Sharing is Caring: Enriching European Counterterrorism Information Sharing through INTERPOL’s MIND/FIND Platform

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INTRODUCTION

Failed intelligence—this term has been used to describe the perceived failures after a number of terrorist attacks including: the Madrid bombings on March 11, 2004 (Carsten 2012), the London bombings on July 7, 2005 (Carsten 2012), the Paris attack on November 13, 2015 (MacAskill 2015), and the Brussels attack on March 22, 2016 (Calamur 2016). The international news, media, and policy makers joined in on the hysteria, citing a need for better intelligence sharing among policing agencies (Walt 2016). Largely, the conversation has been pointed towards European countries and their perceived lack of intelligence in affairs related to terrorism. More recently, a prime target has been Brussels’ internal police force. The story, however, is much more complicated. Intelligence difficulties do not only involve localized state forces, but also supranational organizations. More specifically in Europe, EUROPOL, the European Union’s law enforcement, has been charged with intelligence gathering on issues related to terrorism.\(^1\) Despite the existence of such an agency, European intelligence gathering has been in disarray in practice. Dialogues with member states have been encouraged at the EU level, but better information sharing strategies among member states have yet to be created in practice.

This research seeks to answer the question: “How can counterterrorism information best be shared in Europe?” This paper argues that cooperation enforced by a supranational entity is the best remedy for Europe’s information sharing problem. More specifically, this analysis argues that EUROPOL must be given more enforcement authority by the EU to truly better information sharing. The current system’s focus on member states has led to inaction and a reliance on information sharing platforms that suffer from security gaps, a problem based on the core question of protection national security. Instead, EUROPOL should be given more power to

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\(^1\) This paper focuses on EUROPOL, though intelligence sharing is also carried out by other institutions including the European Union Intelligence and Situation Centre (also known as SITCEN). SITCEN and EUROPOL tend to share information, however, EUROPOL may be better positioned to enforce best practices at the EU level.

For example, EUROPOL is an older organization of the EU while SITCEN was created more recently in 2011. In addition, the literature has been largely focused on EUROPOL as an actor in Europe’s counterterrorism efforts (Deflem 2006; Bures 2007; Argomaniz et al. 2015).
mandate the use of INTERPOL’s Fixed INTERPOL Network Database/Mobile INTERPOL Network Database, as they have been shown to be effective in thwarting transnational terror at border checkpoints. This is the best way to combat informational disparities in discovering and stopping transnational terror incidents.

**BACKGROUND**

**INTERPOL’s MIND/FIND Platform in Global Intelligence Sharing**

INTERPOL aims to help support police worldwide. In this endeavor, it makes available technological tools to each of its member states (INTERPOL 2016). One of these technologies is INTERPOL’S MIND/FIND searchable database, created by INTERPOL in 2005 (Enders and Sandler 2011). MIND stands for the Mobile INTERPOL Network Database and FIND stands for the Fixed INTERPOL Network Database. These systems “provide a technical solution for law enforcement officials in the member countries to access INTERPOL databases remotely, either as a ‘fixed’ access point that can be integrated into an already existing national database system, or as a ‘mobile’ access point that permits autonomous queries on offline copies of INTERPOL databases” (Enders and Sandler 2011, 266).

In 2015, scholars Gardeazable and Sandler (2016) sought to study the efficacy of the MIND/FIND platform as a counterterrorism tool. At this point, more than 100 member countries were connected to the MIND/FIND platform, including countries in Western Europe. Using a causal effects model, Gardeazable and Sandler’s key finding was that countries that adopted MIND/FIND “and also applied it to screen people and documents at border crossings and other key points suffered fewer transnational terrorist incidents than the control group, which either did not install MIND/FIND or else installed it but did not utilize it” (2015, 777). More specifically, a country like France “with 64 million people . . . in 2008, would on average experience 0.32 fewer transnational terrorist incidents each year as a result of using” the MIND/FIND platform (Gardeazable and Sandler 2015, 777). They also noted, however, that many countries that were connected did not actually utilize MIND/FIND for searches.

**EUROPOL: A Eurocentric Agency**

In 2006, two scholars sought to study the power of EUROPOL as a stakeholder in the war against terror post-9/11. For example, Mathieu Deflem found that EUROPOL as an institution is highly bureaucratized (2006). In this assessment, Deflem argued that EUROPOL’s bureaucratization was an impediment to its counterterror efforts. Its life blood are the member states and its continued efficacy largely revolves around cooperation and synergy at the member state level. EUROPOL depends on the information received from the member states.

Later, Oldrich Bures built on this research by discussing EU counterterrorism strategies in the context of negotiated policy agreements after 9/11 (2007). Bures argues that the member state-centric approach suffers from an implementation deficit. More specifically, he notes that EUROPOL has become a “paper tiger” in the EU when it comes to counterterrorism. Although EUROPOL has negotiated counterterror agreements on paper, little has been done in practice. Bures argues that this is likely because of a lack of “pro-integration thinking” in the member states (2007). On the ground level, member states have been unevenly applying counterterror measures,
and national policing agencies and intelligence agencies are not cooperating with EUROPOL as they should. Furthermore, in an assessment of the current European counterterror situation, Argomaniz et al. describe a “running tension between the necessity to enhance cooperation and the reluctance of member states to relinquish competencies and, given the national security sensitivity of counter-terrorism,” member states have generally tightly constrained the EU’s role (2015, 191).

**METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS**

I consulted the annual EUROPOL publication, “The European Union Terrorism and Situation Trend Report (TE-SAT).” These annual reports represent the terrorist threat situation in the European Union, along with identifying intelligence operations designed to thwart these threats. In each report, I marked whether “INTERPOL” or INTERPOL’s intelligence service, “MIND/FIND,” was mentioned to gage INTERPOL’s importance vis-à-vis EUROPOL. I also queried these publications for mentions of European member states and their information sharing patterns to the same effect. I hypothesized that member state systems would be mentioned more than INTERPOL or INTERPOL systems.

Column 1 of Table 1 depicts the total of number of EUROPOL TE-SAT reports consulted in this paper. Columns 2 and 3 illustrate the results of a word search in each of the ten TE-SAT reports. INTERPOL was directly mentioned a total of three times from 2007-2016, once in 2011, 2012, and 2016. INTERPOL’s MIND/FIND, however, was never mentioned in any of the TE-SAT reports. Domestic information sharing with EUROPOL from member states was mentioned in each TE-SAT Report, supporting my hypothesis. Thus, even when INTERPOL was mentioned, domestic information sharing would also be mentioned.

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<th>Total</th>
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**Table 1**: Total Number of INTERPOL Mentions vs. EU Member State Capabilities Mentioned

*Note: This table shows the total number of direct mentions of INTERPOL, MIND/FIND, and member state intelligence in all ten TE-SAT reports from 2007-2016.*

**DISCUSSION**

How can counterterrorism information sharing be best improved in Europe? This research has uncovered some elements that could shed light on answering this question. Querying EUROPOL’s TE-SAT reports supports the idea that information sharing focuses on the compliance of individual member states and not multinational institutions like INTERPOL. This research also supports that INTERPOL’s expertise is sometimes used, but this pales in comparison to the leverage given to member states’ compliance with information sharing. The findings bring to light two issues elucidated in the literature: (1) EUROPOL is a counterterrorism fighter on paper, but not in action (Bures 2015, 57) and (2) European member states are placing more reliance in domestic systems, rather than supranational powers like EUROPOL (Argomaniz et. al 2015, 197). For example, the TE-SAT reports showed reliance on the reporting of member states for the study. If data was not
taken directly from a member state, it would be crosschecked by the member state. This is not only for the assurances of “accuracy” but also a continuous example of autonomy concerns in the EU. Even as it concerns national security, largely a good shared by all despite land borders, EUROPOL is still deferring to its member states. This is a problem because member states, when it comes to national security, are not the best at implementing counterterrorism policies (Argomaniz et al. 2015, 198). Thus, EUROPOL has taken a “backseat” and allowed much of the work to be done by member states whose information sharing regimes are largely imperfect.

Furthermore, the findings and literature illustrate that practically, INTERPOL’s MIND/FIND technology is still not a contender in EU information sharing. Despite quantitatively supported evidence of MIND/FIND’s efficacy in fighting terror, counterterrorism information sharing is subject to the will of the sovereign states at the EU level. Evidence of non-use of the MIND/FIND technology may be explained by the plethora of information sharing platforms available to member states at the EU level, particularly systems like the Schengen Information System, (“SIS”). Even then, these platforms have not been subject to large-scale study and suffer from various security gaps. However, there may be alternative reasons behind these phenomena. For example, perhaps a different system is needed to measure INTERPOL’s importance in information sharing. The TE-SAT reports may not be best because they give a broad overview of the threat situation in Europe. In doing so, they focus not just on how they received the information but also on the effect of information sharing in thwarting terror threats. Future research may seek to gain access to more practical documentation of the number of queries made in INTERPOL systems in the EU versus domestic systems used by each respective member state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and a review of the literature, this paper makes the following recommendations for future action within the European Union:

1. The European Commission must give EUROPOL more power to enforce efficient information sharing programs among the member states and

2. EUROPOL member states must preference use of INTERPOL MIND/FIND systems when conducting border checks. The EU agency, FRONTEX, should be charged with ensuring that MIND/FIND is used at border zones.

This two-pronged recommendation offers a more concrete plan that is in line with the aims of the Bratislava Roadmap. More specifically, concerning internal security, this recommendation will best “intensif[y] cooperation and information-exchange among security services of the Member states” (Council of the European Union 2016, 4). Giving EUROPOL concrete enforcement authority against non-implementing states will best spur action, remediating Europe’s cooperation problem and the use of INTERPOL’s MIND/FIND will lead to more measurable results in the long-run.

CONCLUSION

Best information sharing practices in Europe should include concrete enforcement for non-implementing states and tested
information sharing platforms like that of INTERPOL’s MIND/FIND. This paper has studied the effects of EUROPOL’s perceived lack of power in the counterterrorism space. This is due to the continued pull that member states have in the area of national security. To move beyond this impediment to cooperation, the EU must give EUROPOL more power to mandate the use of the MIND/FIND system to aid in thwarting transnational terror.

Though this paper’s recommendation seeks to prevent terrorist attacks through information sharing, this does not mean that other methods should not be used in the long run. Preventative approaches to transnational terror can also include local/national programs aimed at understanding why people are radicalized in the first place before they are caught in the intelligence sharing “net.” Future research may seek to study the efficacy of anti-radicalization programs in the EU vis-à-vis intelligence sharing programs in thwarting terrorism. Still, at this point in history, improving information sharing proves to be an important endeavor.

Bibliography


