

While Jihad Central is located in the Syria-Iraq, area with the Daesh self styled Islamic State gaining ground, other potential hotspots have been forgotten. One of them that has rarely been in the news and would surprise most people is Africa's behemoth: not Nigeria, but rather quiet South Africa. Because of the clout of the country not only on the African continent but worldwide, links to terrorism could endanger all of us. In February 2015, the United Nations Security Council specifically warned South Africa that terror groups might use the country as an operational base, writes Olivier Guitta

This should not come as a surprise: since as early as the 1990's the Shia terrorist group Hezbollah had training camps in the country and proof of al-Qaeda's presence date back to 1997. al Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hezbollah, Hamas and al Qaeda have reportedly a presence in South Africa. These groups used the country mostly as a fall-back base with fundraising, recruiting, access to official documents and possibly training as their main activities. Numerous cases of South African passport holders linked to terrorism are highlighting the possible ease by which these documents can be obtained by corruption or forgery.

A South African, Haroon Aswat, had spoken several times with each of the four 7/7 London bombers just before the attacks. Aswat had been a fixture at the radical Finsbury Park mosque and a close associate of the one-eyed extremist sheikh Abu Hamza. Recently it was revealed that Daesh butcher, Mohamed Emwazi aka "Jihadi John", had tried to hide and settle in South Africa in 2009 but was stopped in Tanzania.

Samantha Lethwaite, the widow of one of the 7/7 attackers in London, known as the "white widow" and a possible actor in the Westgate attack in Kenya in 2013, had links to South Africa. Indeed, she used a South African passport, lived in Johannesburg for two years and transferred monies from the United Kingdom to al-Shabaab

Somali operatives based in the country. Hussein Solomon, a local respected researcher, claims that none of the networks have been investigated since by the South African authorities.

To say the least, counterterrorism is far from being a priority of the Pretoria government. By not having a strong counterterrorism policy in place, South Africa is de facto endangering the security of its neighbors. South Africa cannot be viewed as a team player when it comes to fighting off international terrorism and that constitutes an issue on a continent that is increasingly a target of jihadists. The main explanation for this lenient policy is that the African National Congress (ANC), the party in power, because of its history considers that terrorists are more often than not "just" freedom fighters.

Another reason could be that there is a pact with terrorist groups. While there have been reports of foiled plots between 2007 and 2010, South Africa has miraculously been spared by jihadi terrorism, especially in light of its place in the world. It looks like terrorists are offered a haven, easy access to official papers and a "leave alone" policy against a promise not to attack the country.

This follows the model of the sanctuary policy dear to Europe that really started in France in the 1970's, when the French authorities made a deal with Palestinian terror master Abu Nidal who was free to establish a base in France and was left alone as long as he promised not to attack France or French interests abroad. This set the example for several countries, including most prominently the UK, Belgium and Germany.

If there is knowledge, or even just a perception, that South Africa is a haven and logistical base for terrorists, then it will draw even more jihadists to the country. That could be a vicious circle that one day, if past experience is a guide, the country will pay dearly : All countries that followed the sanctuary policy were later hit by terrorism. Most probably it will take an attack on the homeland for South Africa's stance on terrorism to change for good.

While South Africa has been recently surpassed by Nigeria as the largest economy on the continent, it still receives about 24 per cent of all the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa, more than the

three next countries put together (Nigeria, Angola, Kenya). In terms of global rankings, South Africa jumped to the thirteenth most attractive FDI spot and global asset managers invest heavily in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

Most foreign investors view South Africa as a very stable country and very few of them are aware of the terrorism factor. Maybe they should take notice now...

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