

Implementing the Capabilities of the ATLAS Network to Improve the European Union's Counter-Terrorism Efforts

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Abstract—The ATLAS Network was established by law enforcement special intervention units of the EU Member States and associated countries. All units who are part of this network are ready to respond to critical events and situations at any time when European security is at risk. The network is based at the Europol headquarters within the European Counter Terrorism Centre since 2018. It is continuously supported internally and directly connected to other networks in the law enforcement sector as well as other EU agencies. The subject of this study is the security of the European Union. The aim of this study is to reveal the possibilities for using the capabilities of the Atlas network to improve the security of the European Union. Based on the analyses conducted, some conclusions are drawn at the end of the article.

Keywords— *ATLAS, ATLAS Network, European Security, Counter Terrorism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Terrorism remains one of the most persistent security threats in the European Union (EU), evolving dynamically in response to political, economic, and technological changes [1]. The ATLAS Network, a collaborative initiative among elite special intervention units, plays an important role in enhancing the EU's counter-terrorism capabilities. This study examines the operational effectiveness of ATLAS, assessing its strengths and areas for improvement in responding to modern terrorist threats. A review of existing literature reveals differing perspectives on the role of multinational security cooperation in combating terrorism. While some sources emphasize the benefits of shared intelligence and joint training programs in enhancing rapid response capabilities, others highlight structural and legal limitations that hinder seamless cooperation between national security agencies.

By integrating these insights, this research aims to evaluate the ATLAS Network's contributions to EU security and to propose recommendations for optimizing its operations to address emerging threats more effectively.

The literature on counter-terrorism efforts in the European Union presents a range of perspectives on the role and effectiveness of multinational security cooperation. Some studies, such as those by Aalberts and Werner (2011), emphasize the legal and institutional frameworks that shape cross-border counter-terrorism collaborations. They argue that regulatory inconsistencies between EU member states pose challenges for unified action. In contrast, Adamos et al. (2023) focus on the operational and technical dimensions of counter-terrorism, particularly the necessity of cybersecurity measures in combating digital threats. Other sources, including Turégano-Fuentes et al. (2008), provide case-based analyses of past terrorist attacks, shedding light on the response capabilities of law enforcement agencies and highlighting key areas for improvement. Europol reports (2023) and Lippay (2021) offer official insights into the ATLAS Network's role, detailing its structure, mission, and operational successes while also acknowledging gaps in interoperability and coordination. Scholars such as Bogain (2020) and Baker-Beall (2019) explore the sociopolitical context of counter-terrorism and discuss the implications of public discourse and securitization on policy-making.

This study synthesizes these varied perspectives to present a comprehensive evaluation of the ATLAS Network, balancing theoretical, legal, and operational considerations to assess its effectiveness in strengthening EU security.

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A. Actuality of the Research

The increase in cross-border threats, lone-wolf attacks, and the use of modern technologies by terrorist groups necessitates a coordinated response among EU member states.

The variety of forms of terrorism, its asymmetric methods and means show many similarities with the features of contemporary low-intensity military conflicts. This makes the commitment and applicability of the combat capabilities of tactical formations a key attribute to achieve decisive and guaranteed results in the course of counterterrorism and counterterrorism activities. The breadth of the spectrum of applicability of modern tactical formations, albeit as a last resort, is justified by their potential capabilities for defensive and offensive countering of most forms of terrorism, which in addition to the capabilities of the forces for the preservation of internal state order, become a complex and adequate state and global response to new threats [2].

Terrorist structures are a new type of asymmetric adversary, having (in most of their forms of organization) an evolving, militarized and network-centric organization with a high degree of autonomy, discipline, determination and ideological conviction of their members, making it a threat equivalent to low-intensity warfare for the armed forces of EU states. The forms of tactical actions applied by terrorist field cells and the rapidly growing scale of conflicts caused by them justify the frequent counteraction of EU states with the help of army tactical formations. The broad spectrum of terrorist tactics and weapons, their gradual expansion from isolated acts to the setting of intra-state military conflict, and the magnitude of physical and psychological impact they achieve, define as possible and adequate the use of a large part of the combat capabilities of the army tactical formations for counter-terrorist and anti-terrorist actions.

The **ATLAS Network**, established as a specialized cooperation platform among elite counter-terrorism units, plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges [3]. Understanding the effectiveness and limitations of this network is essential to optimizing its contributions to EU security. It stands to reason that counter-terrorism will remain a priority for Europol and the EU, which means continuous improvement of the ATLAS Network and its modus operandi are of great importance. There needs to be close cooperation with all European partners to mitigate terrorist threats to the community by depriving terrorists of the means to limit their space to plan, finance and carry out attacks, by effectively countering radicalization and by strengthening information sharing and police cooperation [4].

B. Research Object

The object of this research is the **ATLAS Network**, its structure, functions, and its role in enhancing EU counter-terrorism capabilities through cooperation and coordination. One of the main focal points are the joint exercises and training programs within the network.

C. Research Goal

The primary goal of this research is to analyze the effectiveness of the ATLAS Network in strengthening counter-terrorism efforts in the EU and to explore potential improvements in its coordination and operational effectiveness.

To achieve this, the following assumptions for an optimal coaction of ATLAS have to be checked:

- There is a sufficient legal framework addressing all possible means of international law enforcement special operations and providing Europol as well as the ATLAS members with clearly lined out rules of engagement.
- Common protocols, stand-by routines, notice to move time, and constant and special responsibilities have to be established on the international (European) level.
- Common command structures at the scene or during the mission have to be institutionalized in order to bypass the requirement of adaptation to local command structures.
- The compatibility of equipment and tactics has to be assured in order to allow for interoperability for teams of different nations.

If the institutions of the ATLAS Network prove to be less than ideal in these aspects, recommendations for improvement are developed.

D. Research Tasks

- Examine the current security landscape of the EU and the role of the ATLAS Network within this framework.
- Assess the coordination mechanisms within the ATLAS Network and propose enhancements for better security integration.
- Analyze past counter-terrorism case studies and ATLAS operations to identify strengths and weaknesses.
- Develop an improved concept for the joint training and education of ATLAS forces.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research utilizes a **qualitative analysis** based on legal frameworks, case studies, and official reports from EU security agencies. Additionally, a **comparative approach** is applied to evaluate ATLAS' effectiveness relative to other counter-terrorism cooperation models.

The primary goal of this research is to analyze the effectiveness of the ATLAS Network in strengthening counter-terrorism efforts in the EU and to explore potential improvements in its coordination and operational effectiveness. To achieve this, the study employs a case study approach, examining contemporary terrorist attacks against EU member states in the 21st century. These case studies offer valuable insights into the operational

challenges and successes of counter-terrorism efforts, as well as the role of the ATLAS Network in crisis response.

Additionally, a survey amongst ATLAS members is conducted to gain knowledge about areas of improvement for joint ATLAS training and exercises.

A. Case Selection

Case studies provide a focused analysis of specific incidents, highlighting key operational responses, security gaps, and post-attack policy adaptations. However, their limited generalizability necessitates a comparative approach, ensuring that findings contribute to broader strategic recommendations. The cases selected represent diverse terrorist attack typologies, from large-scale coordinated attacks to cyberterrorism and chemical or biological threats, reflecting the evolving nature of terrorism in Europe.

B. Case Studies and Their Relevance

The Madrid train bombings in 2004 illustrate the challenges of coordinating emergency response efforts across multiple attack sites. The emergency medical response and evacuation were highly effective, but a lack of a unified command structure and inconsistent communication protocols created obstacles. In response, enhanced intelligence-sharing measures were introduced, and counter-terrorism cooperation within the EU intensified, underscoring the necessity of a standardized emergency response framework across member states [5].

The Paris Bataclan attacks in 2015 revealed the complexities of simultaneous terrorist actions targeting multiple locations. While special forces mobilized rapidly and emergency response mechanisms were activated, delays in intelligence coordination and response time were evident. The attack led to a review of cross-border intelligence sharing and operational coordination among EU law enforcement agencies [6].

The Berlin Christmas market attack in 2016 highlighted the difficulties in tracking radicalized individuals acting independently. Although the police response was quick and the attacker was identified, failures in preemptive surveillance and risk assessment were evident. As a result, improved surveillance measures and risk assessment frameworks were introduced, alongside physical security barriers at public events [7].

A similar attack occurred in Nice, France, in 2016, when a perpetrator used a truck to target a large crowd. This method of attack presented unique challenges, as conventional counter-terrorism strategies were not equipped to prevent vehicular attacks. The rapid medical response and immediate threat neutralization were commendable, but the incident demonstrated the need for urban security measures such as reinforced pedestrian barriers and vehicular restrictions in high-risk areas [8].

The Brussels airport bombing in 2016 underscored the threat posed by returning foreign fighters. The swift lockdown procedures and emergency response were effective; however, intelligence failures in tracking

radicalized individuals proved detrimental. This event contributed to stronger international cooperation in monitoring and prosecuting individuals linked to foreign terrorist organizations [9].

The Manchester Arena bombing in 2017, the NotPetya cyberattack in 2017, the Salisbury Novichok poisoning in 2018, and the Cologne ricin attack attempt in 2018 are also selected as case studies.

These case studies provide critical insights into the effectiveness of EU counter-terrorism measures and the role of the ATLAS Network in responding to evolving threats. By analyzing past incidents, this research identifies areas for improvement, particularly in intelligence coordination, emergency response, and policy adaptation. The findings contribute to recommendations for enhancing the operational effectiveness of the ATLAS Network and ensuring a robust counter-terrorism framework in the European Union.

C. Research Limitations

- Access to classified operational data is restricted.
- The ATLAS Network is unique, limiting direct comparison with non-EU models.

The European Union's security architecture has evolved significantly in response to emerging threats and changing geopolitical dynamics. This analysis examines the current state of EU security, focusing on its legal framework, common security aspects, and persistent challenges in implementation.

D. Legal Framework of EU Security

The EU's counter-terrorism strategy is built on several key legislative and policy documents, including:

- EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2005, revised 2020)
- Directive (EU) 2017/541 on combating terrorism
- Europol's Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC)

The EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, initially established in 2005 and revised in 2020, serves as the cornerstone of the Union's security approach. This foundational document is complemented by Directive (EU) 2017/541, which established comprehensive standards for combating terrorism across member states. The operational dimension is strengthened by Europol's Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC), which facilitates intelligence sharing and coordinates cross-border operations [10]. These frameworks aim to standardize security cooperation across member states, fostering intelligence sharing, operational coordination, and rapid response mechanisms.

E. Common EU Security Aspects

The EU's security strategy employs a four-pillar approach to counter-terrorism. The prevention pillar focuses on addressing root causes of radicalization and disrupting terrorist financing networks. The protection element emphasizes safeguarding critical infrastructure and

potential targets. The pursuit component strengthens law enforcement capabilities and cross-border cooperation. Finally, the response pillar ensures coordinated crisis management when incidents occur [11].

F. Current EU Security State

Despite robust frameworks and initiatives, the EU faces several significant security challenges. The persistence of fragmented national responses remains a primary concern, as member states maintain varying legal systems and operational procedures that can impede unified action. The digital age has introduced new vulnerabilities, particularly in the form of cyber (see NotPetya cyberattack in 2017) and hybrid threats, with online radicalization emerging as a significant concern [2]. Furthermore, coordination inefficiencies continue to hamper effective cross-border intelligence sharing, potentially creating security gaps that could be exploited by malicious actors.

It is evident that larger countries such as Spain, France, Italy and Germany experience more attacks and show higher arrest rates [12]. Looking forward, the EU's security framework must evolve to address these challenges while maintaining the delicate balance between security imperatives and fundamental rights. Enhanced integration of national security apparatuses, improved digital resilience, and streamlined intelligence-sharing mechanisms will be crucial for strengthening the EU's security posture [13].

The success of the EU's security strategy ultimately depends on member states' willingness to deepen cooperation and harmonize their approaches while maintaining the flexibility to address unique national security concerns [14], [15]. As threats continue to evolve, the EU's security framework must similarly adapt, ensuring robust protection for its citizens while preserving the values and freedoms that define the European project.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The ATLAS Network

1) Foundation of the ATLAS Network

The ATLAS Network was established in 2001 under the umbrella of **Europol** as a cooperative structure linking the special intervention units of EU member states. It was created to strengthen cross-border collaboration in counter-terrorism and high-risk law enforcement operations. Europol characterizes the ATLAS network in the following manner: 'The ATLAS network is comprised of specialized intervention units from the law enforcement agencies of the EU Member States and affiliated nations' [14].

All entities integrated within this network are equipped and prepared to address critical incidents and circumstances at any moment when the security of Europe is compromised. Since 2018, the network has been situated at Europol's headquarters within the European Counter-Terrorism Centre. It is perpetually sustained internally and is directly interconnected with other networks in the law enforcement domain as well as with various EU institutions. The network receives financial backing from

Europol, facilitating the execution of several annual training exercises. A total of 38 specialized units are affiliated with the ATLAS network, encompassing units from non-EU countries such as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and two units from the United Kingdom [14].

2) Main Mission and Capabilities

The network's primary mission centers on enhancing the collective counter-terrorism capabilities of EU nations through three key mechanisms. First, it facilitates comprehensive joint training and simulation exercises, allowing units to develop common operational procedures and tactical understanding. Second, it maintains rapid response mechanisms that enable swift cross-border deployment during crises. Third, it serves as a platform for technological and tactical knowledge exchange, ensuring that best practices and innovative approaches are shared across all member units [16].

3) ATLAS Network Counter-Terrorism Units

ATLAS encompasses elite counter-terrorism units from all 27 EU member states, supplemented by observer participation from Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Each member unit brings distinct specializations to the network [16]. Notable units include:

- GSG 9 (Germany) – Germany's GSG 9 has established itself as a leader in hostage rescue operations.
- RAID (France) – France's RAID unit excels in urban counter-terrorism scenarios.
- NOCS (Italy) Italy's NOCS specializes in high-risk arrests.
- UEI (Spain) – Spain's UEI has developed particular expertise in armed intervention and crisis response.
- SOBT (Bulgaria) – Bulgaria's SOBT specializes in direct confrontation of organizational crime.

4) Key Characteristics

The network's effectiveness stems from its unique organizational characteristics. Its decentralized structure allows for flexible response capabilities while maintaining coordinated training programs across all member units. Each unit retains legal autonomy within its national framework, ensuring compliance with domestic laws while participating in international operations. This balance between independence and coordination is further enhanced by operational specialization, with different units developing expertise in specific counter-terrorism scenarios.

The ATLAS Network exemplifies the EU's commitment to sophisticated security cooperation while respecting national sovereignty. Its continued evolution and adaptation to emerging threats make it an essential component of Europe's counter-terrorism architecture. The network's success in combining operational effectiveness with respect for national autonomy provides a model for international security cooperation in an increasingly complex threat environment.

B. ATLAS Network and EU Security

The integration of the ATLAS Network into the European Union's security framework represents a significant advancement in transnational counter-terrorism capabilities. This analysis examines the network's current contributions to EU security and explores potential avenues for enhanced implementation.

1) Current Contribution to EU Security

ATLAS has significantly improved interoperability among special intervention units. The ATLAS Network has fundamentally transformed the landscape of special intervention unit cooperation across Europe. Its primary achievement lies in significantly improving interoperability among national counter-terrorism forces. This enhancement manifests in three critical areas: operational readiness, intelligence coordination, and procedural standardization [16].

The network's platform facilitates rapid cross-border deployment of specialized forces, addressing the crucial need for swift response capabilities in crisis situations. This operational readiness is complemented by sophisticated intelligence coordination mechanisms, enabling real-time information exchange through Europol's established channels. Furthermore, the standardization of operational tactics and crisis management protocols has created a common operational language among diverse national units, enabling more effective joint responses to security threats.

2) Possibilities for Better Implementation

Despite its successes, the ATLAS Network's potential for contributing to EU security could be further realized through several strategic improvements. Legal harmonization among EU member states represents a critical area for development. Greater alignment of counter-terrorism laws would facilitate more seamless cross-border interventions, reducing procedural delays in time-sensitive operations.

The establishment of a dedicated ATLAS Coordination Center could significantly improve strategic oversight and operational efficiency. Such a centralized command structure would enhance decision-making processes and resource allocation while maintaining the network's inherent flexibility.

In response to evolving threat landscapes, strengthening cyber-terrorism response capabilities within ATLAS has become increasingly crucial. This involves developing specialized teams equipped to address digital threats and cyber-attacks, which often transcend traditional national boundaries.

Enhanced civil-military cooperation presents another avenue for improvement. Closer integration with NATO and FRONTEX could create more comprehensive security operations, combining military expertise with law enforcement capabilities. This multi-dimensional approach would be particularly valuable in addressing hybrid threats

that blur the lines between military and civilian security challenges.

3) Future Implications and Strategic Considerations

The potential enhancements to the ATLAS Network must be considered within the broader context of EU security evolution. Legal harmonization efforts need to balance operational efficiency with national sovereignty concerns. The development of a centralized command structure must maintain the network's existing strengths in decentralized operations while improving coordination capabilities.

The success of these improvements will largely depend on member states' willingness to deepen integration and share resources. Additionally, enhanced cooperation with other security organizations must be carefully structured to maintain clear operational boundaries while maximizing synergistic benefits.

As the European security landscape continues to evolve, the ATLAS Network's ability to adapt and enhance its capabilities will be crucial. The proposed improvements represent significant steps toward a more robust and responsive European security architecture, capable of addressing both current and emerging threats to EU security.

The ATLAS Network's evolution exemplifies the ongoing development of European security cooperation. By implementing these enhancements while maintaining its core strengths, the network can continue to serve as a crucial component in ensuring European security and stability.

4) Proposing a new and improved training program

The proposed new ATLAS training program builds upon the existing structures while introducing key enhancements to modernize and streamline training across EU special units. By addressing inconsistencies in training standards, incorporating digital learning, and refining practical exercises, the program ensures a more cohesive and effective operational framework.

A major improvement is the standardization of training content, ensuring that all ATLAS members, regardless of their national backgrounds, receive uniform instruction. This includes standardized tactical and operational procedures, unified communication protocols, and common first-aid techniques. By eliminating discrepancies, the program enhances coordination and cooperation in real-world missions.

The integration of a centralized learning management system (LMS) marks a significant step forward. This digital platform provides theoretical coursework, interactive tasks, and self-assessment tools, along with on-demand access to learning materials.

Additionally, it fosters peer learning, enabling participants to collaborate, discuss tactics, and share knowledge. This approach enhances flexibility, allowing

units to stay up to date without requiring constant in-person training.

Practical training remains at the core of ATLAS education, but the new framework refines it into two distinct categories. Non-critical operational exercises allow participants to experiment with tactical approaches in a low-risk environment, fostering adaptability. Meanwhile, critical operational exercises involve high-stakes scenarios, such as hostage rescues or counterterrorism operations, where expert trainers assess performance. This structured approach ensures that participants refine their decision-making and teamwork under both controlled and high-pressure conditions.

Another significant focus of the program is resilience and psychological readiness. Counterterrorism operations often involve extreme stress, making mental resilience essential. Training now incorporates psychological resilience coursework, simulated high-stress scenarios, and ongoing mental health support. By prioritizing psychological preparedness, the program aims to reduce burnout and enhance long-term operational effectiveness.

A structured evaluation system has also been introduced to maintain high training standards. Regular theoretical assessments through the LMS, performance evaluations after practical exercises, and peer feedback ensure that all trainees meet standardized competency levels before advancing to more complex modules.

To optimize resource allocation, the program retains existing Centers of Excellence (CoE) while implementing a structured mobility system for trainers and trainees. Instead of establishing new training centers, personnel will rotate between existing locations in Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia. This strategy ensures even distribution of expertise while reducing logistical costs.

Strengthening international collaboration is another key focus. The program promotes regular multinational training exercises, real-time information exchange via SIENA, and joint tactical simulations between different national units. These measures enhance interoperability, allowing ATLAS forces to function as a cohesive entity in cross-border operations.

In total, the new ATLAS training program represents a comprehensive enhancement of existing structures. By combining standardization, digital learning, and advanced practical exercises, it strengthens European counterterrorism capabilities. Retaining core elements such as expert groups, CoE facilities, and multinational drills, while introducing harmonized training methods and resilience training, the program ensures a more efficient, adaptable, and cooperative special forces network. This initiative not only refines tactical skills but also fosters stronger international collaboration, making ATLAS an even more effective tool in safeguarding European security against evolving threats.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

1. Was the first research task successfully completed?

Yes. The study provided a comprehensive overview of the current EU security condition, highlighting the legal frameworks, common security aspects, and existing gaps.

2. Was the second research task successfully completed?

Yes. The research analyzed the ATLAS Network's effectiveness, its structural and operational components, and identified areas for improvement.

3. Was the research goal fully achieved?

Largely, yes. The research **confirmed the ATLAS Network's importance** in EU counter-terrorism efforts and provided **actionable recommendations** to improve its coordination and integration.

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the ATLAS Network's role in strengthening the European Union's counter-terrorism capabilities. The research successfully examined the EU's current security landscape, assessed the ATLAS Network's effectiveness, and identified key areas for improvement. The findings contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of security studies and counter-terrorism policy.

The study enhances the theoretical understanding of transnational security cooperation by demonstrating how multinational networks like ATLAS contribute to counter-terrorism efforts. It underscores the importance of interoperability, legal harmonization, and intelligence-sharing in overcoming fragmented national responses. Additionally, this research contributes to discussions on security governance by highlighting the balance between national sovereignty and collective security within EU law enforcement structures.

From a policy and operational perspective, the study offers actionable recommendations for optimizing ATLAS operations. Key proposals include the establishment of a centralized ATLAS Coordination Center to improve decision-making, standardization of joint training programs to ensure uniform tactical preparedness, and enhanced cyber-terrorism response capabilities to counter emerging digital threats. Furthermore, the findings support the need for deeper legal harmonization across EU member states to facilitate seamless cross-border interventions.

Future studies should explore the effectiveness of specific ATLAS interventions through empirical analysis of operational data. Additionally, further research into the integration of artificial intelligence and digital surveillance technologies within ATLAS operations could provide insights into modernizing counter-terrorism strategies. Legal scholars should also examine the feasibility of creating a unified European counter-terrorism legal framework to streamline multinational operations.

By bridging theoretical insights with practical recommendations, this study contributes to a more

coordinated and resilient counter-terrorism framework within the European Union. Strengthening the ATLAS Network's capabilities will be critical in ensuring the EU's preparedness against evolving security threats while maintaining democratic accountability and adherence to human rights standards.

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