

EU Internet Referral Unit

TRANSPARENCY REPORT 2018

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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 objective 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 of the EU IRU capabilities are supported by staff members who have a rich diversity of knowledge and skills, ranging from experts in religiously inspired terrorism, linguists, ICT developers and law enforcement experts in counter terrorism investigations.

This report gives an account of the EU IRU's major activities during 2018, in the fields of prevention and investigation.

2. Context

In 2018 the so called Islamic State terrorist organisation (IS) 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 may still have the potential to inspire thousands worldwide.

During the same period the 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's 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. 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 2018 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 included **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 flags online terrorist content and content that promotes illegal immigration services to OSPs with a request that they review the content against their terms and conditions. Regarding the referral of terrorist content, the Unit focuses, in agreement with the Member States, 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.

The referral activity (meaning the reporting of terrorist and extremist online content to the concerned OSP) does not constitute an enforceable act. Thus, the decision to remove the referred content is taken by the concerned service provider under their own responsibility and accountability (in connection 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. The other objective of this process is to gather information to better understand the tactics and modus operandi of the core disseminators of online terrorist propaganda.

From 2015 until 2018:

- The EU IRU, since its establishment in July 2015 and until December 2018, has produced the following figures:

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.

- **Terrorist content:**
A total of **86,076** pieces have been assessed, which triggered **83,871** decisions for referral. The content was detected across **179** online platforms and the Unit performed its searches and analysis on material produced in **15** languages.
- **Content promoting illegal immigration services:**
A total of **1779** pieces have been assessed, which triggered **1526** decisions for referral.
- Seven EU MS (**BE, NL, FR, DE, IT, PT, SI**) channel their referral via the EU IRU technical solution. This pilot tests the concept of coordinating and standardising referrals, in order to increase quality and avoid duplication of work. It offers the EU MS's law enforcement authorities direct access to EUROPOL expertise and technical know-how. At the same time, it is beneficial for the OSPs as it results in high quality referrals delivered in a standardised manner.

Check the Web (CtW)

The EU IRU is maintaining the **Check-the-Web (CtW)** service to build 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 2018:

1,306 videos, audios, publications and statements were uploaded on the CtW portal and the Unit delivered **11** strategic and thematic reports describing trends and patterns in terrorist or violent extremist propaganda.

Referral Action Days (RADs)

The EU IRU is committed to supporting 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 2018:

Five Referral Action Days (RADs) were organised during 2018 with the participation of **17** EU MS and **1** Third Party (TP). **10.213** items of propaganda were assessed to be referred to OSPs. These coordinated referral campaigns focused mainly on the online production of terrorist material by the IS and al-Qaeda affiliated media outlets. Among the items referred were propaganda videos, audio files, images and other publications glorifying or supporting terrorism and extremism.

4. Support to Internet-based Investigations

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

In 2018, MS' requests to the EU IRU for operational support on internet based investigations increased. To cope with the increasing demand, the EU IRU has stepped up its efforts to facilitate cross-border access to electronic evidence.

4.1 Products and services

Support to Internet based investigations

In 2018:

- The EU IRU supported **222 EU MS operations** and produced **336 operational products**.
- The EU IRU provided **6 on-the-spot-deployments** to support EU MS operations.

In April 2018 the EU Internet Referral Unit coordinated a joint action against the IS propaganda machinery in order to disrupt the propaganda flow in cooperation with law enforcement authorities of the EU Member States, Canada and the USA. The takedown operation resulted in compromising IS's capability to broadcast terrorist material online through their network of websites and servers.

Shaping Internet Research Investigations Unified System (SIRIUS)

SIRIUS has been launched by Europol to maximise the level and quality of the operational support to EU MS internet investigations and analysis of Internet-based communication.

In 2018:

- The SIRIUS conference, held at Europol headquarters on **6-7 November 2018**, gathered over **200** representatives from Judicial and Law Enforcement authorities from **40** countries as well as representatives from Airbnb, Apple, Facebook, Google and PayPal. The delegates addressed issues and challenges encountered when conducting Internet-based investigations.
- **More than 1500** law enforcement representatives from **28 EU MS** and **9 third parties** with operational agreements have become members of the SIRIUS platform and made use of the OSINT knowledge database and toolsets. The latter comprises guidelines on **24** OSPs and **23** tools to support investigations of crimes facilitated by the Internet, developed by and intended for the Law Enforcement community.
- SIRIUS has been recognised by the European Commission as a practical measure to mitigate the challenges faced by practitioners in preserving and obtaining electronic evidence. In this regard, the European Commission has extended the SIRIUS grant with the aim of expanding the project's scope to include the judiciary as well as enhance cooperation between the EU and the US authorities in this field.

