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VIRTUAL EXPERT-LEVEL MEETING

ON

"Emerging trends and recent evolution of the threat posed by ISIL/Al-Qaida inspired terrorism in Europe: a spotlight on the terrorist profile(s), incitement techniques, vulnerable targets and potential impact of COVID-19"

SUMMARY REPORT

21-22 April 2021

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"EMERGING TRENDS AND RECENT EVOLUTION OF THE THREAT POSED BY ISIL/ AL-QAIDA INSPIRED TERRORISM IN EUROPE: A SPOTLIGHT ON THE TERRORIST PROFILE(S), INCITEMENT TECHNIQUES, VULNERABLE TARGETS AND POTENTIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19"

SUMMARY REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our society continues to be confronted with an unprecedented level of diversified, constantly evolving risks and threats to international peace and security as well as to economic development and financial integrity. The outbreak of **COVID-19** has clearly, dramatically, exacerbated existing vulnerabilities.

Although recent developments and, notably, the pandemic outbreak, seem to have temporary shifted the focus of the international community and of the media in general mainly towards health-related issues, **terrorism**, in all its manifestations – and its underlying ideology – **remains one of the most crucial threats**. An absence of public attention has not made these problems go away, rather it has allowed them to fester. Furthermore, a widespread lack of opportunity and employment, increasing distrust in the government, social isolation and a generalised sense of anxiety and uncertainty – all exacerbated by the pandemic – have allowed false information and misrepresentation, including from violent extremist actors, to thrive.

With more than 50 years of international action, the **United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute** (UNICRI) has acquired a unique experience in dealing with crime and justice issues within broader policies for socio-economic change and development, the protection of human rights and the promotion of peace. UNICRI is supporting the global community through research, knowledge dissemination, technical assistance, legal reforms, training and capacity building.

Over recent years, and with a view to timely addressing new risks and vulnerabilities, UNICRI has **redoubled its efforts** to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism in all forms and manifestations. The Institute's initiatives tackle all these phenomena from myriad perspectives, such as **disengagement and rehabilitation strategies; prevention of radicalization and terrorist recruitment**, both online and offline; **empowerment of vulnerable populations**, especially at-risk youth; **protection of vulnerable targets and critical infrastructure**; **the links between organized crime and terrorism**; enhancing knowledge about **advances in science and technology, including artificial intelligence; and countering illicit financial flows**. Furthermore, being a UN entity mandated to, *inter alia*, improve understanding of crime-related problems and tailor appropriate interventions and having its Headquarters in Turin, UNICRI has closely observed and analysed **developments of the threat posed by ISIL/Al-Qaida inspired terrorism in Europe and neighbouring regions as well as the worrisome growth of racially and ethnically motivated extremism** (REMT).

In 2020 the European Union adopted two key documents which will inform its counter terrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) actions in the years ahead, namely the **EU Security Union Strategy**[1] **and the EU CT Agenda**.[2]

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1   COM(2020) 605 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020D-C0605&from=EN

2   COM(2020) 795 final https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/pdf/09122020_communication_commission_european_parliament_the_council_eu_agenda_counter_terrorism_po-2020-9031_com-2020_795_en.pdf

The EU Security Union Strategy provided the European Union with a new framework defining the EU strategic guidelines in security for the period 2020-2025. It maps out the main actions, tools and measures to ensure European security and identifies three priority areas: **fighting organised crime and human trafficking, tackling cybercrime and countering terrorism and radicalisation**. With regard to the latter, emphasis is put on a holistic approach aimed to strengthen resilience of critical infrastructure in the real and digital world.

The EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda, published nine months ahead of schedule due to the unexpected attacks in France and Austria, builds on existing achievements while proposing new approaches and tools aimed to further support Member States in anticipating the threat, particularly through strategic intelligence, timely threat and risk assessments, enhanced preparedness, improved early detection capacity and the use of sophisticated technologies, including artificial intelligence-related tools. Based on four pillars: **Anticipate, Prevent, Protect and Respond**, the agenda also highlights the importance of strategic dialogue, community engagement and empowerment to foster resilience through a bottom-up approach, which foresees the active participation of schools, faith groups, youth, social workers and civil society organizations.

Within this framework, and in light of their fruitful cooperation, **on 21 and 22 April 2021, UNICRI and the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator's Office** jointly held a Virtual expert-level meeting on **"Emerging trends and recent evolution of the threat posed by ISIL/Al-Qaida inspired terrorism in Europe: a spotlight on the terrorist profile(s), incitement techniques, vulnerable targets and potential impact of COVID-19"**. The event was attended by **over 200 participants** ranging from government institutions from in and outside Europe, academia, international organizations and civil society. Speakers included representatives from UN entities, the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), EU institutions as well as selected regional and national counter-terrorism experts.

The meeting took stock of the recent evolution and potentially emerging trends of the threat posed by ISIL/Al-Qaida inspired terrorism in Europe in light of the spike of attacks throughout 2020 and against the backdrop of COVID-19. It also provided the opportunity to analyse the newly adopted EU Security Union Strategy and the four-pillar Counter-terrorism Agenda.

This report presents a summary of the presentations of experts as well as of relevant challenges and issues flagged by participants at the two-day event. During the first day speakers provided an updated assessment of the threat stemming from ISIL/Al-Qaida inspired terrorism in Europe having particular regard to the developments occurred in the last 12 months. A specific session was devoted to discussions on the **potential interplay between regular and irregular movement of people and fluctuations of the terrorist activity in the continent**, and to the analysis of projects aimed at monitoring the phenomenon. The second day constituted the opportunity to present the latest EU actions and policies towards security and counterterrorism alongside specific national approaches.

Although in some European Member States, racially and ethnically motivated terrorism (REMT) has reached a comparable level of concern to that of ISIL/Al-Qaida inspired terrorism, **the latter continues to pose by far the biggest menace**. With over 10 attacks in 2020, ISIL and its networks of supporters in Europe remain an active threat,

which the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has not diminished. Attacks are mainly self-funded and perpetrated by lone actors who do not often have formal affiliation to terrorist groups. They are carried out with light weaponry such as bladed knives and they usually target public or symbolic places, including religious sites.

All the above-mentioned aspects make the threat unpredictable at an unprecedented scale and put a huge pressure on law enforcement and intelligence services to stay ahead and anticipate what may come next. To face these challenges, governments are increasingly considering tech-enabled prevention tools which allow for a broader spectrum of information to be collected and analysed. This however does not come without risks, especially vis-à-vis public disputes over data protection and blank surveillance.

Concern was expressed over the negative **impact of certain counter-terrorism measures**, notably vaguely-worded or expansive counter-terrorism legislation, blanket implementation of sanctions, and the potential abuse by governments of regulations to countering the financing of terrorism against civil society actors, all of which impacts on the ability of NGOs to deliver impartial humanitarian assistance. On the other hand, there is evidence showing that camps in the North-Eastern Syrian Arab Republic are also populated and sometimes partially ruled by criminal groups and ISIL supporters – which from a government perspective justifies an intensive application of prevention measures. However, as humanitarian organisations provide support to victims of conflicts and terrorism, so they ultimate prevent further displacement, they also contribute to the stability of the situation on the ground. In this sense, **counter-terrorism and humanitarian law do not necessarily have opposite interests**. Counter-terrorism regulation which however pushes humanitarian organisations to recur to informal means of financing risks to achieve the opposite goal of what is set out to realise.

Although often considered separately, the **interplay between the internal and external dimensions of ISIL and Al-Qaida**, namely the interaction between ISIL and Al-Qaida core and their affiliates as well as their strategies in and outside conflict zones, should not be overlooked. These groups capitalise on regional success in conflict areas to replicate strategies in non-conflict zones as well as to galvanise fighters and supporters globally. That is why a close monitor of how ISIL and Al-Qaida are (re)organising for instance in Africa may help analysts to anticipate their next move elsewhere thus contributing to reduce the impact of their future actions. Attention should be paid, in particular, not only to those areas that are already impacted by armed conflicts but also contexts where we observe a **systematic attempt to undermine state institutions and radicalise wider society** e.g. in schools – which leads to think that ISIL/Al-Qaida are preparing the ground for future action.

In criminal proceedings against ISIL fighters, **battlefield evidence** is crucial to prove affiliation as well as the criminal nature of their terrorist activities. However, battlefield evidence is not ***ordinary*** evidence. Collected by the armed force, it might not fulfil national criteria which assess whether evidence is admissible in court like in the respect of the rules of evidence (i.e. safeguarding the chain of custody). In addition, specific processes envisaged at the national level to transform intelligence into evidence are often strongly limiting the right of the suspect to a defence, as full disclosure is rarely possible. A legal compromise is therefore required to minimise the impact of operational and judicial (legitimate) interests on fair trial.

Whilst most ISIL-inspired terrorists who conducted attacks in Europe were **home-grown**, examples remain of individuals who came from abroad, sometimes crossing EU borders irregularly. As Europe anticipates and will likely face the return of many (former) fighters from the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq at some stage, a constructive discussion on the interplay between terrorism and irregular (or regular) movements of people is needed. This assessment should be evidence-based to avoid any weaponization, especially on consideration of the stigmatisation of migrant and diaspora communities by racially and ethnically motivated extremists.

Criminal investigations related to terrorist attacks committed in the last years in Europe revealed that some of the perpetrators had previously crossed regularly or irregularly either EU external or internal borders. This led some to question the efficiency of EU borders protection. Aware of these vulnerabilities, which are exploited by all sorts of criminals, the **EU has stepped up its efforts to protect external borders**. It has in parallel boosted its capacity in database interoperability, which allows for the simultaneous interrogation of databases containing different but complementary information. However, databases are only useful if there is cooperation by and among Member States that remain the actors primarily responsible for feeding them. Data consistency with other relevant tools such as the INTERPOL Stolen and Lost Travel Documents (SLTD) database is also key.

The pandemic impacted on ISIL and Al-Qaida in many ways. In and outside the conflict zones, it has prevented people to cross borders and frustrated international travel of cash couriers. In the EU, the pandemic has left several wounds in society with many people facing job loss, wealth disparities, slow health care response etc. All these factors have somehow contributed or been exploited to fuel existing grievances, risk and vulnerabilities. It is no secret that **malicious actors have easily adapted their hateful agendas to the COVID-19 context** to challenge states' authority and invigorate online propaganda efforts in order to prey on captive young audiences.

In addition, lockdown measures confined millions of people to their homes with little or no opportunities for socialization and self-realisation. Frustration, coupled with more time spent online has increased their **vulnerability to extremist content, conspiracy theories and disinformation**. A lot of Member States have already expressed concern in this regard. For this reason, the pandemic did not result in a lower threat level. ISIL and Al-Qaida-inspired individuals remain the highest terrorist menace in Europe as they continue to manifest their intention to strike attacks on the EU soil. Therefore, there is concern with regard to weakening preventive efforts by diverting programming funds to other priority areas such as the health crisis or other forms of violent extremism.

The expert meeting of 21 and 22 April 2021 is not envisaged as a stand-alone event but rather as an important first step to lay foundations towards the development of a long-term, more impactful initiative. The outcomes of this first meeting, coupled with in-depth research, assessment and analysis will result in the publication of **a report on the interplay between regular and irregular movements of people and their impact on ISIL/Al-Qaida inspired terrorism in Europe**, which is expected to be validated in July and officially launched in the third quarter of 2021. The report will also pave the way to future UNICRI activities expected in Fall 2021 which aim to consider the threat posed by racially and ethnically motivated terrorism in Europe. All these preliminary outputs will inform and guide the needed, appropriate interventions to be undertaken by UNICRI in cooperation with other entities.

MAIN FINDINGS

Lone wolves, low-scale attacks, symbolic targets

HIGHLIGHTS

- Although still inspired by ISIL propaganda, the 2020 attacks in Europe, and the way ISIL claimed them, showed a more tenuous link between ISIL core and the perpetrators. Consistently with ISIL current military priorities, official ISIL propaganda is mainly engaged in proving ISIL statehood and it thus mainly targets audiences in conflict zones where they are fighting for territory. On the other hand, European networks of supporters sustain the ISIL brand in Europe and incite more violence and new attacks against soft targets. Indeed, more low-scale attacks on the EU soil carried out with bladed weapons are anticipated, especially once COVID-related restrictions will be lifted and public spaces will get crowded again.

- In 2020 ISIL-inspired attacks in Europe occurred in public spaces, sites of worship or other symbolic places. Some of them represent specific symbols which are directly or indirectly connected to those democratic values that terrorist organisations aim to undermine i.e. freedom of press/speech, religion and association. This was for instance the case of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, which was chosen for the second time as a target spot due to its representations of the prophet Mohammed considered by some Muslims in France as blaspheme.

- The Conflans-Saint-Honorine attack, last October, marked a new step in ISIL-inspired terrorism as the target, a middle schoolteacher, was chosen following a local controversy fuelled by an online hate campaign against the teacher. The dad of one of his students launched an accusation through social media as the teacher showed during one of his classes of civics comics of the Charlie Hebdo which were deemed blaspheme by the former. The online campaign becoming viral, picked and reshared by different influential accounts within the radical milieus, likely provided the perpetrator an easy target to strike. After the beheading, the perpetrator took a selfie of him holding the teacher's head and posted it on his social media wall. The attack proved how social media play a substantial role in promoting terrorist deeds and revamped the public debate about social media control over content hosted on their platforms and takedown.

- At the European level, there is increased concern with regard to the effectiveness of deradicalization processes and rehabilitation programmes. For example, the attack in Vienna last November, was committed by an individual who had been cleared by the deradicalisation authorities after his jail period for having attempted to travel to the Syrian Arab Republic. In addition, three returnees belonging to the "Lions of the Balkans" were arrested in North Macedonia in September 2020 after being enrolled in reintegration programmes, released from prison and then detected to be involved in the final planning stage of a terrorist attack.

- Most of 2020 attacks in Europe were perpetrated with cheap bladed weapons and were self-funded.

- As ISIL and Al-Qaida terrorist threat becomes more unpredictable, and attacks are increasingly low-scale, some Member States started wondering how technology can better support security needs in, for instance, being predictive. There are indeed increased demands to close the gap between technology and security to use sophisticated tools for security-related purposes. The current debate at the EU level on the use of facial recognition tools in their counter terrorism efforts confirms this trend.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- As domestic counter-financing of terrorism measures become more stringent, it is unlikely that ISIL/Al-Qaida will opt for high-level attacks which would require huge sums of money to be transferred and thus higher chances for the plot to be foiled. It is instead expected that the current trend of mounting self-funded attacks will remain as it ensures more unpredictability and can be more easily replicated.

- As tech-enabled tools to prevent terrorism become more common, higher chances are of public scrutiny over government's collection of massive amounts of personal data. Risks of backfire and reputational damages can however be handled through, for instance, a comprehensive risk management plan and transparency reports over the use of data that single out how privacy laws are complied with.

- It is expected that symbolic places will remain the core targets of ISIL/Al-Qaida inspired terrorism in Europe. Protection of public places and sites of worship should remain a high priority for EU governments, especially as soon as COVID restrictions will be lifted and crowds will again conduct outdoor activities.

- Events such as the Vienna attack or the arrest of three returnees in North Macedonia let emerge challenges related to the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration strategies, which need to be addressed quickly as more former ISIL fighters are being released from prison. This will require a complementary approach between national governments' action and EU support.

COUNTER-TERRORISM MEASURES AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

HIGHLIGHTS

■ Tension exists between the broad application of current counter-terrorism policies and international humanitarian law. In some case a blanket application of such measures, and particularly, of sanctions, can have an adverse impact on exclusively humanitarian activities. The concern grows as relevant regions are heavily affected by the pandemic.

■ Legitimate security concerns which justify counter-terrorism measures however remain. Evidence has shown, for example that money originally sent to support people hosted in camps in the North-Eastern side of the Syrian Arab Republic, was eventually distracted as it went through a chain of handlers, including to smuggle people from the camps. Funds are usually sent through money or value transfer companies, including alternative remittance systems, such as Hawala. Sometimes, social media fundraising campaigns have also been used, including through alleged humanitarian organisations acting as charities.

■ It is widely reported that a number of humanitarian organisations were unable to obtain formal financial services to operate in areas where the presence of terrorists persists. This ultimately resulted in the need to opt for informal movement of funds, in order to remain active and continue to provide support.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

■ Governments should consider the unintended consequences of counter-terrorism measures, including where applied outside their national territory. Particularly in contexts where security concerns are entrenched with humanitarian needs, it is recommended to carefully balance the impact of the former on the latter. This means, for instance, monitoring that counter-terrorism measures do not impair purely humanitarian initiatives aimed at keeping stability in the region, and thus ultimately preventing further deterioration of the conditions on the ground.

■ Preliminary impact assessments of counter-terrorism measures, which for instance include NGOs in the policy making process, might prevent the unintended consequence of criminalising (and thus jeopardising) the activities of organisations operating on the ground for the benefit of displaced individuals and victims of conflicts.

■ National or supranational initiatives to counter terrorism financing which promote a constructive dialogue alongside stricter regulatory approaches with money transfer companies should be strengthened.

THE EXTERNAL AND THE INTERNAL DIMENSION OF THE THREAT

HIGHLIGHTS

■ Both ISIL and Al-Qaida are organisations which have proved to be extremely resilient over the years and capable of adapting to different geographical and political settings. Historically, they have used their success in ungoverned spaces to multiply their capability in non-conflict zones. They capitalise on regional achievements, reinforce local structures and then replicate winning strategies in external operations. For example, repeated military successes in conflict areas leading to the occupation of a stable portion of territory might put ISIL in the condition to direct resources into the re-establishment of its hyper-organised media apparatus. Once capable of an unprecedentedly aggressive propaganda strategy, which was then jeopardised by military losses, ISIL had been capable of radicalising thousands of Europeans. At first, the group incited its supporters to travel to Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic to join and fight for the 'Caliphate'; then, when travel was increasingly challenging, it galvanised and coordinated affiliates and sympathizers to commit attacks on the EU soil.

■ Many examples which currently raise security concerns can be mentioned. Al-Shabaab has proved to be the most resilient and demonstrated interest in attacking civil aviation. The situation in Mozambique and Burkina Faso as well as the persistent success of ISIL West African Province (ISWAP) show that these organisations can rapidly resuscitate from military defeats in one region and reinforce their position elsewhere.

■ Camps in the Syrian Arab Republic may well incubate terrorist threats, especially as the country continues to be considered by ISIL the final remnant of the 'Caliphate' – and one of its core areas. While the majority of people held in camps are victims, the current over-occupation of these sites and their potential for becoming a hotbed for indoctrination and radicalization shows how humanitarian needs are inextricably linked to security concerns. Cases of training of minors as future ISIL operatives have already been reported.

■ Both ISIL and Al-Qaida prepare the ground for military action starting with undermining a target region's state institutions by penetrating key society pillars with their radical ideologies. In this regard, attention should be paid, for instance, to the spread of violent extremism in countries such as Senegal or Côte d'Ivoire where there is the strategic intent to radicalise society and silence moderating influences in schools or in the judiciary.

■ While the EU has a very advanced level of internal cooperation in security matters, not an equal degree of cooperation exists when EU Member States request evidence of crimes committed in third countries or when third countries demand information on European citizens.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There should be a closer consideration of how ISIL and Al-Qaida's action in conflict zones impact on their activities in non-conflict zones. Failing to have an integrated approach would lead to a partial understanding of their global strategy and, as a result, in impaired capacity to anticipate their next moves.

- What is happening in Africa, with ISIL and Al-Qaida's success on the ground, needs closer attention as it has an impact, eventually, on the European security threat. Attention should be paid not only to those contexts that have already escalated to armed conflicts. Preventive efforts should also be looking at situations where it has been observed a systematic attempt to undermine institutions, peace and stability as this can lead to governments vacuums, socioeconomic distress and ultimately conflicts. European States, in partnership with supporting EU agencies and in accordance with human rights and rights of defence, should consider fostering the cooperation with third countries in exchanging evidence, including on their citizens, to encourage bilateral assistance based on reciprocity.

COLLECTION OF BATTLEFIELD EVIDENCE

HIGHLIGHTS

- As fighters return to Europe either by themselves or through proactive action of the state of origin, they will face trial within national jurisdiction. Evidence collected in the battlefield pose however particular challenges vis-à-vis criminal procedural standards, especially with regard to the right to defence. This evidence is usually collected by armed forces and has high informative value. It often contains intelligence which can, for example, uncover previously undetected individuals or indicate who was receiving payments by a terrorist organisation.

- However, as criminal procedural law changes across countries, in particular depending on whether systems are inquisitorial or adversarial (or mixed), different challenges emerge at the national level in search of a legal compromise. Challenges relate both to the collection phase, i.e. how data is stored and gathered and whether the chain of custody is safeguarded, and also to whether it is possible for the defence to be disclosed the evidence. In fact, a limitation of the former can lead to inadmissibility in court.

- France has piloted a new approach to allow the use of evidence collected in the battlefield in French courts. To this end, the French armed forces and judiciary established a confidential process whereby a set of conditions under which evidence is admissible in court must be respected while collecting battlefield evidence. While details of such process could not be disclosed for security reasons, the information as collected by the armed forces undergoes an intelligence process after which it might be transformed into criminal evidence.

- The Eurojust memorandum on battlefield evidence[3] is considered a key reference document in this domain providing concrete guidance on how to use such evidence while respecting fundamental human rights, fair trial procedures and guarantees.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- As collecting evidence in the battlefield might be in contrast with the army's operational needs, and army officials might not be adequately trained in procedural rules governing criminal trials, a reconciliation is needed between the exigence of using such evidence with due process principles.

- Specific rules which regulate the disclosure mechanism to the defence together with the declassification process of battlefield evidence should address the tension existing between reliance on battlefield evidence by the judiciary and limited accessibility to the case files by the defendant. To minimise the limita-

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3   Eurojust Memorandum on Battlefield Evidence (September 2020) < https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/2020-09-14-Eurojust-Memorandum-on-Battlefield-Evidence.pdf >

tions to a full right to defence as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and in EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Member States should guarantee the greatest transparency as to how battlefield information is collected and processed.

■ Provisions to protect intelligence sources should also be envisaged.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN REGULAR/IRREGULAR MOVEMENTS OF PEOPLE AND THE THREAT STEMMING FROM ISIL/AL-QAIDA INSPIRED TERRORISM

HIGHLIGHTS

■ Home-grown terrorists, i.e. persons born, raised and, ultimately radicalised, in Europe, are responsible for the majority of terrorist attacks in the EU in the last ten years. However, there are also examples of terrorist attacks perpetrated by individuals who came from outside, and, in some instances, entered the EU territory illegally. Such risk is still perceived as high and some EU Member States have expressed concern in this regard.

■ About 5000 Europeans joined ISIL between 2013 and 2018, the majority of whom survived the fall of the 'Caliphate'. Those who wish to return may be implicated in illegal border crossings and document fraud, as it was already the case of most of the members of the cell responsible for the mass-casualty attacks in Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016). They were EU citizens who had joined ISIL in the Syrian Arab Republic and managed to return undetected. Two of the bombers in Paris held Iraqi passports and had entered the EU after infiltrating the flow of irregular migrants through the Eastern Mediterranean route.

■ EU Member States and the EU have long anticipated the return of some of the European citizens who joined ISIL in the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. However, the current Member States' stance towards foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) is to support their detention and prosecution in the conflict zones and not to actively repatriate those who wish to return. This has led to a situation whereby those who managed to return in Europe did it on their own or through the help of smugglers. As a consequence, a limited number of FTFs were repatriated, increasing the possibility of undetected fighters returning to Europe. Conversely,

Western Balkan countries have made the opposite decision and started repatriating and jailing those who were still in the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. 400 are reported to be currently there but their repatriation is expected soon.

■ In the last years Member States have adopted migration policies which directly or indirectly affected the fight against terrorism, including stripping of the nationality those individuals who are assessed to pose a high threat on national security.

■ EU countries also observed attempts of non-Europeans to irregularly enter the EU and then be implicated in terrorist activities. Events such as the 2020 terrorist attack in Nice (France) or the attack at the Christmas market in Berlin in 2016 show, however, that both external and internal EU borders can be vulnerable to the exploitation of irregular routes. These cases also show how asylum protection and, more generally, migrant reception mechanisms might be misused, being the enforcement of deportation and return orders particularly challenging.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

■ The challenge posed to EU countries by FTFs wishing or managing (regularly or irregularly) to return to Europe is not fading away and will need to be addressed in the next years. A coordinated and systematic approach towards the return of these individuals might in fact minimise the risk of undetected movements, and thus of a higher and more unpredictable security threat.

■ Measures aimed at preventing or discouraging the return might have the effect to 'complicate' known routes and thus require extra monitoring efforts and a consequent re-adaptation of such measures. To face this challenge, the EU cannot only rely on its own instruments, but also looking at what neighbouring countries are doing already to address it.

■ Using migration measures as counter-terrorism tools requires attention, not just for their primary security gain but also in terms of potential wider community grievance. Likewise, how (poor) reception conditions lead to a permissive environment for radicalisation and how huge influxes of migrants contribute to the rise of racially and ethnically motivated terrorism (and in turn to community stigmatisation) are to be considered in policymaking and by government preventive efforts.

THE PROTECTION OF EU EXTERNAL BORDERS

HIGHLIGHTS

■ The European Union addresses terrorist travel in three ways: (1) by ensuring that all those who enter the EU territory are systematically checked at external borders; (2) by making sure that data on terrorist suspects, once collected and analysed by Member States, are made available to border guards so that their systematic checks yield actionable results; and (3) through assistance to third countries to prevent terrorist travel in the first place.

■ Checks at EU external borders have improved considerably over the last few years, also thanks to FRONTEX support in detecting illegal border-crossing, fraudulent documents and persons staying illegally. In 2020, detections of illegal border-crossing at the EU's external borders amounted to over 120,000, with individuals mainly coming from the Syrian Arab Republic, Morocco and Afghanistan. Almost the 30% of those crossings took place through the Central Mediterranean route.

■ By enhancing interoperability, the EU is connecting EU databases on criminal records, visa and asylum applications, all third-country nationals' entries and exits, the Schengen Information System (SIS) and the future system for electronic authorisation of visa-exempt visits to the Schengen area. As of late 2023, border guards at the EU's external borders will be able to query these databases through one user-friendly search portal. This will allow to cross-check biometric and alphanumeric data from the various databases to detect identity fraud.

■ INTERPOL is also hugely contributing to the protection of the EU external borders, for example through its Stolen and Lost Travel Documents (SLTD) database that most Member States systematically check when someone cross an external border. In addition, INTERPOL holds a fingerprints database with over 1,000 FTFs' fingerprints, a DNA profile database hosting more than 25 FTFs' DNA samples and launched a face recognition system which gathers over 3,000 FTFs' images. Projects like HOTSPOT[4] aim at developing a biometric data cross-check mechanism against INTERPOL databases for the prevention and the detection of movements of terrorists using irregular migration routes.

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4   In cooperation with UNOCT

KEY TAKEAWAYS

■ At the EU level there are several databases that have come and/or will come into use in checks at external borders. However, for databases to be fully useful, they need to contain all available intelligence. As databases are fed directly by Member States' authorities, it is of utmost importance that they timely and comprehensively contribute with relevant data so to ensure the good functioning of the EU systems in place and their enhanced interoperability. Likewise, the possibility to include information provided by trusted third countries in a smooth way should be improved.

■ The EU is working towards the interoperability of its database to ensure that border authorities are able to interrogate all with one single click. In addition, these systems are also to communicate with databases managed by other entities such as INTERPOL. It will thus be crucial that more is done to achieve adequate and consistent data quality to ensure mutual complementarity.

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON ISIL/ AL-QAIDA OPERATIONS

HIGHLIGHTS

■ The pandemic has impacted on ISIL's capabilities, both in conflict and in non-conflict zones. Although some analysts had expected that ISIL and Al-Qaida would largely capitalise on the widespread fear among society induced by the COVID-19 outbreak, government authorities have observed, in particular, a shift in the groups' official propaganda from the original narrative, depicting the virus as a punishment for the infidels. Even though such messages remain aspirational and lacking in focus, Member States are concerned that ISIL is raising its media profile profiting from a larger number of vulnerable individuals being forced to stay home. In this regard, several attempts by terrorist entities to seek media coverage to perpetrate a climate of fear among populations have been observed. It is worth noting that the same approach has also been adopted by other violent extremist actors.

■ From an operational point of view, the virus has impacted ISIL and Al-Qaida personnel affecting in particular their mobility, including international travels of cash couriers. Restrictions on movements and closures definitely reduced the likelihood of attacks perpetrated against soft targets, yet new crowded places such as vaccination centres could become a new, potential target.

■ As the majority of individuals were forced to confinement for long periods due to the pandemic, exposure to online content has generally increased. This trend has also been observed with regard to the consumption of extremist content online. Individuals who already regularly visited extremist sites, and others who have come across radical views, have significantly increased the amount of time spent on the Internet. ISIL has had a captive audience during the lockdown and, if it has successfully used this for planning and recruitment purposes, it is possible that the easing of restrictions in non-conflict zones will see a spike in attacks once targets become available again.

■ Facing increased scrutiny by online platforms, extremists use well-known social media to hook potential recruits by using harmless messaging to then move onto more private, often encrypted, tools to disclose their full radical potential.

■ In the medium-term increasing inequalities and asymmetrical economic recoveries worldwide might increase cross border criminality at the EU's external borders.

■ Long-term consequences are to be expected also in Europe following COVID-enabled economic and social challenges and the damaging impact of widespread conspiracy theories. This might cause new grievances among vulnerable individuals which can lead to a fertile ground for extremist views to take hold.

■ Resources are being drawn away from CT and PCVE programming to further support measures to fight the pandemic while in some EU countries specific funds aimed to combat ISIL/Al-Qaida terrorism are being diverted to address the challenge posed by racially and ethnically motivated terrorism.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

■ The higher exposure to online content and tools that most of us experienced in the last year and a half will have repercussions on many levels, also on security. Self-radicalising process might as well have increased and, if so, consequences will soon manifest in the real world. Monitoring and preventing efforts should be aware of the key role played in this regard by social media alongside closed encrypted platforms in reinforcing extremist views through confirmation biases.

■ Facing an increased generalised level of vulnerability among population, and especially among susceptible individuals, governments should expect a renewed interest in soft-target attacks. The post-COVID era will in fact serve multiple occasions to terrorists to strike with bigger gatherings in the pipeline. Consolidating the protection of public spaces will be crucial to prevent future attacks.

■ Though government's attention is being caught by the health crisis management, terrorists do not pardon distractions. To avoid shortcomings in prevention the level of alert should remain high, and authorities should not lower the guard.

■ Covid-enabled grievances should be addressed as much as possible to avoid being exploited by malign actors, be them ISIL/Al-Qaida supporters or racially and ethnically motivated extremists.

EMERGING THREATS – FORWARD LOOK

Based on the abovementioned highlights, the below is a preliminary assessment of the threats which could potentially impact on the security landscape in Europe in the next months.

- As many prisoners convicted with terrorist-related charges are expected to be released in the next months, the debate about the effectiveness of rehabilitation processes and reintegration in society should step up and provide concrete guidance to governments. In particular, Member States will need to find an accurate balance between security and legal challenges related to post-prison monitoring and reintegration.

- As summer brings better weather conditions and COVID-19 measures are progressively lifted, new flows of migrants through Mediterranean routes are expected. Alongside the humanitarian dimension of hundreds of individuals arriving on European shores in often inhumane conditions, criminal infiltration of migrant routes remains of concern, especially where huge numbers do not allow for thorough checks on external borders.

- The impact of new arrivals by asylum seekers and other individuals seeking a refuge in the EU will likely feed racially and ethnically motivated extremist narratives with the consequent stigmatisation of communities. Already frustrated by over one year of restrictions, ignited by anti-government protests and pushed by COVID-related grievances, audiences susceptible to racially and ethnically motivated narratives might consider taking action against migrant population or centers.

- The challenges entailing proactive repatriation of FTFs will not fade away. Restored freedom of movement within and to Europe following the improvement of COVID-19 infection rate and the consequent risk of criminal infiltration of irregular or regular routes into Europe might impact on the threat assessment of some EU Member States in considering repatriation mechanisms. In this regard, the fact that Western Balkans have opted for repatriation of their citizens, with hundreds who have already returned to their countries, should play a role also in EU Member States' threat assessment. Western Balkans countries being visa free, the risk of undetected movements towards the EU might therefore increase.

- As governments are gradually removing anti-COVID measures across the continent, more people are expected to socialise and meet outdoor, including in big crowds. This situation might represent the best occasion for terrorists to carry out easily-mounted attacks with several causalities. Protection of public spaces becomes thus more important than ever to prevent Europeans to fall back into fear – this time not of massive infections and virus spread. An emotional stress which for some might become unbearable and can have an unhelpful impact on societal polarisation.

■ Ripple effects of isolation on vulnerable individuals are yet to be assessed. However, a higher online exposure might have represented for some the chance to access extremist content and start the radicalisation journey. Reduced occasions to socialise might have speeded up this process with consequences on violent behaviours and radicalisation paths which remain to be seen and analysed.

■ As the healthcare crisis seems to improve and with new streams of recovery funding, also from the EU, a new discussion on public resources allocation is worth taking place. While the public debate has been mostly devoted to discussing the healthcare crisis, experts and analysts have repeatedly warned that the terrorist threat has not diminished. Hence, programme funding and fund attribution to terrorism and extremism prevention should be restored, where downgraded, and kept where maintained.

■ As the 2020 ISIL-inspired attacks in Europe showed, global ideology is increasingly at the mercy of hyper-local matters. While international terrorist groups keep on their powerful propaganda by fuelling individual grieving and motivating violence, the actual motive often stems from local events which provide a valid pretext for terrorist action. As European society faces the challenge of great polarisation, local disputes within communities should not be underestimated – especially in a digital society where a small event can go viral in few minutes. The ability of malicious actors to exploit local controversies and inspire violence among susceptible individuals is likely to be leveraged again.