

Wanted in Russia: EU court blocked suspected Istanbul attack mastermind from extradition in 2010

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A Chechen national suspected of being the mastermind behind the deadly Istanbul airport terrorist attack, earlier received refugee status in Austria, which helped him to repeatedly avoid extradition to Russia on terror charges.

The fatal attack on the Istanbul airport that took lives of 44 people and left more than 230 injured was allegedly organized by Ahmed Chataev, a Russian citizen of Chechen origin, who joined Islamic State (IS, former ISIS/ISIL) in 2015 and now fights in Syria, Turkish media report, citing police sources.

Chataev was assigned a leading role in training extremists that would then commit terrorist attacks in both Russia and Western Europe, the Deputy Chairman of the Russian Investigative Committee Andrey Przhezdomsky said, adding that, in Syria, Chataev also commands a unit consisting “primarily of immigrants from the North Caucasus,” Russia’s Kommersant newspaper reported earlier this year.

Chataev turned out to be long wanted by the Russian authorities for terrorism-related offenses but he fled to Europe, where he was granted asylum, and successfully managed to escape extradition to Russia.

Chataev joined Islamist secessionist militants that fought against Russia in the Second Chechen War between 1999 and 2000, where he lost an arm. Later, he was considered to be a representative of Dokka Umarov, once a “terrorist №1” in Russia, in the Western Europe.

The eyed Istanbul airport attack mastermind was on a wanted list in Russia since 2003 for sponsoring terrorism, recruiting extremists and membership in a terrorist group, Russian media report. However, in the same year, he received asylum in Austria. Chataev reportedly claimed that he lost his arm as he was severely tortured in Russian prison adding that he is being persecuted by Russian authorities.

In 2008, he was detained with some other Chechen nationals in the Swedish town of Trelleborg as police found Kalashnikov assault rifles, explosives and ammunition in his car. As a result, he spent more than a year in Swedish prison.

In 2010, Chataev was arrested in Ukraine with his mobile phone files containing a demolition technique instruction and photos of people killed in a blast. Russia requested his extradition on terrorism-related charges but the European Court for Human Rights ordered Ukraine not to hand him over to Russia with Amnesty International also urging Ukrainian authorities to halt extradition as Chataev "could face an unfair trial and would be at risk of torture and other ill-treatment."

A year later, he was once again detained as he was crossing the border between Turkey and Bulgaria but he again avoided extradition because of the interference of human rights organizations that stressed Chataev had a refugee status in Austria and thus cannot be sent to Russia, Kommersant reported.

Between 2012 and 2015, Chataev reportedly lived in Georgia, where he also joined some terrorist groups and served a prison sentence on terrorism-related charges.

In February 2015, he left Georgia for Syria, where he joined IS militants and soon took a high position in the Islamic State hierarchy. In October 2015, the US Justice Ministry added Chataev to the terrorist list because of his alleged involvement into recruitment of extremists.