

# Combatting Islamist Terrorism and Protecting our Way of Life

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Today, more than ever before, freedom depends on security. Our societies are only free if our citizens feel safe. It is the duty of state authorities to protect their citizens. The European Union has taken significant steps to strengthen the fight against terrorism: for example, the agreement on the Passenger Name Record (PNR) directive – which had been blocked for years by Groups of the political left in the European Parliament – as well as the Schengen Borders' Code revision, the Entry/Exit System for stronger controls of the external borders and new counterterrorism powers for Europol. The EU has also enacted new rules to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing and has taken action against illicit trafficking in firearms and explosives.

Europe – similar to other parts of the world – has faced numerous terrorist attacks for which the so-called Islamic State (ISIS/Daesh) has claimed responsibility. We have seen terrible forms of violence, from bombings and shootings to individual assaults with knives, as well as car-ramming attacks. Many additional attacks have been thwarted or contained by the work of police and intelligence services. Europe has a common, yet heterogeneous, cultural heritage, based on both the Judeo-Christian religious tradition and Enlightenment rationalism. Our European way of life consists of different ethnic and religious communities, each with their own identities. This way of life is grounded on universally applicable values, such as equality between women and men, the separation between state authorities and religious institutions, the separation of powers, democracy, the rule of law and human and minority rights. Any kind of parallel society model in contradiction with these values cannot be allowed or tolerated.

We need to be very clear: terror is terror and cannot be justified by any political or religious motive. But the threat is not going to disappear. As IS loses territory in Syria and Iraq and the terrorist “caliphate” soon becomes shameful history, it is obvious that IS’s plan is to move the centre of its terrorist activities to Europe. We will need to be vigilant and tackle the terrorist threat, on different levels, in a decisive and effective way in order to protect our free societies. We should not give in to fear to the terrorist threat; but alertness will be crucial for preventing attacks.

As many IS fighters – often EU citizens – return to Europe from the Middle East, the protection of our external borders must be of the highest priority. The reinforced checks on the external borders – also for EU citizens – are therefore important in identifying returnees before they can continue to carry out their atrocities in Europe. The EPP also insists that the EU’s external borders must also be closed for illegal migration by breaking the link between rescue at sea and access to EU territory. In view of the current security situation and the increasing threat of returning IS fighters, it is of the utmost importance to verify the identity of every single person entering our Union.

Police forces and security services must be equipped with adequate funding and with more personnel and greater resources, as well as with relevant counterterrorism training. While the EU and its Member States must continue to improve their cooperation in the area of intelligence – namely, by sharing more information – and in the area of police and justice, more attention must be given to combatting Islamic extremism. We have to prevent people from becoming radicalised. Countering the radicalisation process is crucial, and all elements that lead to it must be considered in finding a sustainable solution. Equally important is to deal with the de-radicalisation of returnees via special programmes implemented in cooperation with public authorities from EU, national, regional and local levels.

The fear of limiting freedom of speech or freedom of religion cannot serve as an excuse to allow the division of our societies, hate speech or incitement to terrorism. It is

necessary to ensure that restrictions and sanctions regarding hate speech are not misused in order to silence minorities or to suppress objective, facts-based or legitimate criticism. Incitement is the breeding ground for terrorism because it seeks to influence, brainwash and manipulate people to commit terrorist acts. Without circulation of extremist ideology, there would be no terrorism. As terrorism has no borders, it is necessary and urgent to address it at international, European, national, regional and local levels, working closely together. The international community should take the necessary steps to criminalise incitement to terrorism. All Member States should as soon as possible criminalise participation in, and the financing of, terrorist groups as well as recruitment, training and travelling for terrorist purposes. Moreover, the EU and its Member States should reconsider their policies towards countries that finance or support Islamist terrorism. In this context, the EU should cooperate with non-EU states and other countries.

The spreading of extremist ideology nowadays occurs not only in mosques and religious centres but also via media and the internet. These technologies have made it possible for terrorists to spread their ideology of hate easily. At the same time, they make it difficult for counterterrorism operations to successfully penetrate terrorist networks. Fighting terror on the internet requires an effort to prevent the use of social media for incitement. Islamist organisations have been expanding their online presence and have their own social media profiles and professional websites. We should use videos and websites to promote a rational Islam that offers a historical-critical interpretation of the Koran. For instance, university departments of Islamic theology and Islamic studies could produce informative video clips about the Muslim faith and the peaceful interpretation of Islam. The European Union should agree on a common definition of illegal content on the internet and enforce monitoring both at national level and in coordination with Europol. This will also require rethinking the delicate balance between security and privacy.

### **The EPP calls for:**

- Stronger control of Schengen's external borders, with comprehensive identity checks on all persons entering the Schengen area; this will entail improving access to existing data bases, as well as increasing and enhancing the human resources and technical equipment at the borders so that effective controls can be ensured as a precondition to free movement inside the Schengen area;
- Stronger vigilance and security measures, including profiling, at large public events;
- Stepped-up cooperation between EU Member States and the Radicalisation Awareness Network's Centre of Excellence, by exchanging data and adopting a common approach on returning foreign fighters;
- Greater involvement and increased cooperation with the candidate countries in the Western Balkans region;
- A reconsideration of EU policies towards countries that promote and finance Islamist terrorism and its underlying ideology – an ideology which plays a key role in the radicalisation process;
- Measures to combat and prevent radicalisation in mosques and religious centres;
- Involving and supporting the EU's Muslim citizens in speaking against radicalisation and promoting a rational Islam in local communities which respects the European way of life;



- The supervision, by the authorities of EU Member States, of funding by foreign entities for mosques and Islamic associations and for the prohibition of such funding if this be found to contribute to radicalisation;
- Measures to combat and prevent radicalisation in schools and universities, and programmes to combat and prevent radicalisation in prisons, in line with national security standards; it is therefore essential to increase the number of law-abiding Muslim chaplains in prisons, the military and the police to ensure that they are committed to the free and democratic constitutional state and that they promote a rational Islam;
- Furthermore, the imams should deliver services in the language of the European country they live and work in;
- Programmes and trainings to integrate vulnerable groups into the labour market, and for courses and activities promoting integration based on European values, especially for Muslim youth;
- Measures to strengthen contemporary European Islamic thought by creating in Member States higher educational institutions recognised by the national authorities; this will contribute to the emergence of an Islam compatible with European values and with Europe's cultural and philosophical foundations;
- Programmes to combat and prevent radicalisation, including a counter-narrative strategy, on the internet and via social media;
- Identifying EU funds and programmes that support cities and regions in the implementation of projects to fight extremist propaganda and develop awareness-raising campaigns;
- Agreement on a common European definition of 'illegal content' on the internet;
- An exchange of best practices at European, national, regional and local levels on the implementation of anti-radicalisation and successful integration projects, including via engagement with third countries;
- Taking decisive action, devoting resources and developing the necessary technological tools at Europol to ensure the swift detection and take-down of terrorist content online, in support of Member States' capabilities;
- Facilitating access to electronic evidence for law enforcement and judicial authorities in the context of criminal investigations;
- Strengthening, in line with the new Legal Framework of the Anti-Money Laundering Directive, the fight against money laundering, the financing of terrorist organisations and the illegal production and trafficking of firearms and explosive weapons;
- Measures to strengthen relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in order to encourage dialogue and debate, overcome tensions and build strong projects together.

Our efforts to counter terrorism will be devoted to the memory and dignity of all victims of terrorism in Europe. All levels of government in all our Member States must make combatting terrorism and extremism a top priority.

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