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# COUNTERTERRORISM NEWSLETTER

FOR AND ABOUT THE BALKANS

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## CT News and Information Updating and Connecting Our Partners in the Region

*DOJ, Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance, and Training  
(OPDAT) in partnership with the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of  
Counterterrorism*

This issue brings you news about the successful prosecutions of FTFs in Kosovo and the recent arrest of a terrorist suspect in Serbia. We also report on terrorists' use of the internet to disseminate propaganda. Finally, we continue our series of practice tips on interviewing suspects.

Tom Saunders  
Balkans CT RLA  
OPDAT/DOJ  
U.S. Embassy, Sarajevo  
[SaundersTN@state.gov](mailto:SaundersTN@state.gov)

Clay Stiffler  
Balkans CT RLA  
OPDAT/DOJ  
U.S. Embassy, Tirana  
[StifflerRC@state.gov](mailto:StifflerRC@state.gov)

Jasenka Ferizović, Legal Advisor  
OPDAT/DOJ  
U.S. Embassy, Sarajevo  
[FerizovicJ@state.gov](mailto:FerizovicJ@state.gov)

Bledar Bashanoviq, Legal Specialist  
OPDAT/DOJ  
U.S. Embassy, Tirana  
[BashanoviqB@state.gov](mailto:BashanoviqB@state.gov)

# Serbian Citizen Arrested on Suspicion of Soliciting Support for ISIS

In February 2022, Serbian authorities arrested Igor Despotovic, who is alleged to have solicited support for ISIS over social media. According to the Belgrade Higher Court, Despotovic opened and administrated multiple social media accounts through which he publicly shared texts, recordings, and photographs glorifying ISIS and “promoting the actions of that organization, with calls for material assistance and joining its ranks, armed struggle, violence and suicide.” Despotovic has been remanded to 30 days in custody while the investigation continues.

To date, seven people have been prosecuted for ISIS-related terrorism offenses in Serbia. All seven defendants were convicted and given sentences ranging from seven-and-a-half to 11 years. Separately, dozens of people were convicted and received suspended sentences for fighting in Ukraine. (These Ukraine-related cases pre-date the conflict that began on February 20, 2022.)

Source: [Serbia Arrests Citizen Suspected of ‘Glorifying’ Islamic State](#)

## Kosovo Convicts Four Foreign Terrorist Fighters Repatriated in July 2021

In January, the Pristina Basic Court Special Department convicted four FTFs of organizing and participating in a terrorist group for their roles in traveling to Syria and fighting for ISIS.

Fidan Demolli, Sadri Nerjovaj, Skender Qerimi and Kujtim Dacaj, who were repatriated to Kosovo from Syria in July of last year, each pleaded guilty. Demolli was sentenced to two years and six months in prison for joining ISIS in 2014 and serving as a fighter and guard until he was captured by Syrian Democratic Forces in 2019. Dacaj admitted that he traveled to Syria with his wife and daughter in 2014 to join ISIS and served as a fighter and sniper instructor. He was sentenced to three years and eight months in prison. Nerjovaj and Qerimi were each sentenced to three years and six months in prison.

Two other FTFs who were repatriated in July are currently on trial on similar charges.

DoJ/OPDAT assisted with the repatriation of the FTFs, helped obtain the battlefield evidence used to convict them, and helped Kosovo obtain a mutual legal assistance response so that the evidence could be used in court.

Sources: [Dënohet me 3 vite e 3 muaj burgim për pjesëmarrje në luftërat e ISIS-it dhe angazhim në Batalionin e Snajperistëve](#)

[Pranoi se luftoi për ISIS-in, dënohet me 2 vite e 6 muaj burgim i akuzuari për terrorizëm](#)

[I akuzuari për terrorizëm dënohet me 3 vite e tetë muaj burgim, ngarkohej se ishte trajner i snajpersitëve në ISIS](#)

[Dënohet me 3 vjet e 6 muaj burgim i akuzuari për pjesëmarrje në ISIS](#)

## Terrorist Use of the Internet: A New Report by UN-supported Tech Against Terrorism

Governments fighting against terrorists’ use of the internet often focus on mainstream social media companies, such as Facebook (now Meta), Youtube.com, and Twitter. And while social media remains a powerful tool for terrorist and other violent extremist groups, these groups also create and operate their own websites, bypassing the oversight of mainstream companies. According to a new report, terrorist and violent extremist-operated websites (T/VEOWs) “pose one of the most significant threats to global efforts in tackling terrorist use of the internet.”

Tech Against Terrorism (TAT) is a group of counterterrorism experts and developers who work with the technology industry to “tackle terrorist use of the internet whilst respecting human rights,” according to its website. In

January TAT published its report *The Threat of Terrorist and Violent Extremist-Operated Websites*, which claims that governments and researchers have failed to focus adequately on the threat posed by T/VEOWs.

T/VEOWs are used primarily to disseminate and archive propaganda, recruit new members, and allow existing members to communicate internally. Since January 2021, TAT has identified 198 websites that TAT assesses to be operated by terrorists and violent extremists that pose a credible and urgent threat to society.

“The fact that terrorists and violent extremists are able to operate hundreds of websites attracting millions of views with impunity is a failure on behalf of the global online counterterrorism sector,” stated Adam Hadley, the founder of TAT. “Terrorist operated websites [are] the key strategic threat with regards to terrorist use of the internet.”

To address this threat, TAT’s report offers recommendations for governments, internet infrastructure providers, and researchers/civil society. For governments, TAT’s four recommendations are:

- Prioritize T/VEOWs in policy discussions concerning terrorist use of the internet;
- Develop a “global mitigation strategy” to combat T/VEOWs, including coordination with other states based on the rule of law;
- Ensure that efforts to combat T/VEOWs are undertaken “with the fullest respect for human rights,” including freedom of expression; and
- Provide clear guidelines for determining whom should be designated a terrorist group, as clear guidelines make it easier to secure tech company cooperation in disrupting these websites.

TAT works with the technology sector to identify websites with terrorism-related content. Once authorities have evidence that a site is being operated by a terrorist group,

they can take a handful of actions, such as working with a DNS Registrar to render the website inaccessible to the public or working with popular search engines to “delist” the site and make it harder to find.

Any government effort to disable or delist a website will implicate concerns of freedom of speech and expression. TAT emphasizes that “action against suspected T/VEOWs should be taken only once the purpose of the website has been ascertained to a high evidential standard.” The proof of criminal activity should be clear and supported by sufficient evidence to avoid unlawful government suppression of legitimate speech.

**Source:** [The Threat of Terrorist and Violent Extremist Operated Websites](#)

## Practice Tip

### Interviewing Skills: Essentials

In the last issue of this newsletter, we presented eight steps of a successful interview. Understanding those steps, however, is only a starting point. Different factors affect the quality and quantity of information obtained in an interview, and investigators should master a range of skills and techniques that can help them succeed as an interviewer. In this issue we present some of these skills and techniques, specifically those that apply so frequently that they are essential.

**Demeanor.** Good investigators should always be in control and “dominate the situation.” Dominance, however, can rarely be achieved through arrogance because arrogance creates hostility in most interviewees, regardless of whether they are guilty or innocent. And if the investigator in turn responds to the hostility by escalating his arrogance, as many inexperienced law enforcement officers often do, a confrontation is inevitable. Investigators should remember that being at ease, not arrogance, indicates dominance: “Behavior, not words, determines dominance. Good interviewers know that an air of confidence and ease typifies the behavior of truly dominant people.”

**Advice of rights.** Investigators must always comply with any legal obligation within their jurisdiction to caution the interviewees about their rights. However, at the same time, the investigators should do their best to avoid the “chilling effect” that this warning can produce. To do this, investigators should first stop viewing the advice of rights as a hurdle and start regarding it as a tool for achieving their goal – the truth. A good investigator will use mandatory warnings to send the message that he is trustworthy and plays fair and to enhance the rapport-building process.

**Note-taking.** While taking notes during the interview is important, it can also interfere with the conversation by causing extended pauses while the investigator writes, reducing the investigator’s opportunity to observe the interviewee and by prompting the interviewees to weigh their words more carefully. For this reason, investigators should ensure that their note-taking does not interfere with the flow of the interview.

**Listening.** Effective listening is the most important technique in the entire interview process because “what is asked and what is said mean little; what is heard and understood means everything.” Investigators should remember that listening is an active process which depends on mental involvement: “We listen with our brains more than with our ears.” Although concentration is key to this, there are some specific techniques that can help investigators to enhance their listening skills. These include: 1) providing nonverbal indicators of listening (such as nodding), 2) intermittently paraphrasing what the interviewee has said and 3) refraining oneself from making any judgements or at least from revealing them prematurely.

**Source:** John E. Hess, *Interviewing and Interrogation for Law Enforcement*, Second Edition, Anderson Publishing (2010)