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Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Delegations will find in the annex the Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism approved by written procedure on 15 June 2020.

Council conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Introduction

1. The Council reiterates its unwavering commitment to protecting EU citizens against terrorism and violent extremism in all their forms and irrespective of their origin. In doing so, it remains dedicated to continuing to support enhanced EU external action in the field of counter-terrorism (CT) and to prevent and counter radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism (P/CVE). In light of the constantly evolving nature of the threats from international terrorism, the Council has decided to update its previous conclusions on EU external action to counter and prevent terrorism and radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism.
2. These conclusions are complementary to, and build on, the Council conclusions on external counter-terrorism of 9 February 2015 and 19 June 2017. Together, the three sets of conclusions form the cornerstones of future EU engagement, in alignment with the EU's 2005 Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the European Agenda on Security and the EU's 2016 Global Strategy, which recalls that security at home depends on peace and stability beyond the EU's borders.
3. Together with broader diplomatic, development, security and humanitarian efforts, working as a stabilising actor in the EU's neighbourhood and beyond, the EU and Member States external action represents an essential instrument for promoting the EU's interests and values on the global stage and for safeguarding the way of life of its citizens as defined in the European Council's Strategic Agenda 2019-2024.

4. Building upon the progress achieved in improving, integrating and deploying European financial instruments and diplomatic tools, in deepening cooperation between Member States and the EU institutions and agencies, and in strengthening cooperation with key international partners, the Council calls for further strengthening of the EU's external counter-terrorism engagement and action in the priority geographic and thematic fields set out below. These conclusions highlight the threats from terrorism, focus on where the EU should invest geographically, pinpoint the priority areas for action, and underscore the importance of enhanced international cooperation.

The evolving terrorist threat

5. The Council recognises that terrorism continues to evolve and that the EU and its Member States have to adapt accordingly. The threat from Da'esh and al-Qaeda and their affiliates remains high. In spite of the successful liberation of the territory in Syria and Iraq from its control, Da'esh maintains a presence in both countries and might take advantage of the deteriorating security situation in the region to regain momentum. Unwavering mobilisation is therefore required of the international community. Exploring different strategies, both Da'esh and al-Qaeda are eager to maintain their influence, expand their activities and spread their violent extremist Islamist ideology at a global level in different forms through local and regional branches around the world. In this regard, they rely more and more on online platforms, which have become even more essential for spreading terrorist propaganda, for inspiring, guiding and directing attacks, and for promoting radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism. The Council therefore calls for the underlying conditions that led to the rise of Da'esh and al-Qaeda to be addressed.
6. The Council notes that worrying terrorist advances continue in the MENA region, in the Sahel/West Africa and in the Lake Chad region. Terrorism continues unabated in the Horn of Africa, with al-Shabaab showing increasing strength, Da'esh maintaining a presence, and terrorist groups spreading further into the interior and south of the continent. Challenges posed by terrorism, and by radicalisation leading to terrorism, are likely to remain a source of pressure in Central Asia, while Afghanistan in particular is likely to continue to suffer from instability and terrorism, despite ongoing peace efforts. Terrorist attacks are being perpetrated in South Asia and terrorist groups are seeking to gain a foothold in South-East Asia as well as in the Western Balkans.

7. At the same time, other key challenges demand further resolute action, such as: bringing foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to justice and preventing their movement, especially undetected crossings of the EU's borders; addressing the increase in home-grown radicalisation and anticipating the persistent threat posed by terrorist sleeper cells and lone actors; adequately monitoring individuals released after serving terrorism-related sentences; adapting to the developments in money-laundering and terrorism financing; mitigating the exploitation of rapid technological developments; tackling emerging and hybrid threats to aviation, critical infrastructure and public spaces; and addressing the spread of violent extremist Islamist ideology and the emergence of politically motivated violent extremism and terrorism, especially in view of the growing number of far-right terrorist attacks.
8. Furthermore, as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented challenge with wide-ranging effects which will only fully unfold in the long term, a specific effort should be made to assess its potential influence on terrorist activities as well as on the prevention and countering of terrorism, and to identify possible targeted EU action.
9. The Council calls for specific actions in the following geographical and thematic areas as a matter of priority in order to complement, enhance and better synergise the EU's aggregated efforts in counter-terrorism.

Strengthening cooperation with key countries/regions

10. The Council notes that the EU has engaged in a number of political dialogues on counter-terrorism with priority partner countries and regions, which has enabled the adoption of specific action plans and cooperation programmes. It acknowledges the important role played by the Network of EU CT/Security Experts in this regard, as well as the need to strengthen that network further.
11. The Council emphasises the need to maintain its key focus on its closest neighbourhood, which is intrinsically linked to the EU's internal security. Particular attention should therefore be devoted to more structured cooperation on counter-terrorism and preventing or countering violent extremism with countries and regions from which the most direct threats to the security of Europe emanate and which have the greatest need for assistance.

12. The Council calls for the EU to advance cooperation with the partners in the Western Balkans in line with the Sofia Declaration of 17 May 2018, the Zagreb Declaration of 6 May 2020 and the EU-Western Balkans Joint Action Plan on counter-terrorism. It further calls for the EU to implement, and adjust where necessary, the existing counter-terrorism partnerships and deepen counter-terrorism cooperation, including with other relevant partner countries in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA), to continue regular targeted and upgraded security and counter-terrorism dialogues with these partners, and help address the underlying issues that led to the rise of Da'esh.
13. The EU should continue to reinforce its presence in the Sahel considering the increasing threat and the risk of contagion to coastal West African countries, and, more generally, address the growing intra-continental dynamic spread of terrorism, such as in the Horn of Africa and in other African countries, where terrorist activities are increasing. The global threat picture requires that the EU should also be open to counter-terrorism engagement and outreach with countries in other regions which are strategically important for European security, such as Central Asia, South Asia and South-East Asia.
14. The Council strongly believes that prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism should be mainstreamed into development assistance programming, where appropriate, as well as country-specific and regional strategies.

Strengthening the EU response in key cross-cutting issues

a) International Law, Human Rights and the Rule of Law

15. Recalling its conclusions on EU priorities in UN Human Rights Fora of 17 February 2020, the Council stresses that all counter-terrorism measures must be conducted in full compliance with EU core values, including the rule of law, and in full compliance with international law, in particular international human rights law, humanitarian law and international refugee law. To this end, the EU will continue to proactively support and promote human rights and the principles of international law, in all aspects of the global counter-terrorism efforts and in all its strategic partnerships, including in the regular reviews of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

b) Foreign Terrorist Fighters

16. The Council recognises that Foreign Terrorist Fighters will remain a major common security challenge for the years to come. The Council also welcomes the progress made pursuant to UN Security Council resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017), and recalls the ultimate goals of preventing travel for terrorist purposes and ensuring accountability for all crimes committed, with full respect for human rights and the applicable international and EU law. A key part of this endeavour will be enhanced and timely cooperation and information sharing among Member States, with INTCEN, Europol, Eurojust and Interpol, as appropriate, and in line with their respective mandates, and with partner countries, in accordance with the applicable legal framework and including strengthening the capacity of these countries to feed Interpol databases and use them for preventing travel and for prosecution.

The EU stands ready to further assist priority partner countries, which are the most impacted by the ‘returnees’ phenomenon, in order to help them bring perpetrators to justice, address radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism in prisons, and support rehabilitation and reintegration activities, including of family members, as well as specialised services for returning children.

c) Criminal Justice Approach to Terrorism, Battlefield Information and Electronic Evidence

17. The Council stresses the importance of a criminal justice approach to terrorism and the need to strengthen the human rights-compliant criminal justice chain worldwide, including security services, investigations and prosecutions, in compliance with the relevant international law, including international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law. In this respect and in accordance with national and EU legislation, efforts should be made whenever possible to make battlefield information available and usable to the competent authorities and judiciary of the Member States so as to ensure effective border control and support effective prosecution of terrorist perpetrators.

In addition to the important bilateral cooperation with key strategic partners, further cooperation and coordination could be developed with other relevant international partners as appropriate and with due respect for the EU institutional framework. The Council furthermore underlines the need to improve the conservation and transmission of electronic evidence during cross-border criminal investigations and prosecutions linked to terrorist cases. All action on this issue must be consistent with the principles of a free, open and secure Internet, without compromising human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, or the protection of personal data.

d) Terrorism Financing

18. The Council notes the conclusions on Strategic Priorities on Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism adopted on 5 December 2019, and further stresses the critical importance of maintaining a strong international commitment to cutting off sources of terrorism funding.

It welcomes the adoption of UNSCR 2462 (2019) on preventing and combating the financing of terrorism, which represents a major step towards the establishment of a comprehensive international framework in this field. The Council reaffirms its full support of the work carried out by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to develop standards and promote the effective implementation of legal, regulatory and operational measures.

The Council remains committed to supporting activities aimed at improving and enhancing information sharing and at providing support to priority partner countries in order to enhance their capacity to comply with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, FATF recommendations, relevant EU legislation and the Paris agenda adopted during the first ‘*No Money for Terror*’ conference held on 25 and 26 April 2018. The Council stresses the importance of reinforcing the capacities of countries to confiscate terrorists’ assets. In the field of preventing and countering terrorist financing, the Council recognises challenges, such as: the exploitation of formal and informal money or value transfers, including remittances; new forms of payments like e-money, involving crypto and blockchain technologies; and terrorism financing from trafficking in drugs and firearms smuggled from conflict zones.

Furthermore, bearing in mind that terrorist groups are generating income from trade and illicit trafficking of cultural property, including that stolen and looted from archaeological sites in conflict zones, while also taking into account the lessons learned in EU operations and missions, the Council invites the EU to reflect on how to assist further affected countries to protect their own cultural heritage, including using relevant tools and measures from Interpol, WCO, UNESCO and FATF.

e) Islamist and Politically Motivated Violent Extremism and Terrorism

19. The Council reaffirms that it condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and that terrorism is unjustifiable, regardless of any considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, and religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them. The Council calls for the focus on violent extremist Islamist ideology to be further reinforced. The threat from politically motivated violent extremism and terrorism, including the threat from far-right and far-left, is growing and is progressively connected across borders, especially via the Internet. The Council therefore calls for increased engagement with relevant partners on this issue.

This entails a dialogue with relevant third countries and with global technology companies on ways to effectively counter violent extremist propaganda on the Internet, including hate speech, in full respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In this vein, democracy, rule of law and good governance are essential in fostering positive narratives and effective and non-violent means for addressing various political, social and other grievances. Interested partners, both inside and outside of the EU, should be invited to participate in this engagement from the beginning.

f) Misuse of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes

20. The Council acknowledges that combating the misuse of the Internet for terrorist purposes is instrumental in the fight against terrorist and violent extremist propaganda. In line with this, it reaffirms the pressing need for a European regulation preventing the dissemination of illegal terrorist contents online. It also stresses the need for a multi-stakeholder approach, in which industry works together with EU and partner-country governments as well as academia and civil society in preventing and countering terrorism.

The Council calls upon the tech industry to take on more responsibility for countering terrorist propaganda and radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism and pro-actively address prevention, detection and removal of illegal content online, while safeguarding human rights, as well as recruitment and planning on their platforms, and should enhance transparency concerning their efforts to this end vis-à-vis the public and governments.

In this respect, the long-standing cooperation of EU Member States with industry through the EU Internet Forum and the more recent global action on the '*Christchurch Call to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online*' are initiatives which have led to concrete progress and provide a good starting-point for further engagement. The Council calls on all states which have not yet done so to support this initiative.

The Council also calls for an exploration of how strategic communication can be used to enhance EU efforts to prevent terrorism and violent extremism and how it can contribute to national and regional efforts to address terrorism and curtail the radicalisation and recruitment that bolster extremist groups.

g) New Technologies

21. The Council acknowledges that new technological developments such as artificial intelligence, unmanned aerial systems (drones), robotics, synthetic biotechnologies, crypto technologies, 3D printing, etc. may be misused for illegal purposes, including for terrorist and violent extremist purposes. The Council calls for capacity building and exchanges with partner countries to maximise the benefits of new technologies for security services and to counter terrorists' misuse of new technologies.

A multi-stakeholder approach and close cooperation with governments, civil society, academia and the private sector, as well as with relevant international organisations, is essential.

Additionally, the Council encourages continued EU support to strengthening the capacity of partner countries to address the risk of terrorist misuse of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials.

h) Victims of Terrorism

22. The Council emphasises the need to pay specific attention to victims in the fight against terrorism and the need to ensure that their rights are protected and promoted on the basis of four critical pillars: memory, dignity, justice and truth. The EU should support capacity-building actions for priority partner countries in the field of support for victims of terrorism. Victims can play an essential role in the prevention of terrorism and violent extremism. They can de-legitimise terrorism and be important voices in countering terrorist propaganda and in ensuring accountability for the crimes committed against them. Furthermore, the Council supports the UN-led projects aiming at enhancing UN Member States' capacities to assist victims of terrorism, and believes that multilateral efforts in this field should be reinforced and reflected in the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

i) Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Addressing Radicalisation

23. Dealing with the underlying conditions conducive to terrorism and violent extremism and limiting terrorist organisations' ability to recruit new supporters is key to stemming the terrorist threat. Addressing underlying conditions requires a comprehensive whole-of-society approach including consistent outreach to vulnerable populations. Close cooperation with youth, children, women, civil society, human rights defenders and victims of terrorism remains a key to success. Involving civil society organisations in countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism remains of utmost importance for a successful approach. It is also important to continue addressing the spread of violent extremist narratives and to further promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue. The Council calls for increased engagement with priority partner countries, including at multilateral level. It reaffirms that there is a need for the EU to provide capacity-building to priority countries and regions, taking into account the different and specific contexts and national and regional Action Plans, help tailor the support to their P/CVE requirements as an inherent part of its CT dialogues with third countries, in line with the relevant Council conclusions of 6 June 2019.

j) A Gender Responsive Approach and Women's Empowerment

24. The Council recognises that women can be particularly targeted and at risk of becoming victims, including through sexual and gender-based violence, as strategic objectives of terrorist groups. Some women may also be at risk of becoming perpetrators and/or facilitators of terrorism and radicalisation.

A gender-responsive approach to countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism, which takes the diversity of experiences into account, is necessary in order to achieve sustainable results, as is the continued promotion of women's active and meaningful participation in prevention and counter-terrorism efforts. Resilience to recruitment by terrorists is strengthened through addressing the underlying conditions of terrorism and violent extremism, supporting equality between men and women, education and political and economic empowerment, and improving access to justice.

The Council further encourages Member States to support research in this field and to take results into account when designing policies, actions and assistance for partner countries.

k) Emphasis on Youth

25. Providing opportunities for young people to strengthen resilience against radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism is essential. Further attention needs to be devoted to education, vocational training, job creation and inclusiveness in order to empower young people to determine their own futures. Programmes for building bridges between young people from around the Mediterranean should be further strengthened, including by expanding existing programmes.

l) Counter-Terrorism Sanctions Regimes

26. The Council reaffirms the importance of robust and effective sanction regimes in the fight against terrorism. Respect for fundamental human rights and due process guarantees are essential for the credibility and effectiveness of restrictive measures.

The EU is determined to continue its lead in this regard. The Council welcomes the significant contribution of the UN Office of the Ombudsperson which, since its establishment, has brought fairness and transparency to the sanctions regime for Da'esh and al-Qaeda.

m) Humanitarian Space

27. Recalling its conclusions on humanitarian assistance and international humanitarian law of 25 November 2019, and in line with UNSCR 2462 (2019), the Council recognises the need to take into account the potential effect of counter-terrorism measures, including sanctions, on humanitarian action. The Council calls for the avoidance of any potential negative impact of counter-terrorism measures on exclusively humanitarian activities, including medical activities, that are carried out by impartial humanitarian actors in full compliance with humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. To that end, the Council reaffirms its continued commitment to preserving the humanitarian space, including inter alia through the development of best practices and the adoption of appropriate mitigating measures.

n) Linkages between Organised Crime and Terrorism

28. The Council recognises the importance of continued monitoring and of an effective response to the threat stemming from linkages between organised crime and terrorism. There is a need to strengthen international cooperation, in accordance with the applicable legal framework, in order to improve information exchange and cooperation between counter-terrorism, law enforcement, judicial and border control authorities. This includes mitigating the security risks of linkages in prisons between organised crime and terrorist inmates. The Council underscores the importance of UNSCR 2482 (2019), which identifies a number of different potential linkages between organised crime and terrorism as well as appropriate countermeasures.

o) Protecting Public Spaces, Critical Infrastructure and Aviation from Terrorist Threats

29. Terrorist attacks frequently target public areas such as schools, hotels, shopping centres, cultural and sports events, crowded areas, transport hubs, and, in particular, places of worship. The Council calls on the EU to continue assisting partner countries in protecting such places. This means, inter alia, funding projects and holding exchanges of best practice and guidance, including by facilitating networks. There is also a need raise the awareness of EU citizens travelling internationally. The Council further calls on the EU to continue supporting capacity building in partner countries for the protection of critical infrastructures and the resilience of networks providing critical services in a range of sectors.

p) Capacity Building

30. The Council calls for an even stronger linkage between the key cross-cutting issues outlined above and capacity-building support for partner countries. EU funding of external CT and P/CVE projects has more than tripled since 2015, standing at approximately EUR 465 million at the end of 2019. Moreover, regular impact assessments are important tools for guiding future action. Where present, the Network of counter-terrorism/security experts in EU delegations should play an important role in further developing targeted capacity-building activities in coordination with other donors, as well as in strengthening cooperation with EU Member States. At the same time, the EU needs to gain a broader perspective of the overall assistance it provides to the same recipients, including through CSDP missions and operations, which can play a role in preventing violent extremism and radicalisation, and also in non-security related areas, which often contribute to addressing the root causes of these phenomena.

International cooperation

31. Mindful of its conclusions on the action to strengthen rules-based multilateralism, adopted on 17 June 2019, the Council stresses the need to continue actively promoting counter-terrorism policies and measures based on the rule of law and international law, in particular international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international refugee law.

32. The EU will steadfastly continue to build and strengthen its strategic partnership with the leading global actors in this field, first and foremost the United Nations. It will continue to pursue cooperation and coordination with a number of partners and international and regional organisations, initiatives and other multilateral platforms, especially with key actors such as NATO, as agreed in the 2017 EU-NATO Common Set of New Proposals, the Council of Europe and the OSCE.

The EU is also a member of both the Global Counterterrorism Forum and its inspired institutions (the Global Community Engagement & Resilience Fund, the Hedayah Center and the International Institute for Justice & the Rule of Law), and the Global Coalition against Da'esh and its working groups. The EU will maintain and step up its engagement with both entities.

As a rules-based community of nations, the EU should seek to strengthen partnerships with like-minded countries and, where appropriate and with due respect for the EU institutional framework, explore opportunities for forging new partnerships.

33. This multilateral, bilateral and regional work should help facilitate joint situational awareness, operational cooperation and donor coordination both between Member States and with a broad range of non-EU actors. As further strengthening of outreach, cooperation and coordination is pursued with the EU's key strategic partners, the Council also notes the importance of continuing efforts to engage with other relevant global and regional actors, as appropriate, in pursuit of the EU's strategic interests.

Council conclusions implementation and further follow-up

34. The Council underlines the need to continuously reinforce the EU's external counter-terrorism architecture and action in line with the priorities set out above, drawing on all available means across institutions, services and internal and external policy areas with a view to maximising synergies.
35. The Council calls upon the relevant EU bodies to continue strengthening the synergy and improving the coordination between the internal and external dimensions of counter-terrorism and between EU institutions and Member States, and to ensure prioritisation when implementing relevant Council conclusions. The Council looks forward to the upcoming Security Union Strategy and to the programming under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027).
36. The Council deems it necessary to re-evaluate periodically its strategic direction on the external aspects of the EU's action on counter-terrorism. This should build on the results achieved in the implementation of these conclusions and should be based on assessments of new threats posed by terrorism and radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism.
