



BULLETIN

No. 75 (807), 14 August 2015 © PISM

Editors: Jarosław Cwiek-Karpowicz • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk • Dariusz Kałan
Piotr Kościński • Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Marcin Terlikowski
Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)

So, It's Not the Islamic State after All? The Threat of International Terrorism in Poland

Kacper Rękawek

The terrorist threat to Poland from Islamic fundamentalists who conduct attacks in other parts of Europe is low. The arrival of Middle Eastern and African refugees in Poland does not have to alter this but will put a strain on security services' resources as they monitor the new arrivals. This could hamper their ability to counteract another terrorist threat—foreign fighters involved on both sides of the Ukrainian conflict. Mindful of this threat, Poland should attempt to widen the scope of European counterterrorism measures, shifting from a sole focus on Syria and Iraq towards surveillance of foreign fighters travelling to or from Ukraine.

Despite active involvement in the global war on terror, Poland has not become a priority target for Islamic extremists, including the Islamic State (IS, a.k.a. ISIS/ISIL). Fewer than 10 Poles are fighting in the ranks of the latter—they were radicalised while living as immigrants in Germany and Norway. Probably in June 2015 one of them participated in a series of simultaneous bombings in Baiji, Iraq, that targeted the Iraqi army and Shiite militias combating IS. It is highly unlikely that IS sleeper cells are present in Poland but the possibility of individuals participating in fundraising for IS (such as three Chechen suspects Poland's Internal Security Agency, or ABW, arrested in May 2015) or carrying out internet propaganda activities should not be ruled out. Although ABW reports do not present Poland as a country seriously threatened by terrorism, we should not neglect other threats, such as those emanating from war-torn Ukraine, a conflict that also attracts foreign fighters who get there via Poland.

Islamist Terrorism and Poland. The lack of IS organisational structures in Poland does not limit the possibility of this organisation sending its operatives from neighbouring Germany in order for them to conduct a terrorist attack. An additional way of infiltrating Poland might be to insert IS operatives amongst Middle Eastern or African refugees flocking to Europe across the Mediterranean or awaiting transfer from one of the refugee camps in the Middle East. However, multi-level security checks ensure that the probability of the refugee group heading to Poland being infiltrated by IS is relatively modest. At the same time, one should not rule out the possibility that members of other paramilitary or terrorist organisations present in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah, other participants in the Syrian civil war, or Syrian security services operatives will find their way to Poland amongst the refugees. Nonetheless, this does not automatically mean that they would commence terrorist or intelligence activities in Poland. Polish experiences with the relocation of refugees show that most of them will head to Western and Northern Europe, where they will find immigrant communities from their own countries. Members of terrorist groups or intelligence agencies might have similar instructions, as their patrons are not overtly interested in Central and Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, this does not render the threat of Islamist or Middle Eastern terrorism to this part of Europe null and void, as proven by the suicide bombing in Burgas and the bombing attempt against the Israeli embassy in Tbilisi, both allegedly executed by Hezbollah. These attacks, coupled with the attack on the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in France and the Jewish Museum in Brussels demonstrate the existing (and functional, regardless of new refugee arrivals) capacity of different terrorist organisations to strike at different targets in Europe (not only Hezbollah, but also IS and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, members and sympathisers of which are already in Europe and have so far demonstrated very little interest in Poland).

The lack of a direct connection between the rather low terrorist interest in Poland and the arrival of 2,000 refugees in the country does not mean, however, that the Polish security services will not have major involvement in monitoring hundreds of arrivals (at least at the beginning of their stays) from parts of the world that witness a high level of terrorist activity. This could divert their attention away from other threats and limit the resources available for monitoring a different source of terrorism that threatens Poland.

A Different Terrorist Threat. In 2011, when Anders Breivik killed 77 people in two terrorist attacks in Norway, many expected similar acts to unfold in other European countries. However, Europol statistics indicated that in 2014 there were no far right terrorist attacks in the EU. Unfortunately, in light of the Ukraine conflict, which attracts radical individuals to the front lines, this situation might soon change.

Up to 600 foreign fighters, volunteers who decided to join the war and were not motivated by a pecuniary award, fight for both sides of the Ukraine conflict. The neo-Nazi contingent amongst such fighters is the most visible, and individuals with such ideological backgrounds, including Poles, are present both in the Ukrainian volunteer battalions and in the separatist armed forces. They all come from a far right milieu that is anti-European, anti-American, anti-democratic, authoritarian and Islamophobic. Some of them declare their intention to remain in Ukraine or Donbas after the war, but most, without any problems from Ukraine, Russia or other transit countries, will return to their native countries. Their participation in the war is mostly not regarded as a criminal act, which differentiates such fighters from “terrorist foreign fighters” (a term applied in UN Security Council resolution 2178) returning from the Middle East. After their returns such fighters could, perhaps influenced by Anders Breivik, commence terrorist activities aimed at the EU’s socio-political order or inspire such attacks by other members of the far-right milieu.

Poland, as a transit country through which foreign fighters travel to the conflict, faces a further threat from the presence on its territory of groups and “infrastructure” facilitating such travel and their potential connection to criminal groups. During the conflict, the Polish land border and Warsaw’s Chopin Airport were used by Western European members of the Azov Regiment (and, illegally, by volunteers fighting the ranks of a Chechen detachment affiliated with Right Sector) to reach Ukraine. They were assisted in crossing the border by Chechens who have Danish passports and are residents of Denmark. This suggests that transnational support structures, political but potentially also criminal or terrorist in nature, exist to aid such volunteers. If the pro-Ukrainian foreign fighters were to stage such attacks in Western Europe then this would give a boost to the Russian narrative on alleged war crimes committed by them while in Donbas (Russia accuses a Swedish Azov Regiment fighter of such crimes) and the “illegal” nature of Ukrainian military activities in the eastern part of the country.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Poland is not a priority target for Islamist terrorists but is threatened by potential terrorist activities of European neo-Nazi groups. The arrival of 2,000 refugees will not change this, although monitoring the new arrivals will diminish Poland’s security level as the attention of the security services will be diverted from other terrorist threats. In order to diminish the latter, not only on the expert level but also during meetings of different configurations of the Council of the EU and working groups devoted to countering terrorism, Poland should raise the issue of the potential terrorist threat emanating from foreign fighters in Ukraine. This will act as an additional consideration to discussions that are focused on Syria. The next step could see strengthening of bilateral cooperation, exchange of information, experiences and best practices with countries that have the best track records in relation to readying their security sectors for threats from foreign fighter returnees, such as the UK, France, Belgium and Denmark. Additionally, cooperation with countries with sizeable Chechen diasporas (Germany, Austria, Belgium and Denmark) and countries with citizens prominent on the Ukrainian front lines (Croatia, Hungary, Sweden, Finland, and also the non-EU Serbia and Georgia), could also be similarly enhanced. Such contacts will be augmented by joint prevention activities aimed at identifying networks from which foreign fighters in Ukraine emerge, their subsequent infiltration, and, if crimes on the territory of the EU were committed, their dismantling through arrests.