



Policy Brief

Counter terrorism in Greece

DISSEMINATION LEVEL PUBLIC

PARTNER

Hellenic Police

AUTHOR

Anastasios Filntisis
Nikolaos Tingas



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In the previous decades, Greece faced a significant terrorist threat mainly from far-left/anarchist organisations. “November 17”, the most infamous terrorist group in Greek history was also the most long-lived organisation of that kind in Europe. The scope of this policy brief is to present the terrorist situation in Greece today. After a short historical overview of the phenomenon, we will focus on the current state of affairs and the main challenges for the future.

1. Terrorism in Greece: A short history

Greece and Western Europe in general, faced serious terrorist threat during the 1970s in two different forms. On the one hand they were affected from the emergence of international terrorism after 1968 and on the other hand from far-left terrorism. International terrorism at that time was characterized from the attempt of Arab/Palestinians to gain attention on the Arab-Israeli conflict, after the Arab defeat on the “Six Days” war. The Arab/Palestinian organizations preferred Europe as an operational field because the region provided potential manpower, abundant and easy targets, geographic proximity and easy cross-border movement. Moreover, an attack in Europe offered immediate worldwide publicity.¹ At the same time Western European countries were affected from the emergence of far-left terrorist organisations after the retreat of the movements that the Western countries came along during the late sixties.

While even during the Greek dictatorship (1967-1974) there were sporadic events of international terrorism in Greece, it was during the 1980s that there was a sharp increase in international terrorism incidents.²

After the restoration of democracy, far-left terrorism thrived in Greece mainly from a small part of members of anti-dictatorial organizations. These individuals supported the view that there was not a fully restored democracy and the ultimate goal had to be the creation of a socialist state. “Revolutionary’s People Struggle” (“Epanastatikos Laikos Agonas”-ELA) and “November 17” started their terrorist activity in 1975 and remained the main terrorist organisations for the next two decades. “Revolutionary’s People Struggle” was an umbrella organization for many other terrorist groups, due to the divergence and disputes about the type of actions that had to be taken.

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An offshoot from ELA became "November 17" as some members of the initial group supported a more radical action. The aim of these groups was to inspire the public to take a radical action against the government and to refresh the social movements.



"November 17" took its name from the date of the student's uprising against the colonel's junta in 1973. The group was active for the next three decades and its attacks included assassinations against high rank American officials, police officers and businessmen as well as bombings, shoot outs and robberies.

The 1980s marked the peak of the terrorist activity in Greece. The most serious terrorist attacks of international terrorism during the 1980s were the hijacking of the "TWA 847" airplane and the hijacking of the "City of Poros" cruise ship. Except from the international terrorist incidents, "17 November", after a small break during the 1980-1983 period, returned in action conducting a lethal attack against US Navy Captain George Tsantes and his driver in November 1983. From then on and until 1992 the organization escalated its activities with assassinations, bombings etc.

2002 was a watershed year for the fight against terrorism in Greece, as the Counter Terrorism Unit achieved the dismantling of "November 17" with the arrests of 14 members of the group. The arrests had a very positive impact worldwide and proved that the Greek authorities could ensure the safety of the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004. It must be kept in mind that just one year before there was the 9/11 attack and there was serious concern about terrorism. At the same time the Counter Terrorism Unit arrested the main members of ELA too, although the group had ceased to exist since 1995.



After a short period, the second generation of terrorist organizations came to the fore. The main groups during the 2000s were "Revolutionary Struggle" and "Conspiracy of the Fire Cells". The second generation was more nihilistic and less ideological. Especially the "Conspiracy of Fire Cells" consisted mainly from young adults who radicalized after the assassination of Alexandros Grigoropoulos, a 15 years old student, by a police officer on 6th December 2008.

Both organizations were dismantled between 2010-2015. Finally, a third generation was active during the 2014-2018 period. The main groups of the decade were "Revolutionary Self-Defense" and "Popular Fighters Group" ("Omada Laikon Agoniston"-OLA).

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During the past twelve years, the Greek Counter Terrorism Unit arrested over 150 individuals for terrorism. As a result, the current terrorism threat, after decades, is low.

As far as international terrorism is concerned, attacks have not taken place so far in Greece from religious motivated terrorism although during the refugee crisis in 2015 there was concern of the possibility that foreign terrorist fighters from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq could enter the country.

2. Countering Special Violent Crimes Division

The Countering Special Violent Crimes Division (Counter Terrorism Unit) is the competent police unit for the fight against terrorism in Greece. It was established in 1988 and since 2007, it has a Northern Greece Sub-Division. It directly comes under the orders of the Hellenic Police Chief. Also a special prosecutor, conducts supervisory duties upon its actions. According to current legislation it is comprised of six departments today:

1. Department for Combating Domestic Terrorism

- > Main mission is to **confront** domestic terrorist organizations/groups and conduct **investigation** on terrorist attacks/cases.
- > Responsible to search, collect, process, exploit information/ intelligence, about criminal activities of domestic and foreign **individuals** and mainly **organized groups** related to terrorism. Monitor these activities, in order to **prevent** and **suppress** acts of terrorism.
- > Providing **knowledge** and **support** investigations carried out by other agencies/authorities.

2. Department for Combating International Terrorism

- > Main responsibility is investigation and counterterrorism regarding international terrorists/ terrorist groups and organizations, especially those religiously motivated.
- > Closely cooperating with counterparts from other countries (information exchange, common/joined operations and coordination).

3. Department of State and Polity Protection

- > Searching, collecting, analyzing and processing information in order to prevent and suppress violent acts by groups and individuals as well as extremist criminal activities, targeting the state security and the democratic constitution or against individuals and materials.
- > Investigating means and methods of the aforementioned groups and individuals.
- > Designing appropriate confronting measures.

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4. Operations and Controls Department

- > Responsible for the first critical actions in a case of a terrorist attack.
- > Operation center (24hours/7days).
- > Collect information and pass it to the competent department. Maintain the Memoranda projects of our Agency and take the necessary actions when it is needed, until the investigation units arrive at the scene.

5. Department of Administrative Support

- > Handle staff issues, financial and resources management.
- > Secretarial service, other internal functioning issues.

6. Department of Technical & Network intelligence management

- > Intelligence Evaluation & Analysis, operate the data base. Provide feedback to the operational units.
- > Maintenance and management of all types of technical instruments within our Agency.³

3. Attacks and Arrests (2006-2021)⁴

In figures 1 and 2 below we can see the number of attacks and arrests per year since 2006, categorised by the type of terror attack.

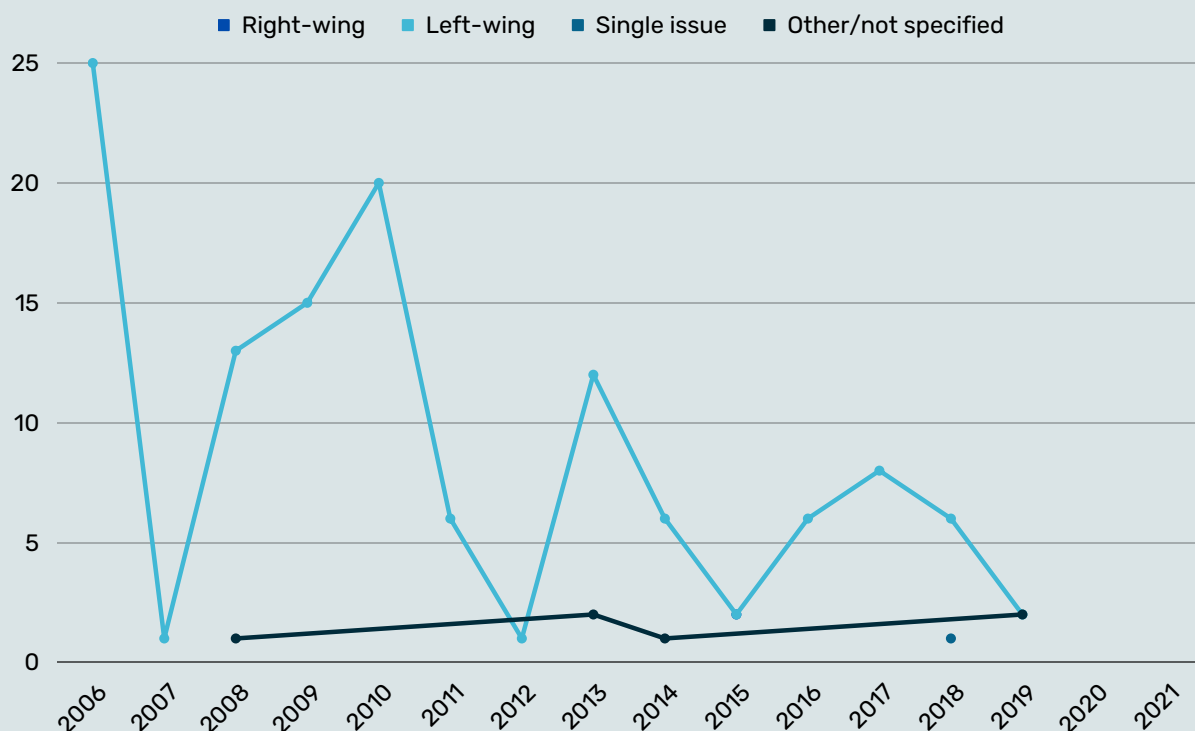


Figure 1: Number of attacks per year and type of terrorism

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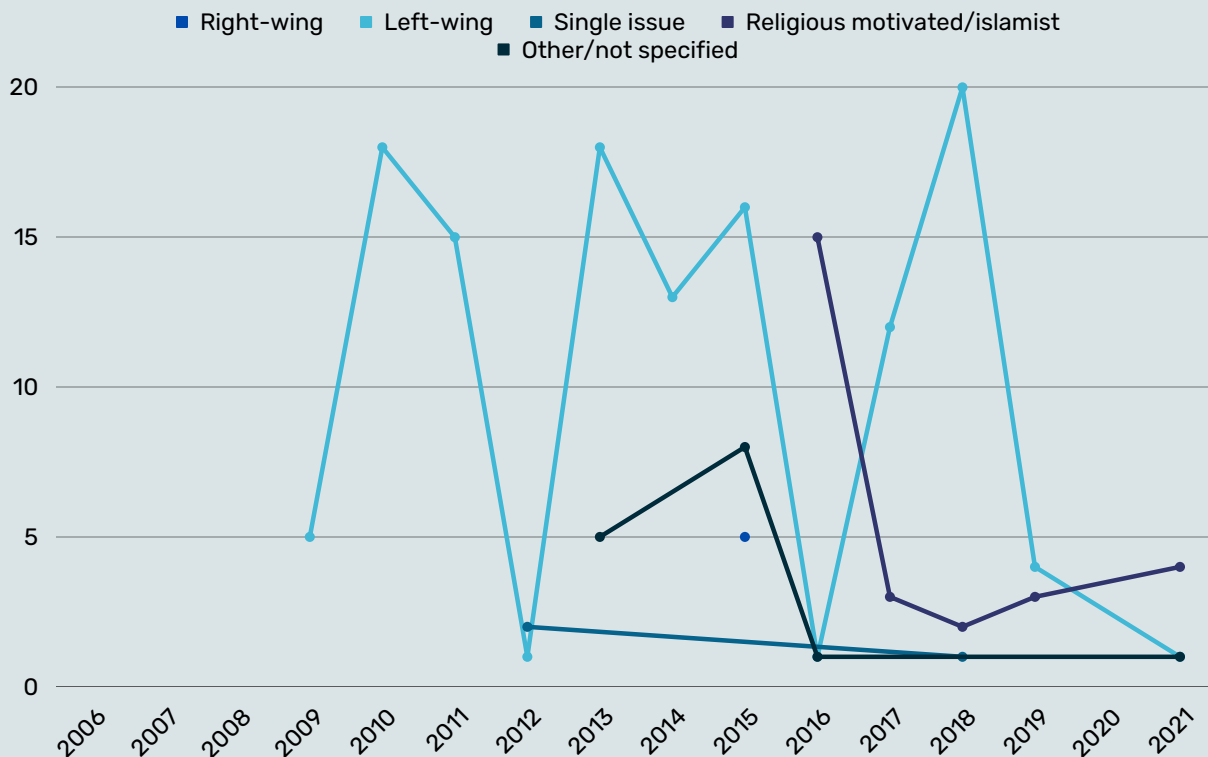


Figure 2: Number of arrests per year and type of terrorism

4. The current situation and Security Challenges

Since 2018, there have not been any major terrorist attacks in Greece and this is the longest period since 1974 that the country does not face a serious terrorist problem. This evolution is due to the arrests by the Counter Terrorism Unit. Also the restrictions that were imposed during the Covid-19 Pandemic had an impact on the far-left milieu. During the last two years, the activities of the far-left milieu are restricted to low-level attacks and they are motivated from specific events. The same situation is noticed in the field of far-right extremism, after an increase of attacks from far-right extremists during the previous decade. The rise of the far-right phenomenon was connected mainly with "Golden Dawn", a far-right/neonazist political party, which entered the Parliament in 2012 and 2015. The Counter Terrorism Unit, after a thorough investigation, arrested members of "Golden Dawn" including the leadership, who at that time were MPs, for criminal activities.

Concerning international terrorism, since 1991, no terrorist attack related to international terrorist networks has been conducted in Greece. Currently there is no indication that the country is a target by international terrorist groups and there is no indication for any presence of active jihadist cells in Greece. Occasionally, the Counter Terrorism Unit conducts arrests of individuals with suspected activity linked to jihadist terrorism.

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The continuous regional instability (Ukraine, Middle-East & North-Africa) poses a permanent challenge to Greece in general and the Hellenic Police in particular. Although the migration flows, after the refugee crisis of 2015, remain in control, there is no indication that the conflicts in the MENA region will end soon. Despite the fears even since 2015, of a possible exploitation of refugee flows by members of terrorist groups and foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to attempt to enter into the EU unnoticed, there is no indication for such pattern.⁵

5. Anti-terrorist Legislation

The first attempt of the Greek state to counter terrorist activity was adopted in 1978. The Law 774/1978 provisions could not have an important impact in the fight against terrorism because in contrast with the legislations in Italy and Germany that faced serious terrorist threat at the same period, it didn't give the tools to the police to counter terrorist activity. This was a result of the then current experience of the dictatorship and there was distrust to give extra capabilities to police. The Law was abolished in 1983. Another attempt to provide an anti-terrorism law was made in 1990 (L 1916/1990). Again, the law was abolished in 1993.

Finally, in 2001, the two main political parties at that time agreed upon Law 2928/2001, in an attempt to counter terrorism effectively after years of failure. Currently the counter-terrorism legislation is in accordance with EU legislation. The conduct of serious terrorist attacks during the two previous decades in several European countries has pushed the cooperation and the legal harmonization. The basic tool to combat terrorism, consists of Article 187A of the Penal Code (modify with 2928/2001 & 3251/2004 laws).⁶

Finally, countering terrorism, combating radicalization and terrorism recruitment are one of the main objectives of the Anti-Crime Policy Programme 2020-2024 of the Ministry of Citizen Protection.

6. Conclusions

Despite the current low level of terrorist threat in Greece, terrorism worldwide remains an important challenge for society. The geopolitical, social and economic instability, the sequence of crises (Covid-19 Pandemic, economic crisis, climate change, migrant/refugee crisis) and the circulation of conspiracy theories are factors that could lead to radicalization of individuals/groups and from then to extremism/terrorism. The Greek Counter Terrorism Unit, in cooperation with other agencies at the national and EU levels continues to monitor the evolution of the terrorist phenomenon and to design appropriate confronting measures in order to ensure the stability and the safety of state security and democratic institutions.

References

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5. Cf. Koutsoliakos, Vasileios & Filintisis, Anastasios, 2016, "Refugees, Smugglers and Terrorists", in: *Per Concordiam*, Vol. 7 Issue 3, pp. 30-35.
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