How to stop terrorism: EU measures explained

Stopping terrorism requires tackling issues such as foreign fighters, border controls and cutting off funds. Learn about the EU’s counter terrorism policies.

What is the EU definition of terrorism?

The EU’s common legal definition of terrorist offences as set down in the directive on combatting terrorism, are acts committed with the aim of:

- Seriously intimidating a population, or
- Unduly compelling a government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act, or
• Seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation

Improving EU border controls

In order to safeguard security within the Schengen zone, **systematic checks at external borders** on all people entering the EU - including EU citizens - were introduced in April 2017.

To record the movements of non-EU citizens across the Schengen area and speed up controls, a **new entry and exit registration system** was agreed by Parliament and EU ministers in November 2017 and should be operational from 2020. Also, travellers from non-EU countries that do not need to have a visa to enter the EU, **will be screened** through the European Travel Information and Authorisation (Etias) system, which should be operational from 2021.

Temporary border controls

To prevent terrorists from circulating freely within the EU, several countries have introduced **temporary controls at their borders**. Parliament sees these internal border checks as unjustified and a **danger for the Schengen area** and wants to allow them only as a measure of last resort.

*Find out more in our file on Schengen borders.*

Securing external borders

The European Border and Coast Guard should have a standing corps of **10,000 border guards by 2027** to effectively secure Europe’s 13,000 km of external land borders and nearly 66,000 km at sea. The new standing corps could, at the request of an EU country, carry out border control and migration management as well as fight cross-border crime.
Stopping foreign terrorist fighters

Since 2015, there has been an increase in religiously-inspired terrorism in the EU. By 2017 about 5,000 individuals from the EU were believed to have travelled to conflict areas in Syria and Iraq to join jihadist terrorist groups, but the number has dropped significantly since.

In 2019, few of those foreign fighters were reported to have returned, however hundreds of Europeans with links to Islamic state remain in Iraq and Syria.

In order to **criminalise acts** such as undertaking training or travelling for terrorist purposes, as well as organising or facilitating such travel, Europe put in place **EU-wide legislation on terrorism** that, together with new controls at the external borders, will help to tackle the foreign fighter phenomenon.

Making use of air passenger data

Airlines operating flights to and from the EU are obliged to hand national authorities the **data of their passengers** such as names, travel dates, itinerary and payment method.
This so-called PNR data is used to prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute terrorist offences and serious crimes. Negotiations took more than five years and Parliament insisted on safeguards for sensitive data (revealing racial origin, religion, political opinion, health or sexual orientation) and data protection.

Find out more in our file on PNR.

Stepping up the exchange of information

Criminals and terrorists often use multiple false identities to evade border guards and police. This highlights the importance of effective information sharing between the relevant authorities - law enforcement, judicial, intelligence - in the member states.

In 2018 new rules to strengthen the Schengen information system (SIS) were agreed, introducing new types of alerts for cases related to terrorist activities. The database allows police and border guards to enter and consult alerts on wanted or missing persons and lost or stolen property.

To use existing and future databases in a more intelligent and targeted way, the EU information systems that help manage borders, security and migration should enable data exchange. This new interoperability should become operational after 2023 and provide a single interface for searches, as well as a biometric matching service to facilitate identification.

Europol, the EU police agency, supports the exchange of information between national police authorities. In May 2016 MEPs agreed to give more powers to Europol to step up the fight against terrorism as well as to set up specialised units such as the European counter terrorism centre, which was launched on 25 January 2016.
Cutting the financing of terrorism

An effective measure to stop terrorists is to cut their sources of revenue and disrupt logistics. In order to do this, the European Parliament updated the anti-money laundering directive in 2018. It will increase transparency about the people behind companies and address risks linked to virtual currencies and anonymous pre-paid cards.

Money laundering is a criminal offence in all EU countries, but definitions and sanctions vary. The new rules to tackle criminal financing will close those loopholes.

Criminal activities in Europe are believed to generate about €110 billion every year. However, only 1.1% of criminal proceeds are effectively confiscated. In October 2018 new rules were agreed to make it easier to freeze and confiscate criminal assets across the EU.

All these new rules will apply from 2020.

Reducing access to dangerous weapons

The EU does everything possible to prevent dangerous weapons coming into the hands of the wrong people.
The revised firearms directive closes the legal loopholes which allowed terrorists to use reconverted weapons for example in the Paris 2015 attacks. It requires EU countries to have a proper monitoring system while keeping exceptions for hunters, museums and collectors.

The vast majority of terrorist attacks in the EU were perpetrated using home-made bombs. It will be harder for terrorists to get hold of the ingredients needed to build explosives thanks to stricter rules agreed by Parliament in April 2019.

Preventing radicalisation

Terrorists and extremists use the internet to spread propaganda and radicalisation. In April 2021, Parliament approved new rules forcing online companies such as Facebook or YouTube to remove terrorist content or disable access to it in all EU countries within one hour after receiving an order from relevant authorities. The new rules do not apply to journalistic or educational content.

Find out more about how the EU is boosting cybersecurity

Radicalisation and countering it was one of the focus points of a special committee on terrorism, which concluded its one-year work in December 2018. Parliament suggested an EU watch list of hate preachers, because they can now operate undetected if they move from one European country to another. Members also recommended segregating radicalised inmates in prisons as well specific training on radicalisation for EU and member states officials.

Most of the terrorist attacks in Europe were perpetrated by home-grown terrorists, European citizens born in the EU who radicalised without even leaving Europe. Parliament proposed measures to fight radicalisation and extremism in prisons, online and through education and social inclusion already in 2015.
In December 2020, Parliament endorsed the EU Security Union strategy 2020-2025 and the new Counter-Terrorism Agenda, which aims to prevent radicalisation by providing, for example, opportunities for young people at risk and supporting the rehabilitation of radicalised prisoners.

*Read more on the causes and the prevention of radicalisation*

---

**The EU added value**

The EU level is the main forum for cooperation and coordination among member states in the fight against terrorism even though combatting crime and ensuring security is primarily a national competence.

MEPs decide together with EU ministers on major EU counter-terrorism laws. Traditionally, Parliament watches over respect for fundamental rights and data protection, which is needed especially in a context of a crisis-driven policy and pressure for action.

Security in Europe is a joint priority for the EU institutions. The EU's counter-terrorism strategy is based on four strands: prevent, protect, pursue and respond. The Commission's Security Union Strategy aims to facilitate cooperation among member states in three priority areas: fighting organised crime and cybercrime, counter terrorism and fighting radicalisation. The EU also works to improve its external security in cooperation with non-EU countries.

*Learn about jihadi terrorism in the EU*
Security