



COMMENTARY

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ISIS MIGHT FOCUS MORE ON ATTACKS IN EUROPE AS IT LOSES GROUND IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

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Encouraging signs in the battle against ISIS come from both Syria and Iraq where the extremist groups have been suffering heavy losses and losing territory. ISIS has even been under attack in their strongholds of Mosul, Fallujah, and Raqqa. It is also believed that the U.S-led airstrikes have significantly harmed ISIS's financial sources¹.

Despite all this, ISIS is still a powerful group that has major outreach capabilities. The leadership is not contemplating the option of surrender, nor does the international community ever intend on inviting them to the peace negotiations.²

One worrying detail is that insurgent groups tend to resort to increased terrorist attacks when they are weaker. History has shown this through the examples of al-Shabab in Soma-

lia³ and al-Qaeda in Iraq that resorted to using indiscriminate terrorism as a response to losing territory and power. Knowing that it is much more difficult to join the fight in Syria and Iraq, ISIS followers could instead resort to attacks on European soil.

At the end of May 2016 a person claiming to be a spokesman for ISIS called upon followers to launch attacks on US and European targets. One can see the change of narrative here: instead of calling upon the followers to join the fight in Syria and Iraq, and only if they can't, to instead attack targets in Europe as done in the past. The alleged ISIS spokesperson said "The smallest action you do in their heartland is better and more enduring to us than what you would if you were with us"⁴.

In the same time, the U.S

Department of State has issued a Europe Travel Alert that is valid until August 31 2016⁵. In the statement US citizens are particularly advised to be cautious around major events, tourist sites, restaurants and means of mass transportation. Analysts do however claim that there is no specific threat, but that the alert is probably a response to "signals and a lot of noise"⁶.

WHAT ABOUT MACEDONIA AND THE BALKANS?

The question that will come to the minds of many people in Macedonia is where it leaves Macedonia and the region and how safe we really are. Although the Balkans is not a primary target for attacks for ISIS and other extremist groups, it is impossible to entirely write off the possibility for attacks in the near future.

Data shows that there are now several hundred returnees from Syria and Iraq in the re-

1 "U.S- led airstrikes putting a financial squeeze on the Islamic State". The Washington Post. April 2nd, 2016.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-led-strikes-putting-a-financial-squeeze-on-the-islamic-state/2016/04/02/e739a7be-f848-11e5-a3ce-f06b5ba21f33_story.html

2 "White House goes into damage control on Syria peace talks". Politico. January 4th, 2016.

<http://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/iran-saudi-arabia-us-syria-217318>

3 "Al-Shabaab shows weakness, not strength in Somalia theatre bombing". The Guardian. April 4th, 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/04/al-shabaab-somalia-theatre-bombing>

4 "Islamic State calls for attacks on the West during Ramadan in audio message". Reuters Canada. May 22nd, 2016.

<http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/id-CAKCN0YC00G>

5 "Europe Travel Alert". U.S Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs. May 31st, 2016.

<https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/alertswarnings/europe-travel-alert.html>

6 "Travelers watch out- but there's no specific threat". BBC. June 1st, 2016.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36403960>

gion. If we consider Thomas Heggehamer's theory that "one in nine volunteers who went overseas to fight then returned and became involved with militant groups"⁷ it adds up to a number of several dozen individuals who might engage in violent activities. In Macedonia alone, 72 fighters have already returned from the battlefields⁸. And this is before taking into account the possibility of hundreds of individuals who have not travelled to Syria and Iraq,

7 "Europe could feel the backlash from jihadist conflicts". BBC. November 30, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25155188>

8 "Иванов: Граѓаните да бидат спокојни, институциите успешно се справуваат со предизвиците (Ivanov: Citizens should be calm, institutions are successfully dealing with the challenges)". Macedonia Information Agency. March 22, 2016. <http://mia.mk/mk/Inside/RenderSingle-News/288/133090587>

but have been indoctrinated into violent ideas, and just might strike near home.

If the ISIS leadership does indeed decide to take the fight even further into Europe and list the Balkans as a valuable target, it will be extremely difficult to prevent the attacks, as it takes only one successful plot to cause great damage. Another challenge could be the drain of capacities of the MOI by the migrant and political crisis. On top of that, there are many soft targets in Macedonia that offer a high return in casualties, a fact that could be exploited by jihadist groups.

Since the Paris attacks on November 13th 2015, the MOI has increased the level of security in the country, with their main focus being securing vital objects in the Macedonian cap-

ital of Skopje. However, MOI cannot be present at all possible targets at all times.

Finally, we come to the issue of just how much freedom of movement we are willing to give up in order for increased security. Not many would, and rightfully so, approve of security checks at every possible target like malls, theatres, cinemas, and restaurants. This would be very time-consuming, cause frustrations and is also against the principle of freedom of movement. It also does not guarantee the prevention of all possible attacks.

In conclusion, despite the fact that there seems to be no immediate threat, institutions must remain vigilant and prepared for the worst-case scenarios.

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