



United States Institute of Peace

Allies Under Attack: The Terrorist Threat to Europe

**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade &
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats**

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Introduction

Chairmen Poe and Rohrabacher, Ranking Members Keating and Meeks, and members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the terrorist threat to American allies in Europe. Your attention to this issue is appreciated.

I testify before you today as the Director of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) at the United States Institute of Peace, although the views expressed here are my own. USIP was established by Congress over 30 years ago as an independent, national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad, in accordance with U.S. national interests and values. Violent extremism and terrorism pose significant challenges to peace and security in our world today, and understanding its causes and finding ways to address it are priorities for USIP.

I began my career working on terrorism in Europe for the FBI almost 20 years ago. It was the tail end of a wave of Marxist and nationalist political violence in Europe that included kidnappings, bombings, and assassinations that led to the loss of many lives and generated the same feelings fear and outrage as today. The wave of political violence being experienced now in Europe is different, however, in that the groups are less cohesive. We are witnessing not only directed attacks, but self-inspired acts of violence. The goals, motives and justification for the violence have changed as well, and unlike the wave of terrorism in Europe in the 1970s through the 1990s, the targets today are more indiscriminate and there is more of a willingness on the part of the attackers to die.

What has also changed is the response. Counterterrorism investigations today are more sophisticated. There are more mechanisms for international cooperation and collaboration. There has also been a steadily increasing awareness and understanding that effective counterterrorism operations are critical but insufficient without an investment in prevention. Law enforcement and security services cannot possibly anticipate and disrupt every potential attack, especially low-level attacks involving one man and a knife or a truck. Understanding why individuals are willing to give their lives to a violent extremist movement or cause and working to address the issues and grievances and that push them in that direction is a critical investment of American time and resources.

A Case Study: Kosovo

Last year, USIP conducted research on understanding why the small European country of Kosovo had one of the highest rates per capita of foreign fighters travelling to support ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The answer, in short, was that a robust recruitment infrastructure had flourished in the region and youth found their messages particularly compelling because of their frustrations with their own lives and lack of opportunity, conflicting ideas about their identity, and an inherited legacy of conflict and violence.

Kosovo faces a multi-faceted challenge now: managing the return of those who went to Iraq and Syria as well as those who never left and who are radicalized and intent on causing harm at home, and preventing new recruits from forming and radical groups from flourishing. Kosovo is not alone in facing these challenges, but their experience illustrates how important it is to have

effective programs and strategies to prevent individuals from radicalizing and joining these groups, or re-joining once they are out of prison.

There are **three critical and interrelated areas in which efforts to prevent radicalization can be most effectively advanced**, and in which our European partners have made significant progress, in part because of their long history of dealing with terrorism:

1. Increasing public awareness and engagement in preventing radicalization

Preventing early stage radicalization, especially for those who have never engaged in any criminal activity, is out of the reach of law enforcement and is more appropriately addressed by family and community members who know and care about those who are vulnerable to recruitment. Much of this work in Europe is led by NGOs, but supported by municipal and national governments and the EU. Community level programs involving teachers, social workers, religious leaders, and families who help build the resilience of youth and intervene appropriately when they show signs of influence have proliferated in Europe. Organizations such as Women without Borders, based in Vienna, help parents understand the risks and support them in interventions. The City of Brussels just released its 2016 annual report outlining the work they have underway that includes video tools, training and neighborhood meetings. EU bodies such as the Radicalization Awareness Network help support and connect these practitioners to one another across Europe. These efforts include – but go beyond- countering the radical ideology that underpins these groups and attracts recruits, to address the relationships, practical issues and grievances that make youth vulnerable to recruitment in the first place. Ideology, after all, is how they are recruited, not why they join.

2. Ensuring effective and accountable criminal justice and law enforcement procedures

An individual's touchpoint with the criminal justice sector can profoundly influence his or her trajectory away from or towards violence. Police play critical and sophisticated roles in deterrence. The establishment of accountable information sharing mechanisms between the public and law enforcement helps ensure that individuals are not prematurely criminalized. Many European law enforcement services have implemented referral mechanisms, especially as more and more non-government actors are involved in this space. Rehabilitation programs in prison are another crucial piece of this effort, and the Nordic countries in particular are able to build upon on a long history of prison rehabilitation programs for all criminal offenders to address this issue. These programs work to ensure a new start for the offender by providing vocational and educational support, helping repair family and community ties, and leveraging psycho-social assistance.

3. Working to prevent recidivism

After prison, many individuals return to the same environment in which they radicalized in the first place and even if they do not engage in violent activity directly, they may continue to espouse ideas that encourage violence or help with recruitment. Effective reintegration programs are an imperative and Europe has a number of programs that were originally developed to

address members of biker gangs, neo-Nazis, and quasi-criminal groups. Some of these programs have been tailored in recent years to address the reintegration of former violent extremists, and support their continued disengagement from violence. They function both as preventative and disengagement efforts in that some who participate in the programs may have not engaged significantly in violent crimes, and others have been incarcerated.

I highlight these important efforts because they have some relevance beyond Europe and also because a commitment to prevention requires global support.

Recommendations

The U.S. has been a leader in efforts to prevent violent extremism and counter terrorism, and can continue to support our allies in Europe in the following ways:

Continue to prioritize and support prevention.

The U.S. helped lead the charge in conceptualizing and developing preventative solutions to violent extremism, and was at the forefront of recognizing the value of community-led and municipal level initiatives. Continued U.S. involvement, commitment and dedication of resources to this line of effort is critical, and is a vital corollary to law enforcement efforts.

Make distinctions with a difference in efforts to fight terrorism.

The reasons why young men in the suburbs of Paris or Brussels radicalize are different from the dynamics in the Western Balkans or the former Soviet Republics or North Africa, all regions which have produced high numbers of foreign fighters. The circumstances, causes and motives are even more different when examining what leads youth to join Boko Haram in Nigeria or what enables Al Shabaab to flourish. Although these threats are interrelated from a security perspective, they require different tools and strategies and approaches to mitigate them. The U.S. needs to ensure these distinctions and nuances are reflected in its policies and engagement.

Remain active partners and leaders within the international community.

Terrorism is a transnational threat and a global and shared challenge. There are a number of multilateral fora for helping advance cooperation and collaboration in addressing this challenge to include the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Global Counterterrorism Forum. The U.S. should remain steadfast in its engagement and commitment to helping build the capacity of countries to develop sustainable and effective CVE and CT strategies, along with allied partners. American leadership is crucial.

Thank you for your continued focus and attention to this critical issue. I look forward to answering your questions.

The view expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.