassified version. The recommendations cover all forms of extremism that could lead to a terrorist threat or to violence and will be included in the ongoing work and implementation of actions against terrorism.

Delegations are requested to send their comments to the Presidency (TWP.PPUE@pcm-c.com), and the Council Secretariat (twg@consilium.europa.eu) by **6 April 2021**.

FINDINGS

As in previous years, the findings in the papers are complementary and convergent. The reporting period was marked by the (second wave of the) COVID-19 pandemic and prolonged lockdown and curfew measures, with physical activity being reduced and virtual/online activities spiking. So far, the impact on the threat from terrorism appears to have been limited. In the longer term, the socio-economic consequences of the crisis and more time spent in isolation and online may lead to a further polarisation of society and may act as a push factor towards radicalisation. The threat of Jihadist/Islamist terrorism remains high, as shown by the attacks near Paris on 16 October, in Nice on 29 October, and in Vienna on 2 November 2020¹. In addition, many European countries face a growing threat from violent right-wing extremists, though no attacks were carried out in the second half of 2020. The left-wing and anarchist violent extremist scene also increased its activities in the second half of 2020, though no terrorist attacks were carried out. Threat pictures across Europe vary with regard to which phenomenon is assessed as the most prominent.

¹ Joint statement by the EU home affairs ministers on the recent terrorist attacks in Europe <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/11/13/joint-statement-by-the-eu-home-affairs-ministers-on-the-recent-terrorist-attacks-in-europe/>

The above-mentioned Europol report and INTCEN assessments can be summarised in the following findings²:

- Overall, the threat level remains as high as it was before. The volume of propaganda generally increased across the board. The threat level from Islamist terrorism remains high, and there has been an increase in the number of Islamist-inspired attacks in 2020 compared to 2019, some of them motivated by perceived ‘blasphemous’ acts in the west [highlighting the important role of Islamist extremist motivations], such as the (re)publication of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. It does not seem to have been significantly influenced by the pandemic. Some Member States have a higher threat level than others. In addition to the enduring threat from Islamist terrorism, some Member States have seen an increase in the threat from violent right-wing extremists (VRWE), though no terrorist attacks were perpetrated in the reporting period. The organised VRWE scene in Europe is not uniform in its appearance or form. It is fragmented and leaderless and comprises many smaller groups, which differ in terms of their membership, structures and ideologies³. The threat stemming from a heterogeneous violent left-wing and anarchist extremism (VLWAE) is still considered to be low but increasing, due to the fact that more Member States were affected in 2020. The protests against government regulations to contain the COVID-19 pandemic attracted extremists from various ideological backgrounds. The evolution of both VRWE and VLWAE seems to be linked to the evolution of the pandemic and its socio-economic consequences, building on social grievances linked to the crisis.

² See also Communication from the Commission, A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond (13967/20).

³ For example ‘anti-minority ideologies’ (anti-Islam, antisemitism, anti-LGBTQ, anti-left-wing); Alt-Right; Accelerationists; Neo-Nazis; eco-fascism. Right-wing extremist conspiracy movements such as QAnon have also found resonance in the EU.

- Lone actor attacks are still predominant both in Islamist terrorism and in VRWE, with attackers inspired by international terrorist organisations or extremist content online, despite having no or only marginal links to other terrorists or violent extremist organisations. Attempts to copy previous attacks are often observed. Attackers mainly use unsophisticated weapons adapted to simple *modi operandi*, such as bladed or stabbing weapons or small firearms, and they increasingly target open public spaces and soft targets. A number of the attackers seem to have mental health issues. The factors mentioned above mean that it can be difficult to identify/detect persons constituting a threat.
- Daesh-inspired attacks continue to be the main terrorist threat to most Member States, although attacks by al-Qaeda (AQ) and its sympathisers remain a possibility. However, the capability of both groups to direct attacks has diminished and the focus seems to be shifting to local insurgency.
- The release from prison of a significant number of individuals who have served their sentences after being convicted of terrorism or terrorism-related offences, and the release of other radicalised inmates have already resulted in attacks and will continue to contribute to a terrorist threat in the near future. While unevenly distributed throughout Europe, radicalisation in prisons and radicalised prison leavers are particular challenging for a number of Member States⁴. A larger number of convicted terrorists are due to be released in the coming months after having served their sentences.
- The number of currently incarcerated violent extremists from the Western Balkans who have already been or will be released over the next few months and years, as well as the returned foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their family members, could pose significant challenges, if this is not properly addressed through disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. The Western Balkans could provide a fertile ground for different forms of radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism, such as political, ethno-nationalist and religious.

⁴ Council Conclusions on preventing and combating radicalisation in prisons and on dealing with terrorist and violent extremist offenders after release (9366/19).

- FTFs and their family members have returned to the European Union only in very small numbers so far. Also, probably as a consequence of the travel restrictions because of COVID-19, there were almost no returns to Europe in 2020. Those who did return were mostly women and children, and indeed a number of Member States have recently started repatriating children and in some cases also their mothers. Some women have fled the camps in north-eastern Syria.
- The situation in the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) detention camps and detention centres is reported to be relatively stable for now. However, the dire conditions in the camps remain a serious security and humanitarian concern.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the interest in biological weapons, including the possibility for weaponising the virus, and the potential of CB (chemical or biological) attacks features prominently in terrorist propaganda. There is increasing discussion about using the coronavirus as a biological weapon, though there are no signs of such talk translating into action soon, not the least due to feasibility issues.
- Arson attacks against 5G-masts/antennas/technology from both right-wing and left-wing extremists have also been observed during the last six months.
- Activities by right-wing violent extremists have not changed significantly since the first half of 2020. The growing concern over the increasing and transnational threat for the past couple of years has led to some VRWE groups being banned in several European countries. There has been a clear increase in their activities in connection with public protests against the measures imposed by the governments to manage the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, and not surprisingly, their online activities were ramped up.

- Over the past six months, VLWAE activities have been reported in different parts of Europe. The assessments depict a heterogeneous landscape, with acts of vandalism and sabotage mainly targeting technology-related targets and more generally, symbols of economic and systemic power by rather than persons. VLWAE groups protested, among other things, against measures imposed by governments to preserve public health (as, too, did right-wing extremists), and against presumed technological control of society, such as tracking systems. Large-scale political events – as well as smaller local events – are also examples of occasions where left-wing violent extremists clashed with right wing-extremists and/or behaved violently towards law enforcement officers present at the scene. However, so far, the levels of violence are not reported to be particularly high and the overall level of threat to Member States’ security is deemed to be low.
- While all major Islamist terrorist groups maintain a presence on social media, the volume and quality of official Daesh propaganda has decreased but remain significant and continues to react swiftly to world events. The propaganda is produced continuously and spread on increasingly diversified channels. Daesh-inspired individuals and groups in EU Member States continue to encourage (lone) actors to commit terrorist attacks on European soil; however there is a shift away from Europe towards affiliated groups in Africa.
- The online presence of right-wing violent extremist groups is on the rise, especially in some EU Member States, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic⁵. This has fuelled the spread of right-wing violent extremist ideology and increasingly taken on an international dimension. A number of terrorist attacks motivated by violent right-wing extremism had a strong online dimension, with some perpetrators live-streaming their acts and justifying the shootings in manifestoes posted on the internet, and major VRWE attacks were primarily inspired by previous attacks disseminated online.
- Terrorist cyberattacks are still deemed less likely, due to the level of capabilities required. However, terrorists might try to misuse new technologies.

⁵ EEAS(2020) 10184: Impact of COVID-19 on right-wing extremism in Europe.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Compared to the first half of 2020, the threat picture has changed very little. This means that the existing recommendations are all still valid and only need tweaking/minor updating.

Based upon the findings and taking into account the ongoing work at EU level, such as the adoption of a new Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU⁶, and recent developments, there is little need for adjustment to the recommendations endorsed by the Standing Committee on Operational Cooperation on Internal Security (COSI) in November 2020:

- Violent extremism and terrorism need to be addressed in all their forms, taking into consideration the increasing polarisation in society, which could be exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if Islamist extremism remains a major threat, parts of Europe are increasingly confronted with a rise in the risks associated with violent right-wing extremism. Violent left-wing extremism is reported to be on the rise as well, but the threat level remains lower⁷.
- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the impact thereof should be closely monitored, as the long/protracted pandemic may increase Member States' vulnerabilities and risks of radicalisation. INTCEN and Europol should continue deepening their assessment of the impact of the pandemic on terrorist operations as well as possible attempts by terrorist organisations and violent extremist groups to exploit the current crisis⁸. A clear distinction needs to be made between non-violent and legal expressions of the freedom of speech in free societies, and violent extremism and terrorism.

⁶ 13967/20 (COM(2020) 795 final, 9.12.2020).

⁷ 'Traditional' left-wing targets are symbols of 'state repression and capitalism', such as buildings and 5G technology, and symbols of extreme-right ideology.

⁸ Among other things, through the reinforcement of narratives (partly shifting towards pandemic-related targets), the use of disinformation campaigns and the dissemination of conspiracy theories over the internet.

- The situation in the camps and the prisons in Northern Syria should continue to be closely monitored by EU Member States, with support from relevant EU actors, where appropriate, and measures to address it should be explored. To this end, the EEAS, the Commission and the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (CTC) will, as soon as possible, present meaningful suggestions to the Political and Security Committee (PSC) to step up EU action related to camps and prisons on the ground, along the five lines of action proposed by the EU CTC, which were welcomed by the PSC⁹.
- Member States are encouraged to use the voluntary protocol¹⁰ setting out a process for evaluating information from third countries on suspected non-EU terrorists and, where possible, entering relevant data in the SIS and into the relevant European databases. In regard to returnees who are not liable to criminal prosecution, reintegration efforts and disengagement and exit programmes need to be undertaken to counter potential future security concerns.
- The risks associated with radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism in prisons, and the release of individuals who have either been convicted of terrorism-related offences or have been radicalised in prison, require efficient measures. The risk assessment of inmates during the detention period and after release is crucial, and the efforts made within prisons and after release and aimed at their reintegration must be strengthened. This requires methodologies and cooperation between prison and probation services, law enforcement, local authorities and all the other relevant actors involved. It is crucial to ensure continuity between the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts within prison and after release, as well as an effective system to share the relevant information.

⁹ 14235/20 (EU CTC paper): ‘Addressing the Legacy of Daesh in north-east Syria: Suggestions for Enhanced EU Assistance for Camps and Prisons’.

¹⁰ 13037/20. The process should be evaluated and further adapted to operational needs if and when necessary, and in any case by no later than October 2022.

- Member States are encouraged to continue their efforts to recognise and handle, at an early stage, public security threats stemming from persons assessed by the Member States to constitute a violent extremist/terrorist threat ('Gefährder')¹¹. The need to further improve the sharing of information on such persons, on the basis of the existing national and EU regulatory frameworks, should be considered while respecting the fact that national security remains the sole responsibility of each Member State in accordance with Article 4(2) TEU.
- Taking into consideration the high level of threat from home-grown terrorists, further efforts to prevent radicalisation leading to violent extremism are needed, focusing on priority areas identified by the Steering Board on Radicalisation.
- Pending the entry into force of the proposal for a Regulation on preventing the dissemination of terrorist content online¹², both Member State authorities and hosting service providers should ensure the swift detection, identification and removal of terrorist content in line with the Commission Recommendation on illegal content online¹³. In addition, efforts should continue under the framework of the EU Internet Forum to tackle the spread of terrorist content online, regardless of ideology, and to ensure the timely removal of online terrorist and violent extremist material.
- The impact of algorithms and their contribution to radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism, including the spread of right-wing violent extremist ideology, also needs to be further addressed. Online gaming is another phenomenon which might require further research¹⁴, [and which may in particular target young people].

¹¹ Council Conclusions on Internal Security and European Police Partnership (13083/1/20 REV 1) and 12506/3/20.

¹² The draft Regulation is expected to be adopted at the end of April 2021.

¹³ Commission Recommendation of 1.3.2018 on measures to effectively tackle illegal content online, C(2018) 1177 final.

¹⁴ Terrorists are increasingly using the messaging systems of gaming platforms for exchanges, and they also re-play violent attacks in video games. See also 9066/20 - EU CTC paper on 'Online gaming in the context of the fight against terrorism'.

- On the basis of the current mandate of Europol¹⁵, it is crucial that the EU Internet Referral Unit's (IRU) capabilities to support Member States' actions to prevent the dissemination of all types of terrorist content are further developed. Member States are requested to consider seconding national experts to Europol and specifically to the IRU to help increase capacity. Regular, Europol-coordinated Joint Action Days, continued efforts to ensure preparedness and a mandate to tackle situations of viral spread of terrorist content through the implementation of the EU Crisis Protocol¹⁶, and the organisation of annual table-top exercises in Europol are also encouraged. In line with the implementation plan on combatting violent right-wing extremism and terrorism¹⁷, the EU IRU should flag violent right-wing extremist content online while continuing its effort to prevent the dissemination of Daesh (-inspired) online content. Where appropriate, consideration should also be given to other forms of violent extremism, such as left-wing.
- It is also important to increase our understanding of the violent radicalisation process (mobilisation for violent action), including the current role of ideology. This includes violent Islamist ideology and violent ideologies within right-wing and left-wing extremist movements.
- It will be important to implement the Conclusions of the European Council of December 2020 to ensure more transparency with regard to external financing of extremism as well as ensuring that the training of religious leaders in the EU is fully in line with fundamental rights and freedoms. The dialogue with Saudi Arabia on Islamist extremist materials and financing should be prepared for as a matter of priority and should take place as soon as the pandemic situation allows.
- The swift and effective implementation of EU tools such as Regulation (EU) 2019/1148 on the marketing and use of explosives precursors¹⁸ and the interoperability package should be monitored.

¹⁵ Amendments to the Europol mandate are currently under discussion.

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/20191007_agenda-security-factsheet-eu-crisis-protocol_en.pdf

¹⁷ 14132/19

¹⁸ OJ L 186, 11.7.2019, p. 1; the Regulation should be applied as of 1 February 2021.

- Cooperation with key third countries and international partners on access to battlefield information should be developed further in accordance with national and EU legislation, to support investigations and prosecutions and increase detection of FTFs and returnees at EU borders. It is crucial to share information and create alerts for all known FTFs, both EU and non-EU, in SIS if the conditions and thresholds established in national and EU legislation are met. For the detection of travelling FTFs, all relevant EU and international databases, such as Interpol's, should be used. Moreover, it is also important to effectively implement the obligations and functionalities deriving from the new SIS regulations and to reinforce systematic checks on all persons crossing the external borders¹⁹, in accordance with the Schengen Borders Code. Checks of the SIS at the EU external borders need to be increased by reducing exemptions and relaxations in the context of the Schengen Borders Code to what is strictly necessary.
- Cooperation with third countries should be further developed, in cooperation between the competent internal and external security actors, in particular with a view to sharing experience and capacity building on counter-terrorism (CT) and preventing and countering violent extremism (P-CVE) and information exchange on FTFs²⁰ (which could be used in criminal proceedings, e.g. travel, possible returns, and networks facilitating travel by FTFs). The continued implementation of the EU-Western Balkans Joint Action Plan on CT and of the six bilateral Implementing Arrangements with the partners in the region are of utmost importance²¹. CT engagement with the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region²² and the Sahel should be enhanced.

¹⁹ This is currently under discussion in the relevant Council working parties.

²⁰ See also Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism (8868/20), which underlined the need to further strengthen the EU's external counter-terrorism engagement and action in certain priority geographic and thematic areas.

²¹ EU and the Western Balkan partners reaffirmed their commitment to implement its objectives beyond 2020 at the Ministerial meeting of 22 October 2020.

²² EU-North Africa Enhanced Political dialogue on Justice and Home Affairs (Presidency Proposal), WK 2060/2021.

- The implementation of the four joint action strands against right-wing violent extremism and terrorism agreed by the JHA Council on 8 October 2019 should continue²³. Increased attention should be given to the transnational dimension of these groups.
- The implementation of measures suggested in the EU Action Plans on the protection of public places²⁴ and on strengthening the resilience against CBRN-related risks²⁵ should be reassessed in light of the increased threat. The protection of critical infrastructures, including the cyber environment, is of high importance, and increased cooperation between the Member States in this area would be beneficial²⁶.
- Increased attention should be paid to emerging threats and also to the security risks, as well as countering opportunities stemming from new technologies. The EU Innovation Hub²⁷ needs to be developed to enable it to play a key role as an observatory of new technological developments and driver of innovation, including by developing standard technical solutions for Member States in the field of internal security.
- The relevant JHA working parties, where appropriate in cooperation with relevant external security working parties, should continue their efforts to translate these recommendations - where necessary and appropriate - into operational measures and to address practical needs, as part of the reflection process on the future priorities and way forward in this area.

²³ A situational overview was presented to the TWP at the end of 2020 (12590/20).

²⁴ 13489/17. The Presidency intends to adopt Council Conclusions on the Protection of Public Spaces in June 2021, currently being discussed in the Law Enforcement Working Party.

²⁵ 13484/17. See also Council conclusions on strengthening the European Union response to CBRN related risks, reducing access to explosive precursors and protecting public spaces (7 December 2017), 15648/17.

²⁶ See also Council Conclusions on complementary efforts to enhance resilience and counter hybrid of 10 December 2019 (14341/19 + COR1). The proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the resilience of critical entities, submitted by the Commission in December 2020, is currently under discussion in the working party on civil protection (PROCIIV).

²⁷ Agreed by the JHA Council on 8 October 2019.