

EU Internet Referral Unit

YEAR ONE REPORT

HIGHLIGHTS

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1. Introduction

This report presents the achievements of the first year of the EU Internet Referral Unit (IRU) and its future priorities, which are in line with its mandate.

2. The response to the threat

Europe has currently been facing the most significant terrorist threat of the past decade. While the so-called digital revolution has empowered citizens in unprecedented ways, technological developments and the emergence of social media have changed the behaviour, interaction, modus operandi and ways of communication of terrorist groups.

Recent terrorist attacks and thwarted attacks have shed light on how the Internet is currently used by terrorists as a key element to disseminate propaganda, recruit, radicalise, coordinate terrorist activities and glorify their atrocities. More recently, we have seen how terrorists use the Internet during the attack phase as well.

Cognisant of the scope of the problem, on 12 March 2015, the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council of the EU agreed that, building upon Europol's Check-the-Web (CTW) service, Europol should develop an **EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU)** by **1 July 2015**, which would comprise the following core tasks:

- To coordinate and share the identification tasks (flagging) of terrorist and violent extremist online content with relevant partners;
- To carry out and support referrals quickly, efficiently and effectively, in close cooperation with the industry;
- To support competent authorities, by providing strategic analysis and operational analysis;
- To act as a European Centre of Excellence for the above tasks.

In addition, the special European Council of 23 April 2015, on the **migration situation** in the Mediterranean Sea, as part of the political direction given to EU agencies, called for Europol and the EU IRU to **expand its Open Source and Internet monitoring activities**, in order to contribute to the disruption of illegal immigrant smuggling networks, by detecting and requesting removal of Internet content used by traffickers to attract migrants and refugees.

3. EU IRU establishment

The EU IRU was established as planned, on 1 July 2015 and as per its Blueprint, its role is to anticipate and pre-empt terrorist abuse of online tools, as well as to play a pro-active advisory role vis-à-vis EU Member States and the private sector in this regard. The Unit within Europol forms a key capability of the newly established **European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC)**. The EU IRU is anticipated to act as a **central service** for all EU Member States and third party cooperation partners, helping to reduce terrorist propaganda content on the Internet, while building partnerships with the private sector (to promote 'self-regulation' by online service providers).

3.1 EU IRU resources

The EU IRU comprises of a team of experts with multiple and diverse knowledge and skills, ranging from experts in religiously inspired terrorism, translators, ICT developers and law enforcement experts in counter terrorism. The IRU is modestly staffed but continues to grow and will reach 21 staff members by the end of 2016. We expect further increases in 2017.

Four Member States have decided to specifically support the EU IRU by seconding staff. The Netherlands appointed a Seconded National Expert for the duration of Q4 2015, and Bulgaria, France and Romania have agreed to long term seconded experts in the Unit. In addition, the United Kingdom has appointed a dedicated Liaison Officer to the UK Liaison Bureau in order to provide a dedicated operational channel of communication between the EU IRU and the UK CT IRU.

4. EU IRU Strategy

In line with Europol's strategic goals, the EU IRU is focusing on three main strategic goals until the end of 2017:

1. Effectively countering online radicalisation and recruitment efforts by terrorists, by strengthening an adaptive referral capability and mapping and influencing online terrorist propaganda networks;
2. Providing a core Internet Investigation Support Capability based on operational support and strategic analysis;
3. Striving to become a European Centre of Excellence, by strategically enhancing partnerships with cooperation partners and investing resources in Research & Development (R&D) Coordination as an Innovation Hub for Europol and the EU MS in the field of counter terrorism.

4.1 Strategic Goal 1 - Effectively countering online radicalisation and recruitment efforts by terrorists, by strengthening an adaptive referral capability and mapping and influencing online terrorist propaganda networks

4.1.1 Referrals

One of the core tasks of the EU IRU is flagging terrorist and violent extremist content online and cooperating with online service providers with the aim of removing this content. In agreement with the Member States, the EU IRU focuses on referring content issued by al-Qaeda (AQ) or Daesh. The identified extremist or terrorist content is referred to the social media platforms which act according to their own Terms of Reference in removing such content. A referral activity (meaning the reporting of terrorist and extremist online content to the concerned online service provider) does not constitute an enforceable act. Thus, the decision and removal of the referred terrorist and extremist online content is taken by the concerned service provider under their own responsibility and accountability (in reference to their Terms and Conditions).

The EU IRU has continuously worked on developing a resilient referral capability able to adapt to a constantly changing landscape and fast technological developments. Referrals to the online platforms have been made both following requests received from Member States and as a result of Open Source Scanning by the EU IRU team.

- **Targeted approach**

The EU IRU tactical approach towards referrals is targeted. Instead of trying to follow each piece of propaganda online, the procedure aims to focus on the propaganda linked to a high profile event, and relayed by high profile accounts (i.e. Paris attack, Brussels attack, Magnanville murder, Orlando shooting). The primary objective is to be relevant during the “viral” time of the propaganda. The secondary objective is to gather information to better understand the tactics and modus operandi of the main online propagandists. During the EU IRU’s first year, in order to ensure this maximum impact on terrorist networks’ disruption, the Unit supported the **CT IRU** Action Days in March 2016.

- **Widespread impact across various online service providers**

The EU IRU has identified over **70** platforms used by terrorist groups to spread their propaganda materials and has been referring Internet content across over **31** online platforms. This is a voluntary arrangement and it is ultimately for the companies to decide whether to remove the material. Nevertheless, in 91.4% of the EU IRU referrals, the material has been swiftly removed. Additionally, the EU IRU is in constant dialogue and engagement with new platforms that are being used by terrorist propagandists, in order to help them increase their resilience against terrorist related propaganda.

- **EU Internet Forum**

The EU IRU has been a key player of the **EU Internet Forum**. The EU Internet Forum is a platform launched by the EU Commission on 3 December 2015, bringing together EU Interior Ministers as well as a number of Internet companies, Europol, and the EU Counter Terrorism Co-ordinator. The aim of the Forum has been to address, in a coordinated manner, the phenomenon of the spread of terrorist and violent extremist propaganda to a large proportion of the global online population. Within the framework of the EU Internet Forum, the EU IRU has and continues to play a key role in addressing the Forum's first objective of reducing accessibility to terrorist content online. It has engaged with the Internet industry with the aim of improving the current, voluntary referral process and sharing best practices and expertise.

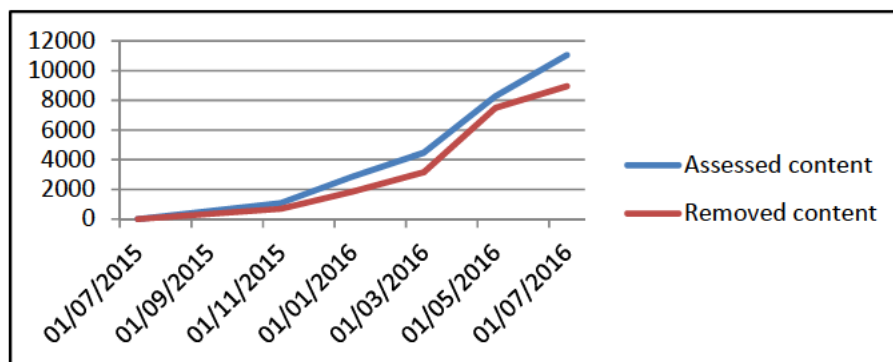
- **Statistics**

The referral activity shows a sharp increase across the past year. The EU IRU objective for its second year of activity is to magnify its impact and effectiveness in the fight against online radicalisation and recruitment efforts by terrorist.

Table 1: Referrals statistics 1

	05/11/2015	01/07/2016
Total content assessed	1079	11 050
Proposals for referral	690	9787
Content removed by online service providers	511	8949
Success rate	74%	91.40%
Platforms identified	9	70
Platforms referred to	7	31

Figure 1: Assessed and removed items from 01/07/2015 until 01/07/2016



The EU IRU has incorporated the Check-the-Web (CTW) service and built upon its knowledge and expertise. The Check-the-Web portal is an electronic reference library of jihadist terrorist online propaganda. It contains, in a structured way, original statements, publications, videos and audios produced by terrorist groups or their supporters. Competent authorities of EU Member States and associated Third Parties can access this content and analysis conducted on it directly through Europol’s secure network.

Table 2: Contribution to CTW

Contributions to CTW	Since 01/07/2015	Total (since 2007)
Videos & audios	1 111	4 963
Publications	225	4 335
Statements	206	4 000
Total	1 542	13 298

4.2 Strategic Goal 2 - Providing a core Internet Investigation Support Capability based on operational support and strategic analysis

4.2.1 Operational Support

Since its set-up, the EU IRU has expanded its activities to counter online radicalisation and recruitment by terrorists, by supporting Member States with Internet investigation activities. This service started in the context of the increasing number of attacks and threats in Europe, where it became evident that resources available to investigate Internet based communication were limited in the Member States. Therefore, the EU IRU decided to step up and to invest in the expertise and technology to provide better support for high profile counter terrorism Member States investigations (e.g. Vendredi 13¹, Thalys, Brussels attack, Magnanville).

In this context, the Unit provided Internet investigative support to 44 operational cases and delivered 82 operational products (of which 19 were delivered in the context of the Taskforce Fraternité) and deployed 3 EU IRU staff on the spot during the Paris attack and 1 staff member to support French national law enforcement during the Euro 2016 championship. The EU IRU has now 3

¹ Taskforce Fraternité.

FTEs allocated to Fraternité on a continuous basis. Beyond this support, the EU IRU is ready to engage in the framework of the **ECTC Joint Liaison Team**.

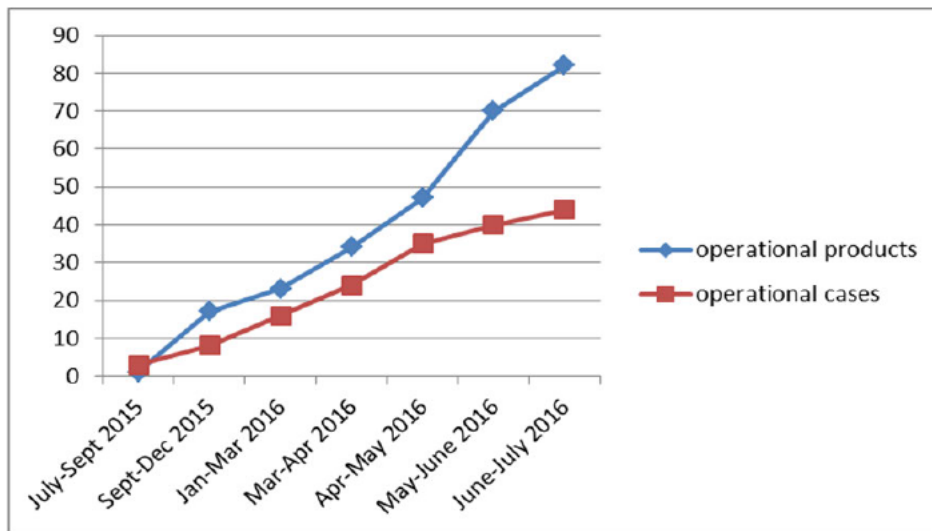
In addition, according to its mandate, the EU IRU expanded its open source and Internet monitoring activities, in order to contribute to the disruption of illegal immigrant smuggling networks. The EU IRU has processed **122** accounts linked to illegal immigration upon request from the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC).

Furthermore, the Unit has supported **43** operational queries and has contributed to **7** Investigation Initiation Documents and **1** Intelligence Notification. Moreover, due to specific counter terrorism related links which have been identified in all Hotspots of the Greek islands, a deployment was requested for frontline support in Greece. The Unit, in a joint effort with all the Operations Units, has deployed **3** staff so far to support the Hotspots in Greece.

• **Statistics**

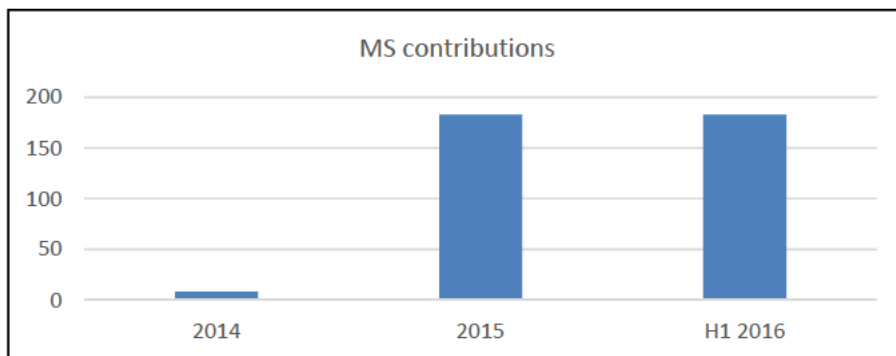
Operational support:

Figure 3: Operational support between 1 July 2015 and 1 July 2016



Since its establishment, the EU IRU has received **366 contributions** in total from the EU Member States, and **26** IRU National Contact Points have been established to date.

Figure 4: Member States contribution since 2014



4.2.2 Strategic analysis

In order to support competent authorities, the EU IRU provides strategic analysis to identify terrorism threats, including trend analysis, early warning and horizontal scanning, as well as crime prevention.

In terms of strategic analysis, the Unit has delivered in total **58** Strategic Reports (including **45** Weekly Intelligence messages). The Unit provided strategic analysis on notable topics, such as the recruitment of women by the Islamic State, “lone actors” or cyber hacking collectives claiming to be part of jihadist groups.

In addition, the EU IRU has been facilitating cooperation between EU Member States and academia to develop common projects on specific thematic areas (“lone actor” projects with Lithuania, Project Regulus², and CLAT³).

EU IRU:

- Contributed **3** chapters for the [Europol 2016 TE-SAT report](#);
- Contributed **2** chapters for the Handbook on self-radicalisation (as a result of the Lithuanian-led ISEC project on lone actors “Handbook on Radicalisation Warning Behaviours” was published in June 2016);
- Participated in an advisor capacity to the CLAT project;
- Supported the REGULUS project.

4.3 Strategic Goal 3 - Striving to become a European Centre of Excellence, by strategically enhancing partnerships with cooperation partners and investing resources in Research & Development (R&D) Coordination as an Innovation Hub for Europol and the EU MS in the field of counter terrorism.

The EU IRU, in close cooperation with other Focal Points within the ECTC, European Cybercrime Centre (EC3), ICT and the private sector, has directed resources to the **development of projects on new techniques, tools and processes**, following the pace of technological development in this sector. Participation and/or collaboration on various research projects are envisaged.

This capability requires **huge investment in terms of human and technical resources**. This happens in a very volatile environment where terrorist groups continuously update their modus operandi, consequently there is an exponential increase in the complexity and volume of information that the EU IRU is processing. Regardless of these difficulties, the EU IRU will continue investing resources in this field as it is critical to the delivery of the referral and operational support services.

4.3.1 ECTC Advisory Group

Given the challenges brought on by a constantly changing landscape and in order to act as a Centre of Excellence in the fields of its activities, the EU IRU needs to bring together the necessary expertise and information from an expanding range of partners. The EU IRU has identified the need to step up

² Project Regulus requested the EU IRU’s support and contacts to reach out to EU law enforcement and academia, who are engaged in the field of countering the threat of “lone actor” terrorism.

³ CLAT project was led by a consortium of UK and Dutch think tanks with the participation of the UK’s Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and other EU police forces.

the strategic cooperation and exchange of non-operational best practices with third parties, which have recognised expertise in the area of terrorist exploitation of online communications. Additionally, the EU Internet Forum has called for increased engagement and cooperation among the main actors responsible for referrals and counter-narratives.

Within this context, the EU IRU has proposed the establishment of an **ECTC Advisory Group** on the abuse of online communication by terrorist groups for propaganda purposes and online recruitment. The Advisory group concept addresses the ECTC's need to maintain an optimal level of expertise in the field of online terrorist propaganda and extremism and implements the EU Internet Forum Objectives. The EU IRU has initiated the process for the establishment of the ECTC Advisory Group and the first meeting is projected for October 2016.

5. Conclusion

After 6 months of a pilot phase and consolidation, the EU IRU's current capabilities are in line with those foreseen in the Initial Operational Capability phase.

For the last year, the EU IRU followed a "start-up" approach, by focusing on innovation and fast deliveries. It operated through two streams of work: the improvement of existing capabilities and the development of new ones. The complexities of the ICT implementation and significant staff shortages have been two critical hindrances in the development of the Unit. In parallel, since its establishment the Unit has been operating in a challenging environment in the field of counter terrorism. Terrorist attacks and thwarted attacks in Europe required the Unit's focus and resources in order to provide a fast and uninterrupted service to the EU Member States.

Despite these challenges and limited resources, the EU IRU managed to establish an interdisciplinary team and provide a unique capability as a centre of excellence in the field. The unit has added **two new core tools** to the ECTC toolbox, namely the Referrals and Internet investigation services.

The Unit has developed a **resilient referral capability** able to adapt to a constantly changing landscape and fast technological developments. To achieve this goal, the EU IRU built on the knowledge and expertise from Focal Point Check-the-Web. This capability has been supported by a team of experts with multiple and diverse knowledge and skills, ranging from experts in religiously inspired terrorism, translators, ICT developers and law enforcement experts in counter terrorism.

In parallel, the EU IRU, considering the increase in terrorist attacks in Europe and in illegal immigration, identified the need to develop a centralised concept for **Internet Investigations** within the ECTC. It has provided high-quality operational support and analysis to EU Member States and delivered strategic analysis to competent authorities.

The Unit has also been actively participating in the **EU Internet Forum** and has engaged its resources in the delivery of its envisaged objectives. With the support of the European Commission it has increased Europol cooperation with online service companies to promote 'self-regulation' activities by the online industry. It has become a trusted partner allowing new avenues for cooperation for the benefit of the EU Member States, both in the prevention and investigation fields.

The Unit still aims to reach its Full Operational Capability as soon as possible. The EU IRU has already achieved a lot with limited resources. The "start-up" approach has enabled the Unit to quickly reach a position of high relevance both to EU Member States and the private sector. However, the Unit is currently in the phase where it requires mature and standardised processes, products and services. This is indispensable for the Unit if it is to build on its achievements, ensure sustainable deliverables

and also provide a solid basis for evolving towards Full Operational Capability. This cannot be achieved without the appropriate budget and human resources.

The EU IRU will, by July 2017, provide a 24/7⁴ referral service and real time access to referral information for Member States' investigators. It will be at the cutting edge with techniques and technology to disrupt online terrorist networks, and will provide expertise for Internet based investigations across the EU. The development of a strong referral capability, which will be informed by tactics derived from operational analysis and outreach to the private sector, will bridge the gap between prevention and attribution. The EU IRU will then be in the position to quickly adapt to the agile and volatile terrorist threats. Last but not least, it will be in a position to better understand how propagandist networks operate and evolve, thus able to effectively support Member States in their attempts to disrupt and arrest.

⁴ As per its Blueprint, the EU IRU is envisaged to deliver a 24/7 available service, benefiting from an envisaged broader 24/7 available Front Office capability within Europol Operations Department.

6. Annex

