

The secret clubs of intelligence and security services: A look behind the scenes of counter-terrorism cooperation in Europe

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*Jihadist violence and the support of a considerable number of European militants for the **Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)** evoked repeated and vociferous demands for improved counter-terrorism cooperation between the European security services in recent years. Despite playing a key role in multilateral intelligence sharing and operative cooperation, a growing number of informal and secretive clubs are, however, hardly ever the subject of political debates, media coverage or expert discussions. The following article provides an outline.*

When the heads of the European domestic intelligence services came together in Berlin in May 2018 for a symposium organized by the **German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution** (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV), the Director General of Great Britain's **MI5**, **Andrew Parker**, declared empathically that counter-terrorism cooperation between European intelligence services was more important than ever. In the first public speech of a MI5 head abroad, **Parker emphasized**: "For many years we and partner services like the BfV have worked to develop and invest in strong intelligence and security partnerships across Europe: bilaterally, multilaterally and with EU institutions. In today's uncertain world, we all need that shared strength more than ever."



Hans-Georg Maassen, head of the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, right, talks MI5 head Andrew Parker during symposium on hybrid threat scenarios in Berlin Monday, May 14, 2018. (Photo: Kay Nietfeld).

What the head of MI5 referred to, in his attempt to reassure European partners in light of the impending **Brexit**, is the somewhat byzantine system to coordinate counter-terrorism efforts in Europe and beyond. This system had been shaped first by **9/11** as well as the major **terrorist bombings in Madrid (2004)** and **London (2005)**, before it was modified and enlarged in the last few years, as a reaction to the violence on European soil organized or inspired by ISIS. It includes bilateral arrangements, European Union (EU) institutions, various international organizations as well as a number of more informal multilateral clubs.

International organizations and informal institutions

Within the structures of the EU, a key institution is the Intelligence Analysis Centre (INTCEN), formerly known as the **EU Situation Centre** (EU SITCEN). This Brussels-based body does not collect its own intelligence but relies on information provided by the services of the member states. The **European Council** maintains an office of the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (CTC), which is responsible for coordinating the work of the Council in combatting terrorism and improving the respective communication between the EU and third countries. Most recently, **Europol**, the EU's law enforcement agency, opened the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC),

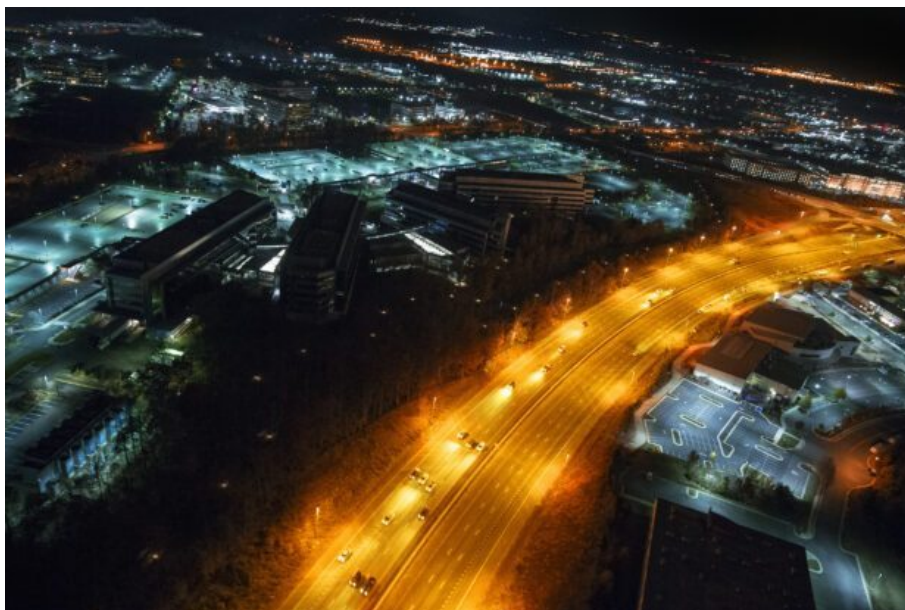
which since early 2016 functions as a platform for information sharing and operational coordination (Robert Lackner, “[Intelligence: The Missing Dimension in EU Security Policies?](#)“, Global View, no. 1, 2016, p. 6-8).



Aerial photograph of the National Security Agency by Trevor Paglen.

Outside of EU institutions, multilateral cooperation takes place in other international organizations and informal networks for which counter-terrorism is not the principal or even sole purpose. Among them are the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the G7. Equally if not more important, however, are several informal multilateral clubs of intelligence and security services for which counter-terrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing are the primary *raison d'être*. These clubs, which operate largely in secrecy and without media coverage, include the [Club de Berne's Counterterrorist Group \(CTG\)](#), the Paris Group, the SIGINT Seniors, the Police Working Group on Terrorism (PWGOT), and the G 13+. Considering the quite remarkable fact that these multilateral clubs are largely unknown to the public and have so far, as far as I am aware, not been discussed as a whole, they will be briefly introduced in this article.

The CTG was created following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as an initiative of the Club de Berne. The oldest multilateral institution set up for counter-terrorism cooperation, the Club de Berne had been organized as an annual gathering of the directors of West European domestic intelligence services as early as 1969. Composed of intelligence and police services from the EU countries, the United States, Norway, and Switzerland, the CTG focuses on analyses of common threats, mainly Islamist terrorism, and on facilitating information exchange and operational cooperation. The group, probably one of the most important in day-to-day counter-terrorism cooperation, has been seeking closer connections to EU structures in the last few years, especially to Europol. Since July 2016, the Club de Berne and the CTG also maintain an operative platform in The Hague, where the domestic intelligence services of the member states, including the Swiss Nachrichtendienst des Bundes (NDB), run a common database and a real-time information system. [1]



Aerial photograph of the National Reconnaissance Office by Trevor Paglen.

The special branches of the national police forces of the EU member states and Norway cooperate within the secret PWGOT. This group was established already in 1979 by the British Metropolitan Police Special Branch, the Dutch Bijzondere Zaken Centrale of the Centrale Recherche Informatiedienst, the West German **Federal Criminal Police Office** (Bundeskriminalamt, BKA), and the **Belgian Gendarmerie**. The foundation of the PWGOT resulted largely from the impression, strongly held among its founding members and particularly the British in the late 1970s, that police cooperation was still insufficient on the operational level.

Accordingly, the objectives of the very informal working group, which holds meetings twice a year, have been the exchange of information (on the operational level), of officials (by promoting the secondment of officers), and of expertise (through the organization of specialist seminars). In the mid-1990s, security expert Peter Chalk concluded that the main value of the PWGOT had been “its role in promoting close working relationships and personal goodwill between the different national agencies involved in the fight against terrorism” (Peter Chalk, “**West European Terrorism and Counter-terrorism: The Evolving Dynamic**“, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, p. 124). [2]

The new clubs on the block

The Paris Group was set up in early 2016, as a result of increased terrorist violence on European soil following the rise of ISIS and especially the major attacks in Paris in January and November 2015. The meetings of this club bring together the intelligence coordinators from 15 European countries, including Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Great Britain, Norway, and Sweden. The Paris Group accordingly goes beyond the cooperation of the domestic intelligence services and likely includes the foreign intelligence services. [3]




Aerial photograph of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency by Trevor Paglen.

Another institution set up recently in light of the challenges caused by ISIS and the war in Syria is the Group 13+ (G 13+). This Belgian-led initiative is not an inter-service group but instead brings together the interior ministers of several European states. Besides Belgium, members of the G 13+, which was originally called the EU9 Group, include the EU member states Denmark, Germany, France, Great Britain, Ireland, Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy and Poland - but also Switzerland and Norway. Already since June 2013, informal meetings are held to discuss information sharing and other common measures against the so-called foreign fighters, by this time especially with regard to the return of fighters who had joined the ranks of ISIS. Apparently, the informal G 13+ has been able to give “impulses from without” for activities that were later pursued at the EU level. This forum therefore provides the Swiss interior ministry with an opportunity to directly help shaping European policies on specific aspects of counter-terrorism. [4]

The most secret multilateral club are the SIGINT Seniors, the counter-terrorism coalition of intelligence agencies concerned with the collection of **Signals Intelligence** (SIGINT). This **NSA-led** effort is composed of two divisions, SIGINT Seniors Europe and SIGINT Seniors Pacific. SIGINT Seniors Europe was set up in 1982 with a primary focus on information about the Soviet military. After 9/11, the group changed its focus to counter-terrorism and was enlarged from 9 to 14 members: the “**Five Eyes**” USA, Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand, as well as Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden.

SIGINT Seniors Europe holds an annual conference and focuses on targeting suspected terrorists as well as on collaboration on the development of new surveillance tools and techniques. Since 2006, it also works to exploit the Internet as part of counter-terrorism. The club runs its own communication system called SIGDASYS to share copies of intercepted communications. SIGINT Seniors Pacific on the other hand was formed by the NSA in 2005. The network, which includes the “Five Eyes” as well as the SIGINT intelligence services of South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, France, and India (as of 2013), maintains a geographical focus on the Asia-Pacific region and operates a complementary communication system called CRUSHED ICE. [5]

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Conclusion

The architecture of multilateral clubs outlined in this article is aimed to bring closer together the intelligence services of Europe, and to a lesser degree of North America, under the banner of international counter-terrorism cooperation. While the foundation of the architecture with institutions such as the Club de Berne and the PWGOT was built already in the 1970s, this counter-terrorism structure has essentially been established in the years since 9/11. Its breakdown corresponds largely to the outline of the national intelligence communities: The CTG brings together the domestic intelligence services, the Paris Group the national intelligence coordinators and the foreign intelligence services, the SIGINT Seniors the signals intelligence services, and the PWGOT the special units of the national police forces. In addition, the G 13+ include the level of (interior)ministers while addressing a specific aspect of counter-terrorism that is currently given high priority: the problems posed by foreign fighters. At least the CTG and the SIGINT Seniors furthermore run their own secret communication systems, through which intelligence is exchanged multilaterally on a regular basis.

In view of jihadist violence, the need of improved counter-terrorism cooperation in Europe, and the transatlantic world more generally, has been discussed time and again in recent years. The establishment of an integrated European intelligence service stands politically without a chance for the time being, occasional calls for the creation of such a body notwithstanding. Politicians, experts, and media outlets therefore concentrate their attention mainly on EU institutions such as INTCEN and Europol as well as NATO. In actual fact, multilateral intelligence sharing and operative counter-terrorism coordination take place to a more significant degree in the secret clubs of the intelligence services introduced in this article. Recently, some of these clubs are also looking for closer cooperation with, or even integration into, EU institutions. Switzerland is firmly integrated into this international cooperation - so far undisturbed by critical eyes in parliament and the broader population.

Footnotes

[1] On the CTG see Richard J. Aldrich, “[Transatlantic Intelligence and Security Cooperation](#)“, International Affairs, vol 80, no. 4, 2004, p. 740f; Mathieu Deflem, “[Europol and the Policing of International Terrorism: Counter-Terrorism in a Global Perspective](#)“, Justice Quarterly, vol. 23, no. 3, 2006, p. 341; “[Implementation of the Counter-terrorism Agenda Set by the European Council](#)“, Note from EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator to Delegations, Council of the European Union, Brussels, 4 November 2016. On the early history of the Club de Berne see Aviva Guttmann, “[The Origins of International Counterterrorism: Switzerland at the Forefront of Crisis Negotiations, Multilateral Diplomacy, and Intelligence Cooperation \(1969-1977\)](#)“, Leiden: Brill, 2018, p. 183-229.

[2] On the PWGOT in general see John Benyon, “[Policing the European Union: The Changing Basis of Cooperation on Law Enforcement](#)“, International Affairs, vol. 70, no. 3, 1994, p. 511f; Eva Oberloskamp, “[Codename TREVI: Terrorismusbekämpfung und die Anfänge einer europäischen Innenpolitik in den 1970er Jahren](#)“, Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017, p. 225f; Didier Bigo, “[Polices en réseaux: l’expérience européenne](#)“, Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1996, p. 90.

[3] On the Paris Group see “[Implementation of the Counter-terrorism Agenda Set by the European Council](#)“, p. 24.

[4] On the G 13+ see “[Implementation of the Counter-terrorism Agenda Set by the European Council](#)“, p. 38; “[Gruppe der EU9, Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Andrej Hunko, Wolfgang Gehrcke, Jan Korte, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion Die Linke](#)“, Drucksache 18/4017, Deutscher Bundestag, 18. Wahlperiode, 17 February 2015.

[5] On the SIGINT Seniors see Ryan Gallagher, “[The Powerful Global Spy Alliance You Never Knew Existed](#)“, The Intercept, 1 March 2018, which is based on NSA documents provided by Edward Snowden.

More information

- [“Mass surveillance and security on the Internet“](#), offiziere.ch, 11 February 2018.
- [TorBox](#): an easy to use, anonymizing router based on Raspberry Pi
- [Seeing The Secret State: Six Landscapes](#) by Trevor Paglen at the 30c3

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