

The EU and Turkey need each other's support on counter-terrorism

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While broadly speaking Turkey-EU relations seem set to remain challenging to say the least, at the same time there are a number of areas where important cooperation continues. One such area is counter-terrorism which is an increasingly important theatre in EU-Turkey relations and where efforts are underway to further strengthen cooperation.

Both EU Member States and Turkey have suffered bloody terrorist attacks at the hands of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), which have left hundreds dead. While international military operations in Syria may have significantly expunged ISIS this does not mean the threat has disappeared, far from it. While the so-called caliphate may have been exonerated, the ideology of the group remains very much alive and kicking, as do many of the group's fighters who are not likely to just disappear.

So what will happen to those ISIS fighters that have not been killed? Certainly some will remain in Syria and Iraq. Others will move on to other dysfunctional States which have weak governance and little or no real security such as Libya, Yemen or Afghanistan. ISIS affiliates and local Sunni jihadists in these countries are likely to happily embrace an influx of battle-hardened fighters. A third group will try to return to their countries of origin including Turkey and EU Member States. Turkey will need to adopt an effective strategy for dealing with this issue both in terms of the handling problem in a domestic context, as well as in terms of cooperating with the EU. Unless an effective system is put in place to deal with foreign fighters they will represent a significant security risk to both Turkey and the EU.

Foreign fighters returning to the EU from Syria and Iraq pose a significant threat for EU Member States. First, it increases the chances of new terrorist attacks, including lone-wolf attacks. Second, there is a significant risk that returning foreign fighters will take steps to strengthen existing terrorist networks and cells by working to endocrine, radicalise and recruit new members with toxic jihadist ideology. The EU, as Turkey, will need to continue to focus on how best eradicate not only these terrorist cells but to better address the root causes of radicalization and jihadist ideology.

Many foreign fighters will probably exit Syria the same way they entered, via Turkey. In this sense, it is vital that cooperation between Turkey and the EU and individual Member States, not least their police and intelligence agencies, is efficient and effective. Signs for enhanced cooperation are promising. At the end of November, Turkey and the EU held a counter-terrorism dialogue in Ankara. Its goal was to look for ways to boost cooperation to prevent and counter violent extremism, terrorism financing and links between organised crime and terrorism, reinforce cooperation in the field of justice and law enforcement cooperation and information sharing. The EU's Counter-Terrorism guru, Gilles de Kerchove underlined the EU's wish to reinforce this partnership given the EU and Turkey face the same threats.

Boosting cooperation should be a win-win for both Turkey and EU. In 2016, to enhance counterterrorism cooperation with the EU, the Turkish police and Europol signed a cooperation agreement. The EU hopes that an operational cooperation agreement between the Turkish police and Europol will also soon be signed. To this end Ankara needs to slightly amend some legislation on data protection so that negotiations can be launched. This would pave the way for the exchange of personal data on security issues. Once this is done

Europol and the Turkish police would be able to exchange personal data on terror organisations along with other organised crime and human trafficking networks.

At the same time the EU and its Member States should do more to crack down on the activities of the outlawed Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which is recognised as a terrorist group by both the EU and US. This is something that the Turkish government has long been urging the EU to do. While some issues continue to raise tensions between Turkey and individual Member States, including for example a Belgian appeals court recently confirming a ruling that suspects and institutions linked to PKK terrorists cannot be investigated and tried within the scope of anti-terrorism laws, there have been some positive developments. For a long time Turkey has urged the EU to extend its ban for using 'terror symbols' to the PKK, after PKK banners and slogans that were reported at a number of rallies in EU countries. Recent steps by Germany and Austria against the use of PKK symbols and flags at demonstrations and other Member States are welcomed. Other Member States should follow their lead. Furthermore, the decision of the European Parliament in November to ban entry to its premises by individuals or groups sympathetic to the PKK or its affiliates was also a positive development.

At this low point in relations the EU and Turkey should take advantage of issues of mutual interest to help reinforce dialogue and rebuild trust, which will bring results for both partners.