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Research Article

The European Union and the Challenges of Terrorism: Threats, Responses and the Unresolved Balance between Collective Security and Fundamental Rights

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Abstract

Terrorism has been on the European Union's agenda for more than two decades, and in that time the problem has changed shape several times without ever going away. This paper asks what terrorism actually demands of the EU as a political system, and how far the Union has been able to meet that demand. It works through three questions: what the threat currently looks like, how the EU has organised its institutional response, and which tensions remain unresolved, above all the difficulty of pursuing collective security without eroding the fundamental rights the Union claims to protect. The study is qualitative and document-based. It draws on EU policy texts, the scholarly literature on the counter-terrorism strategy and its four pillars (Prevent, Protect, Pursue and Respond), Europol's most recent attack and arrest data, and Court of Justice case law, and it reads this material through securitisation theory. The review finds that instruments such as Europol, the European Arrest Warrant and Passenger Name Record (PNR) data-sharing have each been studied at length, but that three issues are rarely brought together: the trust deficit between national security services, the security–rights trade-off, and the growing share of attacks carried out by lone actors radicalised online. The paper argues that the EU's counter-terrorism system is a real institutional achievement but an incomplete one, and it closes with recommendations on trust-building between intelligence services, closer monitoring of national implementation, and rights-sensitive oversight of surveillance tools.

Keywords: Counter-terrorism, European Union, Europol, Securitisation, Radicalisation

Introduction

An attack in a European city today is rarely a purely national event. The people involved may have met online in one country, raised money in another, and crossed two or three internal borders without anyone asking to see a passport. That is the uncomfortable side of European integration. The Schengen area, the single market and a largely borderless digital space are among the Union's proudest achievements, and they are also the conditions under which a small group, or a single person, can move and plan with very little friction. For most of the EU's history, internal security was left to the member states, on the assumption that policing one's own territory was the most basic expression of sovereignty. The bombings in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), the Paris attacks of 2015, and the run of stabbings and vehicle attacks in France,

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Germany and Austria in 2024 and 2025 have steadily undermined that assumption. A state acting alone cannot reliably defend itself against a threat that treats borders as irrelevant.

The EU's answer, built up over roughly twenty years, has been to treat security as a shared responsibility rather than a purely national one. Out of that shift came a body of common tools: Europol's growing counter-terrorism role, the European Arrest Warrant (EAW), joint intelligence structures, and systems for exchanging personal data across the Union (Argomaniz, 2011; Bureš, 2016). The strategic framework for all of this is the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy of 2005, which arranged the Union's work under four headings: Prevent, Protect, Pursue and Respond (Council of the European Union, 2005). The Counter-Terrorism Agenda adopted in December 2020 kept those headings and added a further strand on anticipating new threats (European Parliamentary Research Service [EPRS], 2021). Building this machinery did not, however, settle the underlying problem. It changed the question. Whether Europe can act collectively against terrorism is no longer seriously in doubt; what remains open is how well the collective response works in practice, and what it costs in terms of the rights it exists to defend.

That cost is not a side issue. Each instrument adopted in the name of collective security, from passenger data collection to pooled intelligence to wider surveillance powers, raises a corresponding question about privacy and civil liberties (Bigo & Tsoukala, 2008; Guild & Geyer, 2008). Security and freedom do not always move in the same direction. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has repeatedly been asked to draw the line between them, most visibly in its 2022 ruling on the PNR Directive (De Capitani, 2023). In my view this is where the real difficulty of EU counter-terrorism now lies. The technical work of building agencies and databases has largely been done. The harder work of deciding how much intrusion a democratic union should accept in exchange for safety is still going on.

This paper approaches the subject through three lenses. The first is the threat itself: how varied it is, how it has changed, and why the growth of lone-actor violence with an online origin matters so much for policy. The second is the EU's institutional response, meaning the pillars, agencies and legal instruments described above. The third is the set of tensions that response has not resolved: limited trust between member states, uneven enforcement of common rules, slow adaptation to new tactics, and the unfinished balance between collective security and fundamental rights. My argument is that the EU has met the challenge of terrorism only in part, and that the security–rights tension in particular remains open rather than settled.

The topic also matters beyond Europe. The EU is the most developed example of sovereign states pooling security functions through supranational institutions, and both its successes and its mistakes are instructive for other regional organisations. For a student of international relations in Nigeria, the most obvious parallel is the African Union's own peace and security architecture and the ambitions set out in Agenda 2063, where questions about shared intelligence, cross-border policing and the protection of citizens' rights are becoming more pressing every year. Reading the EU's experience closely is therefore useful well beyond European studies in the narrow sense.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Origins and Evolution of the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy

The EU did not design its counter-terrorism system in advance. It built it in response to attacks. The September 2001 attacks in the United States produced the first serious legislative package, including the Framework Decision on combating terrorism and the initial proposal for the EAW (Bossong, 2012). The

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Madrid train bombings of March 2004 pushed the process further and led the European Council to appoint a Counter-Terrorism Coordinator and to demand a more coherent Union-wide approach (EPRS, 2021). The London bombings of July 2005 supplied the final push, and later that year the Council adopted the Counter-Terrorism Strategy with its four pillars (Council of the European Union, 2005; Argomaniz, 2011).

Most scholars treat the 2005 Strategy less as a single plan than as a label under which a fast-growing collection of laws, agencies and programmes was later sorted (Bossong, 2012; Argomaniz, Bureš, & Kaunert, 2015). Bossong's work on the strategy's early implementation found that political attention was spread unevenly across the four pillars, with prevention receiving a burst of investment after each major attack while the other three were comparatively neglected. Later content analysis points the same way. D'Amato and Terlizzi (2022), studying the 2020 Agenda, found that its objectives were clearly stated but that the threat it was meant to address was often left undefined and the concrete measures remained vague. The general picture is of an architecture that grew incrementally and reactively, and acquired whatever coherence it has after the fact.

2.2 Institutional Architecture: Europol, the European Arrest Warrant and Intelligence Cooperation

The main achievement of the years since 2005 has been the creation of bodies that allow cross-border cooperation without formally taking security away from national governments. Europol's counter-terrorism mandate has widened steadily since 2001, and in January 2016 the agency opened the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) as a hub for ongoing investigations and for coordinating the response to major attacks (Bureš, 2016). The EAW, in force since 2004, allows suspects to be surrendered between member states through a judicial procedure rather than the slow diplomatic extradition process it replaced. Further coordination comes from the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (EU INTCEN) and the Standing Committee on Operational Cooperation on Internal Security (COSI) (Müller-Wille, 2004; Boşilcă, 2014).

A recurring complaint in this literature is how little operational power these bodies actually hold. Bureš (2016) describes a circular problem. Europol has no supranational power of arrest or independent investigation; because it has often delivered limited practical value in terrorism cases, national agencies keep preferring bilateral and informal channels; and that preference in turn keeps Europol marginal. Boşilcă (2014) finds a similar gap between what member states say about cooperation and what they do, and traces it to the reluctance of national security services to share sensitive material. That reluctance has several sources: bureaucratic culture, different legal systems, and a narrow reading of national interest (Müller-Wille, 2004; Argomaniz, 2011).

2.3 The Prevent Pillar and Radicalisation

Prevention has drawn particular scholarly interest, partly because it goes to the political roots of radicalisation and partly because, unlike Protect or Pursue, it does not depend on coercive powers, which makes it easier for the EU to act in this area without a fight over competence (Ragazzi, as cited in Melhuish & Heath-Kelly, 2022). The EU has generally supported member states rather than replaced them, by strengthening national capacity, facilitating cooperation between governments, building shared resources and pursuing international partnerships (Council of the European Union, 2005). Melhuish and Heath-Kelly (2022) show that the EU has also found a way to reach below the national level. By framing radicalisation as something that happens in particular places and communities, and by working directly with municipalities and front-line practitioners through the Radicalisation Awareness Network, Brussels has widened its role in a

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field that formally belongs to the member states under the subsidiarity principle, while continuing to insist that primary responsibility rests with national and local authorities.

2.4 The Security–Liberty Debate

A large normative literature asks whether the EU has struck the right balance between freedom and security in this field (Bigo & Tsoukala, 2008; Guild & Geyer, 2008; Bigo, Carrera, Hayes, Hernanz, & Jeandesboz, 2015). The sharpest disputes concern instruments that collect or transfer personal data in bulk. The PNR Directive, which obliges airlines to hand over passenger records to national authorities so that travellers can be screened against terrorism and serious-crime criteria, has been the most contested. When the proposal was first tabled, the Meijers Committee and the European Economic and Social Committee questioned whether its necessity had been demonstrated and warned of risks to privacy, non-discrimination and free movement (European Parliament Think Tank, 2015). Academic criticism has followed the same line. De Capitani (2023) argues that PNR delivers what he calls virtual security while imposing real and disproportionate limits on passengers' rights. The CJEU's 2022 judgment in Ligue des droits humains did not strike the Directive down, but it read the text narrowly and found that indiscriminate processing of everyone's travel data was hard to reconcile with Articles 7 and 8 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Kuskonmaz (2026) places PNR within a wider family of EU surveillance measures whose fit with data-protection case law remains, in her phrase, a never-ending story.

2.5 The External Dimension

A separate body of work looks at how the EU projects its counter-terrorism policy beyond its borders, on the premise that the security of the member states cannot be separated from what happens in neighbouring regions. Kaunert (2009) traces how internal competences in police cooperation, the criminalisation of terrorism and extradition gave the Union the legal footing to negotiate counter-terrorism arrangements with outside partners, above all the United States, after 2001. The external dimension has widened a good deal since then. In 2015 the Council decided to step up external counter-terrorism work in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa, the Gulf and the Sahel, and the Commission has since pursued agreements that would allow Europol to exchange personal data with a number of North African and Middle Eastern states (Council of the European Union, 2026; European External Action Service [EEAS], n.d.). Kaunert and Léonard (2019) describe the overall pattern as one of collective securitisation, in which counter-terrorism cooperation now runs through the Common Foreign and Security Policy, civilian and military missions, and the traditional justice and home affairs channels at the same time, blurring the internal–external divide written into the treaties. This matters for the comparative point raised in section four: a Union that already treats its own security as bound up with the stability of partner regions has an obvious, if underused, reason to deepen its cooperation with bodies such as the African Union.

2.6 The Respond Pillar and Victims of Terrorism

Respond is the least studied of the four pillars, but it has developed considerably through EU legislation on victims' rights. Directive 2017/541 on combating terrorism, which replaced the 2002 Framework Decision, requires member states to give victims of terrorism immediate access to specialist support, including medical, psychological, legal and practical help, for as long as they need it. It builds on the general Victims' Rights Directive of 2012, which already recognised that victims of terrorism are unusually exposed to secondary victimisation (European Commission, 2021). The Commission opened an EU Centre of Expertise for Victims of Terrorism in January 2020 and adopted the Union's first Strategy on Victims' Rights for 2020 to 2025 (European Commission, 2020). Together these steps mark a shift from

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Respond as emergency medical response towards a more institutional, rights-based model of recovery. Reviews of national practice nonetheless keep finding gaps in advance planning and coordination, gaps that can compound the harm to victims and damage public trust in the police, health services and courts in the days after an attack (EU Centre of Expertise for Victims of Terrorism, 2024). Even the least controversial pillar, in other words, suffers from the same implementation problem that runs through the rest of the strategy.

2.7 Lone-Actor and Online Radicalisation

The final strand of literature deals with the move away from organised cells towards individuals who radicalise with little or no direct contact with a group. Hamm and Spaaij (2017) chart the growth of lone-actor terrorism across different ideologies. Bakker and de Graaf (2011) make the practical point that detecting such people requires a much finer-grained warning system than most agencies were built for, because a lone actor does not generate the pattern of communications between conspirators that intelligence services are designed to intercept. More recent work stresses the role of online platforms. Research published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point on European lone attackers since October 2023 identifies emotional vulnerability, heavy algorithmic exposure and digital isolation as key risk factors, especially for adolescents, and places the February 2025 stabbing in Villach, Austria, within a wider pattern of what the authors call do-it-yourself radicalisation, in which a person absorbs extremist material and acts without any organisational direction (Combating Terrorism Center, 2025). A study of lone-actor cases in France and Germany between 2015 and 2025 reaches a similar conclusion: radicalisation has become less linear and more dependent on online propaganda, and it continues to outrun the detection capacity of national services (Small Wars Journal, 2026). One caution is worth registering here. Wolfowicz, Litmanovitz, Weisburd and Hasisi (2020), in a systematic review of the empirical literature, find that online exposure tends to interact with offline social and psychological vulnerabilities rather than causing radicalisation by itself. That finding complicates any response that relies on technology alone.

3. Empirical Review

Recent data confirm both that the threat persists and that it is unevenly spread across the Union. Europol's Terrorism Situation and Trend Report for 2026, which covers the year 2025, records forty-five attacks (completed, failed and foiled) across ten member states, down from fifty-eight the year before (Europol, 2026). Twenty-four of those attacks were jihadist in motivation, twelve were left-wing or anarchist, five were right-wing and four fell into other or unspecified categories. Jihadist violence was again the most lethal. Of the 486 people arrested for terrorism-related offences during the year, 347 were held in connection with jihadism and forty-three in connection with right-wing terrorism (Europol, 2026). A tactical detail in the same report deserves emphasis. Eight of the nine completed jihadist attacks in 2025 were knife attacks, whereas right-wing attacks more often involved explosives. The distinction matters for the Protect pillar, because the detection and screening measures developed against bomb plots are of little use against a person who picks up a kitchen knife and walks into a public square.

Country-level figures from the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Terrorism Index, as reported in the European press, show wide variation between member states. France recorded twelve attacks in the most recent year covered, with four deaths and eighteen injuries, its highest attack and injury count since 2020, even though its global impact ranking stayed relatively low (Euronews, 2026). Counts differ between sources because Europol includes foiled and failed plots whereas the Global Terrorism Index records only attacks that took place, so Europol's figure for France is somewhat higher. Austria saw the

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sharpest rise in the impact of terrorism among EU states, largely because of the Villach attack of February 2025, in which a twenty-three-year-old man who professed sympathy for the Islamic State killed a teenager and wounded five others in a crowded square (Euronews, 2026; Combating Terrorism Center, 2025). Europol's own data show completed jihadist attacks in Germany, France, Austria, Spain and Ireland during 2025, with Ireland also reporting a foiled right-wing plot, a reminder that both currents remain active (Europol, 2026). At the other end of the scale, Romania, Hungary and Estonia were among the least affected states, and six member states were assessed as not affected by terrorism at all in the review period (Euronews, 2026).

A second finding bears directly on the Prevent pillar. The same reporting indicates that young people and minors accounted for forty-two per cent of terrorism-related investigations across Europe and North America in the most recent year, three times the share recorded in 2021, and that Belgian intelligence services counted minors as roughly one-third of the terrorism investigations opened between 2022 and 2024 (Euronews, 2026). Europol reaches a compatible conclusion for the EU, noting that almost one in three suspects arrested in 2024 was a minor or a young adult, the youngest being twelve years old (Europol, 2025). These numbers support the qualitative literature on online radicalisation: adolescents appear to be disproportionately exposed to extremist ecosystems online, and Prevent programmes designed mainly around community and offline intervention have struggled to keep pace (Combating Terrorism Center, 2025).

The external dimension discussed in section two also shows up in the record. Since 2017 the Commission has sought mandates to negotiate personal-data agreements between Europol and Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey, on the explicit reasoning that cooperation with third countries is a precondition for the Union's internal security (EEAS, n.d.). This external work has grown alongside the internal architecture rather than in place of it, which reinforces the point that the EU now treats its own security as inseparable from developments in neighbouring regions.

Three observations follow from this material and organise the discussion in section seven. First, the threat is heterogeneous. It varies by ideology, by method and by member state, which makes a single uniform response hard to design. Second, low-technology, low-planning attacks such as stabbings now dominate completed incidents, and that shift favours prevention and local detection over the centralised intelligence apparatus in which the EU has invested most heavily since 2005. Third, the youth dimension suggests that the centre of gravity of the threat is moving into digital spaces that sit outside the jurisdiction and institutional reach of bodies like Europol.

4. Gap in the Literature

The literature is large but fragmented in three ways. First, most studies look at one instrument at a time. The EAW, PNR, Europol's mandate and radicalisation-prevention programmes are each treated as separate policy problems, and only a few authors, Bossong (2012) and D'Amato and Terlizzi (2022) among them, ask how the four pillars work, or fail to work, together as a system. Second, the literature on the trust deficit (Müller-Wille, 2004; Boşilcă, 2014; Bureš, 2016) and the literature on rights and security (Bigo & Tsoukala, 2008; De Capitani, 2023) have grown up side by side as separate conversations, even though both describe the same underlying constraint: member states' unwillingness to surrender control over security-relevant information, whether to Europol or to EU-level judicial oversight. Third, while the rise of online and lone-actor radicalisation is well documented (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017; Wolfowicz et al., 2020; Combating

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Terrorism Center, 2025), few studies connect that shift back to the design of the 2005 Strategy, which was conceived with organised, group-based terrorism in mind.

There is also a comparative gap. Regional organisations elsewhere, including the African Union under Agenda 2063, face structurally similar problems: how to build shared counter-terrorism capacity across sovereign states with very different institutional capabilities, without hollowing out either national sovereignty or citizens' rights. Yet little comparative work links the EU's pillar-based model to the design choices facing other regional bodies. This paper does not try to close that gap, but it flags it as a direction for further research, particularly for scholars and practitioners working across the European and African security architectures.

The paper addresses the first two gaps directly, by reading the trust and rights literatures together and by discussing all four pillars within a single frame organised around threat, response and dilemma. It addresses the third partially, by tracing the empirical shift towards online-radicalised, low-technology violence back to the assumptions built into the 2005 Strategy, and by asking in the discussion and recommendations what an adapted Prevent pillar would need to look like.

5. Theoretical Framework

The paper's main theoretical lens is securitisation theory as developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde of the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Wæver, 1995). The core claim is that security is not simply an objective condition that exists in the world but the product of a political process. An issue becomes a security issue when an actor with sufficient authority presents it, through a speech act, as an existential threat to something valued, and when a relevant audience accepts that presentation. Once that acceptance is secured, the issue is lifted out of ordinary politics into a space where exceptional measures, which would normally be rejected, become acceptable (Buzan et al., 1998).

Applied to the EU, the theory helps explain how terrorism was reframed, especially after Madrid and London, from a matter for national criminal justice into an existential threat to the Union's citizens, borders and way of life, and how that reframing justified supranational tools that would have been politically impossible in quieter times. The European Council and the Commission acted as the principal securitising actors, describing terrorism in successive strategy documents as a threat requiring exceptional cross-border measures (Council of the European Union, 2005). The member states and, behind them, their publics were the audience whose acceptance legitimised what followed. The EAW's bypassing of traditional extradition, the PNR Directive's bulk transfer of passenger data and the expansion of Europol's data-processing powers all go beyond what would ordinarily count as proportionate criminal justice cooperation, yet they were accepted as necessary once terrorism had been successfully securitised. Kaunert and Léonard (2019) describe this as collective securitisation, a process in which the securitising move is made and accepted at the level of the Union rather than within any single state.

Securitisation theory also explains why the rights–security tension has been so hard to resolve. Because securitisation works by removing an issue from normal politics, the usual mechanisms of contestation and proportionality review that would check an expansion of state power are partially suspended for as long as the security framing holds. From this angle, the CJEU's repeated interventions, including the 2022 PNR judgment (De Capitani, 2023), can be read as a form of judicial desecuritisation: an effort to bring parts of counter-terrorism policy back within ordinary legal and constitutional scrutiny. Where useful, the paper supplements this lens with Buzan and Wæver's (2003) Regional Security Complex Theory,

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which holds that security dynamics among geographically clustered states become interdependent. In a complex as tightly bound as the EU's twenty-seven members, no single state can securitise, or desecuritise, terrorism on its own.

One further advantage of the framework is that it treats the EU's counter-terrorism architecture as the outcome of an ongoing and, in principle, reversible social process rather than a fixed endpoint. Because securitising moves depend on continued audience acceptance, the theory accommodates the pattern seen in section three, in which the intensity and character of the EU's response has shifted with changing attack patterns, from the coordinated mass-casualty plots of 2004 to 2017 towards the diffuse, individualised violence of recent years. Each new wave of attacks acts as a fresh securitising moment and renews acceptance of expanded measures. This helps explain why the architecture has grown in bursts tied to specific incidents rather than through a single comprehensive redesign (Bossong, 2012; D'Amato & Terlizzi, 2022).

6. Method of Data Collection and Analysis

The study uses a qualitative, document-based design of the kind common in EU security studies. This was the appropriate choice because the research questions concern the evolution, structure and contested legitimacy of an institutional strategy, and those questions are best answered by close reading of primary policy texts and the secondary literature that interprets them, rather than by primary data collection involving human participants.

Sources fall into three groups. The first is primary EU material: the 2005 Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the 2020 Counter-Terrorism Agenda, relevant directives (chiefly the PNR Directive and Directive 2017/541), and the CJEU case law that interprets them. The second is peer-reviewed scholarship, drawn mainly from European Security, West European Politics, the European Law Journal, European Papers and Terrorism and Political Violence, and located through targeted searches on the relevant terms (counter-terrorism, securitisation, Europol, PNR, radicalisation). This was supplemented by policy analysis from research bodies including the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), the European Parliamentary Research Service and the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. The third group is empirical and statistical reporting, principally Europol's annual TE-SAT reports and the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Terrorism Index, together with contemporaneous news coverage used to verify and contextualise specific incidents such as the Villach attack.

Analysis took the form of thematic content analysis, broadly following the coding approach used by D'Amato and Terlizzi (2022). Sources were first sorted according to the four (later five) pillars of the strategy and then coded according to whether they dealt primarily with institutional design, with empirical threat patterns or with the rights–security tension. That coding structure shapes the discussion section, which is organised around threat, response and unresolved dilemma.

The method has clear limits. As a desk study relying entirely on secondary and open-source material, it cannot verify classified operational details of intelligence cooperation, and it depends on the accuracy of the statistics produced by Europol and the Institute for Economics and Peace. No interviews were conducted with policymakers, law enforcement officers or affected communities. The analysis is therefore interpretive rather than causal: it identifies patterns and tensions in the existing record rather than establishing how effective any particular instrument has been.

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7. Discussion

7.1 The Threats Facing the European Union

Taken together, the literature and the data show a threat that is multi-source and cross-border in ways the 2005 Strategy did not fully anticipate. The twenty-seven member states face jihadist violence, right-wing and other ideologically motivated attacks, and in some countries separatist or ethno-nationalist currents at the same time, which argues for a coordinated rather than piecemeal response (Europol, 2026). Layered on top of this is what might be called the Schengen paradox. Passport-free movement is one of the EU's most tangible achievements and a core expression of integration, yet it also lets individuals plan, travel and in some cases strike across internal borders with little friction, so that no national police force can realistically contain a transnational plot on its own. The data in section three sharpen the picture. The shift towards opportunistic knife attacks, of which Villach is the clearest recent example, and the growing share of minors under investigation show a threat that is not just cross-border but increasingly diffuse, individual and resistant to the centralised, intelligence-led detection the post-2005 architecture was built to support (Bakker & de Graaf, 2011; Combating Terrorism Center, 2025).

7.2 The EU's Institutional Responses

Against this background the EU's response rests on the four pillars, given practical form through specific instruments. The EAW allows rapid surrender of suspects between member states; PNR data-sharing gives authorities a view of cross-border passenger movement; and Europol, through the ECTC in particular, offers a central, if still limited, channel for exchanging intelligence (Council of the European Union, 2005; Bureš, 2016). Judged on its own terms this is a considerable achievement. Arrangements that would have been unthinkable between fully sovereign European states a generation ago are now, however imperfectly, part of the routine business of EU internal security. The 2020 Agenda's new Anticipate strand, aimed at strategic intelligence and early detection with the help of new technologies, shows some institutional learning and an attempt to turn the architecture towards the more diffuse, digitally mediated threat described in sections two and three (EPRS, 2021). The external dimension extends the reach still further, embedding counter-terrorism cooperation in the EU's foreign policy, development and neighbourhood instruments so that capacity-building with third countries is treated as an extension of internal security rather than a separate domain (Kaunert, 2009; EEAS, n.d.).

7.3 Counter-Terrorism Challenges: Trust, Enforcement and Adaptation

The literature and the data nevertheless converge on three persistent problems. The first is the trust deficit over intelligence sharing. National agencies still prefer bilateral or informal channels to formal EU mechanisms, a pattern that Bureš (2016) and Boşilcă (2014) both trace to bureaucratic culture, divergent legal frameworks and a defensive view of national interest. The second is uneven enforcement. Even where directives such as PNR have been formally transposed, the CJEU's 2022 ruling made clear that several member states had not brought their implementing laws into line with proportionality requirements, leaving gaps between the letter and the practice of EU counter-terrorism law (De Capitani, 2023). The third, and probably the most consequential, is the widening distance between emerging tactics, especially lone-actor attacks and online radicalisation, and the detection tools the EU's institutions were designed around. As Wolfowicz et al. (2020) show, radicalisation outcomes arise from an interaction between online exposure and offline vulnerability that resists purely technological solutions, so even much wider surveillance powers are unlikely by themselves to close this gap. The Respond pillar illustrates a related problem. Legal commitments to victims are now well established at EU level, yet evaluations of national implementation

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keep finding weaknesses in preparedness and coordination, which means the quality of support a victim receives still depends a great deal on which member state the attack happened in (EU Centre of Expertise for Victims of Terrorism, 2024). Across all four pillars the same pattern recurs: legal harmonisation at EU level has consistently run ahead of resourced, practical implementation at national level.

7.4 Balancing Collective Security and Fundamental Rights

Running through each of these problems is the security–rights trade-off identified through the securitisation lens in section five. Data tracking and intelligence-sharing strengthen the Union's collective capacity, but they sit in continuous tension with its founding commitment to privacy and civil liberties, and recent CJEU case law suggests that this tension is being actively renegotiated rather than settled (Bigo & Tsoukala, 2008; De Capitani, 2023). PNR is the clearest example. Designed to strengthen Pursue and Protect by giving authorities visibility over passenger movement, it has also become the focus of the EU's most sustained legal challenge to counter-terrorism surveillance, culminating in a judgment that found indiscriminate processing of passenger data hard to square with Charter rights (De Capitani, 2023). I do not read this as evidence that the EU's response has failed. It reflects, rather, the open-ended nature of the problem the Union is trying to manage. Balancing collective security against fundamental rights is not something the EU can do once and then put away. It is a standing challenge that returns with every new instrument, every new attack and every new ruling, and it calls for continuous renegotiation rather than a single settlement.

7.5 Synthesis: Unresolved Tensions

Reading threats, responses and challenges together shows why the EU's encounter with terrorism is best understood as a set of unresolved tensions rather than a solved problem. The threat, increasingly diffuse, individual and digitally mediated, exposes the limits of an institutional response that was largely designed around organised, group-based plots. The response, for its part, has proved better at enabling formal cross-border cooperation than at resolving the trust deficit that determines how much intelligence actually moves through those channels. And the resulting problems, uneven enforcement, slow adaptation and the unfinished rights–security trade-off, are not incidental flaws. They are the predictable consequences of a securitisation process that, by its nature, expands executive and administrative power faster than it builds in mechanisms of democratic and judicial accountability. Recognising how these three elements depend on one another is the first step towards the more integrated response set out in section nine.

8. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the challenges terrorism poses to the European Union through three lenses: the nature of the threat, the institutional response built to counter it, and the tensions that response has not yet resolved. The evidence supports one central conclusion. The EU has built a significant supranational counter-terrorism architecture out of what was, until the early 2000s, an almost entirely national policy field, but the problems that architecture was meant to address have neither gone away nor been fully mastered. The four-pillar strategy and the institutions built around it, including Europol, the EAW and PNR data-sharing, represent a durable and largely successful attempt to match a transnational threat with a transnational response.

The response is nonetheless incomplete in three specific respects documented above: a trust deficit that limits the practical value of formal intelligence-sharing channels; uneven transposition and enforcement of common rules across twenty-seven legal systems; and a growing shift towards online-radicalised, low-technology lone-actor violence that the existing architecture was not designed to detect. Laid over all three is

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the unresolved problem of balancing collective security with fundamental rights. Securitisation theory helps explain both why the EU was able to build its architecture so quickly after Madrid and London and why the resulting rights–security tension has proved so difficult to resolve through ordinary politics, leaving the Court of Justice to intervene again and again.

The challenges terrorism poses to the EU are, in short, best understood not as a finished problem but as a recurring test. The Union has already shown that shared European action against a shared threat is possible. What it has not yet shown is how far collective security can be pursued before it begins to erode the freedoms it exists to protect.

9. Recommendations

The findings above suggest the following.

First, the EU should invest in mechanisms for building trust among national intelligence and security services, including graduated, reciprocal information-sharing protocols that allow confidence to grow step by step rather than asking member states for an all-or-nothing commitment to a centralised system such as Europol.

Second, the Commission should strengthen its monitoring of how directives such as PNR are transposed and applied at national level, closing the gap between formal compliance and substantive proportionality in line with the standards the CJEU set out in 2022.

Third, Prevent programming should be reoriented towards the digital environments where youth radicalisation is now concentrated. That means closer, properly regulated cooperation with technology platforms, expanded digital literacy and resilience work in schools, and dedicated training for practitioners who work with adolescents at risk.

Fourth, any expansion of surveillance or data-sharing powers should be accompanied by proportionate, independent judicial oversight designed into the instrument from the start rather than added after litigation, so that the security–rights balance is negotiated openly rather than through repeated court challenges after the fact.

Fifth, the EU should support comparative research on how its pillar-based model might inform, or learn from, the counter-terrorism architecture being developed by other regional bodies, including the African Union under Agenda 2063, given that both organisations face the structurally similar task of coordinating sovereign states against a borderless threat.

Sixth, the external dimension should be pursued with the same sensitivity to rights that applies internally, particularly in data-transfer negotiations with third countries, so that partnerships built to strengthen the EU's own security do not export weaker data-protection standards to jurisdictions with less robust judicial oversight than the CJEU provides.

Seventh, member states and EU institutions should invest in tactical-level detection suited to low-technology, opportunistic attacks. The intelligence-heavy, plot-disruption model built around the Pursue pillar is poorly matched to the knife-attack pattern now dominant among completed jihadist incidents, and community-level vigilance and rapid-response protocols may offer more realistic protection than a further expansion of bulk data collection.

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Finally, future research should move beyond single-instrument studies towards integrated analyses that treat the four pillars as an interacting system, tracing how weakness in one, such as the trust deficit that limits Pursue-pillar cooperation, constrains the effectiveness of the others.

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