
The Scowcroft Group

900 17th Street, NW • Suite 500

Washington, DC 20006

Phone [REDACTED]

www.scowcroft.com

From: Kevin Nealer

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Terrorism - Metrojet and Paris Mark Externalization of ISIS Threat

It has been a consensus view in the US and Europe that the dangers posed by ISIS included metastasizing into other Middle Eastern and African countries -- something that Turkey has already experienced and Saudi Arabia and others likely face. Europe was believed to be at less risk, although as the flow of refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan increased, that risk has risen.

The US and everywhere else were thought to be tertiary targets, subject to opportunistic attacks but almost a distraction to ISIS (cf. Al Qaeda), given its preoccupation with exploitation of Sunni/Shia divisions and goal of regional territorial gains. Remember, ISIS' military leadership largely is drawn from Sunnis who were a part of Saddam's military; they are motivated by revenge for how they have been treated by the Shia-dominated post-Saddam Iraqi government.)

Last week's Metrojet bombing in Egypt, the suicide attacks Thursday in a Shi'ite neighborhood of Beirut, and yesterday atrocities in Paris all demonstrate an unexpected level of sophistication and effort. As a result, European countries and the US are likely to see an increase in incidents and threats that harken back to Al Qaeda's early agenda or are comparable to the Black September and early Hezbollah attacks of the '70s.

What are the consequences?

- ISIS can be expected to undertake further spectacular attacks. It has eclipsed AQ in operational capability, financing, and recruitment. It is not only the wealthiest terror group in history, but one with global reach and ambitions. (The Obama Administration's claims that ISIS is contained now look naive, and that characterization will haunt President Obama and Democrats next year.)
- Expect a significant uptick in EU, US, and Russian engagement against ISIS in the Iraq/Syria theater, but also in Europe. The failure to detect this elaborate scheme (no less complex because it was "low tech" -- so was 9/11) will prompt European security and intelligence agencies to take a much more intrusive and perhaps even confrontational approach both to indigenous Muslim groups and to arriving refugees. While that risks a feed-back loop, the instinct will be to err on the side of immediate results, not impact on radicalization as a social challenge.
- Germany and other EU nations will have to re-examine their commitments to welcome more refugees from the Middle East, and British opposition to allowing refugees, already strong, will harden. The scale of the Paris attacks will energize right-wing politics and pressure center-left governments to make threat reduction a higher priority than humanitarian concerns.

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- The universal horror at what happened in Paris is likely to strengthen the determination of countries gathered in Vienna for the Syria conference to better coordinate and prosecute the campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Bottom Line: Has risk to the United States increased? There are no indications yet that ISIS has changed its approach here. It encourages radicalization and lone wolf attacks but has not mounted direct attacks. But the Metrojet bombing has resulted in a stepped up global effort to secure American airlines. So too, targeting of American institutions/events – it is unlikely a coincidence that an American band was playing at the site of the largest casualties in Paris -- seems highly probable. This applies equally to American bases and facilities overseas, including embassies.

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