

AUGUST 2017

WAR, TERRORISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE NEWSLETTER



Children take part in an inter-faith gathering following the 17 August attack at Las Ramblas in Barcelona

Delay in locating key suspect in Barcelona attack reflects police failures

Police in Subirats, around 30 miles (50km) west of Barcelona, on 21 August shot dead the perpetrator of the 17 August attack in Barcelona, 22-year-old Younes Abouyaaqoub. Catalan authorities on 21 August announced that, after carrying out the attack on the city's Las Ramblas tourist thoroughfare, Abouyaaqoub had travelled on foot to the outskirts of the city, where he had stabbed and killed a driver before stealing his car and driving through a police checkpoint. That announcement took the death toll from the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils to 15. Four suspects on 22 August appeared in court in relation to the attacks.

Information made public after the attacks revealed that police failed to fully investigate an explosion on 16 August at a house in Alcanar, around 125 miles (200km) south of Barcelona – members of the network carried out the attacks the next day. Police also initially incorrectly identified the driver in the Barcelona attack as one of those killed by police in Cambrils later on 17 August, allowing Abouyaaqoub to evade detection.

The Spanish authorities have chosen not to increase the national threat rating to its highest level following the attacks, and the risk from extremist groups remains stable. The decision indicates that police are confident that they have apprehended or killed all members of the network involved and that further linked attacks are unlikely. Nevertheless, the security services are investigating the group's potential broader links with other networks.

Islamist extremists in Spain are likely to have links with other Islamist networks across Europe. Police believe that the group's ringleader may have been linked to attacks in Brussels in March 2016. The network that carried out the Brussels attacks also carried out the attacks in Paris in November 2015. National media on 21 August also reported that members of the Spanish network had made recent trips to France and Switzerland.

Cross-border police cooperation in Europe has strengthened in recent years, but links between suspects being observed separately are often not made until after an attack has been carried out. Developing more sophisticated methods of coordination will remain a priority in Western Europe in the coming years, as counter-terrorism agencies develop new strategies in response to a string of attacks in the past two years.

Turkey unlikely to intervene in offensive in northern Iraq, despite involvement of Iran-backed Shia militias

Iraq's Ministry of Defence on 15 August said that the armed forces had launched airstrikes on the majority-Turkmen town of Tal Afar (Nineveh province). The ministry said that a ground assault would begin once the aerial campaign was complete. The statement followed an announcement by the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs – an umbrella group of mainly Shia militias, including distinct Iran-backed groups) that they would take part in the offensive.

The PMUs' involvement in the operation increases the likelihood of sectarian incidents. The government cannot sideline the PMUs from the operation, owing to their entrenchment in the social and political landscape, their backing from Iran, and their contribution to the fight against IS. Sectarian attacks by Shia militias will prompt reprisals by Sunni militants in areas recaptured from IS.

Turkey is unlikely to intervene militarily in the offensive. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in October 2016 hinted that he might intervene to protect Tal Afar's Sunni Turkmen population from sectarian attacks by PMU members. However, he will be unwilling to risk a confrontation with Iraqi security forces. The Turkish military is also overstretched after the 2016 coup attempt and its deployments in Syria and against Kurdish militants in south-eastern Turkey.

IS remains able to carry out asymmetric attacks away from the front lines. Its positions in Kirkuk and Anbar provinces may serve as bases for attacks on Baghdad and other cities. Militant attacks near areas of combat between IS and Iraqi government-aligned forces are likely to mainly target the latter. However, IS attacks in cities will also target civilians, particularly Shia communities or religious minorities.

Worldwide incidents

NORTH AMERICA

US: A vehicle rammed into demonstrators at a political rally in Charlottesville (Virginia state) on 12 August, killing one person and injuring 19 others. The incident followed clashes between right-wing extremists and counter-demonstrators in Charlottesville, ahead of a so-called 'white nationalist' rally called in opposition to the planned removal of a statue commemorating the Civil War (1861-65).

EUROPE

Finland: A man on 18 August stabbed ten people in the western city of Turku, killing two people and injuring eight others. Police shot and detained the assailant. The attack is being investigated as murder and attempted murder with terrorist intent.

Russia: A man on 19 August attacked and injured at least seven people with a knife and an axe in the western Siberian city of Surgut. The police quickly shot dead the attacker. IS later on 19 August claimed responsibility for the attack via its Amaq news agency. The federal Investigative Committee on 20 August declared that it would be taking charge of the investigation.

ASIA

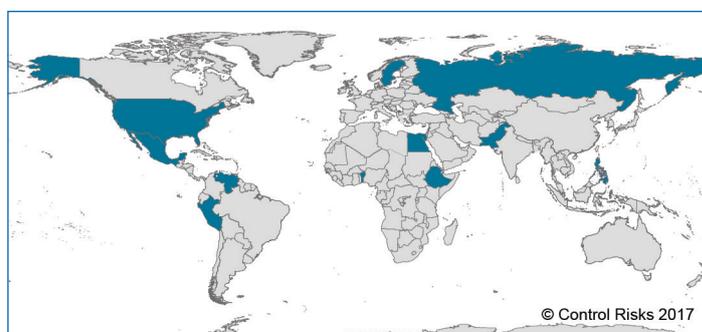
Pakistan: A suicide bomb attack on 12 August killed 15 people and injured 25 in Balochistan's provincial capital Quetta. The attack targeted a vehicle carrying military personnel near government buildings, including the provincial assembly and the chief minister's residence, as well as the Balochistan High Court. IS claimed responsibility for the attack, which occurred in the Pishin Stop neighbourhood.

Philippines: Around 90 members of the Islamist extremist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) on 21 August attacked the village of Tubigan in the coastal town of Maluso (Basilan province), killing nine people and injuring ten others. The raid came shortly after the ASG beheaded seven civilians abducted in various parts of Basilan, including the town of Maluso.

SOUTH AMERICA

Peru: President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski on 16 August rejected violence and called on all striking teachers to return to their labours. Some teachers have been striking since 15 June over perceived low wages. Although most protests have been relatively peaceful, Kuczynski's call comes after police and protesters clashed in the capital Lima earlier on the same day, as protesters held demonstrations outside the Education Ministry.

Venezuela: US President Donald Trump on 11 August said that he would not rule out a military intervention in Venezuela. A Pentagon spokesperson on the same day said that the Defence Department had not been ordered to make any military movements against Venezuela. In response to Trump's statement, Venezuelan Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino called the threat of military action "crazy".



AFRICA

Ethiopia: Police on 20 August arrested 17 individuals, including former soldiers, in Bahir Dar (Amhara region), alleging their involvement in a series of grenade attacks over the past year. Most recently, a grenade attack on 12 August injured two people in the city. The developments come after parliament on 4 August voted to lift the state of emergency implemented in October 2016.

Togo: Two people were killed and 13 others injured on 19 August when security forces opened fire on anti-government protesters in the capital Lomé and the cities of Sokodé (Centrale region), Kara (Kara region) and Anié (Plateaux region). Led by the opposition National Pan-African Party, the protests called for political reforms, a return of the 1992 constitution limiting presidential terms, and the end of rule by the Gnassingbé dynasty.

MIDDLE EAST

Egypt: Militants on 22 August injured a police officer and two conscripts in the city of Arish (North Sinai governorate). Two soldiers were killed the previous week by sniper fire in North Sinai, likely by IS affiliate Sinai Province.

Lebanon: The Lebanese army on 21 August announced that it had conducted artillery strikes on IS positions around the towns of Ras Baalbek and al-Qaa for a third consecutive day. The shelling is part of a wider anti-IS offensive that began in early August. On the same day, a bomb exploded in the Ain el-Hilweh refugee camp (near Sidon) during clashes between militant groups.

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