

Violent Extremism

Returning Foreign Terrorists: What Type of Security Challenges Are They Posing?

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The recent reverse flow of foreign terrorist fighters¹ out of Syria and Iraq following the declared defeat of ISIS is dominating academic and policy circles not only in Europe but in the Middle East as well. According to the 2017 Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors, an average of 61% of respondents from both regions agree that foreign terrorists are representing the biggest threat posed by violent extremism. The number of respondents from Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and France agreeing with that statement are more than other countries.²

These perceptions can be justified in light of the number of foreign terrorist fighters who joined ISIS and other terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. Until January 2015, the International Institute for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (CSR) count of foreign terrorists from the Middle East was 11,000 fighters out of a total of 20,730 fighters; the rest originated from European and Western countries. Until the end of 2017, the Radicalization Awareness Network RAN counted more than 42,000 foreign terrorists from 120 countries. The Soufan Group reported that the largest number of fighters originated from former Soviet Republics, the Middle East and the Maghreb, and western Europe (Chart 1).

It is estimated that the cohort of foreign terrorists who joined ISIS since 2014 represents around 50% of the organization, with varying fighting experience, as some of them acted as foot soldiers or middle- or very high-ranking officers.³

It is noticeable that most of the efforts being done to counter the recent flow of foreign terrorists following the Battle of Raqqa is focusing on one aspect of that flow, which is the reverse flow to home countries, known as the 'returnees.' This aspect is inspired by ISIS' strategy of 'remaining and expanding,' which is based on the creation of new theatres of action⁴ guided by ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's call in September 2014 for "all supporters who could not join the caliphate to attack the enemy wherever they could, and with whatever means, without waiting for instructions."

This article argues that there are other aspects of that flow that raise other challenges to national and regional security which include leaving or being sent by ISIS to another conflict zone, or leaving to a third country to start anew life.

Accordingly, the article is divided into two sections. The first section attempts to map the recent flow of foreign terrorists out of Syria, and identifies two destinations for foreign terrorists, other than their home countries, which include moving to a third country, or to another conflict zone. The second section examines three challenges posed by that flow: local/homegrown terrorism inspired by ISIS, the balance between controlling the flow of terror-

¹ Foreign fighters are defined in this context as non-Syrian individuals that decided by themselves to leave their countries to take part in the armed conflict in Syria without obtaining permission from any official domestic authorities.

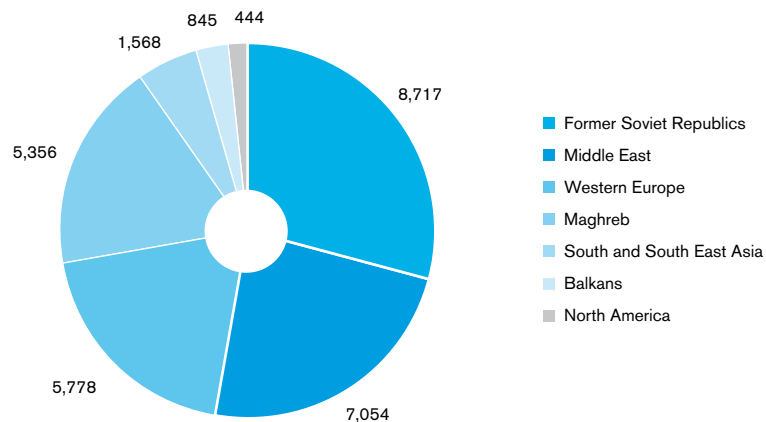
² *Euro Med Survey of Experts and Actor: Violent Extremism in the Euro Mediterranean region*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, Barcelona, December 2017, p.93

³ Maja TOUZARI GREENWOOD. "Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Foreign Fighters," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, 16, no. 1, 2017, pp. 87-97

⁴ Richard BARRETT, "Beyond The Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," The Soufan Center, October 2017, p.17

CHART 1

Foreign Fighters by Region



Source: BARRETT, R. *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Center, 2017.

ists and protecting refugees' rights, and the reintegration and rehabilitation of returnees.

Mapping the Reverse Flow of Foreign Terrorist Fighters

Examining the flow of terrorists returning from the conflict zones in the Middle East is a challenging academic task due to the lack of information on the number of foreign terrorists who left Syria and Iraq after the battles of al-Raqqa and Mosul, either because countries refrain from sharing that data or due to the fact that the foreign terrorists left Syria and Iraq for a country other than their home countries, and therefore have not returned yet.

It is obvious that the assumption that those who left to join ISIS will return to their home countries is dominating the discussions in many academic and policy circles. However, this paper argues that this assumption could be misleading to policy makers and security institutions. The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), up until July 2017, reported that the percentage of foreign terrorists who decided to return back to their home countries represented 30% of all foreign fighters,⁵ leaving 70% of the

fighters not returning home and to an unknown fate. Also, it is not necessarily the case that the country that was the source of the highest number of foreign terrorists to join ISIS will be the destination of the highest number of returnees.

This paper, based on open-source data identifies three trajectories taken by foreign terrorists as follows:

- a. **Moving to another conflict zone:** some foreign fighters decided to move out of Syria and Iraq to other conflict zones in Libya, North Sinai, Yemen, and the Sahel region and vice versa. For instance, the female Saudi fighter Reem al-Jereesh left for Yemen with her son in March 2014, and later moved to Syria to join ISIS. The same route was taken by Wafaa al-Yehia, as she left Saudi Arabia with her two sons in 2012 for Yemen and later went on to Syria.⁶ Moreover, the official Egyptian army spokesman stated the arrest of many foreign terrorists in North Sinai as part of the 'Operation Sinai 2018.' Abdelraheem alMismari, the Libyan terrorist, together with his colleagues, crossed the border into Egypt to establish the terrorist organization 'An-sar al-Islam' in the Western Desert and man-

⁵ RADICALIZATION AWARENESS NETWORK (RAN). "Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families," *RAN Manual*, July 2017.

⁶ RAGAB, Eman. "The Middle East & Foreign Fighters in Syria: Cases of Egypt and the GCC Countries," in: Kacper REKAWEK. *Not Only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective*, Netherlands: IOS Press, 2017.

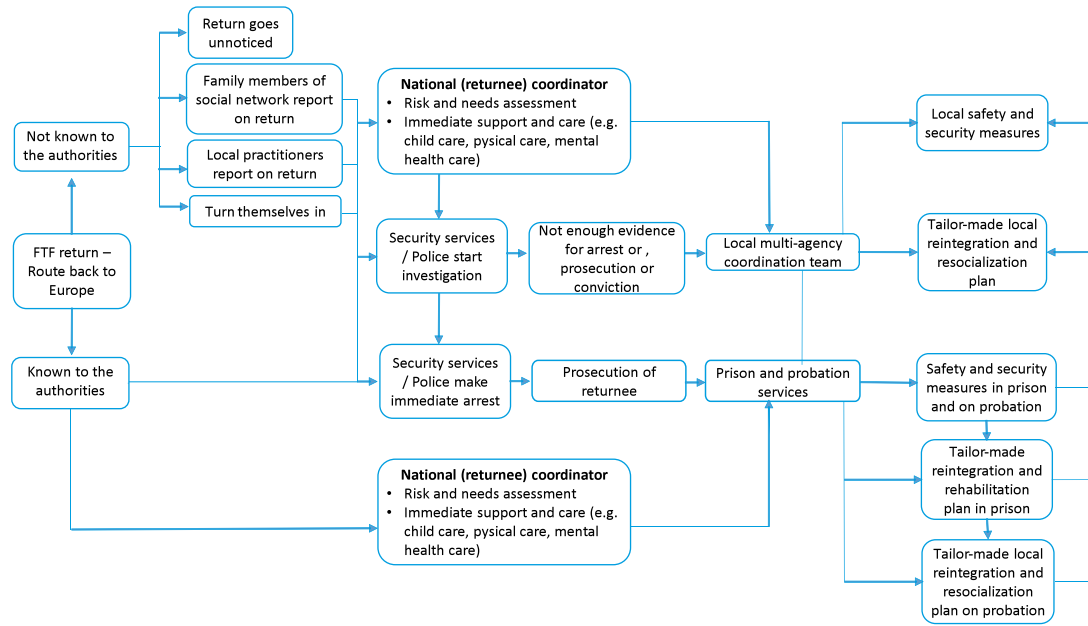
Country	Foreign Fighters	Returned Fighters
Afghanistan		120
Algeria	170	87
Australia	>165	40
Austria	296	90
Western Balkans	900	250
Belgium	~528	>123
Bosnia	248	46
Canada	~185	~60
Central Asia	>5,000	~500
Denmark	>145	67
Finland	>80	~43
France	1,910	302
Georgia	>200	<50
Germany	>915	~300
Indonesia	~600	<50
Israel (Palestinian Territories)	60	<10
Italy	110	13
Jordan	~3,000	>250
Kosovo	317	117
Kyrgyzstan	>500	>44
Malaysia	91	8
Morocco	1,660	236
Netherlands	280	50
Norway	90	>30
Russia	3,417	400
Saudi Arabia	3,244	760
Spain	204	30
Sudan	~150	>2
Sweden	~300	106
Switzerland	~ 70	14
Tajikistan	1,300	147
Tunisia	2,926	>800
UK	~850	~425
USA	<129	7

Source: Richard BARRETT. *Beyond The Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Center, October 2017 , pp.12-13.

- aged to plan and carry out a terrorist attack in al-Wahat al Bahariya in October 2017.
- b. Moving to a third country:** some foreign terrorists decided to start a new life through traveling to a third country. Most of these foreign terrorists are going through self deradicalization processes. Neighbouring countries to Syria and Iraq are the preferred destinations for this category of fighters.
 - c. Returning back to their home countries:** this category of foreign terrorists is the one drawing the attention of academics and policy makers due to its clear impact on the national security of the receiving countries.

The Soufan Group reported in October 2017 that 4,594 citizens or residents from 35 countries had returned home. Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Central Asia received the highest numbers of returning terrorists according to the same report. As indicated in Table 3, the number of terrorists who returned back to Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom was closer to half of the total number of foreign terrorists who left. Most of those returning fighters left Syria during the ceasefires enforced by the US, Russia, and their local allies in al-Raqqa, and managed to cross the borders with Turkey and, from there, reaching their home countries, in the case of European countries, and through Sudan, in the case of African and North Afri-

CHART 2 Return Pathways



Source: RAN Manual Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families. July 2017. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf

can countries (See Chart 2). The BBC reported on 13 November, 2017⁷, that foreign terrorists moved out of al-Raqqa under the gaze of the US and its local ally, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and through deals reached between the latter and ISIS fighters. They then fled to Idlib or out of the country through Turkey with the help of smugglers. This latter trip bears a cost of \$600 per person and a minimum of \$1,500 for a family.

It is worth mentioning that those moving out of Syria, are not only male fighters, but also women and children born there. ISIS relies on women to provide its male fighters with a normal life, and it uses children as informants, through whom they can maintain their control.

Many scholars consider female returnees as low-risk victims. RAN reported that “Female returnees often return to their home countries within the EU for one or a combination of several reasons: some are disillusioned after their experience of hardship and oppression, or after their husband was killed; others come back for medical treatment and family support. In a few instances, women have been bought free and rescued by their families. Some return due to family pressure.”

However, female returnees are likely to pose a threat if they decided to carry out attacks in their home countries, or to act as recruiters. Many countries have encountered that threat. For instance, a recruitment group of 10 women was dismantled by the authorities in Morocco in October 2016.

In the case of children, they are either moved to Syria with both or one of the parents, or have been born to foreign terrorist families in territories controlled by ISIS. The Soufan Group reported that up until 2016, ISIS had recruited and trained more than 2,000 boys aged 9-15. Bearing in mind the religious education ISIS gives children who will then serve as spies, preachers, recruiters, soldiers, executioners, or suicide bombers, they could take part in any terrorist attack being planned or carried out by any ISIS returnee. It is worth mentioning that foreign terrorists may experience fates other than moving out of Syria. On the one hand, some of them have been killed in military confrontations. The BBC reported on 11 October, 2017, that a one-day air strike killed about 500 or 600 fighters and families in al-Raqqa. Another group of foreign terrorists were imprisoned in the Hawi al-Hawa prison outside Raqqa for initial interrogation, but their fate is not known.

⁷ Quentin SOMMERVILLE and Riam DALATI. “Raqqa’s Dirty Secret,” *BBC News*, 13 November, 2017: www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqa_dirty_secret

On the other hand, some of them, especially those originating from Arab countries, decided to stay in Syria and Iraq. *The Independent* reported, in October 2017, that at least 275 Syrian fighters surrendered to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and have been freed from al-Raqqa.⁸ Those fighters are likely to begin a new life or to join other militant groups active in other Syrian cities like Deir Ezzor. The Soufan Group also reported that there are foreign terrorists who decided to remain in Syria and Iraq, and they are more likely to be those who joined ISIS for religious reasons. They are citizens of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia, Canada, Denmark, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Malaysia, Morocco, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sudan, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, and the UK.

Issues and Challenges

This paper argues that the recent flow of foreign terrorists out of Syria, is posing many challenges that are not confined to the replica of the 'Caliphate state,' as the future challenges are defined by the capabilities of these terrorists to carry out significant terrorist attacks in new places.

Thus, examining these challenges requires analyzing the profiles of those foreign terrorists, in terms of their qualifications, their role in ISIS (front-line fighters, leaders ...), criminal background, and their motivation joining ISIS (humanitarian reasons, ideological drivers ...).

But due to the lack of this information, what is mentioned in this section are the general security issues and challenges that could be posed by the movement of foreign fighters not only to countries in the Middle East but also to those in Europe.

Local/Homegrown Terrorism Inspired by ISIS

Some of the foreign terrorists who managed to leave Syria and Iraq to go back to their home countries without being arrested or noticed by national authorities, either ended up becoming local fighters,

establishing local recruiting networks, or acting as local fundraisers. Even if the authorities suspected a returnee, he/she usually gets an early release due to the lack of evidence.

Saudi Arabia has witnessed many terrorist attacks carried out by returning terrorists from Syria and Iraq. For instance Tareq al-Maimoony, Kahled al-Anzy, Abdullah al-Sarhan and Marwan al-Dhefr are four Saudi nationals detained for carrying out the attack on the Shiite mosque in al-Daloh on 3 November 2014. Al-Maimoony is a returnee from Syria, and the other three were graduates from the al-Monasha programme, the national prison-based deradicalization programme. Marwan al-Dhefr was one of the returning fighters from Iraq who was arrested by the Iraqi forces and returned to Saudi Arabia after his release.⁹

Also, Ansar beit al-Maqdis in North Sinai in Egypt is appealing for both Egyptian and foreign terrorists who were in Syria. Egyptian authorities managed, in 2016 and 2017, to dismantle a number of small cells inspired by ISIS in many governorates in Upper Egypt, which either carried out or were planning to carry out a terrorist attack, or were acting as a recruitment cell using face-to-face communication or through social media platforms.¹⁰

The same challenge has been encountered by European countries. For instance, the Brussels attacks on 22 March, 2016, which targeted the airport and the underground, were carried out by a cell that was formed by returning foreign terrorists from Syria, along with two Belgian citizens.

Thomas Hegghammer analyzed data between 1990 and 2010 and found that only between one and nine Western foreign terrorists returned to conduct attacks in the West. Applying the same ratio to the around 5,000 European fighters who returned to Europe, means that around 270 militants are likely to plan and carry out attacks.¹¹

Besides, the role of women and children returnees is crucial in the discussion of this challenge. Many scholars consider female returnees as low-risk victims. RAN reported that "Female returnees often return to their home countries within the EU for one or

⁸ Robert FISK. "Isis has lost Raqqa – so where will its fighters head to next?", *The Independent*, 16 October, 2017.

⁹ Eman RAGAB. "The Middle East & Foreign Fighters in Syria: Cases of Egypt and the GCC Countries," Op.Cit.

¹⁰ Eman RAGAB. "Counter-Terrorism Policies in Egypt: Effectiveness and Challenges," *Euromesco Papers*, Paper number 30, October 2016.

¹¹ "Islamic State returnees pose threat to Europe," IHS Jane's Military & Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2017, p.4.

a combination of several reasons: some are disillusioned after their experience of hardship and oppression, or after their husband was killed; others come back for medical treatment and family support. In a few instances, women have been bought free and rescued by their families. Some return due to family pressure.”

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Balance between Controlling the Flow of Terrorists and Protecting Refugees' Rights

European countries are coming up against the challenge of how to reach a balance between providing an opportunity for Syrian refugees to start a new life, and, at the same time, avoid giving that opportunity to ISIS terrorists trying to enter a European city. Reaching this balance is problematic as the public opinion in Europe holds suspicious stances towards refugees, especially in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Portugal,¹² where the people place their national authorities under great pressure.

Such negative stances are being bolstered by the stories told by European returnees. Abu Basir al-Faransy, a young French ISIS fighter quoted by a BBC report in 2017, mentioned that their return back to France following ISIS' instructions: "There are some French brothers from our group who left

for France to carry out attacks in what would be called a 'day of reckoning.'"¹³

European policies in response to those stances have tended to restrict the flow of refugees. The European countries reached an agreement with Turkey, and managed to close the migrant routes from Greece into Europe. Also Frontex and Europol has enhanced the needed checks and controls.

However, new ISIS inspired networks could be created outside the European radar. It is more likely to be created by foreigners of third countries and European returning terrorists who would plan and carry out attacks in new European theaters.

Reintegration and Rehabilitation

As the foreign terrorists are not leaving Syria and Iraq alone, but with their families in tow, this creates a two-fold challenge for the receiving countries. On one hand, in the case of children returnees, especially those who were born in ISIS-controlled territories, proving parenthood and nationality is a challenge, as most of them do not have official identification documents.

Also, they encounter the issues of how to hold these children responsible for any terrorist action they may have carried out abroad, and how to change their ideological indoctrination and make them familiar with EU norms.

In the case of low-risk female returnees who were granted the opportunity by their government to reintegrate into society, they are still likely to radicalize their children, especially, as RAN pointed out in its report, European females who joined ISIS for ideological reasons and have a deep commitment to the 'caliphate' ideals.

On the other hand, governments need to equip law enforcement institutions with the appropriate and effective tools to disengage both returning foreign terrorists, low-risk and high-risk returnees and those who are willing to live a normal life.

The availability of a well-designed rehabilitation /de-radicalization programme for those returning male and female fighters who are willing to live a new life is very important. Some countries in Europe are

¹² Helen DEMPSTER and Karen HARGRAVE, "Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants," Chatham House, *Working paper* 512, 2017, p.9.

¹³ Richard BARRETT. *Op.Cit.*,p.23

dedicating resources for prison-based interventions and deradicalization programmes, others are more interested in standalone programmes. Most of these programmes are found in northwest Europe such as the EXIT-programmes adopted in Norway, Sweden and Germany, the Danish 'Aarhus approach,' and the Dutch reintegration initiative.¹⁴ Other countries, like Finland, are keen to facilitate the resocialization of returnees in society. At the local level, community seminars are organized which bring together representatives from different public sectors, NGOs, religious communities and community-based organizations. These seminars act as platforms for preventing the 'targeting' of Muslim communities, and polarization around the topic of radicalization and foreign terrorist returnees.

Conclusion

Developing policies to counter these challenges requires resilient national institutions capable of foreseeing the future developments of each of the three challenges and, at the same time, strong regional coordination and cooperation mechanisms. Egypt and Morocco, for instance, are trying to strengthen the resilience of Chad and other Sahel countries in detecting the movement of foreign terrorists. Also, Turkey is keen on sharing its data on

listed foreign terrorists crossing its borders with concerned countries.

The EU managed to reach the aforementioned deal with Turkey in order to restrict the flow of refugees to Europe, and it is encouraging European countries to enhance the sharing of information with Middle Eastern countries.

In addition, RAN and other European organizations are developing customized tools to strengthen the resilience of state institutions and civil society in Europe to contain and prevent threats posed by returnees.

However, more effort needs to be made at the national level. The question of how to deal with male, female, and children returnees is still unanswered. Having an adequate detention regime for any returnees arrested or put on trial is still a work in progress in many countries. Also, the awareness at the local level of the threats that could be posed by having a returnee living in the neighbourhood needs to be enhanced.

In addition, at the regional level, there is still a need to develop an early warning system that could detect the development of a transnational network among terrorists created by their movement between conflict zones in the Middle East and Europe. Finally, directing resources to encourage research institutions in the Middle East and Europe to study why ISIS was so successful in attracting that cohort of foreign terrorists remains crucial.

¹⁴ Bart SCHUURMAN and Liesbeth VAN DER HEIDE. "Foreign fighter returnees and the reintegration challenge," *RAN ISSUE PAPER*, November 2016.