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IS Claims Responsibility For Dagestan Attacks, But Are More To Come?

By Vasily Kolotilov

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An Islamic State flag is seen in this picture illustration.

The Islamic State has claimed responsibility for two recent terror attacks that hit the southern Russian republic of Dagestan. "The harvesting of Russians and their agents will continue," IS was reported as saying by SITE Intel Group Thursday.

The two explosions, which took place within 24 hours of each other left two policemen dead, and three injured.

The first attack happened on Tuesday night in Dagestan's Karabudakhkent district, just to the south of the regional capital Makhachkala. Here, three directional landmines of total 8kg TNT equivalent were used to blow up a police column, destroying two of the vehicles.

Terrorists from the local "Huschet" group were said to be behind the incident, but local security services claimed they were unaware as to whether the group had pledged allegiance

to IS or not.

The second attack took place near Dagestan's second city, Derbent, to the south of the republic. Again, security officers were targeted — they were performing road checks in reaction to the previous terror attack. Passengers activated a bomb in what appeared to be suicide attack, a source from Russia's National Antiterror Committee reported to TASS news agency Wednesday.

The explosions were but the latest in a series of terror attacks to strike Dagestan lately.

In February two police officers were killed by an explosion at a checkpoint near Derbent. Last December a group of people came under automatic fire in Derbent, killing one and leaving 11 people injured.

IS took the responsibility for both terror acts, but local security services have been reluctant to agree.

Going Global

"The latest terror acts are part of a trend, but they are much more dangerous because now they are much better connected with the global jihad", Ekaterina Sokiryanskaya, an expert for International Crisis Group told The Moscow Times.

Armed groups are known to have been active in the region for many years. However, experts consider that by last summer IS had managed to make most local terrorist leaders switch allegiance to them.

Toughened state counter terrorist policy has reduced terrorist activity significantly in the region, expert say. Security measures were especially toughened up ahead 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. The most famous success for Russia's security services was the killing of Doku Umarov in 2013, leader of so-called Caucasus Emirate terrorist group.

After Umarov's killing, new leaders emerged, but the constant pressure from the security services has made it more difficult for them to operate. The flow of recruits almost stopped, and their income has dried up. Terrorists used to blackmail local businessmen, but since their influence fell it has become a much harder task, says Sokiryanskaya. Another factor was the young radicals exodus abroad – they preferred to fight for Caliphate in foreign lands.

But in 2015, IS policy changed. Now, it realized that it was more effective to establish a branch, or "province" right where their members live, Sokiryanskaya said. The initiator of such a shift in policy was Umar Shishani, a Russian national from Chechnya.

Together with others, he established North Caucasus as one of the highest priorities in the IS agenda.

Sabotage War

The majority of IS leaders in the North Caucasus were killed in 2015, with the exception of those in Dagestan enclaves, says Grigory Shvedov, chief editor of the Kavkazskiy Uzel internet agency. "It's no surprise that the explosions took place in the republic," he added.

For Shvedov, the most remarkable thing about the terror attacks is that their style differs from IS. The terrorists attacked law enforcers and security officers using classic saboteur tactics, he said. This was unlike the Islamic State, which also attacks civilians: "If this is part of a trend, it would seem IS in the North Caucasus is something different from IS in Iraq and Syria."

Another explanation, the expert says, is that the terrorists in the North Caucasus are too weak now to perform large scale attacks. "Maybe they are just separate groups of young indoctrinated hitmen who are not ready to conduct complex operations", Shvedov said.

The current weakness of the attackers does not mean that they will not become stronger, however. "What we see is the revival and the new breath of sabotage war that's rare now but is going to continue throughout 2016", Shvedov warned.

Islamic State and Caucasus Emirate are terrorist organisations banned in Russia.

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