

2021

EU Internet Referral Unit

Transparency Report

Terrorist propaganda monitoring and analysis, referrals, and public-private partnerships.



AUTHORS
EU Internet Referral Unit

Catalogue number	QL-AR-22-001-EN-N
ISBN	978-92-95220-48-5
ISSN	2600-4747
DOI	10.2813/341047

© European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2022.

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the copyright of the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

Cite this publication: Europol (2022), 2021 EU IRU Transparency Report, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

This publication and more information on Europol are available on the internet.

Photo credits: cover © shulz, on Getty images

Contents

List of acronyms and abbreviations	2
1. Introduction	3
Terrorist propaganda monitoring and analysis	3
Referrals	3
Public-private partnerships	3
2. Terrorist propaganda monitoring and analysis	5
Methodology and legal Framework	5
Check the Web portal – analysis of content	6
3. Referrals	7
Referral process and legal framework	7
Referrals on content related to jihadist and right-wing terrorism and violent extremism	7
Referrals on content related to migrant smuggling	7
Referral Action Days (RAD)	8
Analysis of referral requests	9
4. Public-private partnerships	10
EU Internet Forum	10
EU Crisis Protocol (EUCP) implementation	10
EUCP Playbook	10
EUCP Tabletop Exercise	10
GIFCT Crisis Response Working Group	11
Responses to right-wing terrorism and violent extremism	11
Research and responding to new challenges	11
ANNEX	13
Mandate of the EU IRU	13

List of acronyms and abbreviations

CBRNE	Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear Explosives
CRWG	Crisis Response Working Group
CtW	Check-the-Web
ECTC	European Counter Terrorism Centre
EMSC	European Migrant Smuggling Centre
EU	European Union
EUCP	EU Crisis Protocol
EUIF	EU Internet Forum
EU IRU	EU Internet Referral Unit
GIFCT	Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism
IRMa	Internet Referral Management application
IRU	Internet Referral Unit
MS	Member States
OSP	Online Service Provider ¹
RAD	Referral Action Days
RWTVE	Right-Wing Terrorism and Violent Extremism
SIRIUS	Shaping Internet Research Investigations System
TP	Third Party
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
TTX	Tabletop Exercise

¹ The working definition of ‘Online Service Providers’ (OSP) used in this report is any internet company providing online services to EU citizens.

1. Introduction

This is the fifth edition of the European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) transparency report. The report is a factual snapshot of the EU IRU’s activities in 2021 in the realm of prevention. This includes the sum of the Unit’s activities aiming at reducing public accessibility to online propaganda produced by terrorist organisations. The EU IRU prevention activities are centred on three streams of work:

Terrorist propaganda monitoring and analysis

The EU IRU monitors the dissemination of publicly available online terrorist content, which is manually assessed by the Unit’s experts and imported into the Check-the-Web (CtW) portal. The portal is an electronic reference library that aims to document and analyse online content produced by groups or individuals who are inspired by the jihadist terrorist ideology. This content, along with the analysis conducted on it, is accessible to competent authorities of the EU Member States (MS) and associated Third Parties (TP) through Europol’s secure network. MS and TP also have the possibility to share their own assessments with all members of the CtW portal.

The analysis of the identified terrorist content focuses on emerging trends from different angles, such as prevailing narratives, ideological motivations, dissemination techniques and usage of new online services and technologies. Following the content analysis, the Unit produces a wide range of strategic reports, such as weekly messages, situation reports, early warning notifications, intelligence notifications and annual reviews. Through the Unit’s strategic reports, counter terrorism units in MS can identify challenges and/or operational priorities to support their investigative actions.

Referrals

One of the core tasks of the EU IRU is the flagging of terrorist content to Online Service Providers (OSP). Flagging is the action of identifying a unique Uniform Resource Locator (URL), or a set of unique URLs, pointing to terrorist content, for subsequent referral action. The referrals to OSP, beyond the URL(s), include the EU IRU expert’s content assessment, justifying the decision for referral, and the request to the OSP for review and decision for removal. The referral of content does not constitute an enforceable act. The decision to remove the referred content is taken by the concerned service provider in accordance with their policies and terms of service.

The referral process is facilitated through Europol’s Internet Referral Management application (IRMa). The application offers a central system for MS IRUs and Europol to transmit referrals. IRMa ensures the processing of referrals in a harmonised and standardised manner. It also facilitates coordination among MS to avoid duplication of referral requests and/or interference with ongoing criminal investigations.

Public-private partnerships

One of the EU IRU’s strategic priorities in the field of prevention is cooperation with technology companies. The Unit engages with OSP that are exposed to terrorist

content or are being exploited in the context of a terrorist activity. The aim of cooperation is to exchange best practices in detecting terrorist content on their platforms, discuss dissemination patterns of online propaganda by terrorist organisations and/or provide examples of specific measures to improve the referral process and content moderation. The Unit is also a key stakeholder of the EU Internet Forum², where public-private partnerships in countering terrorist content online are reinforced.

² European Commission Migration and Home Affairs, "European Union Internet Forum (EUIF)", https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/european-union-internet-forum-euif_en.

2. Terrorist propaganda monitoring and analysis

Methodology and legal Framework

The EU IRU stores and analyses terrorist content in CtW in accordance with a prioritisation process that takes into consideration the EU Agenda on Security, MS' requests and threat assessments. In this context, the prioritisation is further established through the classification of **terrorist groups** and **narratives**.

The terrorist groups that have been prioritised for monitoring and analysis in CtW are those espousing an ideology linked to the doctrine of 'violent jihad' as a means to seize political power.

Specifically in 2021, the EU IRU focused mostly on the production of online propaganda by three terrorist groups including their affiliates and supporters: the so-called Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The Unit focused its monitoring and analysis on content that was disseminated by the so-called 'official' media outlets, or published on websites related to the identified priority groups. It also examined supporter-generated content and 'core disseminators' related to the aforementioned groups that might have appeared on individual public accounts.

The narratives that have been prioritised for monitoring and analysis include:

- incitement to and guidance for lone actor attacks in Europe;
- recruitment of European citizens and residents to join terrorist groups;
- glorification of priority terrorist groups;
- jihadist propaganda produced in European languages;
- dissemination of (instructional) materials on Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and Explosives (CBRNE);
- geopolitical developments in regions where the priority terrorist groups operate.

The major trends and developments in the jihadist propaganda over 2021, according to the material collected and stored in CtW, is detailed in the EU IRU report 'Online Jihadist Propaganda: 2021 in review'³. The annual report analysed the dominant themes, types of publications and media exploited by the priority groups over that period and highlighted changes in key areas related to online jihadist propaganda. The report also shed light on changes in the groups' narratives, the abuse of technology for propaganda dissemination, and online communication patterns.

The CtW portal is source-based, which means that all the analysis resulting from CtW is based on information collected by primary sources. The collected data stems from

³ Europol, "Online Jihadist Propaganda - 2021 in review", 2022, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/online-jihadist-propaganda-2021-in-review>.

open sources on the internet or it is contributed by MS in the context of criminal investigations linked to terrorism. The portal contains publications, statements, videos, operational claims and audio speeches produced by the priority terrorist groups and their supporters.

The data that is stored in CtW is processed solely for the portal’s purpose, in accordance with the EU Directive on combating terrorism⁴ and in compliance with Europol’s Regulation⁵. Europol’s Regulation provides the legal framework for the Agency’s tasks and its processing of information, as well as scrutiny procedures by the European Parliament. The Regulation foresees the direct retrieval and processing of information, including personal data, from publicly available sources, including the internet. Indicatively, Chapter 4 details the rules regarding information processing, including the foreseen sources and purposes of any information processing activity. The Data Protection Function⁶ (DPF) within Europol ensures the lawfulness and compliance of data processing operations with the applicable legal framework. In addition to the assurance activities of the DPF, there is also the supervision exercised by the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS).

Check the Web portal – analysis of content

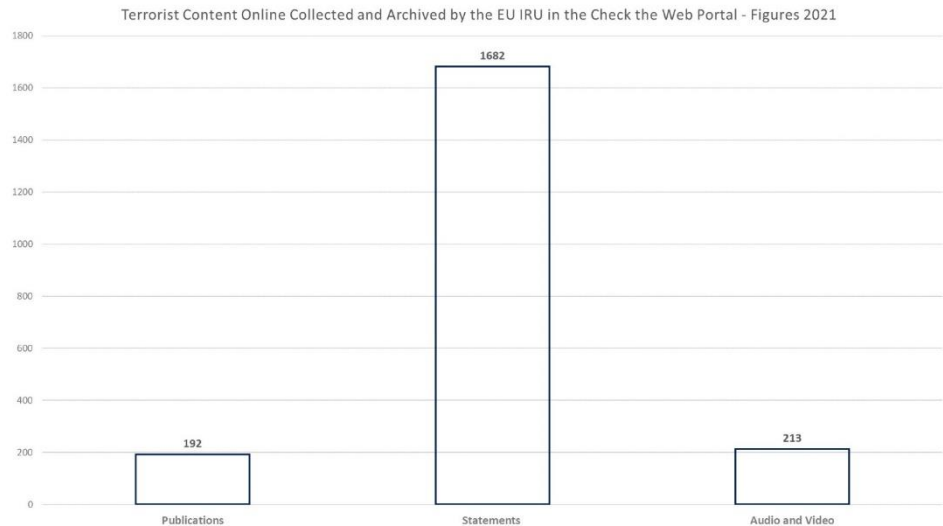


Figure 1. The chart illustrates the volume of jihadist terrorist online productions per type of content (publications, statements, and audio and video files), which have been collected, analysed, and archived in the Check the Web Portal, by the EU IRU, in 2021.

4 EUR-Lex, “Directive (EU) 2017/on combating terrorism”, 2017, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32017L0541>.

5 EUR-Lex, “Regulation (EU) 2016/794 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016”, 2022, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/regulation-eu-2016/794-of-european-parliament-and-of-council-of-11-may-2016>.

6 Europol, “Data Protection & Transparency”, 2021, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/about-europol/data-protection-transparency>.

3. Referrals

Referral process and legal framework

In 2021, the EU IRU flagged and referred online content related to jihadist terrorism, right-wing terrorism, violent extremism, and migrant smuggling.

The referrals of online content were performed in accordance with Europol’s Regulation. In particular, Article 4.1(m) establishes that Europol may support Member States’ actions in preventing and combating terrorism and other specific forms of crime (as listed in Europol Regulation Annex I) which are facilitated, promoted or committed using the internet, including the making of referrals of internet content to OSP for their voluntary assessment of the referred content against their own terms and conditions.

Referrals on content related to jihadist and right-wing terrorism and violent extremism

Referrals to OSP are made both following requests received from MS and as a result of the EU IRU’s proactive monitoring of open sources.

In 2021, the referred content was related to jihadist propaganda production by three priority terrorist organisations, namely the so-called Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, including their affiliates or supporters. Priority was given to propaganda material linked to high-profile events (i.e. terrorist attacks or communications by leaders and key figures) and/or relayed by the so-called ‘official’ media outlets; core disseminators and websites related to the priority terrorist organisations.

In October 2021 the Unit set up a specialised team to support the referrals in the domain of right-wing terrorism and violent extremism (RWTVE). Priority was given to content produced by or favouring proscribed RWTVE organisations (as per national MS legislations), or content disseminated in relation to relevant RWTVE attacks.

Prior to every decision for referral, the EU IRU experts perform a manual evaluation of the content in question to confirm its eligibility for referral. The evaluation of the identified content includes its assessment against:

- Europol’s mandate on forms of crime, as set in Annex I of the Europol Regulation;
- The EU Directive on combating terrorism (EU 2017/541);
- The terms of service of the relevant OSP.

After the content evaluation and decision for referral, the latter is imported into the Internet Referral Management application to launch the referral process.

Referrals on content related to migrant smuggling

Referrals to OSP are made upon requests received from MS and TP, in cooperation with Europol’s European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC). In 2021, the referred

content was related to the advertising of illegal travel services and counterfeit travel documents (i.e. visas, passports).

Prior to the decision for referral, the EU IRU experts perform a manual evaluation of the content in question to confirm its eligibility for referral. The evaluation of the identified content includes its assessment against:

- Europol’s mandate on forms of crime, as set in Annex I of the Europol Regulation;
- The Council Directive defining the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence⁷;
- The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and the Protocols thereto⁸, with special focus on the ‘Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children’ and ‘Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air’;
- The terms of service of the relevant OSP.

After the content evaluation and decision for referral, the latter is imported into the Internet Referral Management application to launch the referral process.

Referral Action Days (RAD)

The EU IRU organises and coordinates Referral Action Days (RAD) together with competent authorities of MS, either in Europol premises or remotely. RAD revolve around intensive referral campaigns which take place within a dedicated timeframe (usually lasting one or two consecutive days) and can be either thematic or platform-specific.

Thematic RAD are referral campaigns on online content that is detected across a number of OSP and related to a specific topic of interest (i.e. jihadist content in Western Balkan languages, terrorist instructional material online etc.).

In 2021, the EU IRU coordinated two thematic RAD: one on the dissemination of right-wing terrorist online propaganda, and another on content promoting illegal migration services from Belarus to Europe.

Platform-specific RAD are referral campaigns on terrorist content that is detected on a specific OSP. Platform-specific RAD are organised in collaboration with the affected OSP and are followed by dedicated discussions with the concerned company regarding patterns of abuse by terrorists and/or violent extremists, the extent of abuse of the company’s services and proactive measures for the detection of terrorist content.

The RAD facilitate direct cooperation among Europol, national IRUs in MS, and OSP. They also allow for swift exchanges of best practice among all parties, with the aim of raising awareness about terrorist propaganda online enhancing the referral process, and improving critical elements such as OSP feedback and response time.

⁷ EUR-Lex, “Council Directive 2002/90/EC of 28 November 2002 defining the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence”, 2002, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A32002L0090>.

⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto”, 2018, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>.

In 2021, the EU IRU coordinated two platform-specific RAD: one on jihadist propaganda disseminated on the Internet Archive platform, and another on terrorist-operated and violent jihadist websites.

Analysis of referral requests

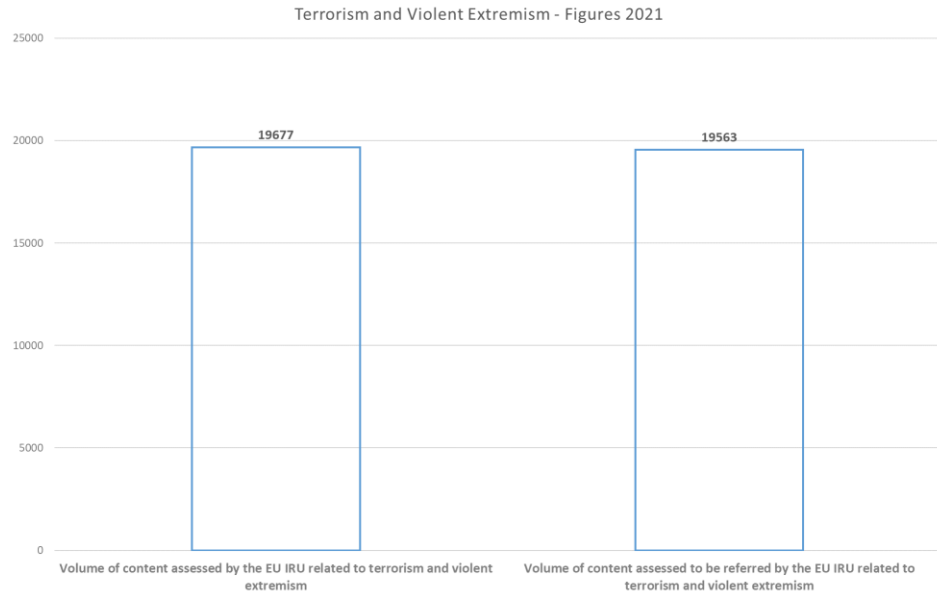


Figure 2. The chart illustrates the volume of terrorist online content assessed, and assessed to be referred to OSP, by the EU IRU in 2021.

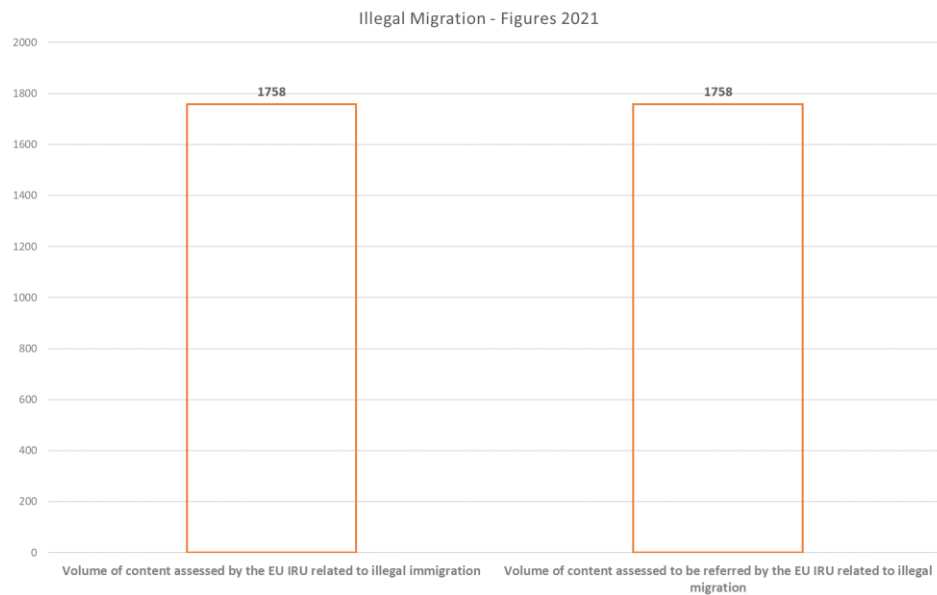


Figure 3. The chart illustrates the volume of online content related to illegal migration that was assessed, and assessed to be referred to OSP, by the EU IRU, in 2021.

4. Public-private partnerships

EU Internet Forum

The EU Internet Forum (EUIF) is the EU framework that further promotes public-private partnerships to counter terrorist content online. It was officially launched by the EU Commission soon after the EU IRU was established, also in 2015, and the EU IRU has been a member of the EUIF ever since.

The priority areas where the Unit invested its efforts in 2021 were related to: a) the implementation of the EU Crisis Protocol (EUCP), b) responses to right-wing terrorist and violent extremist content online and c) responding to new challenges.

EU Crisis Protocol (EUCP) implementation

EUCP Playbook

In March 2021, the EU IRU delivered an operational guide for the MS to facilitate the implementation of the EUCP in crisis situations, titled the 'EUCP Playbook'. The requirement for the development of an operational guide transpired from a consultation process with practitioners from MS and national IRUs that took place in 2020. Practitioners had identified a lack of guidance on the operational processes that would enable the practical implementation of the EUCP by law enforcement. To this end, the EU IRU delivered the EUCP Playbook, which specified the roles, responsibilities and communication channels of each actor from the law enforcement community in the event of a crisis.

EUCP Tabletop Exercise

In November 2021, the EU IRU, in cooperation with the European Commission's DG Home, organised a tabletop exercise (TTX) to test the implementation of the EUCP. The exercise was held online with the participation of representatives of law enforcement agencies and/or content regulators from 29 MS and TP, 13 OSP, the Aqaba Process, the Christchurch Call, and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). Policymakers from EU governments and third countries, the European Commission, the EU Council and the European External Action Service (EEAS) participated as observers, and were invited to share their comments at the end of the exercise.

The EUCP TTX examined the collaboration between government authorities and the tech industry in response to major terrorist incidents with a significant online component. The objectives of the exercise were to: i) test real-time communication between governments and the tech industry in the event of a cross-border massive abuse of the internet in the context of terrorism or violent extremism, and ii) test the interaction of processes when more than one protocol (sector/geography-specific) is initiated, in response to a massive cross-border abuse of the internet in the context of terrorism or violent extremism.

The exercise was conducted under Chatham House rules. It was concluded with the release of a report to the participants which summarised the responses given during the exercise. The report also provided conclusions, as well as a set of

recommendations for improved communication and response to terrorist incidents that spill over to the online environment.

GIFCT Crisis Response Working Group

In 2021, the EU IRU continued its activities as co-chair, alongside DG Home and Microsoft, of the GIFCT Crisis Response Working Group⁹ (CRWG). The CRWG was established with the aim of fostering effective collaboration across industry, government and first-responders to minimise the spread of terrorist or violent extremist content online stemming from a real world terrorist incident. One of the activities of the CRWG was to explore the operational and investigative requirements of law enforcement during a terrorist attack or a protocol-driven event, and examine how the industry can safeguard these requirements. The EU IRU led this stream of work through the established sub-working group dedicated to this topic. The sub-working group concluded its activities in May 2021 with the release of a report summarising the outcome and offering a set of recommendations to GIFCT and policymakers. These related to the enhancement of the public-private partnership, to respond effectively to terrorist incidents with a significant online component.

Responses to right-wing terrorism and violent extremism

In March 2021, the EU IRU participated in the EUIF technical meeting on the establishment of an EU knowledge package of right-wing terrorist and violent extremist groups, symbols and manifestos. The meeting was organised following discussions held at the EUIF ministerial meeting of January 2021, regarding the challenges posed by right-wing terrorist and violent extremist content online. In this context, DG Home committed to working, in cooperation with researchers, MS and Europol, to provide concrete support to OSP in countering the spread of such content in the internet. The technical workshop of March 2021 was attended by representatives of MS and Europol, with the objective to reach an agreement on the approach, criteria and next steps for the creation of a reference list, called “Knowledge package of violent right-wing extremist groups, symbols and manifestos”. The objective of the list would be to reinforce the knowledge position of the EUIF member companies in order to support their content moderation efforts. The document was officially presented to the EUIF members in the senior officials meeting of November 2021. The information contained in it derived from the contributions shared by MS with DG Home and Europol and was expanded with additional information provided by researchers to ensure updates and contextualisation of the content.

Research and responding to new challenges

In September 2021, the EU IRU participated in the EUIF technical workshop, which examined potential risks related to the misuse of algorithmic amplification techniques to spread terrorist and violent extremist content. Besides the EUIF members, the workshop was attended by external experts. The objective was to increase awareness on how amplification techniques can be exploited to disseminate terrorist or violent extremist content and to examine the extent of the threat posed by the misuse of such techniques, as well as possible preventive solutions.

In October 2021, the EU IRU participated in the EUIF technical workshop on the misuse of video gaming by violent extremists. The objective of the meeting was to discuss with tech companies, researchers, experts and policy makers the extent to which violent extremist groups target video gaming and adjacent communication platforms for

⁹ GIFCT, “Working Groups 2022”, 2022, <https://gifct.org/working-groups/>.

recruitment and radicalisation. Besides the EUIF members, the workshop was attended by gaming companies and experts on the use of video gaming for recruitment and dissemination of propaganda.

ANNEX

Mandate of the EU IRU

On 12 March 2015, the Justice and Home Affairs Council of the EU mandated Europol¹⁰ to establish a dedicated unit aiming at reducing the level and impact of internet content promoting terrorism or violent extremism. The EU IRU, which is part of Europol's European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC), started its operations in July 2015 with a mandate to refer terrorist and violent extremist content to OSP and provide support to MS and TP in the context of internet investigations.

Since 2016, the EU IRU also provides support to Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre, by flagging internet content used by traffickers to offer smuggling services to migrants and refugees. The expansion of the Unit's mandate was a result of the special European Council decision of 23 April 2015 on the migration situation in the Mediterranean Sea¹¹, which called for Europol to detect and request the removal of such online content, in accordance with national constitutions.

In 2021, the EU IRU expanded its activities in detecting and referring jihadist terrorist content to also include right-wing terrorist and violent extremist content online. The development of the new capability came as a result of the priorities and recommendations from the JHA Council of October 2019¹² and the new Counter Terrorism Agenda for the EU¹³, which called for Europol to increase its efforts in countering violent extremist ideologies including the spread of right-wing terrorist and extremist content online, through continued engagement with tech companies.

The Unit's overall mission is to link the virtual face of terrorism to its physical aspect, by bridging the gap between prevention and investigation capabilities. The EU IRU detects and refers the core disseminators of terrorist propaganda, with the aim of not only restricting public access to terrorist propaganda, but also identifying and facilitating attribution and the prosecution of perpetrators. Its ultimate objective is to reduce accessibility of terrorist content online by providing a sustained referral capability to MS, and to provide a core internet-based investigation support capability to respond to the MS' priorities and operational needs. To achieve this mission, the Unit operates through four interconnected teams: i) Operations & Internet Investigations Support, ii) Terrorist Propaganda Analysis & Referrals, iii) Advanced Technical Solutions and iv) SIRIUS¹⁴ team.

The EU IRU also works in close collaboration with the other two components of the ECTC; the Counter Terrorism Operations Unit and the ECTC Expertise and Stakeholder Management Unit. This collaboration ensures that Europol's mission to support MS (and third countries with operational agreements with Europol) in combating counter terrorism is implemented coherently and comprehensively - both within the EU and beyond.

¹⁰ Council of the European Union, "Justice and Home Affairs Council, 12-13 March 2015", 2015, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/jha/2015/03/12-13/>.

¹¹ European Council, "Special meeting of the European Council, 23 April 2015 – statement", 2015, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/04/23/special-euco-statement/#>.

¹² Council of the European Union, "Justice and Home Affairs Council, 7-8 October 2019", 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/jha/2019/10/07-08/>.

¹³ European Commission Migration and Home Affairs, "Counter terrorism and radicalisation", 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation_en.

¹⁴ Europol, "SIRIUS Project", 2022, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/operations-services-innovation/sirius-project>.