

EU Internet Referral Unit

TRANSPARENCY REPORT 2017

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1. Introduction

The EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU), 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 Online Service Providers (OSPs) and support Member States (MS) and Third Parties in Internet investigations. It is also mandated to contribute to the disruption of illegal immigrant smuggling networks, by detecting and requesting removal of Internet content used by traffickers to attract migrants and refugees, upon MS requests. The EU IRU works in close collaboration with the two other components of ECTC: Operations and Strategy expertise. This collaboration ensures that the mission of the ECTC can be implemented through the provision of high quality operational support and advanced strategic products, and that the ECTC proactively engages in counter-terrorism (CT) related developments within the European Union (EU) and beyond.

The EU IRU's 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's role is to detect and refer the core disseminators of terrorist propaganda, with the aim of not only removing content, but identifying and facilitating the attribution and prosecution of perpetrators. Its ultimate purpose is to reduce accessibility of terrorist content online, by providing a resilient referral capability for the Member States, and to provide a core Internet-based investigation support capability to respond to the MS operational needs.

Both EU IRU capabilities are supported by staff members who have a rich diversity of knowledge and skills, ranging from experts in religiously inspired terrorism, translators, ICT development and law enforcement experts in counter terrorism.

This report gives an account of the EU IRU's major activities during 2017, in the fields of prevention and investigation.

2. Context

In 2017 the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) terrorist organisation experienced a retraction in the organisation's media production and outreach capabilities. Nevertheless, its material continued to circulate online, augmented by its supporters. The organisation has therefore managed to continue to galvanise a core group of supporters and still seems to have the potential to inspire thousands worldwide.

During the same period, IS and Al Qaida (AQ) continued to hew to their earlier rhetoric. Both organisations stressed the urgency of carrying out attacks in the West but the IS went a step further in hammering home the message that joining the 'jihadist' cause is within the reach of everyone, regardless of age, gender or disability.

Terrorist organisations, and the IS in particular, have used propaganda to ensure, among others, digital depth and resilience. The combination of emotive, political and religious messages contained within the archived material (both the violent and non-violent) is expected to continue to captivate individuals for years to come, thereby preserving the terrorist threat¹.

¹ More information on the evolution of the threat can be found in EUROPOL TESAT Report 2017.

3. Prevention

The EU IRU mission is to reduce public accessibility to online propaganda, produced by designated terrorist organisations.

The EU IRU activities in the field of prevention take place within the framework of the EU Internet Forum² (EUIF). The EU IRU has been a key stakeholder of the EUIF, supporting the first objective of the Forum – that of reducing accessibility to terrorist content online. Its activities during 2017 were in accordance with the **EUIF Action Plan to Combat Terrorist Content Online**. In addition to referrals, the Unit mainly focused on the delivery of **expert assessment** of terrorist content, improvement and **standardisation** of the referral process and **close engagement** with EU MS and Online Service Providers (OSPs) to exchange best practices and expertise.

Cooperation with the private sector is fundamental in prevention and during 2017 the EU IRU built upon the **trust-based** relationship with the industry. The Unit's expertise informed major OSPs about **edge cases** and **new forms of online abuse**, supporting them to improve their detection mechanisms, build resilience and prevent re-uploading of terrorist content. In addition, the EU IRU focused its outreach activity on platforms that are heavily exposed to 'jihadist' propaganda, among which **EU start-ups** and **Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME)**, with the aim to increase their resilience and capacity against online terrorist abuse.

3.1 Products and services

Referrals

The EU IRU flag to OSPs online terrorist content and content that promotes illegal immigration services and it cooperates with OSPs with the aim of removing this content. Regarding the referral of terrorist content, in agreement with the Member States, the Unit focuses on propaganda releases by AQ, the IS and their affiliated organisations. The Unit assesses the content against Europol's mandate and performs a manual **expert evaluation of the content**, in accordance with the principles set out in the EU Directive on combatting terrorism. Following this legal assessment, the content is assessed **against the terms and conditions** of the relevant OSP.

A referral activity (meaning the reporting of terrorist and extremist online content to the concerned OSP) does not constitute an enforceable act. Thus, the decision and removal of the referred terrorist and extremist online content is taken by the concerned service provider under their own responsibility and accountability (in reference to their Terms and Conditions).

Referrals to the online platforms are made both following requests received from Member States and as a result of Open Source Scanning by the EU IRU team. Referrals can also target propaganda linked to a high profile event and relayed by high profile accounts (i.e. Barcelona, London and Manchester attacks). The secondary objective of this process is to gather information to better understand the tactics and modus operandi of the major online propagandists.

In 2017:

- The EU IRU, since its establishment in July 2015 and until December 2017, has produced

² The EU Internet Forum is a platform launched by the EU Commission on 3 December 2015, bringing together EU Interior Ministers as well as a number of Internet companies, Europol, and the EU Counter Terrorism Co-coordinator. The aim of the Forum is to address, in a coordinated manner, the phenomenon of the spread of terrorist and violent extremist propaganda to a large proportion of the global online population.

the following figures:

– **Terrorist content:**

A total of **46,392** pieces have been assessed, which triggered **44,807** decisions for referral, with a success rate of removal of **92%**. The content was detected across **170** online platforms and the Unit performed its searches and analysis on material produced in **10** languages, with focus on non-EU languages.

– **Content promoting illegal immigration services:**

A total of **977** pieces have been assessed, which triggered **765** decisions for referral, with a success rate of removal of **97%**.

- **3 EU MS (BE, NL and FR)** expressed their interest in channelling referrals via the EU IRU's facilities (access granted in 2018). This pilot tests the concept of coordinated and standardised referrals, in order to increase quality and avoid duplication. It offers to BE, FR and NL law enforcement authorities direct access to EUROPOL expertise and technical know-how. At the same time, it is beneficial for the OSPs as they would receive high quality referrals in a standardised manner without duplicates.

Check the Web (CtW)

The EU IRU is maintaining the **Check-the-Web (CtW)** service and building upon its historical knowledge and expertise. Accessible only to Law Enforcement, the Check-the-Web portal is an electronic reference library of 'jihadist' terrorist online propaganda. It contains, in a structured way, original statements, publications, videos and audios produced by terrorist groups or their supporters.

In 2017:

1,159 videos, audios, publications and statements were uploaded on the CtW portal and the Unit delivered **61** strategic and thematic reports describing trends and patterns in terrorist or violent extremist propaganda.

Referral Action Days (RADs)

The EU IRU is committed to support EU MS in **expanding their national capabilities in prevention**. To this end, direct cooperation with law enforcement representatives in Member States is championed during the **Referral Action Days (RADs)**, which the EU IRU has organised on Europol premises since September 2016.

In 2017:

Five Referral Action Days (RADs) were organised during 2017 with the participation of **21** EU MS and Third Parties (TP). **7,506** items of propaganda were assessed to be referred to over **50** OSPs. These coordinated referral campaigns focused mainly on the online production of terrorist

material by the so-called Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliated media outlets. Among the items referred were propaganda videos, publications and glorifying or supporting terrorism and extremism. These RADs have proved fruitful in terms of improving co-operation between the EU IRU and its various national counterparts.

ECTC Advisory Group on Online Terrorist Propaganda

In 2016 the EU IRU established the ECTC Advisory Group on the abuse of online communication by terrorist groups for propaganda purposes and online recruitment. The purpose of this Advisory Group is to bring together the necessary expertise from a wide range of disciplines (IT, social network analysis, experts in terrorist propaganda, psychiatry) to discuss issues pertaining to the abuse of online communication by terrorist groups for propaganda purposes and online recruitment. It is composed of 15 members appointed for a period of three years with the possibility for membership renewal.

In 2017:

The **1st ECTC Conference on Online Terrorist Propaganda** was held at Europol on 10-11 April 2017. On this occasion, over 150 participants discussed a wide variety of topics ranging from solutions on how to analyse big data and map terrorist networks online to insights into the online behaviour, tactics and communication of terrorists.

Participants included members of the ECTC Advisory Group on Terrorist Propaganda, representatives of the EU Commission and EU Council, academia and law enforcement practitioners from Europe and the US.

The research conducted by the ECTC Advisory Group on Online Terrorist Propaganda was presented in the Conference and resulted in the following publications.

- [The "Jihadi Wolf" threat](#) - Author: Arije Antinori, PhD
- [The Response of, and on, Twitter to the Release of Dabiq Issue 15](#) - Authors: Daniel Grinnell (Cardiff University), Stuart Macdonald (Swansea University), David Mair (Swansea University).
- [Exploring the Role of Instructional Material in AQAP's Inspire and ISIS' Rumiyah](#) - Authors: Dr. Alastair Reed & Dr. Haroro J. Ingram
- [Deconstruction of Identity Concepts in Islamic State Propaganda](#) - Author: J.M. Berger via the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague
- [Computer support to analyze IS propaganda](#) - Authors: Lisa Kaati, Magnus Sahlgren, Tim Isbister, Babak Toghiani-Rizi and Katie Cohen, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI).

4. Support to Internet-based Investigations

Upon the request(s) of MS, the EU IRU supports competent authorities by providing operational support through criminal, technical and forensic analysis and, when appropriate, on-the-spot deployments.

In 2017, MS requests for swift operational support to Internet-based investigations increased. For this purpose, the EU IRU has developed unique expertise in facilitating cross-border access to electronic evidence.

4.1 Products and services

Support to Internet based investigations

In 2017:

- The EU IRU supported **167 EU MS operations** and produced **192 operational products**.
- The EU IRU provided **6 on-the-spot-deployments** to support EU MS operations.

Shaping Internet Research Investigations Unified System (SIRIUS)

To maximise the level and the quality of the operational support provided, Europol launched SIRIUS, to support EU MS internet investigations and analysis of Internet-based communication.

In 2017:

- The SIRIUS kick-off meeting, held at Europol headquarters on **30-31 October 2017**, gathered over **100** professionals from **30** countries and more than **60** different organisations, including law enforcement and government authorities in the EU MS and third party partners, as well as relevant OSP industry representatives such as Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Twitter and Uber.
- **451** law enforcement representatives from EU MS were members of the SIRIUS platform and made use of the OSINT knowledge database and toolsets, which comprised guidelines on **19** OSPs and **15** tools to support investigations of crimes facilitated by the Internet, developed by and intended for the Law Enforcement community.
- SIRIUS potential as a practical measure to mitigate the challenges faced by practitioners in preserving and obtaining electronic evidence has been acknowledged by the European Commission, which made available a grant of **EUR 1 million** to expand the scope of the project to include the judiciary and to enhance cooperation between the EU and the US in this field.