



**Policy Brief**

# **The terrorism situation in Portugal**

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# The terrorism situation in Portugal



## 1. The terrorism situation in Portugal<sup>1</sup>: Main events and how they were streamlined in ideological narratives

In 2021, Portugal did not register any severe terrorist attacks within its national territory. However, concerns remain arising from a diverse scope of threats, including the possible return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), the radicalization and violent extremism of populist inorganic-anti-system movements that have particularly emerged in conjunction with the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the increase of cyber-attacks against public and private entities, including the critical infrastructure by groups located in foreign countries .

## 2. The threats emanating from Jihadist groups and Foreign Terrorist Fighters

Portugal's national territory did not experience any serious terrorist incidents in 2021. However, worries about the potential return of FTFs who are part of the terrorist organization Islamic State currently imprisoned in Iraq, in refugee camps in Syria, and others in unknown whereabouts continued.

The threat level in Portugal of Islamist-based terrorism did not change in the year under review. However, phenomena persisted that continued to deserve permanent monitoring due to their potential harm to internal security. The conjuncture of the pandemic crisis boosted an intensive consumption of jihadist propaganda, which is more noticeable among young people. In Portugal, this phenomenon was also felt, with cases of reported young people who, during the confinement period, developed rapid radicalization online through jihadist propaganda and the expansion of their network of international contacts on online platforms and social networks.

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Regarding TFs of Portuguese nationality and their family members, their eventual return to national or European territory may result in increased risks associated with terrorism and even lead to worsening the degree of terrorist threat in Portugal. Fourteen Portuguese Nationals travelled to Syria from 2012 onwards to join the range of IS. Of these, two are still detained in Iraqi prisons since October 2019 and December 2020, respectively. In addition, a few dozen women and children with links to Portugal remain in camps in the northeast of Syria, next to the border with Iraq. Of the remaining 12 TF with Portuguese nationality, eleven were reported dead in the period between May 2014 and the end of 2018; while another's whereabouts are unknown since February 2016; although, it is also possible they have died in the meantime. The re-emergence of the Taliban Movement in Afghanistan added to the previous risks and threats in this region of Asia.

International terrorism carried out, directly and indirectly, by the organizations Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State Group (IS) continued to constitute one of the main threats to Portugal's geographic surroundings and to Portuguese interests abroad. 2021 saw the consolidation and/or expansion of deployment foci linked to and/or influenced by the AQ and IS in various latitudes, emphasizing Africa. Thus, on the African continent, IS tended to focus its activities on two areas where Portugal has outstanding National Forces: i) in Central and East Africa, with emphasis on Mozambique (see participation in EUTM-Mozambique), where there is an important Portuguese community; and in Sahel/West Africa, with emphasis on Mali (see national participation in MINUSMA, EUTM-Mali, and Takuba Force).

In East and Central Africa, IS's influence and activism expanded in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, and Mozambique. In the latter, and despite the successes of the international counterterrorism efforts that took place in the summer, the extremists maintain some capacity for action and have expanded their area of activity and means of propaganda. In Sahel/West Africa, there was intense activism by AQ and its affiliates, with a trend of geographical expansion of this dynamic continuing to be observed, with attacks recorded in Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Benin.

In turn, in the Middle East, the IS maintained its presence on<sup>2</sup> the Syrian-Iraqi stage, demonstrating its ability to adapt to the changes that have taken place.

## 3. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on terrorism and extremism in Portugal



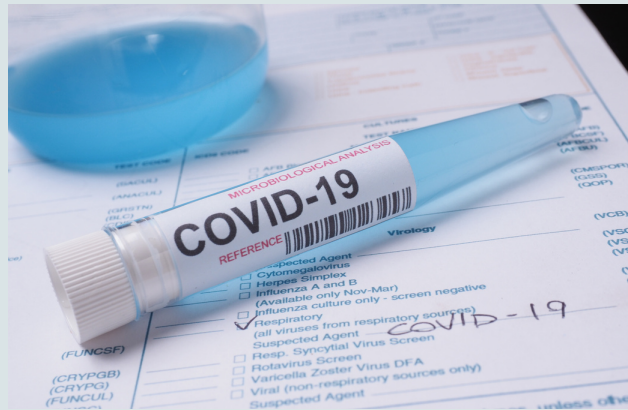
The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic continued, in the course of 2021, to have repercussions on a global scale, both at the political, socioeconomic, and security levels.

At the political level, the dynamics of cooperation versus competitiveness in access to vaccines and other health equipment and materials put under strain the solidarity between European Union countries and accentuated the differences between developed and developing countries and regions.

At a socio-economic level, the need for support and stimulus for the economy forced robust interventions on the part of most Governments, with repercussions for the increase in public debt on a world scale. Likewise, vulnerabilities arising from external dependencies continued to increase, particularly in terms of production and supply chains, which contributed to a generalized increase in prices, with the subsequent increase in inflation rates that we are seeing today worldwide.

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At the security level, the pandemic continued to serve as a pretext for attempts to fracture and polarize societies by inorganic and populist movements, as well as for cybercrime actions, particularly ransomware. Despite the occasional and intermittent imposition of border closures or restrictions on the free movement of people, the resilience developed by terrorist groups and transnational organized crime was confirmed, which, after the initial impact of 2020, were able to readapt their modus operandi, to minimize the negative effects on its activities.



Denial movements and others that reject the measures implemented to combat the Covid-19 pandemic (lock-downs, vaccination campaigns), regardless of the greater or lesser influence of the far-right narrative, have radicalized their discourse and action, broadened the scope of their struggle, based on conspiracy theories, and sought international partners, moving from social protest movements to anti-establishment movements. There are concerns about the emergence of inorganic anti-system movements, adopting denialism paradigms and promoting civil disobedience, although the latter, on a smaller scale.<sup>3</sup>

## 4. Political violent extremism and terrorism

In addition to the pandemic-related extremist developments, anti-system political extremism by traditional left-wing and right-wing extremist groups continued to raise concern. As for the extreme left, including the autonomous movement and the anarchist movement, the involvement of militants in struggles that are not exclusive to extremists, such as anti-fascist and environmentalist struggles, continued to be highlighted, with occasional attempts at their radicalization. In the specific field of anarchism, there were moments of indoctrination and international contacts revealing the ideological alignment of some militants with the current insurrectionary anarchism, the most violent expression of this sector, and with other international revolutionary projects.

In 2021, there was also a growing syncretism between politically motivated violent extremist ideas (both ultranationalist and anarchic/insurrectional in nature) and conspiratorial movements, with international ramifications, which, given their considerable security impacts and socially disruptive capability, dictated an increased risk of accelerating violence processes, especially individual, but also collective.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Online ecosystems and violent extremism and terrorisms

Regarding the terrorist threat in the European Union, this continued to be markedly endogenous, with its agents being mostly self-radicalized individuals, namely through the consumption of online advertising, with some revealing psychological disorders. It should be noted that, as in the previous year, the Covid-19 pandemic provided, in 2021, greater exposure to virtual extremist propaganda, with the registration of a greater number of violent incidents occurring in periods of attenuation of the measures to contain the pandemic crisis. In the context of cyber threats, the pandemic continued to be exploited by hostile actors to develop cyber espionage operations and campaigns in various domains. The objectives pursued were to access sensitive information, sabotage, destabilize and affect the credibility of entities and individuals globally, but particularly in countries of the Euro-Atlantic area.

Indeed, the fact that more organizations depend on digital services to ensure remote work has increased the risk of operational failures, which has been used by those actors.

In 2021, there was a continuity of several outbreaks of offensive cyber operations against national targets, originating from a wide range of threat agents, including groups located in foreign countries. Among the various threats to cyberspace of national interest, four foci of insecurity must be highlighted: cyber espionage, disinformation, cybercrime, and hacktivism. In the universe of cyber espionage against Portuguese targets, there was continuity in the occurrence of cyberattacks aimed at compromising public and private targets, as well as entities with strategic relevance, to exfiltrate classified, sensitive or privileged information or to access and temporarily disrupt the functioning of critical infrastructures in the energy sector. It was a persistent threat with the possibility of development, with regard to the sophistication, volume, and disruptive consequences of these actions.

With regard to hybrid threats, globally, state-affiliated actors continued to conduct information and disinformation operations on social networks and media, as well as influence/interference campaigns, as well as individuals and inorganic movements. These actions aimed to affect the credibility of individuals and institutions, as well as the confidence of the population, seeking to weaken societies and the decision-making processes of public officeholders and governments.

There has also been an increase in disinformation actions aimed at discrediting the vaccination process and denying the effect of different vaccines, as well as devaluing the real effects of Covid-19 on public health. It should also be noted that health measures aimed at combating the spread of Covid-19 were exploited to propagate conspiratorial narratives. The virtual space continued to be the preferred means for disseminating these opinions, despite the recording of a growing number of street demonstrations, which were sometimes associated with acts of vandalism and violent actions directed against buildings and citizens associated with the struggle against the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>



## 6. Counter-terrorism policing

In strict compliance with their attributions, the Intelligence Services contributed to safeguarding national independence, national interests, as well as the external and internal security of the Portuguese State. In addition to producing information aimed at the political decision-maker, the Intelligence Services participated in different forums and working groups, contributing, through the specificity of their action, to the complementarity and functioning of the Internal Security System.

Recognizing the importance of prevention, awareness, and training as fundamental elements for the performance of its missions, the Intelligence Services continued the various programs to promote the culture of information with the national public and private entities and society in general. Of note are the detection and prevention programs for hostile actions, set up for the public and private sectors, with a view to protecting classified and sensitive information, scientific and technological knowledge, and also aimed at national representatives, economic agents, and Portuguese communities with presence in countries of high instability and insecurity.

The Intelligence Services maintained cooperation with various international counterparts, bilaterally and multilaterally, in compliance with their legal competencies, contributing to the early identification of threats to common security.<sup>6</sup>

## 7. Conclusions



Although Portugal didn't suffer until now major consequences of terrorist attacks, terrorism, and associated criminality, it still constitutes a permanent concern on National Security for Law Enforcement Agencies, Information Services, and the government.

Changes in social behavior due to the Covid-19 pandemic influenced some components of the situation. Isolation, but also increased dependence on online social life, led to the emergence of negation movements, radicalization, and polarization.

At the same time, with the end of the Syrian war, the return of foreign terrorist fighters, currently imprisoned in Iraq and refugee camps in Syria, became a novel concern.

The Intelligence Services of Portugal and its LEAs are attentive to the social environment components that can threaten national security or lead to the emergence of terrorism and terrorist attacks.

## References

1. This Policy Brief was prepared by the Innovation and Development Division (DSID) of the Polícia Judiciária of Portugal, as part of T10.5.
2. Cf. Sistema de Segurança Interna, 2022, Relatório Anual de Segurança Interna (RASI) Nacional Security Report, Lisbon, pp. 28-29.
3. Cf. Sistema de Segurança Interna, 2022, RASI, p. 30.
4. Cf. Sistema de Segurança Interna, 2022, RASI, p. 31.
5. Cf. Sistema de Segurança Interna, 2022, RASI, p. 34.
6. Cf. Sistema de Segurança Interna, 2022, RASI, p. 34.