

# Analysis of the impact of urban security policies on lone wolf terrorism threats in the European Union

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## Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of urban security policies in countering lone-wolf terrorism threats within the European Union. The research evaluates the implementation and impact of preventive security strategies in major European cities, particularly in response to individual terrorist attacks over the past decade. The study aims to assess how urban security frameworks have adapted to the increasing phenomenon of radicalized individuals acting independently. The analysis is based on case studies from Western European countries, such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. It considers policy measures including surveillance systems, counter-radicalization programs, and rapid response units. The findings highlight both the strengths and vulnerabilities of the current urban security structure in mitigating lone-wolf terrorism.

## Keywords:

counter-terrorism; European Union; lone wolf terrorism; public safety; radicalization; urban security.

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## Introduction

The rise of lone-wolf terrorism has posed unique challenges to urban security systems across the European Union. These isolated attackers often evade traditional intelligence networks, exploiting the vulnerabilities of densely populated cities. This paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of urban security policies in addressing these emerging threats. The research focuses on analysing security strategies implemented in key European cities that have experienced such attacks.

### 1. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

#### 1.1. *Defining Lone Wolf Terrorism*

##### *Characteristics and patterns of lone wolf attacks*

Lone wolf terrorism involves individuals carrying out violent attacks independently, without direct support from a terrorist group, though they are often inspired by extremist ideologies found online. These attackers frequently struggle with social isolation, mental health issues, or personal grievances, which make them vulnerable to radical content, particularly through social media. ([Danzell and Maisonet Montañez 2016](#); [Phillips 2017](#)).

In recent years, lone wolves have shifted towards using simple but deadly methods like vehicle ramming and knife attacks, as seen in the 2016 Nice truck attack and the 2017 London Bridge stabbings. These quick, low-planning assaults often target crowded public spaces, making them difficult to prevent. Authorities try to detect warning signs—like online threats or extremist posts—but distinguishing real danger from online rhetoric remains a major challenge ([Spaaij and Hamm 2015](#); [McCauley and Moskalenko 2014](#)).

##### *Distinction from organized terrorist networks*

Lone wolf terrorists differ from members of organized groups primarily in their independence—they plan and carry out attacks alone, without support from larger networks. In contrast, groups like Al-Qaeda rely on hierarchy, collective planning, and resources to coordinate large-scale attacks, such as the 2015 Paris attacks and the 2005 London bombings, which are often intercepted through surveillance due to their complexity ([Spaaij and Hamm 2015](#); [Kaplan, Lööw, and Malkki 2017](#)).

However, lone actors are often ideologically linked to global extremist movements, drawing inspiration and attack methods from online propaganda by groups like ISIS or far-right networks. While their attacks tend to be smaller, their unpredictability creates widespread fear, making it harder for security agencies to detect and assess ([McCauley and Moskalenko 2014](#); [Phillips 2017](#)).

#### 1.2. *Urban Security Policies in the European Union*

##### *Key policy frameworks and national approaches to counterterrorism*

The European Union's counterterrorism landscape has evolved significantly over the past decade in response to a series of high-profile attacks, particularly in

Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016). The cornerstone of the EU's approach is the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, first adopted in 2005 and revised continuously to address emerging threats. It is built on four pillars: Prevent, Protect, Pursue, and Respond ([Council of the European Union 2015](#)). This framework emphasizes the prevention of radicalization, the protection of critical infrastructure, the pursuit of terrorists through legal and operational cooperation, and effective crisis response mechanisms. Recent evaluations highlight improved cross-border cooperation; however, discrepancies in national implementation remain a significant challenge ([AMMTC 2018](#)).

Complementing this is the Urban Security Action Plan, which underscores the importance of safeguarding densely populated urban areas. This plan promotes the deployment of advanced surveillance technologies, reinforced law enforcement presence, and community engagement to enhance threat detection capabilities ([Cavallini 2021](#)). Real-time data analysis, including the use of AI-powered CCTV systems and social media monitoring, is increasingly employed to monitor potential threats in urban environments ([Cadet et al. 2024](#)).

Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding the balance between security and civil liberties. Critics argue that some surveillance-driven policies disproportionately target marginalized communities, fueling distrust and reducing cooperation with law enforcement agencies ([RHFV Media 2024](#)).

*National Approaches: France's Vigipirate, UK's CONTEST, Germany's Prevention Strategies*

### **France's Vigipirate Plan**

France's Vigipirate Plan is a comprehensive national security framework introduced in 1995 and regularly updated, notably after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015. It is designed to maintain high-level preparedness by integrating military patrols, police surveillance, and public awareness campaigns ([Yalçinkaya et al. 2022](#)). Following the 2015 attacks, Operation Sentinelle was launched, deploying soldiers to secure public spaces and sensitive sites such as transport hubs, religious buildings, and tourist attractions ([Ginkel et al. 2016](#)).

While the presence of military personnel has provided citizens with a sense of security, its effectiveness in deterring attacks is debated. Research suggests that attackers increasingly opt for low-tech methods (e.g., knife attacks, vehicle ramming), which are difficult to prevent through visible patrols alone ([Kellner 2017](#)). Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the long-term normalization of militarization in public spaces and its potential to infringe upon citizens' freedoms ([Gebrewahd 2019](#)).

### **UK's CONTEST Strategy**

The United Kingdom's CONTEST Strategy, first introduced in 2003 and updated in 2018, is another notable model. It aligns closely with the EU framework, emphasizing Prevent, Pursue, Protect, and Prepare as key pillars ([Home Office 2018](#)). The Prevent component is particularly prominent and controversial, focusing

on identifying individuals at risk of radicalization through collaboration between schools, healthcare institutions, and local authorities ([Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown 2021](#)).

While the UK government has lauded Prevent as instrumental in disrupting extremist networks, critics argue it fosters discrimination against Muslim communities and undermines trust in public services ([Home Office 2024](#)). Some practitioners have also expressed concerns about the program's impact on free speech, as individuals may avoid discussing political or religious views due to fear of being flagged as extremists ([Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown 2021](#)).

### **Germany's Prevention Strategies**

Germany adopts a preventive and de-radicalization-focused strategy, further strengthened after the 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack. This approach prioritizes early intervention, community resilience, and the reintegration of individuals disengaging from extremist ideologies ([Koehler 2021](#)). Programs such as Live Democracy! facilitate partnerships between the state and civil society organizations, fostering grassroots solutions to extremism ([Tamang and Professor 2024](#)).

This bottom-up approach is often praised for emphasizing social cohesion and long-term prevention. However, bureaucratic hurdles and inconsistent funding have hindered the program's agility, limiting its effectiveness in addressing rapidly developing threats ([Bury 2024](#)). Critics also point out that Germany's approach can sometimes appear overly cautious, lacking the robust enforcement measures seen in France and the UK ([Afsharian and Seeleib-Kaiser 2025](#)).

### **Cross-national Evaluation and Common Weaknesses**

While each European country adapts its counterterrorism approach to its specific security landscape and political culture, they face common challenges: detecting lone actors who evade traditional surveillance designed for organized groups ([Shepherd 2021](#)), overcoming delays in intelligence sharing due to institutional fragmentation between agencies ([Ginkel et al. 2016](#)), and balancing robust security measures with civil liberties to prevent alienating minority communities ([Mathews and McNeil-Willson 2021](#)). Looking ahead, experts suggest that Europe's future counterterrorism strategy will likely combine technology-driven surveillance with community-based prevention to address increasingly complex threats ([Bury 2024](#)).

#### **1.3. Surveillance, Intelligence, and Early Detection**

Surveillance technologies like CCTV, facial recognition, and AI-powered threat detection have become central to counterterrorism in Europe, especially in busy urban spaces. Cities like London and Paris now use systems that analyse behaviour in real-time, spotting potential threats like unattended bags or suspicious movements. Facial recognition helps identify suspects in crowds, while AI scans data for patterns like unusual purchases, but these tools still produce false positives and often misidentify minorities, raising concerns about bias ([Asaka and Denham 2023; Singer 2024](#)).

Despite these advances, detecting self-radicalized lone actors remains difficult. These individuals often radicalize privately through online content and show few outward signs, unlike members of organized groups. Surveillance excels at tracking actions but struggles to identify intent—someone buying knives may be a chef, not an attacker. Privacy laws like GDPR also limit online monitoring, and lone actors can radicalize and strike quickly, leaving security services playing catch-up ([Kaplan, Lööw, and Malkki 2017](#); [Duncan 2020](#)).

Experts argue that technology alone is not enough; human intelligence and community engagement are still crucial. Family, friends, or neighbours often notice concerning behaviour before authorities do. Combining AI-powered surveillance with trained behavioural assessment teams could improve threat detection, ensuring technology is guided by human judgment to reduce false alarms and better identify genuine risks ([Duncan 2020](#); [Park and Pak 2018](#)).

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Qualitative Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using a multiple-case study design. Paris, Berlin, and London were selected as the primary case studies due to their experiences with high-profile terrorist attacks between 2015 and 2017, their significance as political and economic hubs in Europe, and their diverse security responses. This comparative approach enables an evaluation of how different national security frameworks adapt to lone-wolf terrorism threats in densely populated urban settings.

The cases were chosen to reflect varying approaches:

- Paris: Militarized deterrence with the Vigipirate Plan and Operation Sentinelle.
- Berlin: Physical barriers and surveillance upgrades following vehicle ramming.
- London: Community-focused prevention alongside rapid response and intelligence integration.

These cities also exemplify the broader European Union's struggle to balance urban security, public freedoms, and multicultural integration.

### 2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The research relies on a systematic review of diverse sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of urban security policies and their effectiveness in addressing lone-wolf terrorist threats:

- **Primary Sources:** National security policies were analysed, including France's Vigipirate Plan ([French Government 2017](#)), the UK's CONTEST Strategy ([Home Office 2018](#)), and Germany's Prevention Programs ([Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution 2022](#)). European Union-level

policies such as the Schengen Information System (SIS) updates ([European Commission 2023](#)) and the Passenger Name Record (PNR) directive ([Council of the European Union 2015](#)) were also examined.

- **Institutional Reports:** Europol's *Terrorism Situation and Trend Reports (TE-SAT)* from 2015 to 2024 provided key insights into terrorism patterns and counterterrorism responses across the European Union ([Europol 2017; 2023](#)). National security assessments, such as reports by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) ([Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution 2022](#)), further informed the evaluation of security measures.
- **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2024 were reviewed, focusing on topics such as urban security policies, lone-wolf terrorism, and surveillance technologies. Key works included research on lone-wolf radicalization ([Spaaij and Hamm 2015; McCauley and Moskalenko 2014](#)), European counterterrorism strategies ([Mathews and McNeil-Willson 2021; Kaunert and Léonard 2020](#)), and the impact of surveillance systems ([Coaffee 2021; Blackburn and Walker 2023](#)).
- **Media Coverage:** Verified news reports were consulted to contextualize the Paris, Berlin, and London attacks and the subsequent policy adjustments. These accounts supplemented official and academic sources, offering real-time details and public reactions to security interventions ([Harris 2017; Dearden 2023](#)).

Triangulating these diverse sources—combining official documents, academic analysis, and media reports—allowed for a robust evaluation of both the effectiveness of urban security policies and their broader societal implications.

### 3. Case Studies: Responses to Lone Wolf Attacks

#### 3.1. Paris: Vigipirate and Military Patrols

Visible deterrence, such as uniformed patrols and military deployments, has become a common security measure in European cities after the 2015-2017 attacks. France's *Operation Sentinelle* stationed 10,000 soldiers in public spaces, aiming to reassure citizens and discourage attackers, while armed patrols in the UK and Germany enabled rapid responses during incidents like the 2017 London Bridge attack and the 2016 Berlin truck attack ([Samaan and Jacobs 2020; Hufnagel 2020](#)). These measures improved public confidence and reduced casualties in fast-moving attacks but also raised concerns about officer fatigue and the long-term impact on civil life ([von Braunschweig 2022](#)).

However, visible patrols struggle to prevent sudden, low-tech attacks like vehicle ramming and stabbings, often carried out by lone actors with minimal planning. Incidents in Nice (2016) and Westminster (2017) showed how attackers can bypass static security using everyday objects as weapons ([Lehr 2018; Escalante 2023](#)).

Experts now emphasize combining visible deterrence with intelligence-driven policing and community engagement, as seen in Germany's use of behaviour detection officers and the UK's updated *CONTEST* strategy, which focuses on early intervention and cooperation with local communities to prevent radicalization (Hufnagel 2020; Harris 2017).

### **3.2. Berlin: Securing Public Spaces**

The 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack, where Anis Amri drove a hijacked truck into a crowded market, killing 12 and injuring 56, exposed weaknesses in Germany's border security and cooperation between federal and state agencies. It also highlighted the growing threat of vehicle-ramming attacks across Europe, prompting urgent calls for tighter urban security (Schneider 2020; Hufnagel 2020).

In response, Berlin installed permanent anti-vehicle barriers, increased police patrols, and tested facial recognition at Berlin Südkreuz station, reflecting a shift toward technology-driven security. While these measures improved safety, they also restricted public spaces, turning once-open Christmas markets and plazas into heavily monitored zones, raising concerns about over-policing and racial profiling (McIlhatton et al. 2020; Dorreboom and Barry 2022; Ciaux and Runkel 2024).

Berlin's experience reflects a broader European challenge—balancing security with public freedom. While barriers and surveillance deter attacks, they risk limiting urban mobility and spontaneous public life. Experts suggest combining flexible security measures with community trust and legal safeguards to protect both safety and democratic values (Coaffee 2021; Mucha 2017).

The urban security policies adopted across Europe after major terrorist attacks reveal both shared patterns and country-specific approaches. France, Germany, and the UK implemented a mix of visible deterrence, surveillance expansion, and community engagement to prevent future attacks. While these measures improved public safety, they also sparked debates over civil liberties and the militarization of public spaces. The table below summarizes key security responses in these countries following the 2015–2017 attacks.

These policy adjustments highlight the tension between strengthening urban security and preserving democratic freedoms. While visible security measures have reassured the public and reduced response times, concerns about racial profiling, restricted mobility, and long-term impacts on community trust remain central to the ongoing evaluation of European counterterrorism strategies.

### **3.3. London: Rapid Response and Intelligence Sharing**

The integration of MI5, police forces, and local councils has been central to London's counterterrorism strategy, especially after the 2005 and 2017 attacks. MI5 works closely with the Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command (SO15), sharing



TABLE NO. 1

**Summary of Urban Security Responses in Europe after Terrorist Attacks (2015–2017)**

Country	Key Event	Main Security Measures	Positive Impact	Challenges
France	Paris Attacks (2015)	Operation Sentinelle: 10,000 soldiers deployed in public spaces; Vigipirate Plan tightened; Anti-Terrorism Law (2017)	Increased public sense of safety; Faster response times	Militarization of public spaces; Civil liberties concerns
Germany	Berlin Christmas Market Attack (2016)	Anti-vehicle barriers; Expanded CCTV surveillance; Strengthened GTAZ (Joint Counter-Terrorism Centre)	Reduced vehicle-ramming risk; Improved monitoring	Mobility restrictions; Racial profiling concerns
United Kingdom	Westminster, London Bridge, Finsbury Park Attacks (2017)	Expanded armed police patrols; "Run, Hide, Tell" campaign; Updated CONTEST Strategy (2018)	Rapid armed police response; Improved public preparedness	Tensions with Muslim communities; Fear normalization

**Source:** Compiled by the author (2025).

intelligence and embedding officers within police units to speed up responses. Local councils also play a key role in the *Prevent* strategy, identifying individuals vulnerable to radicalization and working with police and social services to intervene early. However, *Prevent* has faced criticism from Muslim communities, who often feel unfairly targeted, raising concerns about trust and civil liberties ([Blackbourn and Walker 2023](#); [Qurashi 2018](#); [Brouillette-Alarie et al. 2022](#)).

The “*Run, Hide, Tell*” public safety campaign, launched in 2015, further strengthened the UK’s terrorism preparedness by teaching civilians how to react during attacks. Widely recognized by 2018, the campaign was credited with helping people evacuate safely during the Manchester Arena bombing. The 2017 London Bridge attack highlighted the importance of pairing public awareness with rapid armed response, as police neutralized the attackers within 8 minutes, aided by intelligence coordination through the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) ([Home Office 2018](#); [Dearden 2023](#)).

## 4. Evaluation of Policy Effectiveness

### 4.1. Successes

*Reduced large-scale terrorist plots: shifting trends in European security*

Large-scale terrorist attacks like the 2015 Paris attacks and 2004 Madrid bombings



have become rarer in Europe over the past decade. This decline is largely due to better intelligence-sharing systems like the Schengen Information System (SIS) and the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC), the military defeat of ISIS's territorial caliphate in 2019, and proactive security work—MI5 and UK police foiled 31 plots between 2017 and 2023. AI-driven surveillance has also helped detect threats earlier. While lone actors and extremists remain a danger, complex, coordinated bombings have become far less common (Kaunert and Léonard 2020; Nesser, Stenersen, and Oftedal 2016; Dearden 2023; Husain 2021; Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown 2021).

*Enhanced public awareness and cooperation: a critical counterterrorism asset*

The rise of low-tech, spontaneous terrorist attacks in Europe has made public vigilance a key part of security efforts. Governments now view citizens as first-line responders who can spot suspicious behaviour and assist with rapid interventions. Campaigns like the UK's "Run, Hide, Tell" and "See it, Say it, Sorted" have raised public awareness, while France's Vigipirate alerts and Germany's Security Partnership Initiative encourage early reporting and improve situational awareness (Blackbourn and Walker 2023; Pearce et al. 2020; Harris 2017).

Citizen reports have successfully helped prevent attacks, such as a tip-off near Westminster in 2017 and the arrest of a suspect preparing an IED in Birmingham in 2018 (Home Office 2018; Pearce et al. 2020). However, public reporting is not without issues—false alarms can drain security resources, and concerns about racial profiling have damaged trust between police and minority communities. Rural areas and non-English speakers also remain harder to reach through these campaigns (Brouillette-Alarie et al. 2022; Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown 2021).

Experts emphasize that public vigilance works best when paired with professional security networks. The decline in large-scale attacks shows the success of this cooperation. Systems like the UK's Anti-Terrorism Hotline and France's SAIP app allow rapid information-sharing between the public and law enforcement, enabling faster, more effective responses to potential threats (Kaunert and Léonard 2020; Husain 2021).

#### **4.2. Shortcomings**

Low-tech terrorist attacks using vehicles, knives, and other everyday objects have emerged as the primary threat across Europe over the past decade. Incidents such as the Nice truck attack (2016), the Berlin Christmas market attack (2016), Westminster (2017), and London Bridge (2017) reveal a critical vulnerability: these rapid, low-planning assaults often bypass surveillance and physical deterrents.

Several systemic weaknesses persist despite security improvements:

##### **Intelligence Gaps and Fragmentation**

The Anis Amri case in Germany exemplifies the limitations of intelligence coordination. Although Amri was under surveillance and flagged as a security threat, legal constraints and poor information-sharing between federal and state agencies

allowed him to execute the Berlin attack. Europol's 2023 TE-SAT report highlighted continued delays in cross-border data exchange, with suspects exploiting loopholes within the Schengen zone to evade detection ([Europol 2023](#)).

### **Racial Profiling and Erosion of Trust**

Expanded stop-and-search powers in France and the UK's Prevent program have disproportionately targeted Muslim communities. Reports from human rights organizations and scholars ([Qurashi 2018](#); [Blackbourn and Walker 2023](#)) suggest that these measures contribute to social alienation, reducing community cooperation with law enforcement, the very cooperation that is crucial for identifying self-radicalized individuals early.

### **Over-reliance on Surveillance Technologies**

While AI-powered CCTV and facial recognition systems in cities like London and Paris have enhanced threat detection, their effectiveness is limited against lone actors with minimal planning. These technologies also exhibit bias, leading to higher rates of misidentification among minority populations ([Singer 2024](#)). False positives divert security resources and fuel public resentment.

### **Militarization and Psychological Impact**

Visible security, such as Operation Sentinelle in France, reassures some citizens but also creates a perception of a permanent emergency. Research by Coaffee (2021) argues that militarization can normalize fear, transforming public spaces into zones of suspicion and restricting urban life.

## **4.3. Policy Recommendations for Urban Security and Lone Wolf Threats**

### **Strengthening Intelligence Integration**

Building on Europol's current efforts, member states should develop a unified counterterrorism intelligence hub to minimize information silos. Germany's post-Amri reforms, which improved cooperation between federal and regional security bodies, offer a model. Expanding the Joint Counter-Terrorism Centre (GTAZ) concept across Europe could enhance threat assessments and ensure that data flows seamlessly across jurisdictions.

### **Enhancing Behavioral Risk Assessment**

Beyond technological surveillance, frontline officers and community workers should be trained in behavioural threat detection. Programs such as Germany's "Live Democracy!" already emphasize this approach but require broader implementation. Behavioural risk profiling can complement CCTV analysis, identifying subtle pre-attack indicators.

### **Establishing Independent Oversight of Surveillance Systems**

To address privacy concerns, surveillance initiatives must be subjected to rigorous oversight. Independent bodies—comprising legal experts, data scientists, and

community representatives—should review the operation of facial recognition and AI monitoring systems. Periodic audits can ensure that security measures target genuine threats without disproportionately affecting minorities.

### **Rebuilding Community Trust**

Security cannot operate in isolation. Partnerships with local leaders, educators, and mental health professionals can foster early intervention. For instance, revising the UK's Prevent strategy to emphasize voluntary engagement rather than surveillance could repair strained relations with Muslim communities. Establishing Community Liaison Officers across European cities would strengthen dialogue between law enforcement and diverse populations.

### **Urban Security Design**

Flexible security infrastructures such as retractable vehicle barriers and mobile police units—can safeguard public spaces without obstructing urban mobility. Berlin's experiment with temporary barriers during markets demonstrates how security can adapt to city life without permanently altering its landscape.

## **Conclusions**

European cities have become safer in many ways, thanks to stronger security policies put in place after years of facing terrorist threats. Visible patrols, better intelligence sharing, and public safety campaigns have helped prevent attacks and reassure the public. However, lone wolf attacks, especially those using simple weapons like knives or vehicles—remain hard to predict and stop. These threats highlight that security is not just about barriers and cameras; it also depends on trust, cooperation, and strong relationships between authorities and local communities. Moving forward, keeping cities safe will require finding the right balance—protecting people without sacrificing the freedoms that make urban life thrive.

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## DECLARATION on AI use

The author confirms that AI tools, including language models such as ChatGPT, were used solely to enhance the writing process, improve readability, and assist with grammar and formatting. All intellectual content, analysis, and critical arguments are the result of the author's original work. The AI tools were not used to generate research findings or substitute independent scholarly work.