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Strategic Insights: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/ISIL) and Trinidad and Tobago: Establishing a Dangerous Presence in the Western Hemisphere

May 13, 2016 | Dr. Jose de Arimateia da Cruz

In his National Security Strategy (February 2015), President Barack Obama stated that, “the threat of catastrophic attacks against our homeland by terrorists has diminished but still persists . . . Our adversaries are not confined to a distinct country or region. Instead, they range from South Asia through the Middle East and into Africa.” However, the President failed to mention that terrorists and sympathizers are already making inroads into the Western Hemisphere as well. An example of this is the nation-island of Trinidad and Tobago. It has been reported that about 100 Trinidadian citizens have gone to Syria to fight along with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/ISIL). According to the former commander of the U.S. Southern Command, General John F. Kelly, in his posture statement before the 114th Congressional Senate Armed Services Committee, “when these foreign fighters return, they will possess operational experience, ties to global extremists, and possible intent to harm Western interests.”¹

Therefore, to ignore or take the security of the Western Hemisphere for granted could result in a serious mistake with deadly consequences. This Strategic Insights article examines the role of Trinidad and Tobago as a ground zero in the Western Hemisphere for ISIS/ISIL recruiting and the consequences for the security of the Western Hemisphere, especially for the United States.



Source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/td.html>.



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Trinidad and Tobago is an archipelago located between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, northeast of Venezuela. According to the latest Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Factbook, Trinidad and Tobago's population is ethnically and religiously diverse. In religious terms, it is Protestant 32.1% (Pentecostal/Evangelical/Full Gospel 12%, Baptist 6.9%, Anglican 5.7%, Seventh-Day Adventist 4.1%, Presbyterian/Congregational 2.5%, other Protestant .9%), Roman Catholic 21.6%, Hindu 18.2%, Muslim 5%, Jehovah's Witness 1.5%, other 8.4%, none 2.2%, and unspecified 11.1% (2011 est.). Ethnically, it is East Indian 35.4%, African 34.2%, mixed - other 15.3%, mixed African/East Indian 7.7%, other 1.3%, and unspecified 6.2% (2011 est.).² Geographically, Trinidad and Tobago is located at a key strategic point in the Western Hemisphere. It is a transshipment point for South American drugs destined for the United States and Europe.³ Furthermore, Trinidad and Tobago is a destination, transit, and possible source country for adults and children subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor.⁴

Trinidad and Tobago was also in the news recently for its involvement in the fighting in the Middle East by providing foot soldiers for the terrorist organization ISIS/ISIL, as discussed by the Minister of National Security for Trinidad and Tobago, Gary Griffith, during a radio interview, “more Trinidadian nationals are supporting terrorist groups.”⁵ It is worth quoting Security Minister Griffith to show Trinidad and Tobago’s vision of what constitutes a terrorist in the 21st century. According to Minister Griffith, “it is no longer the case where 20 years ago what we saw as a terrorist . . . was just someone with explosives around his waist and you pull a pin. The concept of terrorism has now moved to different elements. It is just not the actual terrorist, but it also involves persons who may become sleeper cells...then there will be others who will be sympathizers to terrorist activity, then there will be others who will be training persons to be involved in terrorist activity.”⁶

On October 15, 2014, the Miami Herald reported that dozens of Trinidadian citizens had traveled from their country to the Middle East to fight alongside ISIS/ISIL, including Shane Crawford, Milton John Algernon, and another Trinidadian whose Muslim name is Faizool. The case of Shane Crawford represents a typical target by ISIS/ISIL recruiters. Crawford decided to join the terrorist organization due to the “inadequacy of what his life had become in Trinidad and the need to find a greater purpose.”⁷ Crawford, also known under his Muslim name “Asadullah,” was implicated in an attempted plot in 2011 to assassinate Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Kamala Persad-Bissessar and other members of her cabinet. Crawford was detained by Trinidad and Tobago authorities for two weeks. However, he was never charged with any wrongdoing. According to his mother, Joan Crawford, Shane decided to join ISIS/ISIL after the unease and frustration he felt by being incarcerated for two weeks without being charged and being labelled a terrorist. The experience made his life harder in a country where being poor is tantamount to a life sentence of struggles and vicissitudes. Meredith L. Patten, professor at the Institute for Criminology and Public Safety at the University of Trinidad and Tobago, has pointed out:

Much like gangs or any other kind of subculture group, ISIS is looking for easy targets—the more vulnerable. Aside from religion and ideology, ISIS can focus on the hardships some Trinidadians may endure and capitalize on that, purporting to be able to provide a better life and, more importantly, a purpose.⁸

Shane's mother also pointed out that her son joined ISIS/ISIL in order to create a sense of purpose in his life. As she stated in an interview, Shane “is fighting, he does not believe in raping women and killing children. It is those crimes which were being committed in Syria which prompted him to go and fight. His life is better. He has purpose. He has his family and he is not coming back here [Trinidad and Tobago].”⁹

The fact that ISIS/ISIL is targeting segments of a country's population, which are considered to be the downtrodden, is also concerning. ISIS/ISIL recruiters target individuals facing hardships who could easily be lured by promises of a better future. According to Daurius Figueira, a lecturer in government and criminology at the University of West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago, ISIS has already established a presence in Trinidad and Tobago and its recruitment agents are in full swing.¹⁰ Figueira's claims that ISIS/ISIL has made inroads into Trinidad and Tobago is based on a Facebook video in which a man with a Trinidadian accent can be heard instructing children in firearms tactics.¹¹ Figueira also argues that "[ISIS/ISIL] has a specific agenda to train two generations of [mujahideen] in Iraq and Syria."¹² Therefore, Trinidad and Tobago provides a fertile ground for disenfranchised young males willing to sacrifice their lives in order to create a great sense of purpose.

In light of the fact the ISIS/ISIL is targeting the poorest elements in society to become their *shaheed* (martyr) or *mujahideen* (fighter), the Trinidad and Tobago Government has relaunched its Community Development Fund (CDF) Office.¹³ At the launching, the honorable Minister of Community Development, Mr. Nizam Baksh, stated that, "One of the greatest threats in achieving Prosperity for All is poverty in all its forms." The re-launch of the CDF Office will ensure that no community is left behind and all are embraced, thereby contributing to the Ministry of Community Development's mission: "To lead in developing resilient communities through collaboration and the provision of innovative programmes and the goals of Prosperity for All."¹⁴

Trinidad and Tobago prides itself as a multicultural and religiously tolerant society. Trinidad and Tobago is only 5% Muslim but it has been a cradle for radicalism dating back to the 1990s. As Harold Trinkunas, a senior fellow and director of the Brookings Institution's Latin America Initiative, has pointed out, Trinidad and Tobago is "the only country in the Western Hemisphere that has had an actual Islamic insurrection."¹⁵ In July 1990, Muslim political group Jamaat al Muslimeen launched a coup d'état against the government in power. Forty-two insurgents stormed Parliament, taking Prime Minister A. N. R. Robinson and most of his cabinet hostage in the Red House, Trinidad's parliamentary building, for six days.¹⁶

Many senior Muslim clerics in Trinidad and Tobago are actively providing transportation and advice for people who want to travel to the Middle East to join ISIS/ISIL. A Rio Claro mosque in Boos Village is one of the many mosques supporting potential ISIS/ISIL recruits. In fact, on May 11, 2015, police raided a mosque in Rio Claro and found a hidden Beretta pistol and 100 rounds of ammunition.¹⁷ The members of the North Eastern Division Task Force (NEDTF) received information that certain members of the mosque were hiding arms and ammunition in the building. Police said that around 4 p.m. they went to the Masjid Un Noor Mosque located at Union Village and carried out a search. During the search, officers said they came upon a room at the back of the

building which contained some iron sheets. Upon removing the sheets, the officers found the gun and ammunition.¹⁸ Therefore, to ignore Trinidad and Tobago as a potential terrorist recruitment ground could lead to ISIS/ISIL strengthening its foothold in Trinidad and Tobago in order to carry out its nefarious activities.

Implications and Recommendations.

The Western Hemisphere is usually relinquished to the dust bin of American foreign policy regardless of which political party is in control. However, recent events such as the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels have shown that these types of attacks are less likely to be carried out by “lone wolves.” Instead, terrorist attacks in the future are more likely to be carried out by the *wilayat*, Arabic term for “provinces.” According to Daniel Byman, a professor at Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, and director of research at the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, “provinces is the term borrowed from the seventh century, when the armies of Islam burst out of the Arabian Peninsula and established regional governors who ruled in the name of the caliph.”¹⁹ Trinidad and Tobago is a “province” that cannot be ignored in the fight to protect the Western Hemisphere and the national security of the United States.

According to General Kelly, roughly 100 foreigners from the Caribbean, including 80 from Trinidad and Tobago, have joined the war in Syria and returned home. The Caribbean nations do not have the ability to track those individuals when they return home thus creating a major national security concern. According to Kelly, “small Caribbean nations are concerned about the extremists returning home to conduct terror operations, because they don’t have any real ability to deal with the problem. And, once back in their country, the recruits can travel freely between countries and potentially get across the border in America.”²⁰

The U.S. Government, and especially the U.S. Army, can do much in the war on terror to prevent Trinidad and Tobago from becoming a safe haven for ISIS/ISIL recruiters and thus, protect the U.S. homeland. The U.S. Government and the U.S. Army can assist Trinidad and Tobago by tracking criminal networks involved in human and drug trafficking. Criminal organizations today work closely with terrorist organizations in attempting to circumvent law enforcement agencies to facilitate the movement of terrorists or weapons of mass destruction toward the U.S. homeland.²¹

The U.S. Army Cyber Command located at Fort Gordon can also play an important role in the fight against ISIS/ISIL recruitment activities in Trinidad and Tobago. As General Kelly has stated, “ISIS is doing a fair amount of recruiting in the region. Some of the people have become radicalized through the Internet and others through radical mosques.”²² It has been well established that ISIS/ISIL has used the Internet not only for

recruitment but also as a tool for the dissemination of its radical ideology and fund raising. While the Taliban and al-Qaeda have rejected the tools of modernization such as the telephone, television, and the Internet, ISIS/ISIL has embraced social media as a tool in its arsenal of combat. According to Robert J. Bunker, an applied theorist on national security, social media “is also critically important to ISIS because it can be used for psychological and propaganda purposes—including the terrorizing of besieged towns—and can help to promote ISIS international branding and market share as the rightly guided stewards for reestablishing the Caliphate.”²³

The U.S. Army and the Trinidad and Tobago Government can also establish law enforcement and intelligence partnerships involving combined military exercises, information sharing, and training. General Kelly argues that, “The solution to preventing ISIS from coming through the southern hemisphere will require law enforcement and intelligence partnering with every state in the region.”²⁴ Former U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States and Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Roger F. Noriega, asserted that “cross-border criminals represent an asymmetrical threat to U.S. security.”²⁵

Finally, the U.S. Government and the U.S. military must strengthen its bilateral relations with Trinidad and Tobago. An important first step was taken when Trinidad and Tobago was one of two Caribbean nations to co-sponsor United Nations (UN) Resolution 2178 proposed by the United States outlawing terrorism. Resolution 2178 was adopted by the UN Security Council at its 7272nd meeting, on September 24th, 2014. Trinidad and Tobago’s Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, stated on the floor of the UN, “terrorism has and continues to undermine the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peace and security of the peoples of the Middle East and further afield.”²⁶ An important section of Resolution 2178 (*International Cooperation, Section 11*) calls upon member states to:

Improve international, regional, and subregional cooperation, if appropriate through bilateral agreements, to prevent the travel of foreign terrorist fighters from or through their territories, including through increased sharing of information for the purpose of identifying foreign terrorist fighters, the sharing and adoption of best practices, and improved understanding of the patterns of travel by foreign terrorist fighters, and for Member States to act cooperatively when taking national measures to prevent terrorists from exploiting technology, communications and resources to incite support for terrorist acts, while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms and in compliance with other obligations under international law.²⁷

Terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda or ISIS/ISIL, represent a dangerous security threat to the Western Hemisphere, especially to the national security of the United States. The potential of locally grown terrorist organizations should not be ignored by political leaders or pundits. Daniel Byman has identified "hotbeds of jihad that have not yet exported terrorism to the West may do so in the future if local groups strengthen their ties

to ISIS.”²⁸ The U.S. Government and the U.S. military are deployed throughout the world fighting terrorism, consequently these terrorist organizations find it difficult to conduct their nefarious activities in the United States. Therefore, it becomes ever more important for the United States and the U.S. military not to ignore their neighbors in the Western Hemisphere. The terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels remind us that ISIS/ISIL is more dangerous than ever. Its recruitment methods, indoctrination, and proselytizing strike a chord with some members of the *provinces* around the world willing to sacrifice their lives and those of innocent individuals in the name of a dangerous and sickening ideology of hate.

ENDNOTES

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