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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Counterterrorism News and Information - 1

Albanian National to be Tried for Terrorist Financing - 2

Kosovo Court Convicts and Sentences French Resident to Prison for Preparing Terrorist Offenses - 2

Russian National Sentenced in U.S. to 12 Years in Prison for Attempted Terrorism Financing – 2

A New York Woman Sentenced to 18 Years in Prison for Using Cryptocurrency to Finance Terrorist Groups in Syria – 2

U.S. Repatriates 11 American Citizens from Syria – 3

Europol Report: Online Jihadist Propaganda - 2022 in Review – 3

Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe, Part III - 4



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 news from recent prosecutions and convictions of terrorism suspects and funders in the Balkans and the United States (U.S.) The issue also contains news of the recent repatriation of U.S. citizens from Syria and the latest Europol report about online jihadist recruitment. We end with a discussion of the International Center for Counter-Terrorism's book on Germany's increased prosecution of female violent extremist offenders repatriated from Syria.

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Albania National to be Tried for Terrorist Financing

On May 28, a preliminary procedure judge from the Special Court against Corruption and Organized Crime approved for trial the indictment against defendant Muhamed Manollari suspected of terrorist financing sanctioned by article 230/a of the Albanian Criminal Code. According to the indictment filed in March this year, Manollari sent money to his father, M.M. who was active with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (also known as the Islamic State and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) in Syria knowing that his father was a designated person suspected of inciting and financing terrorism with ISIS. The indictment alleges that Manollari's father promoted ISIS terrorist ideology in one of the ISIS recruiting videos calling others to join and help ISIS. Manollari allegedly used stolen credentials and identity documents to send money via Western Union in November 2018 through a Syria-based intermediary.

An indictment is merely an allegation. A defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

Source: Special Prosecution Office against Organized Crime and Corruption in Albania

Kosovo Court Convicts and Sentences French Resident to Prison for Preparing Terrorist Offenses

On April 4, a trial panel of the Pristina Basic Court Special Department reached a guilty verdict on the case against Blend Vranjoli, a resident of France, accused of committing the criminal offense "Preparation of terrorist offenses." The court then sentenced him to three years and six months in prison. As reported in a prior Newsletter, Vranjoli during February 2023 planned to commit terrorist acts in Kosovo directed at LGBT activities or cross-border checkpoints between Kosovo and Serbia. Vranjoli communicated with persons in Syria through Threema app and received instructions from terrorists to make improvised explosive devices.

The court in its detailed decision found that Vranjoli searched the internet for radical content and techniques that would hide the identity of the user. Also, the court found that, in a phone French authorities provided to Kosovo, Vranjoli communicated with the ISIS contact called Al Muhaxher on how to obtain step-by-step instructions on obtaining materials and constructing explosives and a drone that were to be used against objectives such as the LGBT community parade in Pristina or at the border with Serbia.

Source: Special Prosecution Office of Kosovo

Russian National Sentenced in U.S. to 12 Years in Prison for Attempted Terrorism Financing

On April 29, Murat Kurashev, a Russian national residing in California, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for attempting to provide material support to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a designated foreign terrorist organization. In January this year, Kurashev pleaded guilty to a single-count indictment accusing him of sending multiple money transfers amounting to approximately \$13,000 to two known couriers of an HTS fundraiser between July 2020 and February 2021. According to the indictment, during communications on social media and encrypted messaging applications with the fundraiser, Kurashev mentioned that he wished he could join the fight in Syria as a mujahideen and regretted that he could only provide financial support. This clearly showed Kurashev's awareness of the fundraiser's violent extremist ideology and work on behalf of HTS.

Forensic analysis of evidence seized from Kurashev demonstrated that he followed the fundraiser's online activity, including pages soliciting for funds to purchase military equipment. His online activity also included watching extremist content.

Source: [Russian National Residing in Sacramento Sentenced to 12 Years in Prison for Attempting to Provide Material Support to a Foreign Terrorist Organization](#)

A New York Woman Sentenced to 18 Years in Prison for Using Cryptocurrency to Finance Terrorist Groups in Syria

In April 2024, a New York State Supreme Court sentenced Victoria Jacobs, aka Bakhrom Talipov, to 18 years in prison for using cryptocurrency to finance terrorist groups in Syria. Jacobs, 44 years old from New York, was convicted in February of all charges including providing financial support to terrorist groups in Syria, providing support for an act of terrorism, and money laundering.

The evidence at trial showed Jacobs provided more than \$6,000 to the terrorist training group Malhama Tactical, which fought with and provided special tactical and military training to the designated terrorist organization HTS. She laundered \$12,000 on behalf of Malhama Tactical by receiving cryptocurrency and Western Union and MoneyGram wires from supporters around the world and sending the funds to Bitcoin wallets Malhama Tactical controlled. Additionally, Jacobs purchased Google Play gift cards for HTS.

Also, Jacobs provided a comprehensive U.S. Army Improvised Munitions Handbook to an online Jihadist group Hurras al-Din, which she believed was associated both with HTS and al-Qaeda, with an aim to facilitate their bomb-making efforts in Syria.

Finally, the evidence showed that in August 2021 Jacobs bought military-style combat knives, metal knuckles, and throwing stars. Approximately one month later, in a Telegram chat, she allegedly posed as a "brother" who was "behind enemy lines" and asked for prayers for the "courage, strength, guidance, and wisdom to carry out certain missions."

Source: [D.A. Bragg: Victoria Jacobs Sentenced To 18 Years In Prison For Using Cryptocurrency To Fund Syrian-Based Terrorist Groups; Launder Supporters' Contributions](#)

U.S. Repatriates 11 American Citizens from Syria

In May, the United States conducted the largest single repatriation of American nationals from northeast Syria, returning home 11 citizens, including five minors. All the repatriated citizens are members of one family. While none of these individuals were ISIS fighters, one woman is facing charges for training with ISIS abroad.

Along with the 11 American citizens, six Canadian, four Dutch, and one Finnish citizens were also repatriated to their countries as part of this repatriation operation.

United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted that tens of thousands of people, “the majority of whom are children,” from more than 60 countries still remain in Syrian camps Al-Hol and Roj, and emphasized that “the only durable solution to the humanitarian and security crisis in the displaced persons camps and detention facilities in northeast Syria is for countries to repatriate, rehabilitate, reintegrate, and where appropriate, ensure accountability for wrongdoing.” Blinken further encouraged other countries to repatriate their nationals from northeast Syria as well and underlined that the United States will continue to support them in this effort.

Source: [US repatriates 11 US citizens from northeast Syria](#)

Europol Report: Online Jihadist Propaganda - 2022 in Review

In December 2023, Europol published its fifth annual report analyzing major trends, themes, and developments in the propaganda of the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda, as well as their branches and offshoots in 2022. The goal of the report is to enhance awareness and understanding of how jihadist organizations and their supporters abuse technology to disseminate their messages.

According to the report, IS used media to address its loss of leadership and convey the message that the death of two caliphs will not affect IS's functioning. IS also exploited leadership deaths to mobilize supporters and to inspire them to pursue the fight, following the example of their leaders. Despite changes in leadership, IS narratives remained largely unchanged in 2022. The report notes that IS's spokesperson underlined freeing of imprisoned Muslims and IS members as a priority for IS command. To boost supporter morale and illustrate IS's operational strength, IS media highlighted prison breaks in 2022 in Syria, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. IS propaganda further highlighted its efforts to expand geographically and consolidate territorial control. IS claimed a total of 2,058 attacks in 2022. While more than 60 per cent of those attacks occurred in the three countries of Nigeria, Iraq and Syria, the report warns that the overall high number of attacks coupled with the relatively substantial operational capabilities demonstrated in the prison break in Syria, may indicate that IS is regaining strength in the region. Also, the report warns that the fact Syria received less propaganda coverage could be partly due to IS's strategic choice to conceal its actual capacity in the Levant. IS propaganda featured calls for religious migration to Africa, emphasizing its governance capabilities in parts of the continent and presenting Africa as a destination for hijra (migration). In Afghanistan, IS's communication strategy focused on harming the Taliban's quest for international recognition by exposing the Taliban's inability to provide stability and security in the country. The report notes that IS's communication strategy placed great importance on translating propaganda content to multiple languages with the view of overcoming language barriers and reaching sympathizers across the world. According to the report, in 2022 IS messaging was spread across different online spaces including Telegram, Rocket Chat, and in some instances on more mainstream platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. IS used an open-source decentralized video sharing

platform Odysee, as well as the Inter-Planetary File System (IPFS) to store and share videos and other media releases. IS propaganda experimented with exploiting non-fungible tokens (NFTs) to enhance its online resilience. The report notes that “the use of NFTs and other decentralised technologies to disseminate jihadist content presents challenges for law enforcement in terms of content removal” and that it is “also likely to hinder investigative efforts aimed at the identification of propaganda operatives and network administrators on decentralised platforms.”

The Europol report observes al-Qaeda's network and its supporting media sustained the flow of official propaganda messages. Like IS, al-Qaeda also experienced leadership losses in 2022, but it did not translate into narrative changes, nor did it affect the organization's operational activities. With an aim to create the perception of the organization as a global movement, al-Qaeda media apparatus dedicated considerable space to the achievements of its regional branches which were active in several countries including Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo, Algeria, Yemen, and Pakistan. Al-Qaeda-supporting media content was shared on Telegram, Rucker, GNews, Chirpwire, and file sharing websites.

In 2022, HTS's communication strategy was directed at rebranding HTS as the defender of the Syrian people from the current regime and portraying the organization as “a political alternative while shedding links to terrorism.”

Source: [Online Jihadist Propaganda - 2022 in Review](#)

Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe, Part III

In January 2024, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) published the book “Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe.” This book explores criminal justice and other legal responses to female violent extremist offenders in Europe, specifically in Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. In our previous two Newsletters, we summarized the book chapters examining approaches to prosecution of female violent extremist offenders in Belgium and France. In this issue, we provide a summary of the chapter exploring Germany’s experience prosecuting female violent extremist offenders.

According to the book, women and girls make up one quarter of more than 1150 individuals who traveled from Germany to Iraq and Syria, mostly to support the so-called Islamic State. The majority of 129 adult women who returned to date came back voluntarily and before the fall of the so-called caliphate. A total of 27 women were repatriated to Germany. A few women still remain in displaced persons camps or detention facilities in northeast Syria.

To date, Germany has prosecuted a total of 35 female violent extremist offenders for terrorism-related crimes with a connection to Iraq or Syria and criminal proceedings against an additional 13 women are ongoing. Analysis of charges brought against convicted female violent extremist offenders shows that the majority of them have been prosecuted for membership in a foreign terrorist organization; only 17 per cent of defendants, some of whom did not travel to Syria but provided other kind of support to ISIS, have been convicted for providing support to a foreign terrorist organization. Interestingly, the majority of prosecuted female violent extremist offenders were indicted and convicted for some combination of terrorism crimes and core international crimes or domestic crimes. In almost half of these cumulative indictments, the defendants were charged with core international crimes. Charges under domestic law included offenses related to their children (such as failure to fulfil their duty of care and education, and abduction of minors), unlawful handling of weapons, deprivation of liberty, human trafficking, causing bodily harm, and failure to report a crime. Most defendants were convicted after trial or juvenile proceedings. Only 4.9 per cent of prosecutions were concluded by plea agreements.

The average prison sentence imposed on convicted female violent extremist offenders is four years eight months and five days. The actual time spent in prison, however, is likely shorter due to a deduction of pre-trial detention, probation, and early releases.

Even though the first large number of returnees was recorded in 2014 and 2015, systematic prosecution of female returnees in Germany did not begin until 2018. This was due to several factors. First, in the beginning, fewer details were known about their roles in ISIS. Second, crimes that female violent extremist offenders committed were deemed less serious than crimes men committed. Third, authorities had trouble developing adequate legal argumentation regarding the question of whether the women’s involvement amounted to terrorist membership. Investigations eventually uncovered that even though German women overall did not engage in any violent activities, they did however support ISIS in a variety of ways. This support included running households, bearing children with a view of raising the next generation in line with ISIS ideology, spreading propaganda with an aim to recruit other (Western) women, and facilitating travel of other women. Also, in its milestone decision issued in 2018, the German Federal Court of Justice opined that activities such as marrying an ISIS fighter and running a household in ISIS territory constitute membership in a terrorist organization. As a result of these positive legal developments, prosecutors more actively brought cases against female returnees who provided ISIS with other, more substantive types of support even though they did not engage in combat activities.

According to the ICCT book, obtaining evidence was the key challenge in these cases because collecting material evidence from crime scenes in Iraq and Syria was practically impossible. In building these cases, German law enforcement and prosecutors relied on statements of witnesses and defendants themselves, evidence obtained through monitored online communications, expert evidence, and ISIS publications. They also used findings of the so-called structural investigation on crimes ISIS committed to explain the rise and fall of the caliphate and ISIS’s structure. These structural investigations have been recognized as an important tool for proving these cases. Additionally, the United Nations Investigative Team for Accountability of Da’esh/ISIL (UNITAD) and other similar mechanisms provided valuable assistance in some of these prosecutions.

Source: [T. Mehra et al. Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe](#)