

ISIS Threat Laps the Caribbean

Written by Peter Clegg

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PETER CLEGG, DEC 15 2015

Much attention has of course been focused on Western Europe and the United States in terms of the ongoing threat posed by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). But, the groups influence can be seen elsewhere, including in the Caribbean. Most obviously, the state of emergency declared by France following the attacks in Paris on 13 November has been extended to the French territories of the Caribbean (such as Guadeloupe and Martinique). But other signs of the ISIS threat are clear. For example, in mid-November three men believed to be Syrian nationals travelling on forged Greek passports from Haiti were arrested in St Maarten; websites of the Jamaican and St Vincent governments have been hacked and replaced by ISIS images; and several countries in the region have tightened their border controls, with stricter procedures for the entry of foreign nationals. While in St Kitts the government has stopped accepting Syrian applications for its Citizenship by Investment Programme.

Caribbean governments must deal also with the issue of radicalisation, particularly in Trinidad. The country has several radical Islamic groups, and the Trinidadian authorities suggest that as many as 80 nationals have joined ISIS and are fighting in Syria. It has also been reported that Guyanese, Jamaican and Surinamese nationals have joined too. Two other related issues have been highlighted: Caribbean ISIS fighters returning home undetected, and the possibility that members of the Muslim community are funding ISIS fighters. As Trinidad's Minister of National Security Gary Griffith stated on 7 October, "This is not just about terrorist activities but also we are monitoring those who may be financially funding ISIS fighters, who may be assisting in their movement to get to and from Syria as well as those who may want to be involved in the training of terrorist activities".

In March the Chief of the US Southern Command, Marine General John F. Kelly, made clear his concerns over the ISIS threat in the region, arguing it did not have sufficient resources to track and deal with returning ISIS fighters, and one consequence of this would be a greater level of risk for the US. Indeed, if the region develops a reputation for harbouring extremists then its international standing will be damaged. Already, late last year Venezuelan authorities charged eight people including five Trinidadian nationals, with terrorism and criminal conspiracy. The Venezuelan Attorney-General accused them of carrying out "pre-jihad training".

There is another danger of course to the Caribbean, that of a terrorist attack. As has been seen in Egypt and Tunisia, tourism can be hit hard after a terrorist attack. So if an industry attracting 22.5 million visitors and tourism receipts worth US\$27 billion in 2014, and employing almost two million people, was targeted the consequences to the region and its economy would be disastrous.

So far the impacts of ISIS both directly and indirectly on the Caribbean have been limited, but the risks are clearly apparent. With the region's key location to the US, its porous borders, and often weak state capacity to deal with security threats, regional governments must gear up to the challenges that face them. Over the last couple of months there have been positive signs that the authorities are taking the threat seriously, but they face a sophisticated and determined opponent, which will necessitate sustained, coordinated, and adequately resourced action; a combination that has not always been easy to achieve in the Caribbean.

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