

CDE4Peace

Policy Brief no.1

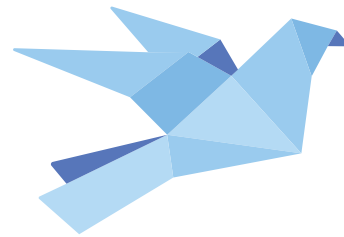
A CSDP mission in Syria?

by Nikolay Pavlov



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After a spate of deadly terrorist attacks in France and Austria in October and November 2020 the problem with countering terrorism is once again high on the EU political agenda. The signs of EU solidarity were clearly demonstrated as French President Emmanuel Macron and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz met in Paris after both their countries have lost lives to terrorist attacks. The two leaders then held a video conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel to discuss collective EU anti-terrorism strategy. As reported, the EU leaders discussed measures such as prevention, better integration, intelligence sharing, tighter control on the EU's external borders and religious training in a way that respects EU ideals. The role of the EU's external action, however, has not been specifically addressed and it could play a significant role in countering terrorism outside the borders of Europe.



refers 29 times to terrorism but does so in such a way as if referring to an abstraction; hence many of the counter-terrorism measures laid out in the document sound hollow. To great extent the political and operational substance of EU counter-terrorism is missing.

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The EU Global Strategy (adopted in 2016) identifies terrorism as one of the main security threats for the EU and calls for increased investment in and solidarity on counter-terrorism.¹ Counter-terrorism is listed as one of the priorities of EU external action. The EU's approach to counter-terrorism, however, is to great extent defined in Idealist terms. "The EU will live up to its values internally and externally: this is the strongest antidote we have against violent extremism", the EU Global Strategy says. This Idealist approach betrays the EU's nature as a civilian peace project and the general lack of highly developed counter-terrorism culture at the EU level. Actually, the EU's counter-terrorism policies are strongly characterised by a reactive approach, in which new steps have more often than not been the result of major terrorist attacks (such as the attacks in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005). Indeed, the EU Global Strategy

A small step for enhancing the EU's counter-terrorism policies is the new Counter-terrorism Agenda of the EU adopted in December 2020.² The document defines a four-pillar strategy to counter terrorism, based on the keywords "anticipate, prevent, protect and respond". Many of the proposed key actions are well-thought and draw upon the EU's experience in this area. The focus on strategic intelligence, threat assessment, early detection technologies and countering extremist ideologies is very relevant for the EU's capabilities as a civilian actor. Some of the actions, however (e.g., urban security) are not fully in line with the EU's traditional remit. In operational terms the Counter-terrorism Agenda aims primarily at strengthening Europol while the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the closely related EU external action remain underestimated; they are referred to mostly in the context of international cooperation.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) and counter-terrorism

The European External Action Service (EEAS) is one of the few institutions where EU counter-terrorism culture is budding. EEAS focusses on the external dimension of countering terrorism. EEAS's role is to coordinate counter-terrorism external outreach and capacity-building assistance to third countries by the EU and the Member States, to ensure coherence and efficiency. Within the EEAS, counter-terrorism related EU external relations – due to their security nature – are handled by the 'Security and Defence Policy' Directorate under Deputy Secretary General 'CSDP and crisis response'. The actual implementation of the EU's counter-terrorism policies is mainly delegated to the Counter-terrorism unit of the EEAS. Overall, the objectives of the EU's external actions on counter-terrorism are well-defined on paper³:

- *Political outreach through specific policy dialogues on counter-terrorism;*
- *Multilateral counter-terrorism coordination;*
- *Establishment and implementation of specific EU counter-terrorism regional and country strategies and action plans;*
- *Mainstreaming of counter-terrorism into EU's foreign policy;*
- *Programming of EU capacity-building measures to support counter-terrorism efforts in third countries.*

In practice it is difficult to assess the accomplishments of the EU's external action on countering terrorism as publicly available information is scarce. Moreover, the EU's external counter-terrorism policies are characterised by complex decision-making and implementation structures and partly overlapping roles and

responsibilities.⁴ They make it difficult to grasp or analyse the EU's external counter-terrorism activities. Therefore, a rigorous review and impact assessment could hardly be carried out at present.

The EU's external action on counter-terrorism and the broader Common Security and Defence Policy of the Union are largely driven by the Member States and dependent on their ability to agree on common goals. In the context of the recent terrorist attacks on European soil it is time for Member States to use the EU's external action more effectively for countering terrorism. Many of the terrorist attacks in Europe are related in one way or another with the remnants of ISIS in Syria, including in terms of ideological motivation. The phenomenon of foreign fighters is directly linked with the conflict in Syria and has had a significant impact on the rise of terrorism in Europe. Therefore, the EU's external action to Syria should go beyond humanitarian aid and donor programmes. Much more effective could be a focussed EU mission in Syria under the Common Security and Defence Policy with two primary objectives: counter-terrorism capacity-building and information gathering on foreign fighters (including detection of travels). So far, the only EU CSDP missions that explicitly focus on counter-terrorism related objectives have all been situated in the Sahel region (EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali). Strategically, it is very important to concentrate the EU's external action on counter-terrorism in Syria, which could have direct impact on preventing terrorist attacks and saving lives in Europe in the future.

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The potential role of Concept development & experimentation (CDE)

A positive sign for enhanced EU planning capabilities would be the implementation of methods for Concept development and experimentation (CD&E) in the planning process of a potential EU mission under the CSDP in Syria. The innovative CD&E methodology which originates from the military domain, is the application of the structure and methods of experimental science to the challenge of developing future defence capabilities.⁵ Over the last 20 years CD&E has been widely used in NATO as one of the tools that drive the alliance's transformation by enabling the structured development of creative and innovative ideas into viable solutions for capability development. Some CD&E methods could successfully be employed in the planning of EU missions under the CSDP, more specifically in defining the mission concept and mandate.

Mission and operational concepts govern the planning and conduct of concrete peace-building missions and operations. Mission concepts and mandates are framed by a number of documents drafted by EU bodies and adopted by EU Member States in the Council. The main documents are the Crisis Management Concept (CMC), Military or Civilian Strategic Options (MSOs/CSOs), the respective Council Decision, the Concepts of Operations (CONOPS), and the Operation Plan (OPLAN). Mandates are pivotal in mission concepts. The mandates actually represent the EU's intentions; and the deficits in the mission concepts reveal the gaps between

mandates (intentions) and implementation on the ground. The introduction of CD&E methods and quantifiable indicators for measuring mandates' performance and implementation could be helpful for defining more realistic mission mandates and clear exit strategies. CD&E methods could be used in the planning phase to carry out a scientific assessment of alternative options for mandates (e.g., executive vs. non-executive mandate, civilian vs. military or civil-military missions/operations). The most pertinent CD&E methods in the context of mission planning are exercises (exercise-based experiments), modelling and simulation (M&S), and wargaming. The added value of these methods is not only scientific but political as well, in terms of enhancing cohesion and the common strategic culture at the EU level.

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Conclusions

Similar to other policy domains EU conflict prevention and peace-building, and the wider CSDP are strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the political and financial capital at the EU level is invested in the fight against the COVID-19 virus. Of course, security threats such as terrorism have not disappeared from the international arena but are rather given less attention currently. For a number of reasons EU conflict prevention and peace-building and the CSDP have never been a top EU political priority. In the present strategic situation fully dominated by the COVID-19 crisis, the CSDP and EU peace-building are further marginalized. As declared by Fiott in 2015, “the CSDP is dead, long live the CSDP”.⁶ Even more so, in the “years of the Corona” the CSDP and EU peace-building are in need of a survival strategy. The marginalization of the CSDP means marginalization of the EU as a global actor. This process is known as

“Astanisation” of regional conflicts (in reference to the Astana format in Syria), which leads to the exclusion of Europe from the settlement of regional conflicts in favour of Russia and Turkey.⁷

Given that, overall, enthusiasm for new CSDP missions and operations is missing, it would be reasonable the next CSDP mission to focus on counter-terrorism goals which are meaningful to public opinion in all EU Member States. As most terrorist attacks on European soil in the last years are in one way or another connected with the malevolent influence of ISIS, no other country than Syria is better suited to host a new CSDP mission with a counter-terrorism mandate. A CSDP mission in Syria would not only demonstrate the EU’s ability to act as a global actor but could also have direct impact on preventing terrorist attacks and saving lives in Europe in the future.

Nikolay Pavlov is a Marie Curie Fellow at SYNYO GmbH within the frameworks of the CDE4Peace project.

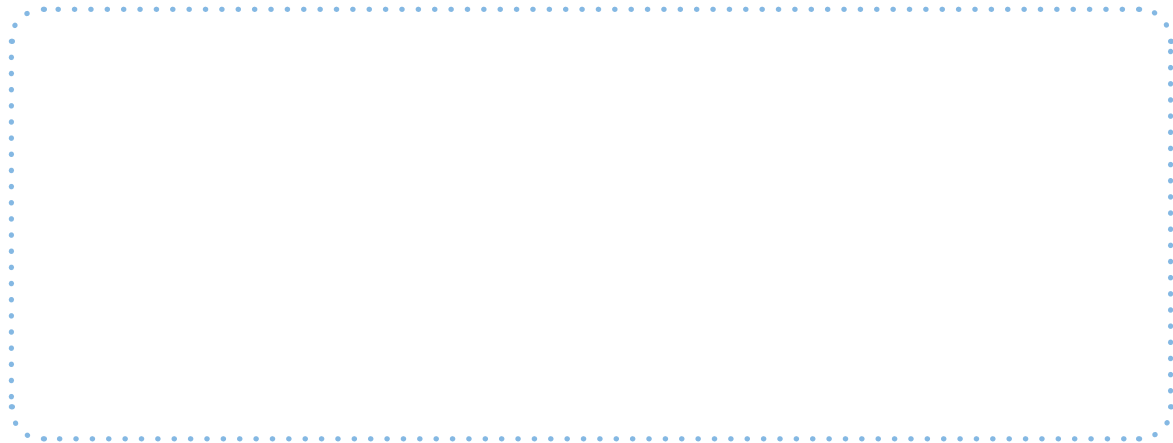


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About CDE4Peace

CDE4Peace is a Marie Curie project funded under the EU's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme (GA no. 882055). The project's principal research objective is to explore the potential of Concept Development and Experimentation for enhancing the EU's conflict prevention and peace-building policy. The project's hypothesis is that Concept Development and Experimentation could serve as a tool for politically independent, unbiased and safe experimentation of novel concepts and approaches in the field of EU conflict prevention and peace-building. The project's research and innovation objectives are closely related to the current developments in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) which forms the political framework of EU conflict prevention and peace-building. The project is hosted by the Vienna-based research and innovation company SYNYO GmbH.



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