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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Delegations
Subject: EU threat assessment in the field of counterterrorism

INTRODUCTION

1. The Terrorism Working Party (TWP) is tasked, if required by changes to the terrorist threat picture, to prepare a set of conclusions and policy recommendations or to adjust the existing recommendations, on the basis of a report from Europol giving an outlook on development in jihadist terrorism¹ and on the EU INTCEN six monthly assessment of the Islamist terrorist threat².
2. In line with the agreed way forward, the Presidency drew up the current document on the basis of the EU INTCEN sixth monthly Islamist terrorist threat assessment and EUROPOL's report. The preliminary findings were presented at the TWP meeting on 19 March 2019, and the present paper will be discussed on 16 April and 7 May 2019.

¹ 7230/19 - An outlook on developments in jihadist terrorism - sixth report
(RESTREINT UE/EU RESTRICTED)

² EEAS(2019) 10064 - Six monthly assessment of the Islamist terrorist threat
(CONFIDENTIEL UE/EU CONFIDENTIAL)

3. The findings in both papers are complementary and - up to a certain extent - convergent, both concluding that there are no major changes to the overall picture. Nevertheless, taking into account also the comments/contributions from Member States during the TWP meeting on 19 March 2019, the current recommendations could benefit from an update, taking into account recent changes to the terrorist threat picture and the work carried out at the EU-level since the last threat assessment.

The Presidency would kindly invite delegations to send their comments on the revised findings and recommendations until 9 April 2019.

FINDINGS

The above-mentioned report and assessment can be summarised in the following findings:

- The threat level remains high and attempts to carry out new terrorist attacks in the EU are highly likely.
- The low number of completed attacks (as well as the high number of foiled attacks), are a result of the improved cooperation between intelligence services and law enforcement agencies at national and EU level.
- Recent attacks have been perpetrated primarily by lone actors, inspired by terrorist groups, using unsophisticated weapons, home-made explosives or vehicles and simple *modi operandi*. Recent incidents show that terrorists are interested in the use of CBRN materials. Daesh-inspired attacks continue to be the main terrorist threat to the EU, although attacks by AQ sympathisers remain a possibility.

- The scheduled release of a significant number of individuals convicted for terrorism or terrorist related offences, as well as potentially radicalised inmates represent a serious security threat in the near future. While unevenly distributed throughout Europe, radicalisation in prisons is a particular challenge for a number of Member States.
- The number of returns of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to Europe has remained relatively low, but the threat they pose is significant, since they have acquired weapons and explosives training and may try to make use of it once they return to Europe. Furthermore, women and children returned from conflict areas represent a potential long-term security threat.
- It is likely that European FTFs still in the Syria-Iraq region either will remain there or try to relocate to other theatres of jihad, with Libya becoming a potential safe haven for Daesh militants. Such a development would pose direct risks to the EU, especially given the local security situation, easy access and close distance to Europe.
- Nevertheless, European FTFs could attempt to return to the EU, also trying to use migrant routes and to take advantage of the challenges associated to identity checks.
- Also, asylum seekers with previous connections, in their countries of origin, with individuals having terrorist background could facilitate the radicalisation process / influence the spread of radical or violent extremist ideas.
- In the long run, the Western Balkans could provide fertile ground for the emergence of a new generation of radicalised individuals, and the fact that a large number of currently incarcerated Islamist extremists from the region are due for release over the next two years do pose supplementary challenges.
- Politically or ideologically motivated violent extremism and terrorism needs to be addressed in all its forms also considering the phenomenon of mutual radicalisation and polarisation in society. The prominence of Islamist terrorism and the radical propaganda messages could contribute to a rise of the risks associated to right-wing extremism.

- While all major Jihadist groups maintain a presence on social media, the volume and content of official Daesh propaganda have decreased, however supporter-created content has compensated, to some extent, for the loss.
- There is an increased interest of terrorists for chemical and biological agents (e.g. ricin), and unmanned armed vehicles (UAV's) could be used in future terrorist plots.
- Terrorist cyberattacks are still less likely, given the lack of sufficient capability. However, terrorists might try to misuse the new technologies

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the findings and taking into account the ongoing work at EU level, the following adjustments to the recommendations endorsed by the Standing Committee on Operational Cooperation on Internal Security (COSI) in May 2018, should be discussed as a matter of priority:

- Taking into consideration the high level of threat from home-grown terrorists, further efforts to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism are needed, focusing on priority areas agreed by the Steering Board on Radicalisation.
- The increasing risks associated to the scheduled release of a significant number of prison inmates convicted for terrorism require efficient measures to tackle prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism in prisons and following their release from prison.
- It is also important to increase the understanding about the role of ideology in the radicalisation process. This includes extremist Salafi ideology as well as ideologies within left-wing and right wing extremist movements.
- The EU tools such as the Regulation on the marketing and use of explosives precursors and the interoperability package should be implemented as soon as possible.

- Work towards a common EU approach on returnees should be continued, taking into account the situation in the EU Member States and the closer neighbourhood. The discussion at EU-level on how to tackle European FTFs (incl. women and children) under arrest in detention in Syria and Iraq should also continue, making full use of the available EU instruments. Increasing cooperation with key third countries and international partners as regards getting access to battlefield information is needed in order to investigate and prosecute FTFs and returnees, as well as to protect the European borders.
- The work with third countries should be enhanced in view of the capacity building and information exchange on FTFs (travels, possible returns, existing networks facilitating the travels). The implementation of the EU-Western Balkans Joint Action Plan on CT and the agreement of bilateral implementation plans with the partners in the region are of utmost importance. Moreover, particular attention should be given to the insertion of FTF nationals from the Western Balkans in the SIS II.
- While the adoption of the proposal for a Regulation on preventing the dissemination of terrorist content online remains a priority, increased efforts should be made under the framework of the EU Internet Forum to tackle the spread of terrorist content online and to ensure the timely removal of online terrorist and violent extremist messages. The Europol capabilities to support Member States actions to prevent the dissemination of terrorist content based upon the voluntary approach in relation to hosting service providers should be exploited and further developed.
- The implementation of measures suggested in the EU Action Plans on the protection of public places and on strengthening the resilience against CBRN-related risks should be speeded up. To better protect critical infrastructures, including the cyber environment, is also of high importance.
- Increased attention should be paid to emerging threats, and also to the security risks as well as opportunities stemming from the new technologies.

- The relevant JHA working parties should continue their efforts to translate these recommendations into operational measures and to address the practical needs, as part of the reflection process on the future priorities and way forward in the area.

NEXT STEPS

The Presidency invites TWP to discuss and endorse these policy recommendations with a view to including them in the ongoing work and implementation of actions against terrorism.

