



Europol's Counter-Terrorism Role: over 25 Years of Partnership



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Abstract

Aim: Provide an overview of the evolution of Europol's counter-terrorism capabilities over the last 25 years. Focus on the establishment of the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC).

Methodology: In this article on counter-terrorism, the methodology employed involves a qualitative approach, leveraging first-hand experiences and insights from Europol's operational involvement and institutional development.

Findings: Over the past two decades, significant terrorist attacks have profoundly influenced the European Union's counter-terrorism policies and institutions. These events have accelerated the development of Europol's dedicated counter-terrorism capabilities, transforming it from an agency with limited operational capacity into a key player in the EU's counter-terrorism efforts. Europol's role expanded significantly after 2015 leading to the establishment of the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC). The ECTC supports national counter-terrorism efforts through enhanced law enforcement cooperation and operational services, addressing emerging threats like jihadist use of the internet for recruitment and propaganda, through the European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU). Despite progress achieved, counter-terrorism remains primarily a national competence, with Europol playing a supportive role. The continuous evolution of Europol's strategic and operational tools reflects the EU's commitment to a collective approach, balancing national prerogatives with the need for coordinated, transnational efforts to combat terrorism effectively.

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Value: The value of this article lies in its practical insights offering an internal perspective from a seasoned security practitioner focusing on operational and institutional realities as opposed to theoretical frameworks.

Keywords: counter-terrorism, Europol, European Union, International law enforcement cooperation

Introduction

In the last 20 years, three seismic events delivered a profound shock to the European Union (EU) counter-terrorism community and shaped subsequent policy and institutional developments in the area: 9/11, the Madrid bombings in 2004 and the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016. These critical junctures had a profound influence on the development of Europol and brought unprecedented new demands on the EU and its Member States, including Hungary, in terms of counter-terrorism response, prevention and coordination.

Hungary's role in counterterrorism is defined by its commitment to both national security and international cooperation within the framework of the European Union and NATO. Hungary's accession to the EU on 1 May 2004, took place only a few weeks after the Madrid train bombings, in which 192 people were killed, the deadliest terrorist attacks carried out in Europe since the Lockerbie plane bombing in 1980. This certainly influenced the development of Hungary's multi-faceted approach to counterterrorism, including legislative measures, intelligence operations, law enforcement actions and international collaboration. Since Hungary formally joined Europol in 2004 – after having deployed a liaison officer since 2002 – both have shared many of the milestones that have marked the development of the EU's counter-terrorism ecosystem.

Europol's initial counter-terrorism tasks

The initial focus of police cooperation at European Community-level was very much international terrorism. The creation of the TREVI group ([URL1](#)), an intergovernmental home affairs network, was prompted by several terrorist acts, most notably the hostage taking during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich and Interpol's difficulties at the time to effectively assist the European countries in combatting terrorism.

When Europol was founded in 1993¹ – initially as the Europol Drugs Unit (EDU) – with a very limited operational capability, only a few member countries advocated for the inclusion of counter-terrorism among its areas of competence. What may seem self-explanatory today was not so easy to determine at the time and only much convincing work at different levels led to a Europol Convention in 1995, which finally included the fight against terrorism among Europol’s core tasks.

Therefore, counter-terrorism was not only at the origin of the idea of Europol, but it became an integral part of Europol’s objectives and tasks in all its legal bases from the foundational EDU, up to the Europol Regulation of 2017². However, counter-terrorism remained a purely nominal function within an organisation that had no real capabilities or structures in that area, nor much interest in developing them. In fact, in Europol’s institutional logic, terrorism was hardly a factor at play. The driving forces for Europol’s organic growth and development were the need to improve its capabilities in the fight against organised crime. Throughout most of its history and at least until 2016, the expansion of Europol’s counter-terrorism role followed an extrinsic logic. The build-up of Europol’s capabilities in this area was a bumpy road with many U-turns and dead-ends, where most often progress was driven by external actors, mainly as the result of tragic security events.

Thus, it was not until the terrorist attacks against the United States on 11 September 2001 that counter-terrorism acquired some significance in Europol’s agenda. The crude reality of security events soon made it self-evident that the Council had to take rapid decisions with a strategic, operational or financial impact on Europol, even without prior consultation of Europol’s Management Board. Accordingly, on 20 September 2001, the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council decided to set up within Europol a task force of counter-terrorist specialists to collect relevant information and intelligence on the terrorist threat, to undertake operational and strategic analysis and to draft a threat assessment. The conclusions of the extraordinary Council meeting ‘instructed’ the Europol Director to report on the input on terrorism provided by Member States into the analytical work files, together with an analysis of any problems. The Council also addressed relations between Europol and the United States, inviting the Director of Europol to take all necessary measures to make use of the possibilities afforded by the Europol Convention to establish informal cooperation with the

1 In 2024, Europol celebrates 25 years since it became fully operational on 1 July 1999, following the ratification and adoption by all Member States of the legal acts provided for in the Europol Convention.
2 Joint action 95/73/JHA of 10 March 1995 concerning the Europol Drugs Unit.

United States and to finalise a formal agreement as quickly as possible. In fact, the Council gave the Management Board less than two months to close that file and submit a draft strategic agreement with the United States, while urging the conclusion of an operational agreement, including on the transmission of personal data. Finally, the Council entrusted the Article 36 (Coordinating Committee in the area of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, CATS) Committee with the task of ensuring the closest possible coordination between Europol, Pro-Eurojust and the EU Police Chiefs Task Force.

Europol eventually adopted plans for the establishment of a Counter-Terrorism Task Force (CTTF) ([URL2](#)), which became operational on 15 November, bringing together experts and liaison officers from Member States law enforcement and intelligence services. The conclusion of a strategic cooperation agreement with the United States was also fast-tracked, followed by an operational agreement in 2002 to enable the exchange of personal data.

Despite the Council pressure, it took more than a month for the Europol Management Board to hold a meeting following the 9/11 attacks. This reflects the difficulty to define a meaningful course of action in a sensitive area such as counter-terrorism, but also the lack of operational responsiveness of Europol at the time. Member States eventually met in the Management Board on 23–24 October 2001 and expressed their support for the draft agreement with the United States, although France and Germany recorded scrutiny reservations, while the United Kingdom and the Netherlands recorded parliamentary reservations.

The CTTF remained under regular review and in a report issued at the end of 2002, the Management Board emphasised the good results achieved by the task force and the continued importance of counter-terrorism activities. The CTTF constituted a good illustration of the need to confront a global threat in a coordinated manner, but from an operational point of view, there were increasing doubts about the validity of the model, which led to its closure shortly after two years of existence. Therefore, when the CTTF mandate expired, Europol's Serious Crime Unit absorbed the relevant counter-terrorism work, marking the end of the first dedicated counter-terrorism capability at Europol.

The response to the terror attacks in Madrid

The Madrid attacks on 11 March 2004 acted as an accelerator, which entirely re-shaped the EU's counter-terror organisational framework, both in the Council and at Europol. For the former, it contributed decisively to the institutional strengthening of the counter-terrorism area, adding new structures, policies and

governance mechanisms to the existing organisational arrangements. The appointment by the High Representative of an EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator (EU CTC) to work within the Council Secretariat was probably one of the most relevant initiatives (URL3). The decision responded to the need for greater coordination in combating terrorism, tasking the EU CTC with presenting policy recommendations and priority areas for action, as well as monitoring the implementation of the EU counter-terrorism strategy. Despite its limited formal competencies, the establishment of the function improved the visibility of EU efforts and consolidated the institutionalisation of counter-terrorism in the EU.

The Europol Management Board met on 1–2 April to discuss counter-terrorism issues, starting with the declaration adopted by the JHA Council on 25 March and the European Council on 29 March with a view to accelerating Member States' action. The Council Declaration called for the completion of the Europol Information System (EIS) noting that the processing of considerable amounts of information by Europol was causing serious backlogs (URL4). Despite its shortcomings, the EIS was the only database on suspects, contacts and communications linking investigations at EU level and providing a situational picture and a platform to reach all Member States at once. The Management Board decided to re-launch a recycled version of the CTTF within Europol's organisational structure, taking account of the intelligence-led policing model and following a project-based approach, as opposed to widening its scope. The CTTF would focus on Islamist terrorism and produce threat assessments with a view to prevention, profiling and operational analyses. It would support Member States' investigations and prepare strategic analysis, including in coordination with the Council Situation Centre. Member States committed to contribute up to 30 officers with a specialised counter-terrorism profile. At the same time, the ratification of three Protocols to the Convention strengthened the operational powers of Europol by allowing it to provide assistance and facilitate coordination in Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) in counter-terror operations. In many ways, Europol reprocessed previously discarded operational instruments, patched up with some new elements in order to reinforce its counter-terrorism capabilities and improve the flow of information in response to the Madrid events.

One of the new tools was the first Europol Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) published in December 2004 (URL5), which after 17 issues has become one of Europol's main strategic analysis products and an important international reference for the monitoring of terrorism. Interestingly, even after 9/11 and the Madrid attacks, much of the first TE-SAT report focused on home-grown domestic forms of terrorism such as separatist and anarchist terrorism, eco-terrorism, cyber terrorism and left- and right-wing extremism, while only

a quarter of the report dealt with jihadism. While the nature of the TE-SAT remained essentially the same – a strategic analysis report based on operational contributions from Member States, complemented with open sources information.

The focus on counter-terrorism only increased with the terrorist attacks in London on 7 July 2005. In 2007, the JHA Council adopted the concept of the EU First Response Network (FRN), to put on standby a group of dedicated counter-terrorism experts from all EU Member states, ready for mobilisation under Europol's coordination, in the event of a serious attack in Europe (Rhinard & Backman, 2017).

With this initiative, also promoted by the EU CTC, Europol introduced the concept of platform of operational services also in the counter-terrorism area. Europol provided the operational centre as a node to ensure efficient exchange of information and provide analytical support tailored to the evolving modus operandi of an attack together with expertise on other forms of crime. In this respect, the experience gained with the First Response Network showed the benefits of multi-functional platforms for counterterrorism action and paved the ground for future initiatives.

For Hungary, this period also coincides with the reinforcement of its counter-terrorist capabilities, notably through the establishment of the Counter-Terrorism Centre (TEK) in 2010. Hungary's primary counterterrorism unit, operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior as a specialised government agency was part of Hungary's comprehensive strategy to enhance national security, address and mitigate terrorist threats and activities and contribute to international counterterrorism efforts.

The ECTC and Task Force Fraternité

The Charlie Hebdo attacks at the beginning of 2015, followed by the terrorist assaults in Paris and Brussels in the ensuing months, constituted a game changer leading to an entirely different perception of the threat in Europe. It became clear that next to reinforcing the collaboration between all agencies at national level, there was a need to boost cross-border cooperation to complement national capabilities.

In March 2015, the JHA Council called upon Europol to establish the European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU), with a view to supporting a comprehensive response to tackle the use of the internet for promoting terrorism and violent extremism. Europol launched the EU IRU, in a pilot phase, in July 2015 with a mix of counter-terrorism experts, IT and linguistic specialists.

The establishment of the European Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC) at Europol took place six months later during the Dutch Presidency of the Council, on 25 January 2016 ([URL2](#)). For the first time in the counter-terrorism policy context of the EU, Member States acknowledged the necessity to have a permanent structure for cooperation at EU level in support of national counter-terrorism efforts. The development of the ECTC was underpinned by the success of Task Force *Fraternité* which supported French and Belgian authorities in the investigation of the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016, analysing tens of terabytes of communication, financial, internet and forensic data to determine the international connections of the terrorists.

The continued support Europol received from Member States at policy and operational level enabled the ECTC to adapt existing capabilities and processes and develop new operational services. The ECTC overcame the traditional hesitancy of counter-terrorism services towards multilateral cooperation by setting up a trusted environment with a dedicated information hub for counter-terrorism matters. This included the creation of a specific counter-terrorism space within Europol's Secure Information Exchange Network Application (CT SIENA) to respond to practitioners needs to directly exchange information at a higher level of classification and enhance the quality of the analytical work. The ECTC progressively developed specialised operational support services, a coordination capacity and investigative expertise, including through the Counter Terrorism Joint Liaison Team (CT JLT). In April 2016, Hungary reinforced its counter-terrorism capacity in the Hungarian Liaison Bureau at Europol deploying an officer from the TEK.

As a consequence of the terrorist attack in Berlin in December 2016, the Chiefs of Police and Heads of Counter-Terrorism of EU Member States and Schengen-associated countries convened in Berlin on 7 and 8 February 2017 in a meeting co-organised by Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) and Europol. The main outcome was a 'Vision Statement', which remains a point of reference for Europol and for European counter-terrorism cooperation. It set out an unequivocal commitment to elevate operational counter-terrorism efforts across European countries by making full use of the ECTC and agreed to establish a Counter-Terrorism Programme Board (CTPB) at the ECTC, to provide Member States with oversight and a platform to influence the development of Europol's capabilities in this field.

A central strategic support capability was devised within the ECTC in order to identify European-wide counter-terrorism implications and promote outreach with relevant partners. The deployments of Guest Officers in Hotspots (initially in Italy, Greece and Cyprus) also contributed important information to support

the detection of returning foreign terrorist fighters or the infiltration on the EU territory of foreign members of terrorist organisations. Following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, this external deployment for counter-terror secondary security controls was expanded to all EU Member States neighbouring Ukraine, including Hungary.

Fighting terrorist content online

Terrorists' use of the internet and social media has increased enormously in recent years. Jihadist groups in particular have demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of how social networks operate and have launched well-organised, concerted social media campaigns to recruit followers. These campaigns promote or glorify acts of terrorism and violent extremism and have led to viral online content. The EU IRU employs a number of specialists with a variety of skills, including operational, linguistic, technical and research expertise. These specialists have an acute understanding of how the process of radicalisation to violent extremism works and how the jihadist networks abuse the online environment to recruit and radicalise people.

Regulation (EU) 2021/784 on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online (TCO Regulation) has provided the legal framework at European level for Member States to protect citizens from being exposed to terrorist material online. This legislation also changed the working relationship that the European Counter Terrorism Centre and the EU IRU had developed with Member States and technological companies. Since the entry into application of the TCO Regulation in June 2022, Member States are in a position to demand the removal of content from Online Service Providers (OSP) themselves, and they can do it through a platform called PERCI, a technical solution built by Europol and managed by the EU IRU to facilitate the implementation of the TCO Regulation ([URL6](#)). The vast majority of tech companies have taken significant steps to protect their platforms against terrorist abuse. Nevertheless, the online environment remains an attractive space for terrorist criminal networks which continue to target the services offered by the tech companies for recruitment, fundraising and propaganda purposes. Once the EU IRU identifies terrorist content, it maps its trace on the internet, collects all publicly available information around this content and creates a 'referral package' to be exploited for different purposes: to assess the threat, to support investigations and to suggest eventual referral to Online Service Providers. The referral or transmission of a notification of internet content to the OSPs can be done by Europol or Member States. Based

on these referrals, the EU IRU also coordinates Referral Action Days to facilitate direct cooperation with law enforcement representatives in EU Member States. The EU IRU is in a unique position whereby it can map terrorist networks across borders and see how they are linked to cases in a variety of Member States. This global perspective is instrumental in dismantling criminal networks and providing information for investigations.

Future outlook

Overall, it is fair to say that in the three or four years which followed the establishment of the task force *Fraternité* ([URL7](#)), Europol's counter-terrorism capabilities progressed more than during its entire previous history. The European Counter-Terrorism Centre has become an essential player in the EU action on counter-terrorism and its operational support increased fivefold. The ECTC is now part of every major counter-terrorism investigation in the EU. Its contribution has evolved from static support and basic crosschecks to specialised actions and the development of highly specialised analytical and investigative tools, such as SIRIUS (Shaping Internet Research Investigations Unified System), the Terrorism Identification task Force (TITF) or face recognition software, and from sporadic involvement in Member States investigations to become an almost systematic instrument in their counter-terrorism toolbox.

Strategic intelligence is of key importance to better anticipate terrorism threats and to shape and develop EU counter-terrorism policy and legislation. Europol's key contribution in this area is the TE-SAT, which provides an overview of the terrorism phenomenon in the EU every year, but also numerous other strategic and operational analysis products on key emerging and evolving drivers of terrorism.

As Europol becomes an increasingly significant player in the European counter-terrorism field, the opportunities for international collaboration naturally increase. However, nothing is definitely acquired in counter-terrorism. Indeed, international outreach and law enforcement cooperation in counter-terrorism matters has to be continuously pursued and deepened, between Member States, but also with third countries. The Terrorism Finance Tracking Program (TFTP), implemented by Europol, is one example of successful EU-US collaboration in developing intelligence to disrupt, detect and prosecute foreign fighters. Information sharing in this area has been steadily increasing and the programme has proven a key tool in counter-terrorism investigations.

Europol's counter-terrorism activities also benefit from the Agency's wide network of about 250 liaison officers from almost 50 countries and organisations,

but the level of threat requires a wider engagement. The fight against terrorism needs to overcome the internal-external divide and relations with a wide range of external partners need to be nurtured at operational, strategic and political level.

Fighting terrorism remains and will continue to be a national competence in the years to come. However, Europol's growing role in this area and the major terrorist attacks in the years 2015-2016 have contributed to changing the paradigm of counter-terrorism in the EU from a national prerogative into a collectively shared responsibility. For decades, operational experts and investigators have been acutely aware that the transnational nature of terrorist networks required a strong collective approach.

During the last ten years, we have seen an enormous investment in the level of knowledge and expertise on counter-terrorism matters in Europol and at EU level, in line with the increasing complexity of the phenomenon. This has usefully expanded the boundaries of our understanding of terrorism and its international and societal implications. Europol continues to identify crosslinks between terrorism and adjacent areas of work, through a networked focus, with the aim of adding value to the work of Member States, with the constant aim of responding to the operational needs of the law enforcement men and women who are the forefront of the fight against terrorism.

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Laws and regulations

Joint action 95/73/JHA of 10 March 1995 concerning the Europol Drugs Unit
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Reference of the article according to APA regulation

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