

Alleged Extremist 'Recruited Shy Girls'

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A man thought to be a member of the extremist group Takfir wal-Hijra has been arrested in the Moscow suburb of Balashikha for recruiting four young women and engaging in extremist activity, the Interior Ministry said.

"For more than six months, investigators have followed the suspect and collected evidence of his illegal activities," the ministry wrote in a statement. "He met with these girls on the street of Moscow and through online social networks. The suspect was looking to recruit modest, quiet and unsociable girls."

The arrest of the 31-year-old Russian citizen comes as President Vladimir Putin and federal authorities have stepped up efforts to curtail terrorism in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. On Saturday, Putin signed tougher anti-terrorism legislation that introduces prison terms for up to 10 years for engaging in training "aimed at carrying out terrorist activity" and makes terrorists' family members liable for the damage incurred by attacks.

The Balashikha suspect, arrested Monday, is thought to have gained young women's trust,

encouraged them to live with him and urged them to convert to Islam. Upon his arrest, the suspect's car contained three grams of amphetamine and a gun, while illegal electronic media and literature on radical Islam were recovered in his apartment.

According to the statement, the suspected extremist was planning to leave the Moscow region with a new pupil.

The suspect's arrest took place just a few weeks after the republic of Tatarstan's Supreme Court convicted two members of Takfir wal-Hijra for plotting a terrorist attack. A pair of Chistopol natives were given 13 and six years in prison, respectively, for planning to bomb a building after returning from the current war in Afghanistan, Interfax reported.

Recognized as a extremist organization by the Interior Ministry in 2010, Takfir wal-Hijra, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, emerged in Egypt in the 1960s. By the 1990s, the organization was reorganized into a decentralized network of cells throughout the world.

"Takfir wal-Hijra conceives a relation with the Islamic community in a global fashion rather than ties to a region or a local ethnicity," said Christopher Swift, an adjunct professor of national security studies at Georgetown University, in a telephone interview.

"The group is radical but does not have a large followership. Its mode of thinking is much more anarchic than other Islamist movements," he added.

Young women have been at the center of domestic terrorism in Russia since the early 2000s. "Black Widows," a term first used for female suicide bombers who took revenge for the deaths of their Chechen separatist husbands in the 1990s, have carried out numerous attacks on Russian civilian and military targets, including the Dubrovka Theater in 2002, the Tushino Airfield in 2003, the Moscow metro in 2010 and Domodedovo Airport in 2011.

Russia's most recent suicide bombing came Oct. 21, when Naida Asiyalova, a 30-year Dagestan native who lived in Moscow, detonated a bomb that killed six people on a bus in the southern city of Volgograd.

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