COUNTERTERRORISM YEARBOOK 2017

Edited by Jacinta Carroll

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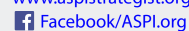
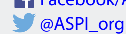
 Facebook/ASPI.org
 @ASPI_org

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TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE

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Europe has a long history of terrorism, from anarchist groups in the 19th century to ethnoseparatist and far-left groups in the 20th century, such as the Irish Republican Army, the Basque group ETA and Germany's Red Army Faction, including some groups that are still active today. While the number of attacks and victims of terrorism was higher in the 1970s and 1980s than today, the overall terrorist threat has never been as high as it is now, when 40% of European citizens cited terrorism as their main concern in 2016. This is a stark change from previous years when terrorism was ranked well behind other concerns, such as immigration or the economic crisis.[1] Public concern about terrorism in Europe is matched by that of CT officials, who consider that Europe is confronting an unprecedented threat.

This chapter reviews the major developments that have occurred in terrorism and CT in Europe in 2016. The past 12 months have seen an extraordinary amount of activity: this includes some successful attacks, as well as a number of foiled plots and numerous arrests. Governments and their security services have responded to the threat with more measures at the political, legal and operational levels. This chapter offers a concise overview of the main trends, focusing largely on the threat of jihadi terrorism and on a cluster of the countries most affected by it.

TERRORISM IN EUROPE

Terrorism was an issue of major concern for Europe in 2016. Although various types of terrorist groups are active on the continent, from ethnoseparatists to political extremists (left-wing and right-wing), the jihadi threat largely overshadowed other forms of terrorism. In absolute terms, the number of jihadist attacks in Europe remained limited, and probably well below the number of attacks conducted by other types of terrorist organisations, consistent with the trend observed over the years.[2] However, jihadist activities broadly defined, including propaganda and recruitment activities, consumed much of the attention of security services in Europe, resulting in a large number of operations, arrests and trials. The rise in far-right activism was also a concern in several countries, and a number of incidents were reported. In geographical terms, it should be stressed that only some European countries were heavily affected by the jihadist threat, mostly in Western Europe, whereas many other European countries have seen no jihadi-related activities in their territory. While France has been under a 'state of emergency' since November 2015, and countries including Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden were on high terrorist alert, others such as Finland, the Baltic countries and most Central and Eastern European countries were on very low threat levels and mostly concerned with security threats other than terrorism—notably Russia.

IS-RELATED ATTACKS

All jihadist attacks committed in Europe in 2016 were related to the Islamic State (IS). In contrast to the previous year, when the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris took place in January, no attack was linked to al-Qaeda or its affiliates. There were at least 10 IS-related attacks in Europe last year, although the exact figure is difficult to establish because doubts remain about the motivation of the attackers and their connection with IS in a number of cases. There were different types of IS-related attacks: some involved foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) returnees, others didn't; some involved a network of individuals, others involved lone actors; some involved contacts with IS recruiters, but in others the attackers were simply 'inspired' by IS propaganda.

The Brussels attacks on 22 March were the only successful sophisticated plot in 2016, killing 32 civilians and 3 suicide bombers and injuring more than 300. The attacks were unique for 2016, and for Belgium, as they involved an international network of individuals connected with the November 2015 Paris attacks, coordinated bombings in two different locations (the international airport and a metro station) and the use of homemade explosives. It was also the only successful plot involving FTF returnees in Europe. The Bastille Day attack in Nice, when a Tunisian man drove his truck on the promenade des Anglais, killing 86 and injuring more than 400, was less sophisticated in most regards but was nonetheless the most lethal. It was similar to the attack five months later on a Christmas market of Berlin. The 26 July church attack in the little town of Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray in France was less deadly than the other attacks listed here but struck the population by its brutality and the symbolism of its target: an 86-year-old priest. One of the two assailants had twice attempted, unsuccessfully, to join IS in Syria, and was under close surveillance by the French security services.

Other attacks took place over a particularly deadly summer in France, Germany, Denmark and Belgium (Table 4). The 18 July attack in Würzburg in Germany was the first to be claimed by IS on German soil, as opposed to France and Belgium, which had already been hit in previous years. In addition to the Würzburg attack, IS claimed credit for other small-scale attacks conducted by lone actors, such as in Charleroi and Ansbach, in Belgium and Germany, respectively. From publicly available information, it's not clear whether these perpetrators had established ties with IS members, or whether they had received instructions—in other words, whether these were cases of 'lone soldiers' or 'lone wolves'. However, IS's promptness in endorsing these attacks, despite their relative failure (since none resulted in any fatality) is quite remarkable, and could suggest that the group is seeking to maximise its visibility in Europe—and possibly in other regions—and to perpetuate a climate of fear, rather than trying to achieve symbolic or tactical successes.

TABLE 4: List of the main attacks claimed by IS in continental Europe, 2016

Location	Date	Description
Brussels, Belgium	22 March 2016	Coordinated suicide bombings at the airport and in the metro
Magnanville, France	13 June 2016	Stabbing of two police officers at their house
Nice, France	14 July 2016	Truck driven into a crowd on Bastille Day
Würzburg, Germany	18 July 2016	A man assaults train passengers with an axe and knife
Ansbach, Germany	24 July 2016	Suicide bombing near a music festival
Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, France	26 July 2016	Two men cut the throat of a priest in a local church
Charleroi, Belgium	6 August 2016	A man stabs two police officers
Copenhagen, Denmark	1 September 2016	A man shoots two police officers
Hamburg, Germany	30 October 2016	Stabbing of a young man
Berlin, Germany	19 December 2016	Truck driven into Christmas market crowd at Breitscheidplatz, killing 12 plus the hijacked driver and injuring 48

Source: Author's own compilation. This list includes only the successful attacks claimed by IS, but not the attacks that may have been inspired by IS, without an official claim from the group.

Beyond the 'successful' attacks related to IS, a number of plots either failed or were foiled in 2016. While reliable figures are unavailable for the whole of Europe, intelligence and political statements indicate that the number of failed or foiled plots was significantly higher than the number of actual attacks. According to a report from the French Government, 16 attacks have allegedly been foiled in France alone.[3] Numerous press articles have reported disrupted plots in Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, including a number during the 2016 European football championship, which took place in France in June. In a major CT operation coordinated between France, Belgium and the Netherlands, for example, an individual named Reda Kriket was arrested in Argenteuil, France, with a 'war arsenal' in his house, including automatic rifles and explosives. He was allegedly preparing an 'imminent attack'.[4]

In September, in another widely reported CT operation, three women were arrested for allegedly planning a terrorist attack in France. Shortly before their arrest, they had abandoned a car loaded with gas cylinders and gas cans in a tourist area of Paris, although it wasn't entirely clear whether the intention was to blow up the car, since no trigger device was found. Links were identified between these women and the perpetrators of the attacks in Magnanville and Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, and with an IS recruiter based in Syria, Rachid Kassim.[5] Other plots were disrupted in Germany, including a plan allegedly targeting the Berlin airport. An intelligence officer was also arrested for apparently plotting an attack in Cologne.[6]

In addition to these established cases of jihadi terrorism, a number of dubious events were reported in which a connection with IS could be neither confirmed nor totally rejected. For instance, on 1 January, a man drove his car at a group into soldiers in Valence, France, but was stopped when he was shot and wounded; although jihadist material was found on his computer, French authorities stated that the attack wasn't an act of terrorism. A few days later, in Paris, a man armed with a knife and wearing a fake suicide belt was shot down as he tried to attack police officers in front of a police station. Although a pledge of allegiance to IS was found on him, and an IS flag was found in his residence, no clear connections could be established with the terrorist organisation, which didn't claim the attack. A number of other dubious cases were reported across Europe in 2016 involving stabbings, assaults and fake suicide belts. Although most of those cases appeared to not be related to jihadist terrorism, and some were the work of disoriented or mentally ill individuals, their high visibility through media reporting meant that they nonetheless contributed to an increasing feeling of insecurity or even psychosis among the population.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS, RADICALISATION AND THE JIHADI THREAT

The FTF phenomenon remained an issue of concern for security services in 2016. It's estimated that there are more than 5,000 FTFs from the EU, of whom approximately 30% have returned to Europe and 15% have died.[7] In continental Europe, the countries most affected are France (around 1,900 FTFs), Germany (800), Belgium (550), Sweden (300), Austria (300), the Netherlands (250) and Denmark (130).

In a significant development, the dynamic of FTFs evolved in 2016 compared with previous years. Whereas the number of young Europeans leaving for Iraq or Syria had been increasing, then stabilising over the past three years, the number of 'jihadi travellers' seems to have dropped dramatically. In France, for example, only 18 departures were reported over the first six months of 2016, as opposed to 69 over the same period a year earlier. In Belgium, no departures were reported between January and September, whereas the previous year saw an estimated monthly rate of from five to 10. Similarly, the number of returnees seemed in decline across Europe compared to previous years.[8] US intelligence sources confirmed that FTFs' movements via Turkey plummeted to their lowest levels in 2016.[9]

A number of factors might explain this trend. Domestically, there was certainly a greater awareness of the threat associated with FTFs following the multiple attacks in 2015, resulting in higher security attention but also in the adoption and implementation of measures that strengthened states' capacity to prevent FTF departures. A number of those measures had been adopted in 2015, including administrative sanctions such as the confiscation of passports and identity cards from potential FTFs, as well as hotlines in several countries for family or friends to report cases of radicalisation. Domestic measures can't account for all of the downward trend in departures, however, as external factors also played a role. IS's loss of control of the border between Syria and Turkey made travelling more complicated, and more dangerous, while the military defeats of the terrorist organisation and the absence of positive lifestyle perspectives in Syria or Iraq made travel altogether less appealing.

In addition to these logistical considerations, IS seems to have adjusted its discourse to the new geopolitical reality. Messages of the group from 2014 called on supporters to 'make hijra' (migrate to IS territory), which it described as an obligation; those who didn't have the means to make hijra could take action in Europe to support IS, but this was presented as an inferior contribution to the cause.[10] In 2016, the discourse changed, perhaps even to the point of reversing the priorities. While IS would still welcome additional fighters in Syria, Iraq or even in other places such as Libya, IS's leadership (through the voice of its spokesperson al-Adnani[11]) and a number of IS recruiters started to call specifically for local actions in Europe.[12]

A key figure in this process was Rachid Kassim, a French agent of IS presumably based in Syria, who is very active on Facebook and Telegram. In his messages, he called for 'local jihad' rather than hijra, but also called for small and efficient attacks, rather than grand schemes that would take time to plan and increase the risk of detection by intelligence services. In addition to inciting terror, he provided operational advice, such as on how to build bombs, and helped connect jihadi candidates sometimes several hundred kilometres apart. Kassim is suspected of inspiring or facilitating the attacks in Magnanville and Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray and the failed car bombing in Paris.[13]

Thus, in 2016, homegrown and home-based radicalised individuals proved a major vector for jihad in Europe, whereas the focus had previously been more on FTFs. As illustrated by the attack in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, frustrated jihadists—those who had failed to join IS in Syria—could be a serious security threat, but radicalised individuals who had taken no steps to travel proved an equal threat. This required security services to broaden their investigations, since more people could be considered at risk. Whereas the number of FTFs is finally stabilising, the number of home-based radicalised individuals is larger and potentially still growing, as there's no indication that the problem of radicalisation is being contained.[14] This means that the threat from jihadist terrorism in Europe remained stable overall in 2016, which was reflected in unchanged threat levels across Europe, or perhaps even increased, as suggested by the increasing number of attacks and arrests compared to previous years.

ISLAMIC STATE, REFUGEES AND FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

At least two attacks (those in Würzburg and Ansbach) were committed by asylum seekers, and other cases of radicalisation among asylum seekers were reported in the media.[15] Although limited, those cases called attention to the vulnerability of these populations to extremist ideologies. Furthermore, it's known that some FTFs, including some involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks, used refugee flows to enter Europe undetected via Greece and Hungary.[16] In September, Germany arrested three Syrian refugees on suspicion that they had been sent by IS on a mission.[17] While such cases of infiltration were limited, the combination of these various occurrences fuelled the rhetoric of those opposing the growing number of refugees seeking to enter Europe—many of whom were truly fleeing regions devastated by terrorism and war.

In reaction to the refugee crisis and to the rise of jihadi activism in Europe, far-right extremist movements have gained traction. It's perhaps in Germany that this trend is most acute and growing—probably as a result of Chancellor Angela Merkel's welcoming policy vis-à-vis migrants—but the phenomenon was more widely spread across the continent. In Germany, a number of attacks on refugees, asylum shelters and mosques were reported in 2016, as well as other incidents such as the assault of a mayor considered too 'accommodating' to migrants.[18]

COUNTERTERRORISM IN EUROPE

Because only part of Europe was directly affected by the threat of terrorism, most responses to terrorism came from a core group of countries: Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands. However, other countries were involved in the broader European CT process, notably in the context of the EU, which was also active in CT policy in 2016. Overall, the European response could be characterised by some evident trends: a sense of political urgency, a security-focused approach, further criminalisation of terrorist activities, and an accelerated CT policy cycle.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

As a result of the terrorist activities described above, the fight against terrorism remained very high on the political agenda of many European countries in 2016. The main elements of the political discourse were essentially reacting to the evolving threat, but with a strong posturing, or communication, dimension. Authorities in countries targeted by terrorism sought to show leadership and firmness in their CT posture while reassuring the population. This was most evident in the political statements made in the aftermath of attacks, including condolence messages sent by foreign leaders and in the various commemoration ceremonies. Common themes in all the statements were shock, solidarity, condemnation and determination. The tone of the post-attack speeches varied slightly, however, from one country to another. French President

Francois Hollande had a more warlike response after the attacks, notably in Nice, emphasising the military response, but also being quick to describe the attacks as 'terrorist', even before the evidence emerged. In contrast, Merkel was more nuanced, emphasising German values and principles, warning of political overreaction, and giving time for the investigation before drawing conclusions. These different tones reflected partly different approaches to CT and different security cultures, but they also inevitably shaped the threat perception among media and citizens.

Beyond words, governments sought to show deeds. This has been particularly the case in the aftermath of terror attacks, when the popular pressure is at its peak. One must distinguish two types of measures in this process, however. The first set of measures is announced in the direct aftermath of an attack, with a view to dealing with the incident and its immediate consequences. These measures are adaptive and temporary, answering to real operational necessity. For example, after the Brussels attacks, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel announced that the threat level had been raised to its maximum level, that additional military assets had been deployed, and that controls at the border had been set up.

A second set of measures, which are designed to be more structural and permanent, can also be proposed at a later stage. These measures can be announced relatively shortly after a terrorist attack, with a view to reinforcing and the government's communication strategy. For example, Merkel announced her 'nine-point security plan'[19] only a few days after the attacks in Würzburg and Ansbach, just as the French and Belgian authorities had announced security measures days after the Paris attacks in November 2015. Such measures can be really 'new', but they can also put older measures back on the table. In the emotional and security-aware post-attack context, there may be a tendency to pass measures that had been previously blocked, as illustrated by the EU Passenger Name Record proposal, which was adopted in the aftermath of the Brussels attacks after five years of political obstruction in the European Parliament. Measures may also be implemented following attacks in another country, such as Germany's announcement of new CT measures following the attacks in Brussels and Istanbul in early 2016.

Beyond the announcement of specific measures, which may indeed be part of a government's communication strategy and a certain form of 'penal populism',[20] the attacks in 2015–16 created a real sense of political urgency. France adopted its Action Plan against Terrorism and Radicalisation, containing 80 measures, in May 2016, six months after the Paris attacks and a month and a half after the Brussels attacks.[21] Belgium had already announced its own action plan of 30 measures in 2015, which was complemented by a much-awaited security plan (or 'framework note') in 2016, extending beyond terrorism and radicalism to include other security threats as well as mechanisms of coordination between the different layers of institutional competence, which is a necessity in a federal state such as Belgium.[22] Germany adopted a new strategy in 2016 to prevent violent extremism, while others such as Sweden or Denmark had already adopted similar action plans or CT strategies in 2015 or earlier. Overall, whether measures, action plans or strategies were adopted in 2015 or 2016, a lot of work has been done in most countries to put these plans into action over the past year.

At the domestic level, governments faced some opposition and even criticism of their CT policies, despite a short-lived sense of national unity in the aftermath of attacks. In France, former president Nicolas Sarkozy was particularly critical of the government's response to terrorism, whereas in Germany, Merkel's immigration policy came under very harsh criticism after the two attacks carried out by refugees and other cases of radicalised individuals or alleged terrorists hiding within refugee centres.[23] Some debates about radicalism and Islamism proved particularly controversial. Notably, proposals to outlaw particular female Muslim attire—the burqa (the full-body veil) and the 'burkini' (swimwear covering the entire body)—mainly in France, were echoed in neighbouring countries. Slightly less controversial, but nonetheless sensitive, discussions began in several countries about the necessity to encourage the emergence of a 'European' Islam.

In another significant political development, parliamentary commissions were set up in France and Belgium to investigate the Paris and Brussels attacks, respectively. The French commission submitted a 300-page report in July 2016, which notably recommended rethinking the intelligence architecture and cooperation between CT services.[24] However, the report seems to have received little political attention.[25] In Belgium, the commission started its work in April 2016 and is expected to submit its conclusions in early 2017.

Beyond domestic politics, terrorism was at the centre of several international forums. Belgium and France held a bilateral summit on 1 February to confirm their CT cooperation and announce some additional measures, such as the appointment of a French liaison magistrate to Brussels. France and Germany also held several bilateral summits (in April and August, notably) and ministerial meetings, leading to the adoption of a joint initiative on internal security on 23 August 2016.[26]

These bilateral initiatives complement work done at the EU level, in which a group of 'most affected countries'—the so-called G11—played a key role. The group was initiated by Belgium in 2013 and meets informally before every meeting of the 28 EU ministers of justice and home affairs to draft the conclusions on terrorism. In the context of Brexit, 2016 also saw the nomination of a new British Commissioner at the European Commission, Julian King, in charge of the EU's European Agenda on Security, a regulatory package to improve Europe's internal security, including against terrorism. Supported by the very active office of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, the EU is progressing

a number of pieces of EU-wide legislation and other instruments to strengthen the continent's response against terrorism.

Key priorities at the EU level included:

- encouraging the exchange of information among member states, as it was established that EU member states didn't make full use of relevant EU instruments and mechanisms before 2015
- developing more tools for data collection, including biometrics
- ensuring interoperability between relevant databases, as the various EU databases on criminal records or terrorism have not previously been connected
- reinforcing the external borders of the EU
- creating more synergies between the European Agenda on Security and the European Agenda on Immigration, which have been developed and implemented separately despite of a number of interactions and some overlap between them.[27]

THE LEGAL RESPONSE

At the legislative level, 2016 continued in line with the previous year in the further criminalisation of terrorism-related activities, notably through the implementation of international law and recommendations at the national level. As the terrorist threat continued to grow and materialise in 2015–16, the legislative and policy cycles accelerated significantly. A number of European countries among the most affected EU member states adopted and implemented new laws based on UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), which classifies as a criminal offence the act of travelling, or attempting to travel, to another country for terrorist purposes, providing or receiving terrorist training, or the financing of travelling for terrorist purposes. While a number of member states had already taken legal measures to restrict the travel of FTFs in 2014–15, the fight against the financing of terrorism became a real priority in 2016, particularly in France, Belgium and Germany. France and Germany pushed the topic strongly at the EU level.[28]

In parallel to these national processes, the European Commission presented a new directive to combat terrorism in December 2015, which was negotiated through 2016 and is expected to be adopted in early 2017. The new directive will replace one from 2002, which had been updated in 2008. It will integrate into EU law the elements of UNSCR 2178 and of Financial Action Task Force recommendations on terrorist financing, with a view to harmonising the EU's judicial response to terrorism, and thus ensure that there's no 'two-speed' CT in Europe.

The adoption in April of the Passenger Name Record (PNR) regime by the European Parliament was another major development at the EU level, after more than five years of negotiations between the parliament and EU member states. The EU PNR arrangements will allow member states to collect and retain passenger flight details for flights in and out of Europe, including to track individual itineraries. This proposal had long been resisted by the European Parliament on the basis of data privacy and security concerns. After the attacks in Paris and Brussels, the measure was adopted by a large majority when member states agreed at that it was needed to more effectively combat terrorism and organised crime. However, questions remain about the real value of this tool, and specifically about how it will be used by intelligence services. While member states have two years to implement the new rules, Belgium and France anticipated the EU decision by commencing work on national PNR arrangements, including planning to extend the measure to maritime travel and, in the case of Belgium, to international high-speed trains.

In the most affected countries, a number of laws to strengthen the powers of the state against terrorism and radicalism were also discussed or adopted. For example, the judicial framework in France and Germany was modified to reinforce the operational capacity of the security services, including by broadening the use of special investigation techniques, such as wiretapping. France also provided for longer prison sentences for terrorists, including the possibility of imprisonment in perpetuity, while Belgium sought to revise its constitution in order to lengthen administrative detention from 24 to 72 hours for acts of terrorism. In addition, more stringent measures were taken against hate speech, such as outlawing websites preaching hate in Belgium, but also going as far as criminalising the consultation of jihadi websites. In September 2016, a French citizen was sentenced to two years in jail for regularly consulting IS propaganda online from a public library.[29]

OPERATIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES

At the operational level in most EU states affected by terrorism, one of the dominant trends in 2016 was the pursuit of measures designed to reinforce the security and intelligence services. The workload of the various CT services (judiciary, police, intelligence) continued to increase in 2016 as a result of the persistent terrorist threat. Ever more individuals and networks had to be monitored, investigated or prosecuted, leading to delays and bottlenecks in the judicial system and to a need for difficult prioritisation among police and intelligence services, based on particular criteria (both objective and subjective).[30] These structural constraints inevitably weaken the broader CT approach. In a small country such as Belgium, with a significant number of FTFs and radicalised individuals but limited CT personnel, the pressure on these services has become extreme.[31]

To address this problem and to cope with the threat more broadly, some European countries announced that additional personnel would be hired and more resources would be made available to the relevant services. France hired 7,500 new staff in 2015–16 for the ministries of justice and the interior and announced 650 additional positions for its domestic intelligence services in 2016–17. Furthermore, about €900 million was committed to various aspects of the response to terrorism in 2015–16.[32] In a similar vein, Belgium pledged an additional €400 million for the fight against terrorism after the Paris attacks and committed to recruiting 1,000 new staff, but the allocation of the new resources proved to be a rather lengthy process.[33] In Germany, Chancellor Merkel and Interior Minister de Maiziere announced similar measures following the summer attacks.[34]

Another visible aspect of the security measures taken by some European governments was the deployment of military forces in the street. In this regard, it's interesting to note the differences between member states. While France has long been accustomed to the presence of its military in the streets, this was new for Belgium in 2015 and a sign of exceptional times. The number of troops patrolling the streets increased after the Brussels attacks, before being slightly reduced towards the end of the year. In Germany, the possibility of deploying the military on domestic territory for CT purposes was also discussed but faces significant hurdles for historical reasons.[35]

Another key CT dimension related to dealing with radicalised individuals and potential FTFs. The use of administrative measures to prevent people leaving Europe to join terrorist organisations, such as confiscating the identity cards or passports of potential jihadis, has become more generalised. In 2016, countries also continued to develop their institutional infrastructure and capacity to detect and monitor radicalism. French authorities planned to double their capacity to handle radicalised people by 2017; in Belgium, regional and local authorities sped up their efforts to develop specific programs and initiatives to prevent or deal with radicalisation.

Other priorities in 2016 included combating the financing of terrorism and CT in the cyber domain. As noted above, France and Germany pushed jointly for a stronger European response in the fight against terrorist financing while putting in place a number of domestic measures to strengthen their services. In Belgium, countering terrorist financing slowly emerged as a priority after years of neglect, and a number of legal and operational adjustments reinforced this approach.[36] France and Germany were also in the lead to promote enhanced efforts to counter the use of the internet and social media by terrorist organisations. Both countries prioritised responses to terrorists' use of encrypted communication tools and the development of counter-narratives to the jihadi discourse.[37] German Interior Minister de Maizière announced the establishment of a new centre for information technology for security authorities (ZITiS), which will focus on crime and terrorism on the internet and eventually employ 400 staff.[38] At the EU level, Europol gave the Internet Referral Unit a more active role in its newly established European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC), including the task of taking down terrorist material from the web. One of the EU's flagship projects on strategic communication and counter-narratives, originally called the Syria Strategic Communications Advisory Team but now the European Strategic Communication Network, was extended beyond its original end date of mid-2016.

At the EU level, the most notable operational development in 2016 was the launch of the ECTC. The new centre brings together representatives from EU member states and Europol staff working on terrorism-related issues and is designed to be operational, flexible and a major advance in EU-wide CT cooperation. Its establishment followed the positive contribution of Europol in the investigations of the Paris and Brussels attacks through Task Force Fraternité, in which Europol established an operational centre in Paris to investigate the international ramifications of the jihadist network behind the attacks.[39] EU member states, most importantly France, saw Europol's contribution as positive, and that led to greater operational and political support for the strengthening of the EU agency's powers.[40]

In the area of intelligence cooperation, while calls by the Belgian Prime Minister to create a 'European CIA' after the Brussels attacks were ignored, European countries agreed to step up their cooperation in the informal Counter Terrorism Group (CTG), which brings together the heads of European intelligence services. Under Dutch leadership, the group agreed to further standardise and systematise the exchange of information on the terrorist threat. Discussions were also underway to create operational bridges between the CTG and the ECTC, although that proved too contentious for some member states. Still, the recent development of the ECTC and the deeper cooperation within the CTG are a remarkable step forward in police and intelligence cooperation, as that progress was unthinkable even a few years ago.

There is reportedly growing cooperation among police, judicial and intelligence services outside the EU framework, in bilateral or multilateral exchanges, in view of the transnational nature of the threat. An increasing number of meetings, information exchanges and joint investigations were reported among most countries affected by terrorism, particularly between France and Belgium.[41]

The EU took steps to secure its external borders in 2016, most notably with the announcement of the creation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

Member states and EU institutions were also active outside EU territory in efforts to develop CT partnerships with countries in the Mediterranean (particularly Turkey, Morocco and Tunisia) and in the Middle East. They took part in diplomatic and military initiatives, notably in the context of the US-led anti-IS coalition. France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Denmark and the Netherlands participate in the coalition's military operations in Iraq and Syria.

PROSPECTS FOR 2017

For CT in Europe, 2016 was a very busy year. The number of jihadi-related attacks increased from the previous year, numerous plots and terrorist-related activities were disrupted, significant numbers of people, particularly youth, continued to radicalise, and some turned violent. The nature of the threat also partly changed, as most plots resulted from homegrown and 'home-based' radicalised individuals, as opposed to FTF returnees—all related to IS. Following this trend, CT efforts intensified in 2016 as additional political, legal, operational and administrative measures were adopted and implemented across Europe. The European countries most affected by terrorism to date—France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands—largely took the lead domestically as well as internationally. At the EU level, the unprecedented level of the threat and a clear sense of urgency allowed for major breakthroughs, particularly in police and intelligence cooperation.

Despite the increased efforts and the many CT measures adopted, the threat level remained high in many countries at the end of 2016. In recognition of this, France prolonged its state of emergency again until mid-2017, after its presidential election.

Given the evolution of the conflict in Iraq and Syria, a new wave of jihadi departures isn't likely in the foreseeable future, which means that the terrorist threat will continue to come mainly from home-based radicals in 2017. However, intelligence services also fear the return of FTFs to Europe as IS loses its safe havens in Syria, although it's unclear how many will come back and with what intentions. Some are likely to die while fighting, some will move to other jihadist theatres, and some will return to Europe disillusioned or traumatised. Some could return intending to commit terrorist acts, increasing the number of people who need close scrutiny. This scenario calls for the adoption of an effective strategy to deal with returnees, but most countries are unsure about how to approach this. Imprisonment appears a sensible and appealing response but could be counterproductive, given the problem of radicalisation in prisons. Each country is experimenting with a different approach to deradicalisation and disengagement—and sometimes more than one approach—but no best practice seems to have emerged yet. More European coordination will be needed on this.

Finally, the focus of CT is likely to continue to evolve in 2017. In jihadist terrorism, a return of al-Qaeda can't be discounted as IS loses global traction. Beyond this, the rise of far-right and far-left extremism is likely to continue during an important election year in several countries (France and Germany, among others) and could further increase the risk of societal polarisation.

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