

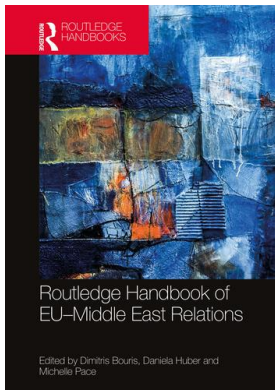
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 22 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of EU–Middle East Relations

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EU–Middle East relations and the fight against terrorism

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429317873-40>

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Published online on: 31 Dec 2021

How to cite :- Francesco Milan. 31 Dec 2021, *EU–Middle East relations and the fight against terrorism from*: Routledge Handbook of EU–Middle East Relations Routledge

Accessed on: 22 Mar 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429317873-40>

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EU–MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS AND THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

Francesco Milan

Introduction

Terrorism-related issues have been on the European Union's (EU) agenda long before the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks of 2001. The advent of global terrorism, however, has triggered a conceptual and structural evolution in the way the EU and its members approach the fight against terrorism. While this has led to a range of initiatives and reforms, the transition is still very much a work in progress.

This chapter will explore how this transition has – two decades in the making – highlighted a range of persisting challenges in the European way of counter-terrorism. The constant evolution of terrorist organisations has forced the EU to rethink its vision towards a comprehensive approach against terrorism: one that needs to combine internal efforts against violent extremism with initiatives that tackle its external manifestations. In the context of EU relations with Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries in the field of counter-terrorism, this has led to a wide range of initiatives, all of which had to satisfy the double requirement of being tailored to the partner country's necessities, while also meeting the EU's need to operate within the parameters of its guiding principles and its political boundaries.

This chapter will first examine the evolution of the EU's counter-terrorism strategy after 9/11, highlighting the key challenges faced throughout the process. It will then analyse EU initiatives' role in two major counter-terrorism theatres of operations: Afghanistan and Iraq. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its ramification for counter-terrorism will be the focus of the subsequent sections, where the analysis will examine how the EU has addressed domestic threats, as well as the extent to which cooperation with MENA partners has been strengthened.

By examining policies and initiatives in the field of counter-terrorism within the EU as well as in cooperation with countries in the MENA region, this chapter explores two critically important aspects of the EU's counter-terrorism strategy and its cooperation with MENA countries. Firstly, it discusses how the EU's endeavours can be seen as complementary to those of other national and international actors (e.g. local governments, third-party governments, international organisations), examining the division of labour in place in the “counter-terrorism realm”; secondly it discusses the persisting challenges the EU has yet to overcome in its engagement with MENA partners in the field of counter-terrorism.

As the task of providing a comprehensive overview of all internal, bilateral and multilateral counter-terrorism initiatives the EU has been pursuing since 2001 is well beyond the remit of this chapter, the discussion will focus only on those actors, agencies, decisions and agreements that are particularly relevant to the understanding of EU's evolving relations with MENA countries in the field of counter-terrorism.

The evolution of the EU's counter-terrorism strategy

Building on individual countries' experiences with domestic terrorism and transnational crime throughout the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s, *counter-terrorism* equalled *police* and, to a lesser extent, *judicial cooperation* within European circles (Hassan, 2010: 446–447). Testament to this approach was the EU's knee-jerk reaction to 9/11 events, embodied in the Plan of Action authorised via an extraordinary European Council meeting on 21 September: its main objective was, among other things, “enhancing police and judicial cooperation” within the Union, while more comprehensive and proactive initiatives related to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) were to be pursued “at the earliest opportunity” (European Council, 2001).

Only after the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373(2001) the Council of the European Union formalised a Common Position on terrorism, developing “specific measures to combat terrorism” which included common definitions on various components of terrorism as a phenomenon, defining the parameters for judicial and police cooperation and encouraging “the widest possible assistance” within the Union in the field of prevention (Council of the EU, 2001). Member States provided additional financial resources and manpower to Europol and contributed to the creation of the Counter Terrorism Task Force (CTTF) (Keohane, 2005: 17). Furthermore, in 2002 the Council signed off the European arrest warrant framework (Council of the EU, 2002b), while also formalising the creation of Eurojust to improve judicial cooperation against transnational crime and terrorism (Council of the EU, 2002a).

As well-intentioned and transformative as these initiatives might have been, it took a couple of years of actual implementation to identify their major shortcomings. As “A Secure Europe in a Better World” (the so-called European Security Strategy – ESS) was officially approved in December 2003, some of the broader challenges of European coordination in countering international terrorism became increasingly apparent. During the ESS's drafting phase, the *external dimension* of the EU's response to terrorism, embodied in the concept of pre-emptive action, became a source of friction among EU Member States, especially as the discussion unfolded against the backdrop of Operation Iraqi Freedom (Quille, 2004).

Furthermore, as Keohane (2005: 18) noted, an internal report authored by High Representative for the CFSP Javier Solana on the eve of the March 2004 Madrid terrorist attacks warned that initiatives such as the European arrest warrant were not being implemented by some Member States. Significantly, it also highlighted how “the EU lacked sufficient resources to play a meaningful role in counter-terrorism; and co-ordination between EU officials working on law enforcement, foreign and defence policies was poor”.

Re-assessing the situation in the aftermath of the March 2004 Madrid terrorist attacks, the Council made several decisions affecting the EU's counter-terrorism infrastructure – again, with mixed results. Proposals for the creation of a European intelligence agency were quickly dismissed, due to individual states' concerns about systematic, rather than *ad-hoc*, intelligence sharing (Müller-Wille, 2008); on the other hand, the role of the EU Situation Center (SitCen) was strengthened, and in October 2004, the Council gave its green light to the creation of

Frontex, the Agency in charge of managing the EU's external borders (Council of the European Union, 2004a).

The creation of a Counter-Terrorism Coordinator with the appointment of Gijs de Vries, tasked with the harmonisation of the EU's overall measures against terrorism, was not backed up with appropriate financial and human resources, nor with granting the post substantive decisional powers. Falling short of embodying the "counter-terrorism Czar" (Bakker, 2015: 289) that the coordinator could have been, the lack of leverage and power embedded in the post eventually led to de Vries's resignation in 2007, followed by a telling seven-month gap before his successor, Gilles de Kerchove, was appointed (Edwards and Meyer, 2008: 10).

Significantly, this phase also engendered a more proactive approach outside the EU's boundaries, prioritising cooperation with "third countries where counter-terrorist capacity or commitment to combating terrorism needs to be enhanced": in a nutshell, this asked for a more robust use of ESDP tools in the fight against terrorism, particularly in the field of capacity building (Martins and Ferreira-Pereira, 2012: 542–543). In an attempt to approach external engagement through new means, 2004 also saw the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The ENP included comprehensive initiatives that, coupled with dedicated counter-terrorism capacity building projects and other security- and justice-related activities (e.g. Frontex, Europol and Eurojust agreements), brought a significant degree of engagement in the field of security with various MENA countries (Wolff, 2009; Den Boer, 2015: 408).

The Hague Program, approved in March 2005, further pushed for more cooperation both *within* and *outside* the EU, stressing the need to further support Eurojust's work (which, in turn, was asked to step up its cooperation with Europol), as well as the need to step up external engagement in relation to migration and security. More importantly, it recognised "the development of a coherent external dimension of the Union's policy of freedom, security and justice as a growing priority" (European Council, 2005), a consideration that had been on the EU agenda since the 1999 Tampere Summit (Wolff et al., 2009).

These broader initiatives were brought together under the banner of a new European Counter-Terrorism Strategy only after the London terrorist attacks of July 2005. While the development of a Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) External Strategy stood out as an explicit recognition of a legitimate external dimension in the European Union's fight against terrorism, the new document ultimately fell short of expectations (Bossong, 2008: 40–41). As stressed in an official assessment of the Hague Program carried out in 2009, the lack of integration between internal and external policies, and delayed responses to emerging challenges were still the main obstacles to an effective European strategy:

Continuity and consistency between internal and external European justice, freedom and security policies are essential to produce results and to meet the challenges posed by globalisation. The EU needs to anticipate challenges rather than wait for them to reach our borders.

(Commission of the European Communities, 2009: 16)

Despite this declaration of intents, the EU was caught by surprise once more in 2011, when the Arab uprisings swept across the MENA region. In contrast with its *ex-post* approach to the unfolding events, in a document titled "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood" it recognised the ever-increasing importance of the ENP and the need to strengthen its work. Moreover, the document underlined the profound necessity, then more than ever, for the EU to undertake a truly comprehensive view on counter-terrorism cooperation (European Commission, 2011).

And yet, the critical need to have a significantly more “upstream” approach to terrorism, both from a geographical and a phenomenological perspective, only fully emerged with the advent of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS): as European-born aspiring jihadists travelled to join like-minded ISIS terrorists in Iraq and Syria or carried out attacks on European soil, the need for European counter-terrorism efforts to step up the game in the field of radicalisation prevention, both domestically and internationally, became even more apparent. In the aftermath of the late 2014–early 2015 wave of terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS in Europe and around the world, the Council pushed for European counter-terrorism activities to be “mainstreamed fully into EU foreign policy”, especially through the strengthening of cooperation with key Middle Eastern countries (Council of the European Union, 2014: 3).

Afghanistan, Iraq and the EU’s civilian missions

As soon as Afghanistan and, later, Iraq, emerged as the frontlines in the global military and diplomatic response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the parameters of the EU’s external “deliverables” in the realm of counter-terrorism became apparent. In Afghanistan, while the initial creation of a US-led, national government-focused “coalition of the willing” bypassed both NATO and the EU as potential partners, the ensuing launch of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in December 2001 showed how the Alliance was still the go-to platform for large-scale international deployments for a rapid military response, and how ESDP was still far from being up to similar tasks (Hassan, 2020: 80).

And yet, in time this assumed more the characteristics of a functional “division of labour” between NATO and the EU, rather than being a venue for organisational competition (Whitman, 2004). While NATO undertook both the hard security aspects of the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban as well as long term-oriented stability and reconstruction initiatives, EU efforts had a different focus. Although supportive of its members’ military contribution to ISAF, the EU’s activities were not strictly related to the hard, short-term security needs of counter-insurgency. They rather addressed reconstruction, stabilisation and, within it, security sector reform (SSR) – particularly in field of justice and police reform (Gross, 2009). These, alongside other security-centric initiatives, became of growing importance as the boundaries of what constituted insurgency, terrorism or even organised crime became increasingly blurred (Europol, 2007: 10).

The G8 donors’ conference of January 2002 provided a basic division of labour on security sector reform in Afghanistan, asking Germany, Italy and the UK to take the lead on three of the five pillars of the Afghan SSR initiative (Dennys and Hamilton-Baillie, 2012). The lack of a truly coordinated and integrated approach to SSR, however, led to suboptimal results. Until 2007, two police reform initiatives were run in parallel by Germany and the United States – both with significant shortcomings and subpar outcomes (Hodes and Sedra, 2013: 61–67). As international pressure on the EU to have a more prominent role on the matter mounted, the EU eventually took over the German mission and launched the European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan) in June 2007, proving that “hot” military deployments might have been too ambitious for the ESDP, but civilian missions were not.

Still, while EUPOL Afghanistan was an attempt to salvage the efforts of one of the EU’s Member States and “to build greater coherence amongst actors rather than increasing the multiplicity of effort” (Council of the European Union, 2007: 43), it was nevertheless frequently criticised by key players in the conflict (including Afghanistan’s own government) for being too narrowly focused on long-term objectives, ignoring immediate tactical and operational needs of the Afghan Police (Gourlay, 2012: 12).

The EU's role in counter-terrorism followed a similar trajectory in Iraq, as, in the early 2000s, the country was en route to becoming one of the main hotspots for jihadist terrorism in the Middle East. On the one hand, the fragmented and diverging positioning of various Member States regarding the US-led intervention in Iraq showed, once more, the de facto boundaries that hamstrung the development of a truly actionable ESDP, especially concerning the use of military force. On the other hand, events on the ground in Iraq contributed to a convergence between those members who advocated for a distinctly military role for the EU, and those who argued "that security implied far more than simply force and coercion", paving the way for the first European Security Strategy, which stressed the importance of developing a combination of hard and soft security tools (Menon, 2004: 645).

Consistent with its approach to the Afghanistan crisis, the EU initially focused its security commitments in Iraq on long-term stabilisation through promotion of the rule of law. Once more through ESDP, it launched another civilian mission, the EU Integrated Rule of Law Mission for Iraq (EUJUST LEX-Iraq) in 2005. As EUJUST LEX-Iraq was drawing to a close, the EU and Iraq signed the so-called Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 2012, where the two parties agreed, among other things, to share information on terrorist groups, as well as best practices in the field of counter-terrorism (European Union, 2012).

With the emergence of ISIS in Iraq, much like in Afghanistan a decade earlier, the EU's and NATO's counter-terrorism efforts also crossed paths around Baghdad. As Schafranek (2019) examined, after an official request by the Iraqi government, both the EU and NATO set up distinct, and yet overlapping, capacity building missions. The EU's Advisory Mission in support of Security Sector Reform in Iraq (EUAM) was inaugurated in November 2017; it operates at the strategic level, and focuses on the non-military component of Iraq's security sector, including supporting the development of the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI), on the other hand, was established in October 2018, with the mandate of helping Iraqi security forces develop autonomous capabilities and avoid the re-emergence of ISIS.

Spanning two decades, the EU's security efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq contributed significantly to the understanding of the functional boundaries the Union abides by in the field of counter-terrorism. If, as Menon (2004) put it, "[t]he Union is not an appropriate forum for the large-scale deployment of military forces", it has been consistent in its focus primarily on non-military tools and on adopting a long term-oriented approach to counter-terrorism via its civilian missions (Gross, 2013). Within this framework, as other terrorism-related crises have further demonstrated, EU capabilities have been deployed not to compete with other actors on the ground, but as complementary assets in what usually are ongoing hard (i.e. military) interventions. More importantly, events in Afghanistan and Iraq were testament of the fact that post-9/11 terrorism had as much to do with external engagement, bi- and multi-lateral cooperation, and a combination of military and non-military means, as much as it had to do with homegrown security threats.

The new challenges of Jihadist radicalisation in Europe

Almost a decade after the 2005 EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism, the emergence of ISIS and the devastating success of its recruitment campaign across Europe and the MENA region fully revealed the unprecedented magnitude of the radicalisation problem. This led to a major overhaul of its text between 2013 and 2014 to reflect evolving trends such as so-called lone-actor terrorism, foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and the use of social media as recruitment platforms (Council of the European Union, 2014).

A joint statement released by members of the European Council in the aftermath of the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks neatly captured what the EU's revised counter-terrorism priorities in the fight against ISIS had become – the security of its citizens, the prevention of radicalisation, and cooperation with international partners (European Council, 2015).

These priorities recognised how a truly comprehensive approach required a focus on preventative and responsive action against radicalisation, while also acknowledging the importance of the external dimension of counter-terrorism, subsequently fully captured in the 2015 European Agenda on Security (European Commission, 2015). Moreover, they highlighted how European policies and initiatives were in dire need of a major overhaul.

EU Member States had a track-record in programmes aimed at preventing and countering radicalisation. Since 9/11, and even more prominently after Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks reached Europe, EU members embarked upon a wide range of programmes aimed at preventing and countering radicalisation. Domestic political, social and security dynamics within each state dictated the scope of legal and policy interventions; as Vidino and Brandon (2012: 69) concluded in their examination of counter-radicalisation programs across Europe, "no counter-radicalization initiative, let alone comprehensive strategy, can be imported to another country [. . .] if it is not adapted to the local reality".

Aware of these limitations, and in line with its contributions to other aspects of counter-terrorism, the EU's initiatives to combat radicalisation have been complementary to the individual programs Member States have been developing: coordination, rather than centralisation, has been their guiding principle. Accordingly, to counter ISIS's expansion in Europe and its neighbourhood, starting from 2015 the EU launched a series of initiatives to ramp up its own and its Member States' counter-radicalisation and counter-terrorism capabilities.

The "European Agenda on Security" aimed at facilitating a coordinated response to terrorism, and explored how the EU could "bring added value to support the Member States in ensuring security" (European Commission, 2015: 2). Key initiatives spearheaded by the document included the creation in 2016 of the European Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC), an operations centre and hub of expertise (embedded in Europol) that provides operational and investigative support on terrorism-related investigations; a key element is that it acts upon Member States' request, so agency over investigations remains with individual Member States, rather than with ECTC.

Another important milestone was the March 2017 "Directive on combating terrorism" (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2017): as the problem of returning foreign terrorist fighters was becoming increasingly important, the Directive strengthened the legal framework and sped up the harmonisation process of legislation on terrorism-related training, travelling and financing.

These initiatives complemented the work that the EU's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) has been carrying out since 2011, leading to the EU's internal efforts towards sharing best practices in the field of counter-radicalisation. Bringing together a network of practitioners and experts in the dynamics of radicalisation, over the years RAN has provided guidance and advice on a plethora of issues, from gender-related challenges in radicalisation, to online recruitment and engagement; some of its most impactful initiatives helped to shape governmental decisions such as de-radicalisation programs in prisons and counter-radicalisation strategies (Fitzgerald, 2016).

RAN, which has been focusing efforts on the challenges emerging from this phenomenon since its early days, has attempted to provide a modicum of coordination through the publication of a policymakers-oriented manual published in the same year. Gathering practitioners' observations and recommendations, the RAN manual (2017) developed a comprehensive set

of ideas and additional insight into dynamics surrounding FTFs and their families, to inform decision makers (Meines et al., 2017).

While some of the initiatives have led to significant successes, such as Europol and the ECTC's participation in Gallant Phoenix, a major operation to track returning European FTFs carried out in collaboration with the US and Jordan (Hidalgo, 2018), scattered and incoherent policy responses from European Member States have increased the complexity of dealing with captured and returning FTFs (Milan, 2020), attesting to the shortcomings of the 2017 Directive.

Strengthening cooperation with MENA countries

After ISIS fully established itself as a significant violent non state-actor in Iraq, a rapid succession of terrorist attacks between the end of 2014 and throughout 2015 hit both European and MENA countries such as Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon (Gamio and Meko, 2016). These actions underlined how ISIS, by demonstrating its ability to carry out attacks virtually anywhere, had become the new “poster boy” of global jihadist terrorism.

The emergence of ISIS dramatically raised the stakes in the EU's counter-terrorism cooperation with the MENA region: the terrorist group managed to carve out niches of presence in virtually every country, while FTFs flocked in large numbers from Europe and from adjacent partner countries such as Morocco, Tunisia and Libya to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq – many with the ambition of eventually bringing the fight back into their home countries. Against this background, the EU's efforts to coordinate and cooperate with MENA countries have focused on preventing and contrasting radicalisation, tackling the flow of resources across the region, and on contributing to the development of effective security apparatuses in line with the principles of democratic security sector governance.

While the ENP had traditionally stood out as the go-to platform for bilateral agreements between the EU and neighbouring countries, two major revisions in 2011 and 2015 contributed to further expand its bandwidth in the EU's bilateral cooperation in the region; these changes, in addition to other, more security-centric initiatives, have taken centre stage in the development of counter-terrorism cooperation between the EU and MENA countries.

In time, due to the flow of FTFs, weapons and financial resources, coupled with the growing presence of ISIS in Libya, the Morocco-Algeria-Tunisia-Libya continuum emerged as an area of primary focus for the EU; within it, Tunisia stood as one of the main interlocutors in the EU's engagement efforts. The three major terrorist attacks that hit the country in 2015 demonstrated the extent to which the country stood as a primary target for ISIS, as the battle to gain control of the border city of Ben Guerdane the following year further confirmed. Systemic, long-standing problems with governance and socio-economic disparity made Tunisia's border regions with Algeria and Libya hotspots for radicalisation, terrorist recruitment, as well as major smuggling routes.

As Tunisia's government initiated an ambitious effort to reform its institutions and mark a departure from the country's authoritarian past, it also welcomed the support offered by a wide range of external actors, with France cooperating in the field of intelligence and special forces training, the UK helping with aviation security, and Germany and Italy helping with land and maritime borders management, respectively (Dworkin and El Malki, 2018).

For the EU, Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove guided a significant attempt to develop “a privileged working relationship” with Tunisia in the field of counter-terrorism. Since 2015, the EU has supported the reform of Tunisia's internal security forces and its judiciary; it has contributed to the drafting of Tunisia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted in November 2016, and has been running police capacity building programs in the field of

counter-terrorism since 2015 through The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL). In addition, it has also focused on enhancing the management of the porous Libyan border, while developing counter-radicalisation and preventative programs to engage with communities living in border regions (De Kerchove, 2017; Gaub and Pauwels, 2017).

In a similar fashion, Morocco has developed strong security cooperation channels with individual European countries, particularly with France and Spain; unlike Tunisia, however, the Kingdom has resisted external attempts to influence its counter-terrorism strategy and to advise it on reforming its security sector. As Dworkin and El Malki (2018: 28) observed, the country's "far-reaching surveillance of its population and the king's role as the personification of religious authority may contribute to Morocco's image as a bastion of security, but they are also bound up with its resistance to genuine political accountability", providing limited entry points for the EU's conditionality-driven initiatives on counter-terrorism matters.

Diplomatic frictions that stemmed from a European Court of Justice's ruling in February 2018 against Morocco's position on Western Sahara halted any progress towards increased cooperation in counter-terrorism, meaning that since then agencies "no longer ha[d] any cooperation with Morocco in the field of information exchange, nor in the fight against terrorism, since relations were almost frozen because of the European Court's judgments" (Kasraoui, 2019). An EU–Morocco cooperation program signed in December 2019, however, might have been a first step towards a rapprochement, as a significant share of European funds made available have gone to a border management program that, in turn, is expected to revamp Moroccan cooperation with Frontex and Europol (European Commission, 2019).

While Algeria and Libya are also central to counter-terrorism initiatives in the region, EU engagement with the two countries has suffered from stagnation and significant setbacks. Despite broadly converging security interests between Algeria and the EU, the country's "primarily military counterterrorism policy" (MacKenzie et al., 2013: 150) has traditionally limited the EU's engagement options. Even the commitments made in the EU–Algeria Association Agreement signed in 2017 struggled to go beyond the recognition of the need for the two parties to "develop their dialogue and to step up their cooperation on combating terrorism", and did not put into place any concrete policy for cooperation (European Commission, 2017: 8).

As for Libya, after the EU was overshadowed by Member States' scattered initiatives first, and by NATO's primacy in matters of hard power when it came to the 2011 military intervention, as the crisis was unfolding the Union "proved totally incapable of action" (Howorth, 2013: 32). Initiatives launched after the fall of Gaddafi's regime failed to contain terrorist recruitment and mobilisation of manpower, money and weapons from Libya across the region and vice versa; in the chaos of Libya's civil war, the EU Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission Libya (EUBAM Libya), launched in 2013, ended up operating from Tunisia from 2014 due to Libya's prohibitive security conditions. As with other major crises, military activities have been carried out by NATO and by individual countries, with the EU relegated to a marginal role.

Conclusions

Since the events of 9/11, the EU's progression on the counter-terrorism learning curve has been recurrently punctuated by major terrorist attacks on its own soil and in neighbouring countries. Throughout the first decade of the 2000s, the EU had to grapple with the notion that the external dimension of terrorism was as important as the internal one – if not *more* important. The Union also had to figure out the extent to which it had to be considered a single, unified entity in dealing with terrorism-related challenges at the international level, and what were the actual boundaries of its authority and capability.

The experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with the wave of Al Qaeda-sponsored terrorist attacks that hit Europe, contributed in providing an initial framework to the EU's understanding of what a truly *comprehensive* approach to counter-terrorism entails: terrorism was no longer mainly a domestic issue, pertaining to individual countries and that might have some potential international ramifications – the external dimension of terrorism had become as important as the internal one. More importantly, while the EU might not have had proper structures in place for using hard (i.e. military) instruments, its civilian missions could potentially complement other actors' military interventions.

Since then, the EU displayed increased awareness that a deeper level of engagement with partner countries in the MENA region was paramount to a successful counter-terrorism strategy. The “strategic shock” of the so-called Arab Spring, coupled with the emergence of ISIS on the international stage further contributed to solidifying the idea that the EU had to strengthen its counter-terrorism capabilities internally, as much as it had to step up its cooperation and coordination with third parties across the Mediterranean Sea.

Political and diplomatic hurdles, however, significantly constrain EU efforts to translate principles into practice. Organisational fragmentation, embodied by the wide range of EU agencies and institutions that have a discreet role on counter-terrorism, is further compounded by the fact that Member States see counter-terrorism as strictly tied to sovereign powers – one of the policy areas that simply cannot be devolved to another political entity.

In counter-terrorism cooperation, the EU's engagement with MENA countries often runs parallel to that of its own Member States or other organisations. The EU's conditionality-dependent agreements are, however, often seen as carrying the risk of embedding a strongly normative agenda, pushing partner countries to prefer bilateral agreements with individual countries (Durac, 2018).

In conclusion, EU–MENA relations in the field of counter-terrorism provide a multilayered picture of the EU's efforts in counter-terrorism. On the one hand, the EU has demonstrated that it can transform a potential weakness such as the lack of an autonomous and credible military capability into a strength, by concentrating its efforts on civilian missions, which are at the heart of a truly comprehensive approach to countering terrorism. On the other, an excessive prioritisation of long-term objectives risks alienating partner countries, while also overlooking the need to consolidate progress through short-term improvements.

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