

USDOS – US Department of State

Country Report on Terrorism 2020 - Chapter 1 - North Macedonia

Overview: North Macedonia cooperated with U.S. counterterrorism efforts and was a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. With no terrorist attacks in 2020 and no reported departures to join ISIS, the main counterterrorism issue North Macedonia faced consisted of returned FTFs from Syria and Iraq, given their ability without rehabilitation to establish violent extremist cells, plan attacks, and radicalize others to violence. The National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVET) estimated that 143 citizens of North Macedonia (excluding children) previously traveled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups. Of the 126 adults who spent time in Syria and/or Iraq, 38 were killed, 69 returned to North Macedonia, and 19 remain. Authorities assessed the terrorist threat level to be “average,” or medium, as ISIS members and sympathizers maintained a presence in country. In June the government adopted a national reintegration plan for FTFs and their family members.

2020 Terrorist Incidents: There were no reported terrorist incidents in North Macedonia during 2020.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: North Macedonia’s legislative framework is adequate to prosecute individuals suspected of committing or aiding terrorist activities or participating in foreign wars. Low sentencing for terrorism-related offenses remains a challenge.

Authorities repatriated one male FTF from Turkey in February and three females, who had resided in Syria, from Turkey in March. In September the male received a five-year prison sentence for attempting to join a foreign army. The U.S. Department of Justice provided mentoring to the prosecutor, who utilized battlefield evidence provided by U.S. interagency partners.

The Ministry of Interior’s (MOI’s) “Terrorism and Violent Extremism Sector” led law enforcement-related CT efforts. In August the unit arrested three individuals in Kumanovo in a joint operation with the Agency for National Security (ANS); they have not yet been indicted on terrorism charges. The MOI stated that the three served jail time following their extradition from Turkey in 2016 for attempting to join ISIS and, following their release from prison in 2019, were plotting terrorist attacks in the country and possessed weapons and explosives. The unit, alongside ANS, then arrested eight individuals, three in Skopje and five in Kumanovo, in December on suspicion of terrorism and in connection to the August arrests. Through participation in the Department of State’s Antiterrorism Assistance program, the MOI has received training in counterterrorism investigations and identification and seizure of digital evidence, and has received associated equipment grants. The unit experienced staffing shortages throughout 2020 but continued efforts to enhance its capacity. ANS marked its first anniversary as a separate entity from the MOI in September and retained its significant CT investigatory capacity. A new Secretariat in charge of coordinating the security and intelligence communities became functional in 2020. An EU-funded twinning project worked to strengthen North Macedonia’s coordinating capacities.

North Macedonia continued its partnership with the United States on traveler screening tools and continues to take steps to enhance border security and screening efforts to include systematic use of Advanced Passenger Information and Passenger Name Record data in line with international standards.

The National Coordinator on Border Administration and ANS in November signed an MOU for quick exchange of terrorism-related information at border crossings. North Macedonia’s authorities cooperated with INTERPOL, EUROPOL, the European CT Centre, and the FBI.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: The country’s AML/CFT legal framework follows international standards. North Macedonia is a member of MONEYVAL, a FATF-style regional body. Its FIU, the Financial Intelligence Office (FIO), is a member of the Egmont Group. The government in September adopted amendments to the Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorism

Financing to transpose the provisions of Directive V (2018/843) and harmonize the law with the EU acquis; Parliament must still adopt the amendments. The FIO launched a national risk assessment on terrorism financing of non-profit organizations (NPOs) to effectively implement FATF Recommendation 8 in support of measures to protect NPOs from terrorism financing activities. Embassy Amsterdam launched a project assisting the FIO in strengthening its capacity, updating suspicious terrorism financing indicators, and developing a legal framework on virtual currencies in accordance with FATF recommendations and EU directives. The FIO in 2020 received two suspicious transaction reports for terrorist financing and eight informal reports; it submitted nine reports to relevant institutions for further investigation. DOJ/OPDAT resident legal advisors trained prosecutors and investigators on terrorism financing.

Countering Violent Extremism: The NCCVECT conducted awareness-raising activities around the national CVE strategy and action plan to strengthen implementation capacity. The NCCVECT assisted the multistakeholder Community Action Teams (CATs), currently operational in four municipalities, in developing and implementing their Action Plans, focusing on preventing violent extremism. With support from the Strong Cities Network, Kumanovo's CAT set a national example, developing policy measures to strengthen social cohesion and build community resilience to violent extremism.

The United States supported the NCCVECT through an imbedded CVE expert, and the Women Without Borders' Mothers' Circles program expanded to three additional municipalities. Following U.S. engagement, the NCCVECT formed an interagency working group on reintegration. The working group drafted the country's first whole-of-government National Plan for Reintegration, Resocialization, and Rehabilitation of FTF Returnees and Members of Their Families, which the government adopted in June. This was a critical step in preparing for repatriation of FTFs and family members from Syria; the plan's implementation has just begun, as COVID-19 delayed implementation. A Dutch-funded project engaged families of convicted terrorist offenders to provide a clearer picture of their challenges and needs, and the International Organization for Migration used this analysis, as well as the national plan, to help inform its own Dutch- and EU-funded reintegration program.

International and Regional Cooperation: In 2020, North Macedonia continued its close cooperation with other Western Balkan countries on CT and CVE issues. North Macedonia finalized a draft MOU on CT and CVE cooperation with Kosovo, which is awaiting official signature, expected in 2021. The country offered investigative support to Austrian authorities following the November 2 Vienna terrorist attack, in which the perpetrator, three suspects, and a victim had familial ties to North Macedonia. In 2020, North Macedonia joined the Swiss-based GCERF's Regional Accelerated Funding Panel for the Western Balkans, to support reintegration and rehabilitation efforts.

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