**Still the Absent Friend? The European Union’s Global Counter-Terrorism Role After Twenty Years**

**Abstract**

*Over a decade ago, it was claimed that the EU was an ‘absent friend’ in foreign policy counter-terrorism. Much has changed since then, however. Al Qaeda and Islamic State are shadows of what they were. The contribution of this article is to re-evaluate and offer a theoretically-informed account of the development of the EU’s global counter-terrorism role, drawing on collective securitisation. We advance two arguments here. Firstly, EU global counter-terrorism activity has occurred, grown, and become routinised due to terrorist threats and attacks, institutional developments, and interactions with interlocutors. Secondly, the characterisation of the EU as an ‘absent friend’ is unsustainable in 2021. While the EU remains secondary to its member states in many ways, it has developed tools of its own that have enhanced its capabilities in external counter-terrorism.*

**Introduction**

Over a decade ago, it was claimed that the EU was an ‘absent friend’ in foreign policy counter-terrorism – a characterisation that seems to have stuck (Keohane, 2008). Much has occurred since then, however. Al Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) are shadows of what they were. While jihadist attacks continue to occur in Europe, it has been several years since the last mass-casualty event. Europol’s Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) from 2020 shows a decrease in the number of jihadist attacks between 2017 and 2019, from 33 to 21 (Europol, 2020). The Global Terrorism Index reports that most terrorist attacks continue to occur in conflict zones, such as Afghanistan and Nigeria, although deaths peaked in 2014 and have declined thereafter (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020). The recent return of the Taliban in Afghanistan will also alter the security environment. There are now concerns that right-wing extremism is on the rise in many Western states (Auger, 2020). The societal divides caused by the Covid-19 pandemic must also be factored into any future threat assessment. Serious changes have also occurred within the EU, including the Treaty of Lisbon and consequent strengthening of the EU’s external role, and Brexit, which will almost certainly weaken EU action abroad, perhaps in counter-terrorism more so than other policy areas given the UK’s importance there. Clearly, much has occurred since early assessments of the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism, making the time ripe for a reappraisal.

The contribution of this article is to re-evaluate and offer a theoretically-informed account of the development of the EU’s global counter-terrorism role. We draw on collective securitisation to perform this task, which emphasises how issues are securitised in collective settings and the following responses (Kaunert and Leonard, 2019; Sperling and Webber, 2017). We advance two arguments here. Firstly, EU global counter-terrorism activity has occurred, grown, and become routinised due to terrorist threats and attacks, institutional developments, and interactions with interlocutors. Secondly, the characterisation of the EU as an ‘absent friend’ is unsustainable in 2021. While the EU remains secondary to its member states in many ways, it has developed tools of its own that have enhanced its capabilities in external counter-terrorism. Despite this, as a caveat, there is no assurance of the longevity of the EU’s commitment to combating terrorism given potentially declining concern about the issue, the complexities of Brexit, and other longstanding and recent challenges.

This article is structured in three main sections before some concluding thoughts. To begin with, we review the literature on the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism. Thereafter, the theoretical approach, that of collective securitisation, is outlined. This framework is then applied to the development of the EU’s global role in counter-terrorism, with a focus on the EU’s major relationships and conflict hotspots of the past two decades, specifically the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Middle East as IS rose and fell. Finally, the conclusion focuses on future challenges and potential avenues for further research.

**Absent Friend or Looking in the Wrong Places? The Literature on the External Dimension of EU Counter-Terrorism**

This section examines the development of the literature on EU counter-terrorism, from the internal to the external dimensions, with the former being more thoroughly explored than the latter. It shows that, despite major developments in terms of terrorist threats and responses by the EU, academic literature continues to lag behind, and there is limited theoretical engagement. The internal aspects of EU counter-terrorism have received significantly greater attention and such studies have often been more theoretically-informed than those looking further afield. Several studies have drawn on components of the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) and the novelty of the roles of various EU actors as policy entrepreneurs in this area (Argomaniz, 2011; Argomaniz et al., 2015; Bossong, 2012; Bures, 2011; Kaunert, 2010; Kaunert and Leonard, 2019; Monar, 2007). This is not to say that external aspects have been completely ignored, but that several gaps in the extant literature are worthy of being addressed.

Keohane (2008) offered perhaps the earliest assessment of the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism and so provides a yardstick by which to gauge developments in this area since then. He argued that ‘that the relative absence of foreign policy from the EU’s counter-terrorism efforts is surprising given the nature of the threat’, citing a range of reasons for this, such as the EU’s internal focus, the nature of the Union, and role of other actors, such as the US, who overshadowed the EU (Keohane, 2008, p125). Much of this could be empirically supported at the time, although some deficiencies became evident as the literature developed. One of the main weaknesses of this piece is that it uses a narrow view of foreign policy. Indeed, it examines only United Nations conventions, counter-terrorism dialogues, and counter-terrorism assistance as EU external counter-terrorism. The first two of these could be considered little more than talking shops, whereas the third is of greater importance. Additional suggestions for emphasis could have been, for instance, agreements between the EU and third states on information sharing, such as those concerned with Passenger Name Record (PNR) data. Not only this, but a new literature on the external dimension of EU Justice and Home Affairs, over classic foreign policy, emerged soon after the publication of Keohane’s piece, which pushed scholars to look beyond traditional instruments (Argomaniz, 2009; Wolff, 2009; Wolff, Wichmann, and Mounier, 2009).

Publications pertinent to the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism can be categorised as general or as focusing on a particular case. The former frequently draw on the concept of actorness to evaluate the EU (Beyer, 2008; Brattberg and Rhinard, 2012; Ferreira-Pereira and Martins, 2012; Monar, 2015; Wennerholm, Brattberg, and Rhinard, 2010). In the latter category, there has been much focus on the EU-US relationship (Argomaniz, 2009; Kaunert, 2009; Ripoll Servent and MacKenzie, 2012) and some on the Mediterranean and Middle East dimensions (Baker-Beall, 2019; Kaunert and Leonard, 2011; Wolff, 2009), above other cases. On major conflict areas, however, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Middle East in relation to IS, literature is more limited. New dimensions of EU external counter-terrorism activity have recently been highlighted, such as by Cross (2017), who shows how attacks by individuals linked with IS have led to progress in intelligence sharing, formal and informal diplomacy, and the internal-external nexus of security. However, this piece looks at only a limited window of time, namely 2015-2016. Clearly, while academic progress has occurred on the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism, there are many gaps here. Above all, there is not yet an evaluation of the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism that combines geographical coverage with knowledge of events since 2001.

To sum up this section, we can see how literature on the internal dimension of EU counter-terrorism has developed over the past twenty years, but that the external dimension has received less academic attention and continues to lag behind major developments. There is a shortage of theoretically-informed work, as well as studies being limited historically or geographically. Perhaps most surprisingly of all, we lack in-depth assessments of EU counter-terrorism action in the regions considered to be the epicentres of global terrorism over the last two decades.

**The Collective Securitisation Framework**

The previous section identified the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism as having received little in the way of theoretical explanation. Cross (2017) and Wolff (2009) are exceptions in that they both draw on historical institutionalism, specifically critical junctures, to examine the development or lack of development of the EU in this area. Cross (2017) considers but then dismisses securitisation theory as capable of explaining the development of EU external counter-terrorism, emphasising the importance of crises over constructions. However, ‘precipitating events’ and authoritative actors are important in the securitisation of issues, and these can help explain how action has occurred even in the absence of attacks. Collective securitisation is a recent development and been used to account successfully for the internal development of EU counter-terrorism, as well as other issues (Kaunert and Leonard, 2019; Sperling and Webber, 2017). Because this approach shows how issues become securitised between multiple actors, highlights how threat framing evolves and the consequences of this, and has been a productive research programme to date, we draw on it to see what it can tell us about the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism over the past twenty years. To be clear, we build on Kaunert and Leonard (2019) by showing how perceptions of threats have developed over the past twenty years and recognise differences depending on the region in question.

Securitisation theory emerged in the 1990s and attempted to explain how issues move into the securitised realm via speech acts, thereby requiring exceptional measures to combat them (Waever, Buzan, and de Wilde, 1998). Numerous theoretical developments and empirical applications have occurred since then (Balzacq, 2005; Balzacq et al, 2016; Huysmans, 2000; Lupovici, 2014). What is novel about collective securitisation is that it emphasises how issues are securitised collectively as opposed to individually and the role of non-state actors in such processes. Sperling and Webber (2017) originally examined the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in desecuritising and then resecuritising Russia in relation to Ukraine after 2014. We, by contrast, emphasise the EU institutions. Moving on to the components of this theory, there are a set of important key actors here: the referent object or that which is threatened; the securitising actor, which is an authoritative player that can claim an issue to be a significant problem; the audience that accepts, rejects, or even initiates the securitising move; and policy actions, a change that occurs in policy, although they need not be of an emergency kind here (Sperling and Webber, 2019, pp.236-245). In its original version, collective securitisation proceeds in six stages (Sperling and Webber, 2019); however, Kaunert and Leonard (2019, p262) merge stages three and four (securitising moves and audience response) ‘given their co-dependence’.

Thus, the aspects we focus on below in relation to the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism are:

1. Status quo discourse and policies: this refers to the language and practices used surrounding an issue prior to the subsequent stages;
2. Precipitating event: here, we look at a single or several events that are of sufficient magnitude so as to disrupt the status quo, leading securitising actors and audiences to re-evaluate the security landscape;
3. Securitising moves and audience response: the authoritative actor responds to the precipitating event with a speech act and the audience responds affirmatively, negatively, or plays a role in such securitising moves themselves;
4. Policy outputs: this focuses on specific measures at EU-level to tackle the newly pressing challenge. National approaches mirror and are shaped by the EU;
5. New status quo: the final stage returns us to the first and the routinisation of the securitised issue.

In terms of our empirical focus, we limit this article to the EU’s main relationship, the US, as well as what became known as the epicentres of global terrorism, Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Middle East, primarily during the conflict with IS and the aftermath of it. Through these, we show that the EU has developed significantly as a counter-terrorism actor since 2001 in the parts of the world that really mattered. As we show later, there is no shortage of EU counter-terrorism activity around the world and other relationships could have been considered, such as Algeria, Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Mali, Nigeria, and others. These are worthy of further study in due course, but only after we know what the EU has done in the main regions of the global fight against terrorism since 2001. To sum up, we draw on collective securitisation through the process outlined above to examine the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism, with the view that this approach can shine new light on this area. Furthermore, we have justified the regions of the world we focus on here as being those central to the global fight against terrorism.

**The Development of the External Dimension of EU Counter-Terrorism**

Kaunert and Leonard (2019) have shown how European states historically saw terrorist threats as national issues and that 9/11 and subsequent events changed this. External relations are a further core element of sovereignty, so it is intriguing to see how terrorism has become a routinised external responsibility for the EU over the past twenty years. We now turn to our application of collective securitisation to the EU’s global counter-terrorism role.

1. **Status quo discourse and policies**

Terrorism appeared to be on the decline in Europe in the 1990s compared to a previous high point in the 1970s that urged European governments to form the TREVI Group to foster greater co-operation (Kaunert and Leonard, 2019, p264). ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland were coming to an end with the negotiation and signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and many leftist groups that had been active in the last decades of the Cold War were disappearing. Despite this, there were some disturbing signs, not least the observation by French security services that ties between jihadist groups were strengthening (Gregory, 2003, p132). Nonetheless, there appeared to be no pressing need to escalate the problem of terrorism at the European level despite some optimistic discussions at Tampere in 1999.

Turning now to the EU’s main concerns in the major conflict regions of the post-2001 period, the US spent much of the 1990s concerned about terrorism and frequently castigated Europeans for focusing only on their domestic responses (Hoffman, 1999). The US often tried to reach out and push for greater co-operation on the issue with the EU, but the organisation and its member states were not ready to take this step at the time (Rees, 2006, p37). Nevertheless, some progress on co-operation was made, such as with agreement on the New Transatlantic Agenda in 1995, which listed terrorism as a joint issue of concern (United States of America and European Union, 1995, p4).

On Afghanistan and Pakistan, the EU was a minor actor in this region up to 2001. Hassan (2020, p74) views relations between the EU and Afghanistan as trade and aid from the 1950s and then moving into humanitarianism in the 1990s. However, the EU had a difficult relationship with the Taliban (European Union, 2011; Rashid, 2010). The United Nations (UN), US, and EU all imposed an arms embargo as well as other measures on it in 1999 for harbouring Al Qaeda (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Moving on to Pakistan, which was viewed as a separate issue before 9/11, although the EU ran some of its operations in Afghanistan out of Peshawar after the Taliban emerged victorious in the civil war. The main feature of the EU-Pakistan relationship between the 1960s and 2001 were trade and development, and this relationship deepened over time with the signing of several trade and co-operation agreements (Noor, 2008). Combating terrorism was not a significant issue in either relationship before 2001.

Looking now at the Middle East, the major concern for much of the 1990s was how to obtain peace in the region. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait remained fresh in the memory and sanctions had been imposed and continued, thereby containing the issue. Even so, the EU was a major provider of humanitarian aid to the country, second only to the UN (European Commission, 2011). Finally, on Syria, it was far from the EU’s priority in that, unlike other states in the region, no association agreement was signed, despite being negotiated (Pierini, 2016, p4). Once again, terrorism was not a major feature of these relationships.

As will be demonstrated in the subsequent sections, these regions have since come to be viewed quite differently. Indeed, this section starkly demonstrates how different the EU’s position was on each interlocutor and the issue of terrorism before and after 9/11.

1. **Precipitating events**

There have been several of what could be considered precipitating events for the EU, although 9/11 was by far the most important initially and changed global politics for many actors. There was also a noticeable shift to IS and foreign fighters in the years after 2010. 9/11 remains the largest terrorist attack of all time and made terrorism and the circumstances believed to cause it global priorities in a way that they had not been previously. The EU was no exception and had to respond, not least because of its specific circumstances, noticeably freedom of movement. Kaunert and Leonard (2019, p261) show how ‘9/11 was a precipitating event, one which led some EU leaders to call upon the member states to develop an EU counter-terror policy and step-up counter-terrorism co-operation with the United States’. It was not just counter-terrorism co-operation with the US that was prioritised by the EU but other states as well. Having said this, supporting the US was viewed as essential at this time and a norm emerged that states should join it in the ‘war on terror’ (Kaunert, 2007, p392). Part of this was the need to follow and support the US in Afghanistan following the discovery that Al Qaeda committed the attacks. Subsequent attacks in Europe in 2004 and 2005 brought the threat home to the continent, sustaining and routinising the focus on terrorism. For Europe specifically, individuals were trained at camps in both Afghanistan and Pakistan before and after 9/11, as well as the former being a major source of heroin on the streets of Europe. Even so, the absence of attacks and emergence of new challenges, such as the global and Eurozone economic crises, did not stop the growth of EU global counter-terrorism activities.

In the 2010s, there was a noticeable shift away from the focus on Al Qaeda due to the emergence of IS and the foreign fighters joining it, including a suspected 5,000 from the EU, with the great fear being that they could return and commit attacks or radicalise others (Baker-Beall, 2019, p437; Cross, 2017). Foreign fighters became the main EU counter-terrorism priority from 2013 onwards (European Parliament, 2016). The spate of attacks by individuals linked to IS between 2014 and 2016 made the issue more pressing still, with the attack on Paris in November 2015 that left more than 130 dead having a particularly significant impact on the EU (CNN, 2015). What was different about this threat compared to Al Qaeda in earlier years is that foreign fighters came from many EU member states, from Sweden to Italy and Ireland to Poland, although Belgium, France, Germany, and the UK accounted for the vast majority. Despite the above, there is mixed evidence for the threats posed by foreign fighters. Indeed, Hegghammer and Nesser (2015, p20) state that of 4,000 foreign fighters related to IS, only eleven up to then had been involved in plots, making a blowback rate of only one in 360 – still of concern, but perhaps not as great as was originally feared. Nonetheless, it was this threat that mobilised Europeans for much of the 2010s.

1. **Securitising Moves and Audience Response**

It was, of course, the US president of the time, George W. Bush who made the first moves in response to the events of 9/11. His powerful speech on the same day, saying ‘[t]his enemy attacked not just our people but all freedom-loving people everywhere in the world… We will rally the world… This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil, but good will prevail’ (in Kaunert and Leonard, 2019, p266). Later in September of that year, Bush widened the response, saying ‘[f]rom this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime’ (The Washington Post, 2001). The US Taliban prior to the invasion in 2001: that they close terrorist training camps, extradite the Al Qaeda leadership, and return all foreign nationals detained in the country, but none of these were met (George W. Bush, 2001).

The audience here was clearly other states, who were compelled to either join the US or forced to oppose it. The EU and European states were not immune to these pressures, being the closest allies of the US. European leaders expressed similar sentiments to Bush. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in a speech on 11th September 2001, said:

[a]s for those that carried out these attacks, there are no adequate words of condemnation. Their barbarism will stand as their shame for all eternity.

As I said earlier, this mass terrorism is the new evil in our world. The people who perpetrated have no regard whatever for the sanctity and value of human life. And we, the democracies of the world, must come together to defeat it and eradicate it (The Guardian, 2001).

Chris Patten, then EU External Relations Commissioner, considered it ‘an act of war by madmen’ and compared it to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Guy Verhofstadt, then Belgian Prime Minister and holder of the rotating Presidency of the EU, expressed ‘deep shock and dismay… On behalf of the European Union, [we] condemn in the strongest possible terms this type of cowardly attack on innocent civilians’ on hearing of the attacks (CNN, 2001). The key themes expressed here were clearly Western and democratic solidarity and the differences between civilisation and barbarism. Later EU documentation, such as the 2005 Counter-Terrorism Strategy, echoed how terrorism is a ‘threat to the values of our democratic societies and to the rights and freedoms of our citizens… In this context concerted and collective European action, in the spirit of solidarity, is indispensable to combat terrorism’ (Council of the European Union, 2005).

Despite the above, it was often the case that West European states – those with historical experience – were more concerned about terrorism than other member states (Bures, 2010). However, the emergence of foreign fighters was perceived as a problem for Central and Eastern European as well given that citizens of these states had travelled to join IS. In the 2014 TE-SAT report, Rob Wainwright, then head of Europol, said: ‘[t]here is a growing threat from EU citizens who, having travelled to conflict zones to engage in terrorist activities, return to the European Union with a willingness to commit acts of terrorism. This was especially evident in the case of Syria in 2013. This phenomenon adds a new dimension to the existing threat situation in the European Union’ (Europol, 2014). At that time, European officials were making the foreign fighter situation sound dire indeed, saying that an attack was ‘inevitable’ and ‘pre-programmed’ (cited in Baker-Beall, 2019, p437). What has probably stuck in the memory here was the attack on Paris in November 2015, which led then French President Francois Hollande to call it an ‘act of war’, to declare a state of emergency, and to invoke the EU’s mutual defence clause for the first time (BBC, 2015; Euractiv, 2015). We can see here how strong language was consistently used in relation to different terrorist attacks and threats. Significant and powerful actions followed, but not only in the immediate aftermath of attacks.

1. **Policy Outputs**

After 9/11, discussions intensified in the EU as to how the organisation would respond and even about its place in the world, with commitments to ‘play a greater part in the efforts of the international community to prevent and stabilise regional conflicts’ in its conclusions to the extraordinary European Council meeting on 21st September 2001 (European Council, 2001). Such statements have been repeated in similar forms many times since. This section highlights counter-terrorism policy outputs that have emerged as a result. These demonstrate how much has occurred at EU-level over the past twenty years, both in terms of expansion of activities and geographical range.

The US was the first priority for EU co-operation and a raft of agreements quickly followed that cover working with EU agencies (Europol in 2001 and Eurojust in 2006), mutual legal assistance and extradition (2003), and container security (the Container Security Initiative in 2004). Co-operation developed further in due course to include agreements on the transfer of PNR data (2004, 2006, 2007, and 2011)[[1]](#footnote-1), as well as a further one concerned with international bank transfers (on the Terrorist Tracking and Finance Programme (TFTP) in 2010). To demonstrate the importance of just this final agreement to both sides, twenty-eight requests in relation to the TFTP were prompted by the November 2015 attacks in Paris, with this leading to 799 intelligence leads (Wesseling, 2016, p20). However, given frequent contestation over data protection and privacy within these and other arrangements, including over the 2000 Safe Harbour agreement, the US and EU negotiated a Privacy Shield in 2016. While this was invalidated in 2020, Washington and Brussels are currently negotiating a new settlement. Furthermore, the EU could and has been criticised for being coerced into actions by the US that it otherwise would not have taken and as replicating unsuitable American security practices. The picture is, however, rather more complex in that, while US pressure has been important, some internal actors, such as the Commission and member states like the UK, welcomed Washington’s uncompromising stance to push for changes they had long sought. Also, the EU’s response has come in for much criticism as going further than the US. The 2006 Data Retention Directive (DRD) went beyond what was overtly possible in the US at that time (de Goede, 2008). European states have a long history of taking strong internal actions against terrorism. Thus, US pressure may have helped force European states to reach a common position, but many were not concerned about going beyond US demands for internal security. In this relationship, there can be no avoidance of concern over civil liberties and the influence that US has had on the EU, but the US role has clearly been important in pushing the EU to take actions against terrorism. This co-operation can be seen as substantial and worthwhile for both sides. For now, however, co-operation has likely reached its limits at that level, although the US continues to be an important interlocutor. The evolution of this relationship will depend a lot on who sits in the White House in the future.

The EU was a minor actor in many parts of Asia for many years, but 9/11 fundamentally changed how it viewed, dealt with, and resourced its activities in the area. It is rarely mentioned in studies that the EU institutions were, in fact, some of the main contributors to, not only the reconstruction efforts, but the attempts to finance and support Afghan institutions, such as the police. These were, broadly speaking, actions that were attempting to prevent the failure of Afghanistan and possibility that such places become terrorist havens, as they were before 9/11. As Klaiber (2007, p10) said, although the EU and its member states had contributed more than a third of the financial assistance and aid programmes at that point, Europe had a visibility problem: ‘[d]espite these facts, the work and contribution of the EU for the reconstruction of Afghanistan is hardly ever mentioned in books and articles written about Afghanistan’. Indeed, the country received €4 billion in development aid since 2002 from the EU, making it the largest beneficiary of such assistance in the world (European Commission, nd). Three examples of significant commitments were the EU’s naming of a special representative to the country in 2002, one of only a handful at the time; the EU paid the salaries of around 124,000 employees of the Ministry of the Interior and was a long-term contributor to the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan; and a European police training programme was run under the auspices of the Common Security and Defence Policy between 2007 and 2016, which cost somewhere in the region of €400 million and was the first civilian mission deployed in a war-like environment (Tardy, 2017, p1).

Moving on to Pakistan here, it also received significant support from the EU after 9/11. It was identified as a key state for technical assistance soon after 9/11, and some well-funded programmes in ‘good governance, rule of law, and human rights’ have since been run. Indeed, fifteen per cent or €97 million of the more than €600 million available for bilateral co-operation is focused on these issues for the period 2014-2020 (European External Action Service and European Commission, 2014). Particular attention in many programmes has been given to the border areas of Pakistan in the belief that dealing with poverty reduction and improving education will help prevent radicalisation. One programme that was of clear relevance to terrorism relates to how the EU helped finance the development of Pakistan’s National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) through the Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) between 2010 and 2011 (Monar, 2015, p353). The point is not here to suggest that the EU has been an effective player in this region, but that its priorities changed and grew in response to threats since 9/11, and not always immediately following attacks in Europe or elsewhere. One concern should be, however, that aid projects have increasingly being used for security purposes, or at least are presented or justified that way. Following the return of the Taliban to Kabul in August 2021, it is not yet clear what the EU’s role in the region will be. There are competing views at present also on whether the new Taliban government will work with jihadist groups with wider objectives, thereby making it a haven for terrorists once more, or whether it will reject these.

Finally, the US plays both centrifugal and centripetal roles when it comes to the EU. On the one hand, its activities divided the Union over the invasion of Iraq in 2003. On the other hand, it pushed the EU to take seriously the issue of foreign fighters in the early 2010s, albeit due to its own security concerns linked to visa waivers (The Guardian, 2014). A major part of the conflict with IS was the military campaign by Western states, but post-conflict challenges and concerns about the resurgence of IS due to persisting Sunni marginalisation necessitate a different approach today. After foreign fighters became the main EU counter-terrorism priority from 2013 onwards, over twenty measures have been presented in response (European Parliament, 2016). The threat led to a strategy on Iraq and Syria, albeit with a particular focus on foreign fighters, which proposed a range of responses but was not made available to the public (Council of the European Union, 2015). The EU quickly closed off and rejected ties with Bashar al-Assad following his ruthless crackdown on protestors that helped spark the Syrian conflict and thereby made it difficult to do more than provide aid to displaced peoples and opposition groups (European Commission, 2021a). By contrast, it has given considerable support to war-torn Iraq, amounting to over one billion Euros between 2014 and 2019. Projects relevant to counter-terrorism include nearly €30 million Euros for conflict resolution and reconciliation and the provision of assistance to demining and assisting those in or returning to areas liberated from IS control (European External Action Service, 2019). Furthermore, due to the role of important actors, including, France, the UK, and European Commission, circumstances led to the introduction of an EU-PNR – a measure that was previously mired in controversy. The Commission, among others, played a role in financing national programmes with the objective of a European system (European Parliament, 2015, p7). These are wide-ranging and significant responses to the challenges in the Middle East and complications of foreign fighters, some of whom are still in the region. Without the baggage that the US has in the region, it may be that the EU plays an important role in the future of Iraq in particular. Question here are why the EU is so anonymous despite huge levels of support, as well as why this assistance does not translate into significant influence.

1. **New Status Quo**

There can be little doubt that terrorism becomes a greater issue following attacks, but we have shown here that action has grown around the world even in their absence. The US has often played a role in EU security priorities and behaviour, although it has not simply been a case of US coercion and EU compliance; European states have greater historical experience of terrorism anyway. Contestation surrounding many aspects of the EU’s response to terrorism continues, not least over the emphasis on the gathering of personal data and the nature of its relationship with the US. However, EU activities in conflict zones appear to be relatively uncontroversial, even though these are significant, can be costly, and have been ramped up over the last two decades. One of the costs of this, however, is that counter-terrorism now appears to be ubiquitous, with aid having been securitised in the sense that attempts to improve education are now being framed as relevant to preventing radicalisation, for example. Having said this, few would question the need for the EU to tackle terrorism abroad. Indeed, that the EU be used to confront the issue is popular among Europeans. Terrorism also remained, even by 2020, the second greatest challenge according to Eurobarometer (thirty-eight per cent), with the highest being climate change (forty-five per cent) (European Commission, 2021b).

We see EU institutions playing stronger roles now in co-operation with third states, such as the various tools now developed by the Commission, including the IcSP and others, such as the Development Co-operation Instrument. EU institutions have also negotiated various security agreements with the US, such as that concerned with TFTP and PNR. The Parliament now plays a stronger scrutinising role, but has probably become more compliant as a result of additional responsibility (Ripoll Servent and MacKenzie, 2012). Furthermore, an initially underestimated actor, the EU’s Counter-Terrorism Co-ordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, seems to be increasingly involved in countering terrorism and was at the forefront of discussions surrounding foreign fighters. The same can be said for Europol, with Rob Wainright highlighting the same issue even before major attacks. Incidentally, the agency also has its own agreements with states around the world. Finally, the EU has proven active as an organisation combating terrorism. This challenge continues to feature prominently in the 2016 global strategy, as well as several of its offshoots, such as in relation to Iraq and Afghanistan (European Union, 2016). Combating terrorism has become a normal part of the EU’s external activities and continues to be considered among the main challenges facing the organisation.

**Conclusion**

This article has argued, firstly, that EU counter-terrorism action has occurred, grown, and become routinised due to terrorist threats and attacks, institutional developments, and interlocutors; and secondly, that the EU can no longer be considered an ‘absent friend’ in this area. We have seen here how the EU played almost no role in combating terrorism before 2001, whereas its actions now span the globe and are significant in many places, with counter-terrorism now being an important responsibility for the organisation. This article has attempted to provide an overview of the EU’s actions with major partners and in key conflict zones to demonstrate the above, yet EU counter-terrorism activity stretches much further, into even lesser-threatened parts of the world.

Collective securitisation has permitted us to see how the security environment has changed over the past two decades, from Al Qaeda to IS foreign fighters; the key actors highlighting terrorist challenges, which has increasingly included EU actors; the responses stemming from these, with the EU role expanding in terms of responsibilities and geographically; and the routinisation of the EU’s role over time. Looking at the passage of twenty years shows how different the EU is in 2021 compared to 2001.

Still, the expansion or even continuation of the EU’s counter-terrorism activity is far from assured and the external security environment is in flux. There is rising concern that the far-right is the emerging issue, not just in relation to violent extremism but also in non-violent, albeit still pernicious, forms. Such developments might lead European states to turn inwards and away from tackling terrorism abroad. Also, while terrorism remained an issue of concern throughout the various challenges already presented by the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it may yet go down the agenda due to Russian activity in Eastern Europe, climate change, further economic crises, or other challenges. As with 9/11 and recent events in Afghanistan, world-altering events are not always foreseen and security agendas can change extremely quickly at such junctures. Not only this, but the UK has played a vital role in keeping terrorism at the top of the agenda. With Brexit occurring, the UK has lost this influence and the EU loses one of its major security players. This will weaken both in terms of their global roles. Furthermore, and linked to this, it may be that EU activity cannot proceed any further than is already the case given the lack of serious further integration since the Treaty of Lisbon. The EU remains what it was, does not have any operational capabilities of its own, and member states remain an important part of counter-terrorism, both at home and abroad.

Further research, then, could look at other parts of the world that have not been so threatened, as well as the EU-US relationship today and how this is affected by Brexit. Brexit itself requires greater attention for several reasons. What was the impact of the UK on EU counter-terrorism and who occupies a leadership role now that the UK has left? How will UK-EU co-operation evolve? What is the state of civil liberties in the EU following twenty years combating terrorism and the possibilities of venue shopping? Finally, the EU must increasingly prepare itself for a diverse threat landscape that may include violent right-wing extremists. How seriously is it taking this threat and what is it doing to combat it?

Whatever the EU may be characterised as today, it is not an absent friend. It faces many challenges, the security environment is uncertain, member states still play significant roles, and Brexit has weakened the EU, but EU counter-terrorism action has became routine, at least for now.

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