

Europe's fight against terror

11 March 2019 will mark the 15th European Day of Remembrance of Victims of Terrorism, established to commemorate all victims of terror following the 2004 Madrid bombings, which left 191 people dead and around 2 000 injured. Since then, Europe has experienced several waves of terrorism and the European Union's policy response has evolved over the years, starting after 11 September 2001 and reaching cruising speed in 2015. What are the results of more than 15 years of EU counter-terrorism action? Is there still room for further progress?

Terrorism goes global: a (not so) new challenge for Europe

Several European countries, such as France, Spain and the UK, have faced essentially national terrorist threats for decades. However, in the last 20 years, with the rise of [Islamist extremism](#) and especially after the deadly attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, terrorism has become a borderless global phenomenon. Since Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, an unprecedented wave of terror has flooded Europe, affecting no fewer than nine EU countries between 2015 and 2018. While the [threat](#) was initially perceived as coming from outside Europe, it quickly became clear that the situation was more complex, as most perpetrators were actually EU citizens. The emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria ([ISIL/Da'esh](#)) attracted thousands of (mainly young) Europeans, referred to as [foreign fighters](#), to the war zones. The radicalisation process can take just a few weeks and often happens [online](#). Some foreign fighters returned to Europe to carry out or orchestrate attacks. Europe has also increasingly been confronted with 'lone wolves' – terrorists acting alone, with only loose, if any, links to ISIL/Da'esh or other terrorist or extremist groups. The [modus operandi](#) has also changed: terrorists, especially those acting alone, use everyday objects, such as knives or cars, to hit as many victims as possible among civilians (soft targets), although members of the police and military (hard targets) have come under attack several times (especially in France). Such attacks do not require any sophisticated preparation and cost hardly any money, making them difficult to prevent. Investigations into recent attacks have also confirmed that there is a [link](#) between terrorism and other crime: criminal networks and petty crime are used to fund terrorist activities, while a high proportion of perpetrators have a criminal background.

Responding to common threats: the EU takes the lead

There is a growing understanding that no individual nation can tackle these complex threats alone: while a number of European countries have coordinated their [efforts](#) at intergovernmental level since the 1970s, the EU began to develop its [counter-terrorism policy](#) shortly after the 9/11 attacks. In 2002, it adopted the [Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism](#), setting out a common [definition](#) of terrorist offences (terrorism being considered a [crime](#) in Europe), and established the [European arrest warrant](#), facilitating the surrender of suspects between EU countries. 2005 saw the adoption of an overall [EU counter-terrorism strategy](#) based on four pillars: prevent, protect, pursue, respond. Even though Member States have primary responsibility for public security, the entry into force of the [Lisbon Treaty](#) in 2009 reinforced the EU role in the area of police and judicial cooperation on serious crimes with a cross-border dimension, giving it the possibility to define minimum rules on criminal offences and sanctions using the [ordinary legislative procedure](#) (Articles [82](#) and [83](#)). Using its new powers, the EU stepped up its action in response to the latest wave of terror. Based on the [European agenda on security](#), adopted in 2015, the current European Commission presented [27 legislative initiatives](#) (five of which have now been adopted). Measures directly targeting terrorist activities concern the harmonisation of criminal sanctions, terrorism financing and money laundering, ID card security, and rules on legally-held firearm controls and on [explosive precursors](#). The [Directive on Combating Terrorism](#), adopted in March 2017, extended the list of terrorist offences to include travel and training for terrorist purposes, as well as terrorist propaganda online. Other measures concern border protection and information sharing, with a proposal to make the numerous [EU databases](#), such as the Schengen Information System ([SIS](#)), [interoperable](#). Recent non legislative measures include an action plan to [protect public spaces](#) and a recommendation on tackling [illegal content online](#), which

requires internet companies to take down terrorist content within one hour. To remove extremist propaganda efficiently, in 2015 the EU put in place cooperation channels between law enforcement and private actors: the [EU Internet Forum](#) and the Internet Referral Unit (IRU) within Europol. Moreover, Europol saw its [powers](#) reinforced to become a European counter-terrorism information and cooperation hub, with the creation of the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC). The EU has also set up a Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) of over 3 000 practitioners, to improve understanding of the phenomenon and exchange best practices in prevention.

The EU has not forgotten the [victims of terrorism](#): the Directive on Combating Terrorism introduces provisions on victims' specific needs and rights, to provide for more efficient care and support in the aftermath of an attack, including when it occurs abroad. A new Coordination Centre for Victims of Terrorism is to be set up by 2019. Survivors of attacks and victims' families can also play a [role](#) in countering extremism.

Timeline of EU counter-terrorism action – legislative and institutional measures

(1) Following the 9/11 attacks

2002: adoption of two major counter-terrorism measures: the [Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism](#) and the [European Arrest Warrant \(EAW\)](#)

(2) Following the March 2004 Madrid attacks

2007: appointment of the [EU counter-terrorism coordinator](#) (Gijs de Vries, now Gilles de Kerchove)

(3) Following the July 2005 London bombings

2005: establishment of [Frontex](#) in Warsaw, to enhance protection of EU borders

2005: maritime security – [Ports Security Directive](#)

2008: changes in [aviation security](#) regulations

(4) Following the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks, until now

July 2015: [update](#) of the EU [terrorist list](#)

January 2016: launch of the [Europol Counter-Terrorism Centre \(ECTC\)](#)

April 2016: adoption of the [EU Passenger Name Record \(PNR\) Directive](#) to collect **passenger data**

May 2016: new [Europol Regulation](#)

March 2017: adoption of the [Directive on Combating Terrorism](#) (replacing framework decision)

March 2017: a targeted [regulation amending the Schengen Borders Code](#), introducing **systematic checks at external borders** on all persons, including EU citizens

May 2017: adoption of the [Firearms Directive](#), strengthening rules on the detention of weapons

November 2017: adoption of the [Entry/Exit System \(EES\)](#) for third-country nationals

Legislative proposals still pending

Proposals on [terrorism financing](#): update of anti-money-laundering (AML) rules, criminalisation of AML, freezing and confiscation orders, illicit cash movements and illicit trade in cultural goods

Proposals on [information systems](#): ETIAS, ECRIS, SIS, Eurodac, interoperability, eu-LISA mandate

Amendment to Schengen Borders Code on [temporary reintroduction of internal border controls](#)

[April 2018 package](#): access to financial information by law enforcement, access to electronic evidence, rules on explosive precursors and on security of ID cards

European Parliament has its say

The European Parliament has played an [active role](#), not only as co-legislator, but also in spurring action and providing its views on issues such as the [prevention of radicalisation](#), [ways to counter terrorism financing](#) and protection of fundamental rights, including in the framework of the [anti-terrorism measures](#). In 2017, a Special Committee on Terrorism (TERR) was set up in Parliament to look into gaps and loopholes, and suggest possible ways forward to improve the efficiency of European counter-terrorism policy.

This note has been prepared for the [European Youth Event](#), taking place in Strasbourg in June 2018.

