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# The EU's Growing Global Counter-Terrorism Role

Since 2001, argues Alex Mackenzie, the European Union (EU) has become increasingly assertive in its attempts to combat internal and external sources of terrorism. As its initiatives in South Asia and West Africa demonstrate, the EU's activities expand well beyond its partnership with the United States.

By Alex MacKenzie for ISN

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As the European Union (EU) continues to grapple with the sovereign debt crisis, it often seems as if dealing with other challenges to European security has been put on the backburner. However, terrorism continues to pose a significant threat to Europe, as demonstrated most recently by the terrorist attacks on Oslo and Utoya Island in July 2011. Indeed, the attacks perpetrated by Anders Behring Breivik demonstrate that Europe remains vulnerable to both internal and external sources of terrorism.

Yet it is often overlooked that the EU has made considerable efforts to enhance its ability to combat terrorism outside of Europe since 9/11. The introduction of internal measures, such as the European Arrest Warrant, are well-known, but what of external measures? Following the attacks on the United States, the EU made improving counter-terrorism co-operation with its principal ally an important goal. Special efforts were also made to offer counter-terrorism related assistance to several 'priority' countries around the world.

As a result, the EU has made significant progress in the development of its counter-terror activities, including border management, providing technical assistance to third states, and combating the financing of terrorism. In doing so, the EU has become one of the few important non-state counter-terrorism actors in the international system.

## **EU-US co-operation**

Despite several high-profile disagreements concerning civil liberties and data protection, the EU's most important counter-terrorism partnership has been forged with the United States. Since 9/11, both sides have signed several agreements that not only reinforce this partnership but also promote a more integrated approach to counter-terrorist activities. These agreements are focused, for example, upon enhancing trade security (the Container Security Initiative [CSI] - 2004), border management (Passenger Name Records [PNR] Agreement - 2004, 2006, 2007, and 2012), and countering terrorist financing (the SWIFT Agreement - 2010).

Accordingly, the US is dependent upon international bank transfer data from the Belgian-based Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) for the smooth operation of its [Terrorism Financing and Tracking Programme](#) (TFTP), which extracts what are considered to be suspicious financial transactions. The US has also set the standard on border management, with Canada and Australia having concluded PNR agreements with the EU. Moreover, South Korea and Qatar have expressed an interest in [PNR agreements with the EU](#), while South Africa, Malaysia, and Cuba are also preparing demands for similar arrangements. Indeed, such agreements have utility beyond that of countering terrorism and may be utilized to tackle transnational organized crime.

The close working relationship with the US has also enhanced the EU's reputation as a credible counter-terrorism actor in the eyes of other states. However, the EU's security arrangements with the US are by no means viewed favourably by all. In particular, the European Parliament – which has traditionally been keen to uphold citizens' rights and data protection – has emerged as a vocal critic of agreements that facilitate the transmission of EU citizens' data to US authorities (which often have lower data protection standards than those that exist in Europe). Therefore, while the EU is, without doubt, the US' closest partner in terms of counter-terrorism activities, concerns remain regarding how the partnership may impact upon citizens' rights on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, such concerns are likely to increase should the EU move forward with its own internal PNR and TFTP systems, both of which are modelled on the US' existing security measures.

## **Rest of the world**

The EU-US partnership may be the best documented example of the EU's role in external counter-terrorism, but it is by no means the only one. The proliferation of PNR agreements between the EU and third states over the last ten years is well-known, and other countries are likely to request similar agreements over the coming years. Less acknowledged, however, are the numerous (often small-scale) projects that the EU finances and operates abroad. And while many reinforce the EU's status as a major global counter-terrorist actor, not all projects can be deemed a success.

Following 9/11, the EU prioritized several countries for counter-terrorism related assistance. These included neighboring countries, such as Algeria and Morocco, which have in the past been linked with attacks on EU member states, such as the 2004 Madrid railway bombings. However, the North African countries have proven difficult for the wider EU to co-operate with due to their [preference for bilateral partnerships](#), particularly with their former colonial masters and more geographically proximate countries, namely, Spain, France, and Italy.

The EU has experienced more success with its counter-terror activities in South Asia, particularly in concert with the provision of economic and security assistance to Afghanistan. For instance, the EU has started to roll out projects around the world under the auspices of its Instrument for Stability (IfS). Perhaps the most noteworthy project involving the IfS in South Asia was the [provision of €15 million](#) for strengthening civilian law enforcement in Pakistan, and the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA), which ran between 2010 and 2012. In Afghanistan, the EU has also implemented a number of projects that may go some way to helping the country build institutions necessary to help combat terrorism in the long run. Key projects include the European Union Police (EUPOL) Afghanistan, where EU member states' (with the participation of some non-EU countries) police trainers are helping build up the capacity of the Afghan National Police (ANP). The EU has also been involved in efforts to improve Afghanistan's judicial system, to encourage farmers to grow crops other than opium poppies, and made substantial monetary contributions to the United Nations' Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA). Accordingly, while the EU cannot act directly to combat terrorism by military means, it can act by capacity-building and financing member state or international projects.

In addition to South Asia, the EU has also taken a recent interest in the Sahel region of West Africa.

Growing concerns over the movement of weapons from Libya following the civil war and the recent rebellion in Northern Mali have prompted the EU to act against terrorism and other threats in the region. The primary terrorist threat to the region is currently considered to be [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#) (AQIM), which reportedly has links with Malian rebels. In response to the myriad challenges facing the region, the EU has drawn up a [strategy](#) for the Sahel, in which it makes clear that security and development go hand-in-hand. In order to achieve some of the goals outlined in the strategy for the Sahel, the EU recently launched '[EUCAP Sahel](#)', a primarily civilian counter-terrorism assistance mission, to Niger, with liaison officers to be based in Mali and Mauritania.

## **Moving forward**

The EU's counter-terrorist activities continue to expand around the world. More often than not, however, such projects are on a much smaller scale to activities in South Asia and West Africa, and many are yet to be discussed to any considerable degree. Yet the sum total of the EU's counter-terrorist activities shows that Europe still faces a number of threats from terrorism. This, in turn, helps to explain why the EU is continuing to move forward with its efforts to combat terrorism abroad despite much of the Eurozone remaining in the economic doldrums. Ultimately, these developments further highlight that the EU has, over the past ten years, become one of the most important non-state actors attempting to combat terrorism.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[The European Union and the Threat of Terrorism from Nigeria](#)  
[The European Union and Its Fight Against International Terrorism](#)  
[European Counterterrorism: Current State of Affairs and Prospects](#)

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