



ENC ANALYSIS



EU Counter-Terrorism Efforts & MENA Violent Extremism: Did the EU help MENA Countries Enhance their Security?¹

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¹The claims on the decline in terrorist deaths in MENA doesn't include the recent Hamas-Israeli armed confrontation that resulted in thousands of deaths. This is mainly due to the controversy associated with the nature of this conflict and the character of the Hamas military actions.

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About the author



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Abstract

Today, terrorism in MENA has relatively ebbed. Militant Islamist groups in MENA, and their activities, aren't making many headlines. This can surely be attributed to several factors, including across-country collaboration amongst MENA countries. Yet, this analysis claims EU counter-terrorism efforts have also played a role in inhibiting this form of militancy in MENA. The focus is dedicated to investigating these efforts and their impact on MENA Islamist militancy as well as the controversy associated with prioritising its own security over support to democracy and human rights.

Keywords: MENA, terrorism, insurgency, counterterrorism, EU, regional security

Introduction

Since 2011, MENA countries have suffered a clear surge in militant insurgency, mostly by Islamist groups. ISIS, AQIM, ISIL, al-Qaeda were strongly involved in recruiting members, planning and carrying out violent attacks that inflicted both human and infrastructural damage across countries, inside and outside MENA (USIP, 2016/2017). In fact, over the last two decades, EU countries, like France (BBC, 2015), Belgium (CNN, 2017), Germany (Eurojust, 2018), Spain (EEAS, 2020), and Norway (Le Monde, 2022) were hit hard by terrorist attacks that were either directly or indirectly related to MENA Islamist militants (Hussein, 2021).

Yet, for the last couple of years, the terrorist death toll in MENA has taken a downward slope. The number of casualties resulting from terrorist attacks in MENA in 2022 demonstrated a sharp decline of about a third (32%) with less than 800 deaths, which was the lowest death count for the region since 2013. Likewise, the number of deaths resulting from terrorist attacks in MENA sank sharply from more than half of world terrorist deaths in 2016 to less than a sixth of it (12%) in 2022 (GTI, 2023). This analysis paper claims this decline in MENA terrorist deaths is the result of multiple factors that inhibit the thriving of terrorist groups. Yet, it's also the claim that EU counter-terrorism efforts (CTEs) have been among these factors and did play a role in making it quite challenging for militants to execute strong blows to disrupt peace and public order inside or outside the countries they reside in. As Islamist militants have been saliently active in the region on one hand and were responsible for thousands of deaths in it over the last few decades on the other, this paper is focused on the MENA terrorist death decline and EU CTEs. In two key sections, the scope of MENA Islamist militancy, the EU CTEs and why they are believed to positively contribute to its decline will be analysed.

Post-2011 Terrorism

Islamist militancy has been part of MENA landscapes for long decades. To name a few, they have made headlines in Egypt (Ibrahim, 1982), Algeria (Filiu, 2009), Morocco (Boukhars, 2005; Pargeter, 2008) and Saudi Arabia (Hegghammer, 2008), at different points of time during the second half of the twentieth century. At the break of the millennium, 9/11 shocked the entire world not only with the massive

destruction it inflicted on the USA, but also by the accurate planning and execution of the attacks. Key figures of al-Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden and Ayman elZawahri, originally came from MENA countries (USIP, 2016/2017, 18). This fact, along with the acknowledgment that there is a strand of Islamists who believe and propagate the use of violent activism to make their case heard or even towards establishing an Islamic state, raised concerns on MENA countries, mostly Muslim-dominated, as providing breeding soils for such militancy.

The fear and concern became more immense after the 2011 wave of uprisings instigated a state of political upheaval that compromised domestic security across the region (Palma, 2019). The frequency of attacks and the amount of damage they caused could neither be overlooked nor denied. Adding insult to injury, Islamist militants in MENA were reportedly training terrorists to carry out attacks in other regions, either physically or online. Several of them reportedly thrived on the brutal and massive civil wars that broke in Syria, Libya and Yemen (Durac, 2015, 38-40; UNODC, 2021).

This has been changing in the last few years. Militants aren't thriving anymore in MENA. As stated earlier, there was a sharp decline in terrorist deaths in the region, both in figures and as a proportion to global counts. Why is this the case? One may number a couple of non-EU candidate factors that could help explain their decline:

One, developing military capabilities in the region. Out of a strong sense of the imminent security challenge posed by militants, several MENA countries sought upgrading their armies. The Middle East received almost half of arms deals with the USA in between 2013-2017 and Saudi Arabia received about fifth (18%) of US exports for the same period (SIPRI Fact Sheet, 2018). Likewise, the region counted for more than 40% of US arms exports in between 2018-2022, although there was a slight decline compared to 2013-2017 and Saudi Arabia still counted for about fifth of its exports for 2018-2022 (SIPRI Fact Sheet, 2022). In a similar vein, several MENA countries engaged in joint military drills as part of their efforts to upgrade their combat and defence capabilities. For instance, Egypt actively engaged in several military drills with countries from inside and outside MENA over the last ten years. The Egyptian Armed Forces participated in a joint drill, called Zayed 3, with its Emirati counterpart to improve technical and combat skills of their units (MENA Affairs, 2021). In 2022, it engaged with Jordan in a joint military drill in called Aqaba

7, as part of a series of drills between the two countries (Middle East News Agency, 2022a), another one with Jordan, called “Castle of Mountain,” including combat training and a simulation of a real-life raid (Middle East News Agency, 2022b), and a drill comprising air and naval exercises with Greece (Ahram Online, 2022).

Two, across-country interventions to thwart militants. The UAE is a key MENA country in the fight against Islamist militants (Ardemagni, 2016). As countries affected by prolonged civil wars opened the door for these groups to thrive in the MENA region, the UAE was engaged, on multiple and often simultaneous fronts, to thwart the major security threat posed by their violence, including supporting key parties in civil wars which allegedly fought these groups (Voice of America, 2014; France 24, 2015; El Yaakoubi, 2016). It also joined forces with other MENA countries towards fighting them. In Libya, it joined forces with Egypt, for several years, in support of the Haftar National Liberation Army, in an effort to thwart Islamist militancy (Gearan, 2014, France 24, 2019). Likewise, it was strongly involved in the Yemeni civil war, partly to hunt down al Qaeda elements, even that its involvement was initially motivated by its attempt to restrain the Houthi expanding control over Yemeni territory (Reuters, 2016; Heras, 2018). It also had close cooperation with the United Nations in fighting terrorism and dedicated much effort to military and non-military approaches to combat terrorists. Noteworthy, it contributed to the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/ISIL (UNITAD), whose task is to collect and store evidence of serious crimes committed by this group in Iraq (UAEUN, n.d.).

EU CTE & Their Role

The EU has long shown concern about Islamist militancy and was a victim itself, more than once, of its attacks. The real flex for the EU and its members resided, and probably still does, in striking a balance between guarding basic rights and freedoms, especially with a long tradition of standing for humanitarian values and norms, while preempting its member states from hosting terrorists or falling victim to terrorist attacks.

Unsurprisingly, its spending on the CTEs has increased over time, mainly to enhance cooperation between law enforcement authorities at state level on one hand and the EU entities in charge of security and justice, such as Europol and

Eurojust on the other hand (Bakowski, 2023). From a structural point of view, three key entities are in charge of the CTE in Europe. These are: The Council of Europe, the EU and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). While the Council of Europe is focused on the legal framework, addressing the factors leading to terrorism, and safeguarding key European values, the OSCE is a forum for political dialogue on security issues and a platform for possible joint action. Its membership comprises more than fifty countries from North America, Europe and Asia. Unfortunately, all of its decisions are reached by consensus, but not legally binding (UNDOC, 2018).

The EU is evidently concerned about the threat of terrorism and has paid enormous efforts to combat it. Towards this end, the EU has long set key strategic objectives to fight terrorism that were focused, inter alia, on inhibiting access of terrorists to resources, enhancing international efforts to fight terrorism, addressing factors that help terrorist groups to recruit its members (EU Monitor, 2004). Even that its member states are basically responsible for their own security, the EU provides several tools to help maintain and enhance the security of its member states. These can be summarised as follows:

- The Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA (amended in 2008), providing a common definition of terrorist and terrorist-related crimes to promote cooperation, mainly amongst member states (Official Journal of the European Communities, 2002). It was replaced in 2017 by The EU DIRECTIVE on Combating Terrorism 2017/541 which aimed at harmonising the legal framework for prosecuting terrorist offences inside EU countries by setting a minimum of rules and standards (Official Journal of the European Union, 2017).
- In 2003, a Committee of Experts on Terrorism (CODEXTER) was created, it is an intergovernmental body in charge of coordinating efforts by the Council of Europe on combating terrorism. It focused on the use of internet by terrorists and radicalization among other themes. In 2018, it turned into the Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Committee (The Council of Europe, n.d.).
- EU Counterterrorism Strategies. The EU CTE is largely framed under the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy of 2005, adopted by the European Council. According to it, the Union is committed to combating terrorism at a global level through four key pillars: Prevent, Protect, Pursue and Respond. It was further revised and modified in later versions of 2008 and 2014 (UNODC, 2018).

- It concluded an agreement on Terrorism Finance Tracking Programme (TFTP) with the United States that entered into force in 2010 (Delivet, 2016). It also established an Anti-Money Laundry system. In 2015, a Money Laundering Directive ((EU) 2015/849) (MLD4) was adopted to boost EU's protection against money laundering and/or funding terrorism; it allowed tracing money transfers from and into the EU (MLD4, n.d.). Most recently, more strict measures were adopted through a deal between the EU Parliament and Council to further obstruct and trace money laundry. This new agreement improves tracing money laundry at state level as well as coordination among countries towards that end (Council of the European Union, 2024).
- In 2011, The European Commission created a radicalization awareness raising network. It is focused on an exchange of experience and good practice towards those who might have leanings towards extremism or violence (Delivet, 2016).
- In 2020, a Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU was adopted by the European Commission. It is concerned with anticipating threats and risks, fighting radicalisation and extremism, and follow-up after violent attacks (EEAS, 2023).

In addition, one can safely claim the EU learned a few lessons from the attacks it encountered across its territory. Key among them was realising that culprits from inside the EU, in several major deadly attacks, were travelling to high-risk areas, including Iraq and Syria, where militants were thriving (Hussein, 2021). EU officials started scrutinising its citizens and residents who travelled to these areas. This was mainly made possible through item 12 of the EU Directive on Combating terrorism, above, that stipulated:

Considering the seriousness of the threat and the need, in particular, to stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, it is necessary to criminalise outbound travelling for the purpose of terrorism, namely not only the commission of terrorist offences and providing or receiving training but also the participation in the activities of a terrorist group. It is not indispensable to criminalise the act of travelling as such. Furthermore, travel to the territory of the Union for the purpose of terrorism presents a growing security threat. Member States may also decide to address terrorist threats arising from travel for the purpose of terrorism to the Member State concerned by criminalising preparatory acts, which may include planning or conspiracy, with a view to committing or contributing to a terrorist offence. Any act of facilitation of such travel should also be criminalised.

(Official Journal of the European Union, 2017).

Yet, technology lent the EU a big hand towards that end. Out of knowing that terrorists use the internet to recruit EU citizens and residents, the EU, and its Council, endorsed a regulation 2021/784 on the dissemination of terrorist content online (Official Journal of the European Union, 2021). The key purpose of this regulation is to take down terrorist content within an hour and thus shield EU citizens from the proliferation of these ideas that are commonly used to recruit terrorists and/or guide them to carry out terrorist attacks (European Commission, 2022). The monitoring and control over internet content, that came through it, was only made possible through IT which allows detecting the content and reporting it to the online platforms, which are compelled, acc. to this regulation, to take down the reported content.

Another key and related lesson learned was that terrorism was a global phenomenon, requiring action across borders. The fact that terrorists often breed outside the EU brought the latter to the conclusion that much of its CTE should involve non-EU countries. Hence, the EU assisted MENA countries in combating militancy. In this regard, it adopted two key schemes:

One, regional cooperation dialogues/projects/initiatives. For instance, in 2016, it presented the Global Strategy for the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union (EU), identifying terrorism as a key threat to the EU and the dire need to promote cooperation with EU neighbourhood countries. Relatedly, it created a program called the Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE), comprising a number of specific actions to facilitate Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) projects to strengthen conditions that promote development, and resilience against extremism. From 2013, around €38 million were allocated to multiple STRIVE actions in more than twenty countries worldwide to prevent/counter violent extremism. Several MEN countries benefit from this programme including Tunisia, Yemen and Iraq (CTMORSE, n.d.). Another project is PREVEX (Preventing Violent Extremism), received funding from the EU Horizon program in 2020. It focuses on MENA and the Balkans, and it investigates case studies of violent extremism, which are then regionally compared. The project seeks to improve the understanding of the different factors leading to violent

extremism. It is expected to contribute to the development of effective policies preventing violence by cementing societal resilience (EUI, n.d.).

Two, bilateral cooperation schemes between the EU and individual MENA countries. For instance, the EU engaged in initiatives to combat organised crime, terrorism and fraud with the UAE as well as their cooperation in MENA post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian aid. One key joint project is the Hedayah Center – an independent international think tank, in Abu Dhabi, focused on fighting extremism (Dajani, 2017).

Obviously, there are concerns regarding the EU CTEs. For one thing, European countries are frequently accused, or at least blamed, for turning a blind eye on MENA autocracies, out of concern for its own security (Lynch, 2021; Hussein, 2022). There is even a claim that EU efforts to support democratisation in its neighbourhood have unintentionally fallen short of its ambitions due to EU bureaucratic pitfalls (Dandashly & Noutcheva, 2019). For another thing, the aforementioned EU Directive 2017/541 sets the alarm for the protection of human rights through its broad definition of a set of crimes, including offences of travel for the purpose of terrorism and public provocation to commit acts of terrorism that might in application diminish human rights (ECNL, 2021; Gherbaoui & Scheinin, 2022).

Conclusion

Today's evident decline in MENA terrorism deaths can't be solely attributed to one single factor. Several factors were at play to diminish its scope. The EU, out of concern for its own security and based on the various measures listed in this paper, is believed to have contributed to this current state of decline. On one hand, it made it more challenging for militants to use the internet to spread their spell amongst its citizens. On the other hand, it created projects to coordinate efforts with, and assist, MENA countries to fight violent extremism. Obviously, there are no guarantees that militants won't thrive again in MENA. But one good thing learned out of the current decline in MENA terrorist deaths is that it takes multilateral efforts to besiege them and their fatal attacks on one hand and that key international actors, like the EU, can always help dry the swamps of militancy inside and outside its territory towards enhancing its own security on the other hand.

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