

## Spanish Presidency of the EU High Risk Security Network

held by the Guardia Civil through the Grupo de Acción Rápida

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*It is not so much about the need for knowledge as it is about  
the willingness to share it.*

Martin Schieffer, Head of Unit DG HOME-D2

In recent years, radical terrorism has targeted extremely violent attacks against critical (civilian) infrastructure, sensitive targets and transport hubs across Europe. In order to avoid this type of violence, or at least to prevent an increase in its occurrence, the Member States of the European Union are taking more and more preventive action, realising the need to implement more robust security measures and ensure better preparedness. Achieving a higher level of preparedness and security requires the development of a common cross-border strategy and joint actions and the involvement of state authorities, professional associations and private actors. It is important to extend this cooperation to as many countries as possible - both European and non-European.

In response to these needs and objectives, the EU High Risk Security Network (EU-HRSN) - an EU network of uniformed special forces for high-risk operations - was established as part of the implementation of the *EU*

*Action Plan “Union for Security: Protection of Public Spaces”* (announced in October 2017).



**Figure 1.** EU High Risk Security Network logo.

Source: Grupo de Acción Rápida's own materials.

This announce stated:

In the last three years, the European Union and its Member States have taken decisive steps to prevent terrorists from executing attacks, share information between Member States, counteract radicalization and better manage our borders. But as the terrorist attacks carried out in Europe show, it is necessary to reinforce preventive actions to prevent the perpetration of future attacks such as those that occurred in the streets of Barcelona, Berlin, London, Manchester, Nice, Paris or Stockholm; which have had as their common denominator their execution in open public spaces. Although the risk of such attacks can never be completely eliminated, there are concrete operational measures which Member States can take with the support of the EU to better protect public spaces from the threat of terrorism. The Commission is committed to providing specific funding of more than 118 million €, 11 million € over the next year, to intensify the exchange of best practices, to publish guidance material for Member States and to foster cooperation between local actors and the private sector (...). The Commission will establish a Professionals Forum where law enforcement professionals and existing law enforcement networks can share knowledge on the protection of public spaces. The Commission will also establish a High Risk Security Network to organize joint training and joint exercises for law enforcement

agencies to improve their preparedness and increase their response capacity<sup>1</sup>.

## EU-HRSN concept

The EU-HRSN was officially inaugurated on 1 November 2018. Its mandate is to integrate representatives of European uniformed high-risk special operations forces (civilian and military) that are part of law enforcement agencies or units performing operational or protective support tasks, in order to ensure the protection of public places, soft targets and critical infrastructure from acts of a terrorist nature and the detection and prosecution of their perpetrators. The establishment of the network is intended to facilitate the exchange of developed tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and to build better resilience to attacks. The exchange is intended to cover good practices in preventing, detecting and responding to the first phase of a terrorist attack, but not necessarily the organised response and intervention usually carried out by a government when deploying priority resources in response to a terrorist attack.

The presidency of the EU-HRSN allows the country holding the chairmanship to use not only the resources provided by the European Commission, but also the national resources allocated to the above-mentioned objectives. The first presidency was held by the Dutch Koninklijke Marechaussee through the Hoog Risico Beveiliging Brigade (HRB) and with the support of Spain, which took on the role of vice-presidency. On 1 July 2021, the Spanish Guardia Civil took over the presidency for a further 24 months, in accordance with the EU-HRSN Charter, through the Grupo de Acción Rápida (GAR).

Grupo de Acción Rápida was born in 1978 as “Unidad Antiterrorista Rural” (UAR), with the specific target of fighting against ETA, Spanish national-socialist terrorist band with more than 850 killed in 42 years. This Unit, has in its backpack more than 40 years of CT fight experience, and has been internationally deployed to Kosovo, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, Central African Rep. and Lebanon, inter alia, under the NATO and UN umbrellas.

<sup>1</sup> EU Action Plan “Union for Security: Protection of Public Spaces”, October, 2017.



**Figure 2.** Grupo de Acción Rápida logo.

Source: Grupo de Acción Rápida's own materials.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, some EU-HRSN activities were halted or delayed by ten months. This led to a six-month extension of the presidencies held first by the Dutch HRB and then by the Spanish GAR. The latter will end on 1 January 2024. The development of the EU-HRSN idea was negatively affected by the death of Colonel Jesús Gayoso Rey, head of the GAR and co-founder of the EU-HRSN, who died of a coronavirus infection. He was one of the main animators of both this and other EU initiatives. Let us hope that the next presidency, which will be held by Portugal's Guarda Nacional Republicana (GNR), through the Grupo de Intervenção de Ordem Pública (GIOP), will not have to face these kinds of problems. Unforeseen challenges are the domain of the members of the EU-HRSN, and when people of the same mindset work together, there are no insurmountable obstacles.

## EU-HRSN aims

The main objectives of the network are:

1. Sharing best practices, conducting cross-training, sharing knowledge of procedures and other operational details, and building collaborative structures at the tactical command and control level to improve resilience to acts of serious violence or terrorism targeting civilian critical infrastructure, soft targets and transport hubs in EU Member States.

2. Increasing the knowledge base of all members by undertaking activities whereby knowledge of TTP, standard operating protocols (SOPs), risk assessment and (predictive) profiling is shared through cross-training.
3. Advising EU organisations responsible for security issues taking into account lessons learnt from the exchange of experience between EU-HRSN Member States.
4. Sharing lessons learned through specific communication channels with other organisations cooperating on security in the EU. This does not refer to working on common standards or practices, but includes - where appropriate and compatible with national law - adapting best practices and tactics and bringing together the techniques developed as a common doctrine to make them most effective. The aim is to achieve synergies, and this is to be achieved by meeting on national crisis response procedures and drawing on different solutions.

### **EU-HRSN membership**

Members of the EU-HRSN are uniformed high-risk special operations formations (civilian and military) that are part of law enforcement agencies or units performing tasks in support of operational or protective activities to ensure the protection of public places, soft targets and critical infrastructure from acts of a terrorist nature and the detection and prosecution of their perpetrators.

Membership of the EU-HRSN is possible upon submission of a written application to the Chair. This application is subject to approval by a two-thirds majority of the Network's Member States. One of the conditions for admission is the acceptance and signature of the EU-HRSN Charter.

Associated membership is an alternative option. It gives interested parties the possibility to participate in the EU-HRSN without fulfilling all the requirements for EU-HRSN members. However, the cost of such membership is not covered by the EU budget.

## EU-HRSN organisational structure

The structure of the EU-HRSN includes:

- a) leadership in the form of a chair, vice-chair and steering group. The Vice-Chair is elected by a vote among the members of the Steering Group and automatically becomes the next Chair after 24 months. This allows them to gain the knowledge, experience and networking needed to properly lead the EU-HRSN during the presidency. The current Steering Group consists of representatives of the Presidency (Spanish Guardia Civil via the GAR), the Vice-Presidency (Portuguese GNR via GIOP), Belgium (Police Fédérale), Estonia (Kaitsepolitsei), Ireland (Garda Síochána via Special Tactics & Operations Command, STOC), the Netherlands (Koninklijke Marechaussee via HRB) and the D2 Terrorism Unit of DG HOME (Directorate-General of the Directorate-General for Terrorism, DG HOME-D2) as a permanent observer;
- b) 25 full members (counter-terrorism units) from 18 Member States;
- c) Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States as associate members;
- d) ATLAS Network and DG HOME as observers.

## EU-HRSN activities

The network is vigorously exchanging information with and receiving organisational and substantive support from other counter-terrorism initiatives of the European Commission. This applies in particular to the experience of the work on so-called Red Teaming tactics<sup>2</sup> within the Policy Group on Public Spaces Protection, the projects carried out within the EU-US security subgroups (e.g. security of special events, explosives seminar) and the Protective Security Advisors (PSA) group, which is a very interesting initiative of DG HOME-D2. This group consists of a number of experts with extensive expertise in public spaces protection (PSP) and counter-terrorism protection at mass events and major VIP events (e.g. CBRN-E, C-IED, UAS/

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<sup>2</sup> Red Teaming – types of procedures related to assessing the level of protection against terrorist activity and dealing with measures to increase attack resistance. These are carried out using unmanned systems (editor's note).

C-UAS threats<sup>3</sup>, snipers, tactical rescue and response, K2 service dog unit, building resilience to hybrid threats in critical infrastructure)<sup>4</sup>. They can be organised into small teams, advising a particular service or government and supporting a comprehensive security approach.



**Image 1.** Meeting of the Protective Security Advisors group.

Source: Grupo de Acción Rápida's own materials.

The EU-HRSN also exchanges extensively with other EU networks such as ATLAS and ENLETS (The European Network of Law Enforcement Technology Services). It is also represented in various forums, e.g. Operators and Practitioners, and has close links with EU working groups on issues such as CBRN-E, UAS/C-UAS, EDD<sup>5</sup>. All this serves to disseminate best practice in the protection of major events, public spaces, transport and communication hubs or places of worship. In order to achieve these objectives, five working groups have been set up within the EU-HRSN:

- WG 1 – *Threat and Risk Assessment* – working group on threat and risks assessment for terrorist attacks, coordinated by PSA unit,
- WG 2 – *Tactical use of UAV/C-UAV*<sup>6</sup> – working group on unmanned aerial vehicles, coordinated by Spain (GAR),

<sup>3</sup> CBRN-E - chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, explosive threats; C-IED - counter improvised explosive device; UAS - unmanned aerial system; C-UAS - counter unmanned aerial system (editor's note).

<sup>4</sup> See in more detail: M. Schieffer, R. Olszewski, B. Zapletal, W. Wojtas, *European Union initiative to support Member States' efforts in the protection of citizens and critical infrastructure from terrorist attacks*, "Terroryzm – studia, analizy, prewencja" 2023, no. 4.

<sup>5</sup> EDD – Explosives Detection Dogs (editor's note).

<sup>6</sup> UAV - unmanned aerial vehicle; C-UAV - counter-unmanned aerial vehicle (editor's note).

- WG 3 – *Tactical Rescue and Response* – working group on tactical rescue and high-risk incident response issues, coordinated by Ireland (STOC),
- WG 4 – *Human Factor* – working group on issues related to the selection of people and their training procedures, coordinated by the Netherlands (national police),
- WG 5 – *Multi-agency Command and Control* – working group responsible for managing high-risk operations, coordinated by the UK (National Counter Terrorism Security Office).



**Diagram.** EU-HRSN working groups.

Source: Grupo de Acción Rápida's own materials.

During the current Spanish Presidency, efforts have been made (together with the Steering Group) to develop a new approach to event protection issues. Indeed, the GAR's experience has shown that there is no better way to exchange knowledge and good practices than to work in the field, facing real challenges and applying different TTPs, developed in different environments and legal frameworks, and confronting hostile TTPs encountered in the work of the services of individual member countries. This way of exchanging knowledge and experience was used for the first time in the history of the EU-HRSN in September 2022 in Templemore (Ireland), to which the Irish police (Garda Síochána) invited more than 60 experts from 12 different countries. These were specialists



in tactical rescue and emergency response, representatives of all those who would be involved in a real situation requiring intervention.

In turn, the Experiences Polygon for Special Forces (UAR/GAR/CoEST)<sup>7</sup> met in November 2022 in Logroño (Spain) to exchange experiences between members of WG 2. This included experts from the US (FBI), Belgium, Spain, Portugal, France and Ireland.



**Image 2.** WG 2 meeting - exchange of experience on C-UAS.

Source: Grupo de Acción Rápida's own materials.

The work of WG 1 started a few weeks later in Brussels. As they are closely linked to the activities of the EU PSA group and those involved in Red Teaming tactics, the opportunity was taken for those involved in these three EU initiatives to exchange their knowledge.



**Image 3.** Meeting of WG 1 and persons involved in Red Teaming tactics in the EU PSA.

Source: Grupo de Acción Rápida's own materials.

<sup>7</sup> CoEST – Centre of Excellence for Special Training.

In 2023 in London meeting of WG 5 and Ramming Vehicle Workshop took place. Meeting of WG 4, general conference, steering group meetings and joint training and other forms of knowledge exchange organised to increase resilience to terrorism and create conditions that make it more difficult to undertake various types of terrorist acts are planned for the second half of 2023.

The activities of the EU-HRSN are not limited to the EU area. It also directly or indirectly supports other Union initiatives beyond its borders through projects such as GAR-SI SAHEL (Groupes d'Action Rapide - Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel), covering Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Chad, the already completed CT MENA (Counter-terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa) concerning the Middle East and North Africa, and CT Public Spaces - in Ghana, Kenya and Senegal.

The EU-HRSN network is needed and that is why this initiative will grow, as terrorist threats will unfortunately continue to exist. Creating a common language in the counter-terrorism community, sharing expertise and building trust is intended to create a strong team to effectively counter terrorist threats. The EU-HRSN may prove to be one of the best tools in the fight against these threats.

## Useful links

Action Plan to support the protection of public spaces:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PL/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017DC0612>

CT Public spaces:

<https://www.ctpublicspaces.eu/>

EU networks and initiatives:

<https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/pps/items/715174/en>

GAR-SI-SAHEL:

[https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/regional/gar-si-sahel-groupes-daction-rapide-surveillance-et-intervention\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/regional/gar-si-sahel-groupes-daction-rapide-surveillance-et-intervention_en)

PSA:

[https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/protection/eu-protective-security-advisors-eu-psa\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/protection/eu-protective-security-advisors-eu-psa_en)

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