



**Policy Brief**

# **The terrorism situation in Europe: impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and online trends**

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## The terrorism situation in Europe: impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and online trends

### 1. Main figures

The figures reported to Europol by EU Member States (MS) in relation to terrorist activities recorded in 2020 show that the threat posed by terrorist groups in Europe continues to be high.

- » A total of 57 completed, failed and foiled terrorist attacks were reported by EU MS in 2020; the UK reported 62 terrorist incidents and Switzerland reported two probable jihadist terrorist attacks;
- » A total of 21 people in the EU were killed in terrorist attacks in the EU in 2020. Only one person was targeted, while the other fatal victims were chosen at random as representatives of populations identified as enemies on ideological grounds;
- » A total of 449 arrests on suspicion of terrorist offences in EU MS were reported in 2020; the UK reported 185 terrorism-related arrests;
- » EU MS assessed that in 2020 jihadist terrorism remained the greatest terrorist threat in the EU.

The number of terrorist attacks in EU MS in 2020 was comparable to 2019, but decreased compared to 2018. The number of arrests on suspicious of terrorist offences in EU MS was significantly lower than in 2019; it is still unclear whether this decrease is linked to a change in the operational capacities of public authorities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Terrorism in the EU in 2020





## 2. Impact of COVID-19 on terrorism and extremism in Europe in 2020

### 1. The restrictions on travel, possibly among other factors, contributed to a low number of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) leaving Europe, as well as of returnees to Europe.

It is difficult to collate definite overall EU numbers of FTFs and returnees, but most EU MS saw the numbers of FTFs and returnees relatively stagnant in 2020.

A number of European countries however still consider the threat emanating from returnees to be significant, due to the combat experience, knowledge, capabilities and potential motivations not only to conduct attacks, but also to engage in radicalisation and propaganda activities, logistical support, or terror financing.

### 2. Extremists and terrorists tried to exploit different aspects of the pandemic to create narratives in line with their ideological persuasions.

Restrictive measures taken by governments such as lock-downs were integrated in the **right wing extremist propaganda**: for example, Belgium noted right-wing extremists arguing that immigration aggravated the spread of COVID-19 and that asylum centres were hotbeds of contamination. This narrative ties in with antisystem and technophobic sentiments, e.g. opposition to 5G technology.

Criticism of the containment measures imposed by governments was also incorporated by **left-wing and anarchist extremists**.

**The self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) terrorist group** tried to portray COVID-19 as a punishment from God. While initially providing safety guidelines for its supporters, including common hygiene measures and the advice to avoid areas affected by the pandemic, IS argued that the expected economic downturn and the involvement of security and military forces in combatting the spread of the virus would lead to an escalation of criminality, attacks and chaos. The group's propaganda stressed that the countries of the anti-IS coalition, the Global Coalition Against Daesh, were now particularly vulnerable, and incited its followers to perpetrate attacks to exacerbate the current climate of fear linked to the pandemic.

**Al-Qaeda** attributed the spread of the pandemic in Muslim majority countries to people distancing themselves from true Islam and argued that it should be taken as an opportunity to seek God's mercy, by liberating Muslim prisoners, providing for people in need and supporting the 'mujahidin'. In April, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM, 'Group in support of Islam and Muslims') commented on the spread of COVID-19, thanking God for 'deciding to send his soldier to help fight the enemy'. JNIM referred to the decision by Spain to withdraw troops from the military coalition fighting jihadist groups in the Sahel and expressed hope that the Malian President would consider their negotiation proposal for a political settlement. In August, a leading member of AQAP argued that the COVID-19 pandemic and other catastrophes were due to mistakes made by people, including not believing in God, and claimed that the virus 'shows us what one of God's soldiers, invisible to the naked eye, can do'. According to al-Qaeda propaganda, COVID-19 exposed the fragility of a global economy dominated by the USA. The group pointed to the high death toll in the USA and other Western countries and the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic.

### **3. Restrictions on public life meant there were fewer opportunities to perpetrate terrorist attacks with a large number of victims**

Many soft targets such as museums, churches and stadiums were closed or only accessible to small numbers of people. However, this did not result in a major change in *modi operandi*, given that even prior to 2020 jihadist attacks have predominantly targeted random people in public spaces.

### **4. Restrictions on physical meetings led to fewer opportunities for face-to-face gatherings and probably led to an increase in the online consumption of terrorist and extremist content, as well as networking.**

COVID-19 was observed to accelerate the trend of spreading propaganda online among right-wing extremists, as EU MS noted an increase in transnational right-wing activities online. EU MS reported that increased time spent online has probably also led to an increase in the consumption of jihadist online content and the online networking of radicalised individuals.

### **5. The pandemic may have represented an additional stress factor for vulnerable individuals with mental health problems, potentially encouraging them to turn to violence.**

Effects of the pandemic that might potentially contribute to self-radicalisation included: social isolation from family and peers caused by temporary restrictions on the rights of association and free movement of persons; fear of falling ill; increased time spent online or at home with radicalising influences; reduced job security and subsequent financial difficulties; dissatisfaction with measures to combat the spread of COVID-19; and misinformation and disinformation online, in particular on social media platforms. At the same time, the restrictions reduced opportunities for intervention, as individuals had fewer points of contact with government bodies in areas such as education, health care, social welfare and law enforcement.

As a result, lone actors might turn to violence sooner than they would have done under different circumstances.

### **6. In general, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic and social crises have contributed to polarisation in society, increasing the acceptance of violent measures among larger sectors of the population.**

Expressions of social dissatisfaction increased, both online and offline, with social media playing a facilitating and mobilising role, as well as the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Moreover, the polarised climate created opportunities for extremist groups to reach audiences beyond their traditional supporter circles.

## **3. Main events of 2020 and how they were streamlined in ideological narratives**

Two events that took place in 2020 in particular were exploited to fit the narrative of terrorist groups.

### **3.1 The killing of George Floyd in the US**

In May 2020, a 46-year-old African American man was killed in Minneapolis, USA during an arrest. A video recorded by a bystander began to spread and as a result, protests started to emerge across the US and in Europe against police brutality and systemic racism.

In late June the al-Qaeda core leadership issued a statement, in both Arabic and English, in which it praised the protests and invited protesters to convert to Islam. The statement claimed that al-Qaeda's fight against the USA aimed to end injustice and tyranny. The group also featured the social unrest in the USA in the June issue of its regular English-language online magazine.

IS supporter-generated content circulating in jihadist online communities celebrated the 'chaos spreading in the streets' and praised 'God's punishment' for the perceived US aggression against Muslims.

### 3.2 The publication of satirical depictions of the Prophet Muhammad

In early September 2020, Charlie Hebdo re-published the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad – which had been used to justify the January 2015 attack on its editorial team – the day the associates of the terrorist attackers on Charlie Hebdo were due to go on trial in Paris, France. Adding to the tensions, the leader of a far-right Danish political party, who was also granted Swedish citizenship in 2020 and announced that he would run for parliament in Sweden, carried out a number of anti-Islam actions in Sweden in August and September 2020.

These incidents triggered a strong anti-French mobilisation, which was exploited by terrorists via violent actions targeting French institutions in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and three terrorist attacks in France, including the beheading of a school teacher in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.

Al-Qaeda interpreted the controversy as a confirmation of its long-promoted narrative of supposed global aggression against Islam, and alleged anti-Muslim attitudes and policies in Europe, particularly in France. Al-Qaeda used this interpretation of the events to call on people to join al-Qaeda in its fight against the West, and to encourage lone-actor attacks in Western countries.

In particular, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which had claimed responsibility for the 2015 attacks on Charlie Hebdo, was the first al-Qaeda affiliate to issue a statement, which was released a week after the republication of the cartoons. The group incited lone-actor attacks in retaliation for the alleged blasphemies. The statement contained a list of suggested targets, including cartoonists from Denmark and Sweden, who had been the centre of past controversies related to cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, and right-wing politicians from the Netherlands and Denmark.

In late October, the leader of JNIM used the continuing protests to call upon all Muslims to unite under one banner, and incited young Muslims to conduct suicide attacks by any means possible, as ‘the worshippers of the Cross have crossed the line’. In December, JNIM claimed that it carried out a series of attacks on French forces in Mali to express its support for the Prophet Muhammad.

In November, a publication by al-Sahab Media paid tribute to the perpetrator of the 16 October beheading of a French school teacher, calling him and the perpetrators of the 2015 attacks on Charlie Hebdo ‘heroes of Islam’ and ‘defenders of the Prophet’. The text also incited more violence to avenge the Prophet Muhammad, encouraging a boycott of French products and linking France’s alleged anti-Islam policies to the country’s military involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Mali and other Muslim-majority countries. It also urged Muslims to provide al-Qaeda with human and financial support.

IS official propaganda outlets also addressed the topic, but to a lesser extent. In late October, an editorial in IS’s weekly Arabic newsletter al-Naba’ argued that Muslims had to take sides and affirmed that the only way to stop the enemy from insulting Islam was to fight. It called for attacks on major French companies and interests in Muslim majority countries.

Al-Qaeda and IS supporters actively promoted hate messages in response to the cartoons. Online media outlets supportive of al-Qaeda helped further publicise the threats and attacked the French President for his public support of freedom of expression. They condemned the ‘hate campaign’ allegedly launched by France against Islam and its military interventions in Muslim-majority countries.

Online media outlets supportive of IS also published posters criticising the republication of the cartoons, issued general threats against the French population, and incited lone actor attacks in revenge. In late September, for example, pro-IS media outlet al-Battar Media called for ‘lone wolves’ in France to sacrifice themselves to avenge the Prophet. In late October, another pro-IS media outlet, Asawirti Media, released a video inciting all Muslims to support the Prophet in the ‘war against Islam’ and praised the perpetrator of the attack in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.

## 4. Online ecosystems and activities

### 4.1 Jihadist groups

As in previous years, propaganda by jihadist terrorist groups outside the EU provided extremist narratives and online content to jihadists in Europe in 2020. In particular, IS and al-Qaeda continued to incite lone-actor attacks in Western countries. These calls spiked in particular in the aftermath of jihadist attacks in Europe.

However, the quantity and quality of propaganda produced by official IS media outlets decreased considerably in 2020. The loss of the last remnants of territory IS controlled in 2019 diminished not only its capacity to carry out complex directed attacks in the West, it also weakened the group's propaganda apparatus due to the loss of media production facilities and personnel.

Probably as a reaction to the loss of territorial control and the prestige linked to it, on the one hand, and the large number of IS members in detention on the other, the IS leadership in 2020 emphasised the territorial and military successes of its network of affiliates, notably in Africa, and the importance of freeing imprisoned members of the group. In his January message, for example, the IS spokesman stressed that, rather than being defeated, IS had expanded to a number of countries and regions. In another video released in July via its al-Hayat Media Centre, which specialises in propaganda targeting non-Arab audiences, including Western audiences, IS encouraged its supporters to perpetrate attacks by any means available.

In addition, IS supporters online struggled to recreate their online networks after the November 2019 takedown by Telegram<sup>1</sup>. This platform had been the choice of jihadists since they were forced to abandon Twitter in 2016. Such intervention had a profound impact on the number of jihadist posts on the platform, and Telegram maintained the disruptive pressure in 2020, resulting in a much reduced lifespan of newly created accounts. IS official mouthpieces and supporting online media outlets have since struggled to rebuild their networks. As a result, IS messaging and supporter networks became dispersed across multiple, often smaller, online platforms. Among those mentioned by EU MS are Conversations, Discord, Element (formerly Riot), Facebook, Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat, WhatsApp and Zoom.

In 2020 a constant turnover of branded media entities supportive of IS was noted, with some disappearing and new ones being introduced, probably in an effort to avoid deletion. For example, Uqab News surfaced in 2020 and produced digital media products typical of IS' official A'maq News.

As the volume of official IS propaganda decreased, committed IS supporters and their networks did their utmost to ensure that IS messaging reached its target audiences, in particular by calling for lone actor attacks and adopting the messages to local audiences and languages.



The al-Qaeda network continued to maintain a sustained propaganda presence online in 2020, using its established media outlets, in particular: al-Sahab Media, which published messages by the al-Qaeda core leadership and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS); al-Malahim Media, which published messages from the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); and al-Andalus Media, which published messages from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Algeria and the Sahel region.

These official outlets often issue statements and threats, as well as messages of solidarity with other affiliates, thereby publicly affirming the bonds between the different regional al-Qaeda branches.

In the Sahel, AQIM has been a member of the jihadist alliance JNIM since 2017. While both entities offer similar narratives in their propaganda, AQIM with its al-Andalus Media focuses on ideological messages, conveyed predominantly through audio-visual releases by its leadership. JNIM, by contrast, uses its al-Zallaqa Media mainly to reflect the alliance's military exploits. Al-Andalus Media and al-Zallaqa Media appear to share media resources, which testifies to the strong links between the entities.

## 4.2 Right-wing terrorism and extremism

The right-wing extremist scene can be described as very heterogeneous, with differing manifestations in terms of organisation, political objectives and the preferred means of achieving these.

In recent years, right-wing extremist propaganda has used a mix of online and offline methods with a growing trend towards online propaganda. EU MS assessed that COVID-19 and the containment measures taken by governments in Europe have drastically accelerated this trend towards the spread of right-wing extremist propaganda through the Internet. Social distancing and lockdowns have forced people to spend most of their time at home, so time spent in front of the computer increased significantly. With younger and more vulnerable individuals in particular spending more time online, the risk of exposure to right-wing extremist propaganda and online right-wing communities increases, increasing the risk of radicalisation.

Although the longevity of this change remains to be seen, it seems that in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the trend of a shift from classic offline propaganda methods such as printed texts, leaflets, stickers, concerts and conferences, to the online world, specifically targeting and endangering the youth. A point of great concern to several EU MS and the UK in 2020 is indeed the increasingly young age of such extremists, many of whom are teenagers still living with their parents or guardians.

Right-wing extremists continued to use a variety of online platforms to disseminate propaganda. Among others, the following were reported by EU MS: websites affiliated with specific groups, Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, Vkontakte.

Media reporting suggests that Telegram channels associated with right-wing extremist content grew by 6,000 users in March 2020. One channel in particular, which had a focus on COVID-19, grew from 300 to 2,700 users in the same period<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, video games and video game communication applications, including Discord and Twitch, were increasingly used in 2020 to share right-wing terrorist and extremist propaganda, in particular among young people. Often the propaganda is delivered in a subliminal way, combined with irony, paving the way for possible radicalisation. Video games are predominantly popular with young people, who are among the most vulnerable if exposed to these types of content. This might help explain the increasingly young suspects arrested for right-wing terrorism and extremism.

The use of irony and memes, as has been observed on online platforms linked to the 'chan culture' (a succession of message boards similar to the original 4Chan<sup>3</sup>) can lead to the emergence of a shared feeling of community, an 'in-group', especially among a younger generation of digital natives. Central to this 'in-group' status is the shared consumption of extremist content. Users are initially drawn in by the visual culture and then become slowly more tolerant of radical and

extreme ideologies hostile to 'outgroups', such as black people or ethnic minorities, Jewish people, women, or the LGBTQ+ community<sup>4</sup>. Slight modifications in the functioning of online platforms or reputational damage can impact the dynamic of the communities present on such platforms. An example is the chan message board 8chan, which was used in 2019 for announcing and publicising an international series of right-wing attacks before disappearing in mid-2019<sup>5</sup>. A 2020 study found that its successor 8kun did not entirely succeed in attracting the former 8chan community, due to restrictions on the creation of subsections (boards) and rumours that its owner was linked to the QAnon conspiracy theory. Original 8chan users were observed to initially move to other platforms, such as Discord and Telegram<sup>6</sup>.

### 4.3 Left-wing and anarchist online activity

In 2020, left-wing and anarchist terrorist and violent extremist groups continued to use the Internet as the main means to claim responsibility for the attacks they perpetrated. They also disseminated propaganda and carried out awareness-raising and recruitment activities online. In general, the pandemic did not significantly affect these online activities.

Left-wing and anarchist extremists have a high level of security awareness, and the technical developments of recent years have resulted in an increased capability to communicate anonymously. They were also observed to run their own communication platforms.

In 2020, an online attack against the website of a Swiss-based security company demonstrated the technical capabilities available within the left-wing and anarchist extremist scene. In August, the website was hacked and defaced, supposedly by a group of hackers calling themselves 'Crew'. The results were posted on a platform linked to violent left-wing extremist groups.

### Disclaimer

This policy brief represents an abridged version of Europol (2021), European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

### References

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