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

Inside this issue, we introduce Joseph Baldwin, the new OPDAT Counterterrorism Legal Advisor based in Tirana. From the Balkans, Kosovo recently indicted the last FTF repatriated to Kosovo this year. We bring an overview of cryptocurrency adoption around the world by the Chainalysis, and observations by the George Washington University on online methods and networks terrorism supporters use to spread propaganda.

Tom Saunders
Balkans CT RLA
OPDAT/DOJ
U.S. Embassy, Sarajevo
SaundersTN@state.gov

Joe Baldwin
Balkans CT RLA
OPDAT/DOJ
U.S. Embassy, Tirana
BaldwinJR@state.gov

Jasenka Ferizović, Legal Advisor
OPDAT/DOJ
U.S. Embassy, Sarajevo
FerizovicJ@state.gov

Bledar Bashanoviq, Legal Specialist
OPDAT/DOJ
U.S. Embassy, Tirana
BashanoviqB@state.gov

Joe Baldwin Takes Up Post as OPDAT CT RLA for Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia

We are pleased to announce that on December 5, Joe Baldwin started as the new regional counterterrorism Resident Legal Advisor (RLA) based in Tirana, Albania, as part of the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ's) Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance, and Training (OPDAT). He will be responsible for counterterrorism capacity building, case-based mentoring, and legislative assistance in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. He will work closely with the OPDAT regional counterterrorism RLA in Sarajevo, along with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. DOJ's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP). Before becoming an RLA, Joe was an Assistant U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland, where he prosecuted a wide variety of crimes, including the illegal export of firearms, financial crimes, and organized crime. Joe has been lead counsel in numerous jury trials. Earlier in his career, Joe was a civil litigator. He represented the United States in a variety of civil matters including tort litigation, employment disputes, and freedom of information cases. While in private practice, he represented technological companies in patent and trade litigation regarding the integration of various technologies into what would become the smart phone. Prior to law school, Joe served in the United States Navy as a surface warfare officer on a guided missile destroyer. He holds degrees from the United States Naval Academy, the University of Maryland, and the University of Virginia School of Law. He will be living in Tirana, Albania, with his wife.

Kosovo Indicts Repatriated FTF of Terrorism and Recruitment

On October 25, 2022, the Kosovo Special Prosecution Office's Department for Terrorism indicted Ylber Bela, charging him with participation in a terrorist organization and terrorist recruitment. Bela was repatriated in late May this year during a joint repatriation action conducted by Kosovo and Albania, with the U.S. assistance.

According to the indictment, in 2013 Bela organized travel for himself and another co-fighter to Syria, where they joined the Jabhat-al Nusra and ISIS ranks. Under alias "Abu Hamza al-Kosovi," he was registered in training on arms for three weeks, before he engaged in military actions for ISIS. Referring to evidentiary assistance provided by the U.S. authorities, the prosecution provided material evidence and testimony from the defendant's co-fighters showing that he had enrolled as a fighter in the ISIS foreign terrorist fighters registry. The evidence showed that Bela engaged in ISIS terrorist activities until the fall of the so-called Islamic Caliphate.

The DOJ/OPDAT Counterterrorism Legal Advisor facilitated the exchange of battlefield evidence for this case through mutual legal assistance channels between U.S. and Kosovo authorities.

An indictment is merely a set of allegations. A defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

Source: The Kosovo Special Prosecution Office

Cryptocurrency Adoption Remains High, According to New Report

Cryptocurrency investment remains high despite recent price volatility according to a new report from Chainalysis.

Chainalysis is an American firm that sells software to aid in blockchain analysis and reports on cryptocurrency trends around the globe. This year Chainalysis issued its third annual report on the Global Crypto Adoption Index, which ranks 146 countries based on their level of "grassroots" adoption of cryptocurrency. Rather than ranking countries by the raw volume of transactions, the report adjusts for each country's population and wealth to determine where people are putting the biggest share of their money into cryptocurrency.

The Chainalysis report does not directly address terrorist financing, but the report's conclusions should draw the attention of terrorism investigators and prosecutors. Crypto remains an enticing medium for criminals of all kinds to store and transfer value, especially in jurisdictions with lax regulations where investigators do not monitor such transactions.

According to the report, the global adoption of cryptocurrency leveled off recently. Adoption was growing consistently since mid-2019, with an all-time high in the second quarter of 2021. Since that peak, adoption has moved up and down in waves, but global adoption remains well above its pre-2019 levels. Many of the consumers and investors who began using cryptocurrency in 2020 and 2021 remain invested even as prices have become less stable.

In its analysis, the report groups together the Balkan states together with other Western Europe countries and, from the report alone, it is difficult to draw conclusions specific to the Balkan region. By comparison, the report estimates that almost 20% of all cryptocurrency value received in Eastern Europe is associated with risky or illicit activity, more than any other region.

Many of the Balkan states ranked low in the overall adoption of cryptocurrency but relatively high in the use of "peer-to-peer" cryptocurrency exchanges. For example, Albania ranked 96 in overall adoption but 49 in peer-to-peer volume. Bosnia and Herzegovina ranked 115 in overall adoption but 65 in peer-to-peer volume. This suggests that terrorism investigators should

become familiar with the various peer-to-peer exchanges and how they operate.

Bulgaria and Serbia are two of the highest ranked countries in the region for overall crypto adoption, placing in 48th and 59th place out of 146 countries.

Emerging markets dominate the Global Crypto Adoption Index. Among the 20 top-ranked countries, 10 of them are countries that the World Bank index categorizes as "lower-middle income." They are: Vietnam, Philippines, Ukraine, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Morocco, Nepal, Kenya, and Indonesia.

The report notes that crypto consumers in lower-middle and upper-middle income countries often rely on cryptocurrency to "send remittances, preserve their savings in times of fiat currency volatility, and fulfill other financial needs unique to their economies."

The OPDAT program has cooperated with Chainalysis in the past to provide country-specific analysis of cryptocurrency adoption. Prosecutors and investigators interested in learning more from Chainalysis can contact their OPDAT Resident Legal Advisor to discuss future programming.

Source: Chainalysis_The 2022 Geography of Cryptocurrency Report

GWU Report: Islamic State Supporters Maintain the Virtual Caliphate Through Adaptation and Innovation

In September, Program on Extremism at George Washington University published a report analyzing Islamic State (IS) supporters' efforts to maintain online presence across various platforms and ensure survival of the so-called "virtual Caliphate" after the fall of IS in 2019.

According to the report, the history of the "virtual Caliphate" began on Twitter in 2013 and 2014, when IS supporters created a large number of accounts which were used for spreading of propaganda, recruitment of new members, internal communications, and incitement of attacks outside IS-held territory. After Twitter conducted mass deletion of pro-IS accounts in 2015, IS-supporters migrated onto Telegram. They continued to operate uninterrupted on Telegram until 2018 and 2019 when Europol and Telegram carried out two operations that resulted in considerable disruption of the IS activity on this platform and led to "further decentralization of pro-IS networks as supporters explored alternative and increasingly more obscure apps." Despite the substantial decline of pro-IS spaces on Telegram and the effort of supporters to explore other platforms, the report notes that Telegram remains an important base of operation for pro-Is online networks, primarily due to the privacy features of Telegram's private groups which prevent even content moderators from viewing content shared within the group.

The report highlights that, regardless of which platform they use, IS supporters use online communications for three objectives: create, connect, and deceive.

Create

Ensuring a continuous production of pro-IS content has been essential for maintenance of pro-IS virtual ecosystems. Pro-IS materials, such as official IS news, magazine, and video releases, are generated by independent "content creators" and translated into several languages by unofficial translation collectives: "The innerworkings of this type of grass-roots project can take place on an individual level as well as in private smaller Telegram chats, where a handful of 'leadership' accounts provide direction to others in the group through designation of specific tasks." IS supporters also create file repositories for archiving pro-IS content with an aim to facilitate dissemination of propaganda and other resources (such as instructions for improving online security, manufacturing of explosives, etc.) to broader audiences. According to the report, creation of pro-IS materials goes beyond virtual environments and includes production of physical items such as IS-themed clothing and apparel and hand-drawn IS fan art.

Connect

Another important objective for IS supporters is to secure maintenance and growth of their networks. The report observes that, depending on the platform, they employ different strategies to accomplish this goal. For example, keeping backup accounts and sharing backup account information with one another for individual profiles, pro-IS channels, and group chats in case primary accounts are banned, became main response to deplatforming efforts on Telegram and similar platforms. On Facebook and Twitter, IS supporters use specific functions of these social media networks, such as "tagging," to disseminate messages and content and to connect pro-IS users.

Deceive

To avoid content moderation, IS supporters invest a lot of effort into obscuring their online activity and applying countermeasures. According to the report, the tactics they employ are adjusted to the nature of the platform and include obscuring pro-IS content through textual deception, visual deception, and account deception. For example, on mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter and TikTok, IS supporters try to disrupt AI detection by blurring or otherwise editing images of IS-related content. Similarly, they alter word spacing or the letters in a text, use euphemisms, codewords, vague language or even emojis to refer to pro-IS materials in order to avoid AI detection algorithms. When it comes to obscuring online accounts or websites, some of the identified tactics that IS supporters use include setting profiles to "private mode" to prevent them from external unauthorized access, hiding friends list on Facebook to prevent network tracing, creating channels solely dedicated to link-sharing on Telegram, creating mirror websites on the dark web for distribution of updated surface web URLs if a current page is removed, etc.

According to the report, despite all the setbacks, IS supporters continue to invest immense efforts to maintain their online presence and to find ways to further expand their reach. Operating within "create, connect, and deceive" framework has proven to be a key to the survival of the IS online ecosystem: "By following these goals, IS supporters maintain online resiliency, allowing them to withstand both IS' real-world losses and numerous anti-IS moderation campaigns online."

Source: Meili Criezis_Create, Connect, and Deceive: Islamic State Supporters' Maintenance of the Virtual Caliphate Through Adaptation and Innovation