

## EU must prevent tax fraud from financing terrorism

Written by Mariela Baeva on 9 June 2015



Two US citizens of Somali origin were recently prosecuted for using their federal student loans to fund trips to the Middle East in order to join Isis.

They used their financial aid to 'invest' in travelling to Europe, from where they headed to Syria via transitional points like Turkey and Greece.

The two individuals followed courses on topics such as IT and nursing and did not graduate. It is reported that they were swiftly drawn to fight alongside extremist groups.

University friends have described them as diligent students and good community members, therefore preventing them from falling into the 'troubled young people' category that would require a special approach by experts on antisocial behaviour.

The only traces they left of their pro-jihad tendencies were found on their Facebook and Twitter accounts, on which they expressed support for Isis.

They also attempted to travel to south-eastern Europe, as was proven by an IP address used to purchase tickets online.

Further investigation has sparked deeper concerns for taxpayers' money. Student grants have been abused to inject thousands of dollars to fund trips and purchase equipment - specifically for Isis - in full conscience of the organisation's terrorist activities.

The case is based on shocking disclosures by a joint terrorism task force and law enforcement officers, as well as discussions with people who know the students.

The suspects' bank records show they withdrew thousands of dollars in cash that they had acquired through educational financial aid.

The EU must fully cooperate with representatives from the banking sector in order to prevent fraud and taxpayers' money being used to fund terrorist organisations.

Member states must work on critical counterterrorism measures, taking into account rights and civil liberties, as well as national security. Governments must step up to the challenge.

Access to student grants must be placed under strict supervision and submitted to clear rules - this must be at the top of the relevant authorities' agenda.

And, cooperation and exchange of information between authorities is of the utmost importance.

Penalties could be imposed in case of fraud, or a person's passport or citizenship could be taken away if they were convicted of terrorism and related activities.

Networking with communities and families helps support the work of law enforcement authorities. At-risk communities deserve a special focus. Local authorities may be involved in reporting concerns.

However, due to the complexity of anti-terrorist issues, there are many different approaches to dealing with them within the EU - policy efficiency and dynamics of escalation, for example.

The core point resides in re-balancing fundamental rights and civil liberties with citizens' safety and national security, as well as preventing the abuse of taxpayers' money to finance extremist groups.

## About the author

Mariela Baeva is a former Bulgarian MEP

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