

III. The growth in European foreign terrorist fighters

LINA GRIP

Individuals directly supporting terrorism on the ground in other countries are now frequently referred to as ‘foreign terrorist fighters’. The United Nations Security Council has defined foreign terrorist fighters as: ‘individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict’.¹ The inclusion of the term ‘terrorist’ implies a narrower group compared to the broader definition ‘foreign fighters’. The term ‘foreign terrorist fighter’ is controversial mainly because it presumes either an international legal definition of terrorism (which does not exist) or a common identification of certain individuals and organizations as terrorists. In this context, it is mainly up to states to define ‘terrorists’ and ‘terrorism’ within their national legal framework. This makes it difficult to achieve cross-national coherence in both identifying and developing policy responses to foreign terrorist fighters.

Although the phenomenon is not new, there has been a sharp rise in the number of foreign terrorist fighters joining the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Ukraine recently. In November 2014 the UN assessed the number of foreign terrorist fighters in the Syria and Iraq conflicts to have grown to over 15 000 people from 81 countries.² About 3000 of them were from Europe, with the highest numbers of participants coming from France, Germany and the United Kingdom (see table 6.1). The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, which has been working with governments and other external partners since 2012 to track the number of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq, estimates a 33 per cent increase both at the global and the European level during 2014. The number of female foreign fighters appears to be growing, and has probably already surpassed the number engaged in any other conflict. Female foreign fighters are now estimated to make up 11 per cent of the European foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.³

The known European foreign terrorist fighters have few common characteristics, varying in age, gender and socio-economic background.

¹ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178, 24 Sep. 2014, p. 2.

² United Nations News Centre, ‘At high-level debate, UN, Security Council renew pledge to counter foreign terrorist fighters’, 19 Nov. 2014, <<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49381#.VI7uBSf5k6E>>.

³ Neumann, P. R., ‘Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20 000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s’, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), <<http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>>.

Table 6.1. Foreign terrorist fighters from Western European states

Country	Estimate	Per capita ^a
Austria	100–150	17
Belgium	440	40
Denmark	100–150	27
Finland	50–70	13
France	1200	18
Germany	500–600	7.5
Ireland	30	7
Italy	80	1.5
Netherlands	200–250	14.5
Norway	60	12
Spain	50–100	2
Sweden	150–180	19
Switzerland	40	5
United Kingdom	500–600	9.5

^a Up to; per million population.

Source: Neumann, P. R., 'Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20 000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s', International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), <<http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>>.

In addition, few of them have any family connection to Iraq or Syria, and the role of religion does not seem straightforward. While there is no empirical evidence suggesting a common religious upbringing, among Western recruits a disproportionate number are converts to Islam. In light of the rise in European foreign terrorist fighters, it is becoming increasingly clear that the substantial resources directed towards the development of counterterrorism policies in the past decade, following the terrorist bombings in Madrid and London in 2004–2005, might have prevented another mass-impact terrorist attack in Europe but have failed to prevent the new radicalization of individuals to terrorism and violent extremism.

Security risks posed by returned foreign terrorist fighters

On 24 May 2014 a French foreign terrorist fighter shot dead four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium. Mehdi Nemmouche is awaiting trial accused of having carried out the attack after spending most of 2013 fighting in Syria. He was arrested in June in Marseilles, France, following a routine customs check that found weapons in his car. Nemmouche was extradited to Belgium in July under the European Arrest Warrant system, where he was charged with murder in a terrorist context.⁴ On 7 January

⁴ Robinson, F., 'French suspect in Brussels Jewish Museum killings charged', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 July 2014.

2015 a terrorist attack against the French satiric newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* killed ten staff and two policemen in Paris, France. The attack was carried out by two brothers, Cherif Kouachi and Said Kouachi, who were killed by French police after taking two hostages in a village in Northern France two days later. Meanwhile, an associate of the Kouachi brothers, Amedy Coulibaly, shot a police officer and took several people hostage at a kosher grocery store in Paris. Coulibaly killed four of the people he held hostage before he was killed by the police when they stormed the grocery store. The police were aware of the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly prior to the attacks. All three were allegedly part of the militant jihadist Buttes Chaumont network, which was recruiting people to fight in Iraq and Syria.⁵ Cherif Kouachi had served 18 months in prison in 2008–2009 for helping to transport French foreign terrorist fighters to Iraq. At the same time, Coulibaly was in prison for an armed robbery. The Kouachi brothers had allegedly travelled to Syria in the summer of 2014 and had previously received terrorist training in Yemen.⁶ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claimed responsibility for the attack against *Charlie Hebdo* two days later.⁷

In the following week, several police operations against suspected terrorist cells were executed in Belgium and Germany. In an operation outside Brussels, the Belgian police killed two men who had recently returned from fighting with the Islamic State (IS) in Syria.⁸

In 2013 the EU's law enforcement agency, Europol, set up a system for collecting, analysing and sharing information at the EU-level on the recruitment and travel facilitation of suspected individuals. The information collected in this database, 'focal point travellers', may be shared with 'competent authorities' both inside and outside of the EU.⁹ The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service assessed foreign terrorist fighters to be their greatest security concern for 2013.¹⁰ British intelligence agencies perceive the threat from foreign terrorist fighters to be at the 'severe' threat level, the second highest on the scale.¹¹ The threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters has also gained the attention of the UN Security Council,

⁵ 'Charlie Hebdo suspect Cherif Kouachi linked to network of French militants', *The Guardian*, 8 Jan. 2015.

⁶ Paris attacks: suspects' profiles', BBC News, 12 Jan. 2015, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30722038>>.

⁷ 'Al-Qaeda group claims responsibility for Paris terror attack', *Time Magazine*, 9 Jan. 2015.

⁸ 'Islamists killed in Belgian terror raids "planned to massacre police in street"', *The Guardian*, 16 Jan. 2015.

⁹ Council of the European Union, 'Foreign fighters and returnees from a counter-terrorism perspective, in particular with regard to Syria: state of play and proposals for future work', 9280/14, 5 May 2014, p. 7.

¹⁰ Kern, S., 'Dutch Jihadists returning from Syria pose significant threat', The Clarion Project, 15 May 2014, <<http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/dutch-jihadists-returning-syria-pose-significant-threat>>.

¹¹ 'UK terror threat level raised to "severe"', BBC News, 29 Aug. 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28986271>>.

which unanimously adopted a resolution condemning foreign terrorist fighters on 24 September 2014:

Expressing grave concern over the acute and growing threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters . . . Concerned that foreign terrorist fighters increase the intensity, duration and intractability of conflicts, and also may pose a serious threat to their States of origin, the States they transit and the States to which they travel, as well as States neighbouring zones of armed conflict in which foreign terrorist fighters are active and that are affected by serious security burdens, and noting that the threat of foreign terrorist fighters may affect all regions and Member States, even those far from conflict zones.¹²

Compared to ‘home-grown’ terrorists, foreign terrorist fighters returning from conflicts abroad may have learned advanced terrorist skills and been exposed to extreme violence or carried out violent attacks, as well as having been convinced, pressurized or brainwashed into certain beliefs. There are growing concerns among European security services, therefore, that foreign terrorist fighters may be better connected, more motivated, greater skilled and more lethal on their return back to Europe. Short of mass-impact terrorist attacks, returned foreign terrorist fighters might also be tasked to radicalize new recruits, mobilize support for terrorist organizations (including financial backing) or facilitate travel to conflict zones.

Facilitation of foreign terrorist fighters

The sharp increase in European foreign terrorist fighters can be partly explained by successful online radicalization and recruitment. The withdrawal of Western media from parts of Syria makes IS the sole reporter ‘on the ground’ from IS-controlled areas, allowing the group to disseminate information as it pleases.¹³ The Internet is used for both spreading terrorist propaganda and as a forum for making international contacts and travel arrangements. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are commonly referred to in reporting on foreign terrorist fighters.

In comparison with other recent conflicts, such as Afghanistan, Syria is relatively easy for European citizens to access. Most Europeans enter and leave through Turkey, by using a combination of low-cost airfares to Ankara or Istanbul and overland buses to the Syrian border. The border between Turkey and Syria remains porous.

Enhanced bilateral cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Turkey on border security and migration is probably necessary to reduce the number of foreign terrorist fighters entering or leaving Syria, but the

¹² United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (note 1).

¹³ Sinkkonen, T., ‘War on two fronts: the EU perspective on the foreign terrorist fighters of ISIL’, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) Briefing Paper no. 166 (FIIA: Helsinki, Jan. 2015), p. 4.

deteriorating relationship between the two complicates deeper cooperation. The Turkish airports of Istanbul Atatürk and Antalya handled around 6 million passengers arriving from Europe in 2012.¹⁴ There is also evidence that some travel is partly facilitated by organized crime. Several confirmed European foreign terrorist fighters have criminal convictions in their home country and may have made their travel arrangements through criminal contacts. The Turkish border is frequently used to smuggle Syrian irregular migrants, often travelling on a genuine EU passport stolen from an individual who resembles the migrant. Counterfeit documents require ‘sophisticated and expensive techniques to produce quality forgeries’, and their use is closely linked to organized crime.¹⁵

Legal measures and other responses

European states are rapidly (re)designing policies, including new national legal measures, to address what they see as currently the most severe and urgent security threat in Europe. The UN Security Council ‘encourages Member States to employ evidence-based traveller risk assessment and screening procedures including collection and analysis of travel data, without resorting to profiling based on stereotypes founded on grounds of discrimination prohibited by international law’ but also to address root causes of radicalization.¹⁶

Several non-European states, from Australia to Morocco, are investigating new legal frameworks to address crimes committed by their nationals overseas. But given the relative proximity to the Syrian conflict and extensive border liberalization in the Schengen area, European states are among the most active in seeking to address foreign terrorist fighters by new legal measures. In several European states, including France, the Netherlands and the UK, nationals returning from conflicts may face criminal charges for being part of a terrorist organization or for supporting one. For example, new French legislation adopted on 4 November 2014 imposes sentences of up to 10 years and fines of up to €150 000 (\$187 000) on ‘anyone found to be simultaneously in possession of dangerous objects or substances (such as explosives and weapons), and consulting terrorist websites or receiving terrorist training’.¹⁷

European states have also adopted measures which include: (a) giving authorities the legal power to store and share information on foreign

¹⁴ European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex), *Annual Risk Analysis 2014* (Frontex: Warsaw, May 2014), p. 22.

¹⁵ Frontex (note 14).

¹⁶ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (note 1).

¹⁷ ‘Key European terrorism legislation may be revised’, Statewatch News, 12 Dec. 2014, <<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2014/dec/eu-terror-laws.html>>.

terrorist fighters based on monitoring and surveillance; (b) banning individuals from travelling, including through the seizure of passports and the revocation of visas or citizenship (if dual citizenships are held); (c) adopting tighter laws against online recruitment; and (d) forcing participation in de-radicalization programmes.¹⁸

In France, several returned foreign terrorist fighters have been convicted for fighting alongside Islamic extremists in the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region, and for facilitating the organization of travel abroad.¹⁹ In the UK, of the estimated 300 British fighters who have returned from Syria since 2013, 65 had been arrested for ‘Syria-related’ activities as of June 2014.²⁰ Several of them have been convicted of terrorism training and for the preparation of acts of terrorism in Syria.²¹ In December 2014, the Swedish Security Service and the Swedish National Police were respectively investigating potential terror and war crimes committed by the approximately 40 Swedes who have returned from fighting in Syria.²²

Cases of disillusionment and victimization

The UN Security Council’s definition of foreign terrorist fighters does not cover all the circumstances under which Europeans might travel to territories controlled by terrorists. For example, a number of Europeans have travelled to Iraq or Syria under false premises or without a terrorist intent.²³ Many are very young, even teenagers. Some quickly realize their mistake and try to return home. Others fall victim to terrorists themselves. Survivors escaping captivity may have been witness to grave human rights abuses. There is also evidence, for example, that young females have been victims of sexual slavery, witnessed mass killings and undergone forced female genital mutilation.²⁴ The exposure to extreme violence may cause post-traumatic stress and difficulties to cope or reintegrate in society—

¹⁸ ‘Letter to Parliament from Ivo Opstelten, the Minister of Security and Justice, on the policy implications of the current edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN32)’, 13 Mar. 2013, <https://english.nctv.nl/Images/policy-implications-dtn32-uk_tcm92-491331.pdf>, p. 4; Travis, A., ‘New anti-terrorism package shaped by concerns over legal challenges’, *The Guardian*, 1 Sep. 2014; and Agence France-Presse, ‘Brussels Jewish museum shooting suspect drops extradition appeal’, *Business Standard* (New Delhi), 11 July 2014.

¹⁹ ‘Brussels Jewish museum shooting suspect drops extradition appeal’ (note 18).

²⁰ Rawlinson, K., ‘UK will feel fallout of war in Syria “for years to come”, warns top Met officer’, *The Guardian*, 22 June 2014.

²¹ ‘Syria terror training Briton jailed for four years’, BBC News, 5 Dec. 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-30347666>>; and Casciani, D. ‘British brothers jailed for training at Syria terror camp’, BBC News, 26 Nov. 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-30213771>>.

²² ‘Säpo utreder terrorsvenskar’ [Swedish Security Service investigates terrorist Swedes], *Svenska Dagbladet*, 14 Dec. 2014; and ‘Ung svensk ska ha dött i IS tjänst’ [Young Swede believed to have died serving IS], *Svenska Dagbladet*, 10 Dec. 2014.

²³ Hoyle, C., Bradford, A. and Frenett, R., *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue: London, 2015).

²⁴ Pierce, S., ‘ISIS’s human trafficking crimes get little attention’, Human Trafficking Search, 15 Sep. 2014, <<http://humantraffickingsearch.net/wp/isis-human-trafficking-crimes-get-little-attention>>.

similar to the consequences for other war victims, child soldiers and combatants. European states need to strengthen their capacities to cope with these experiences and to offer appropriate treatment or rehabilitation. Denmark has taken an inclusive approach to addressing returned foreign terrorist fighters and has offered special programmes for disengagement from violence through social and community support.²⁵

Effects on European integration

It is too early to tell whether European states, especially the EU member states, will be able to work together to address the issue of foreign terrorist fighters. So far, states have mainly worked nationally to design what they see as appropriate measures, although some coordination of national strategies has taken place. The European approach to handling the threat of returned foreign terrorist fighters is intertwined with at least three sets of broad and complex political issues. First, the question of European foreign terrorist fighters is intertwined with the EU's relationship to the Syrian conflict. The EU has found it difficult to formulate a policy towards Syria under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad. Since the start of the civil war, European governments have been divided on a possible military intervention in Syria. France led the pro-intervention coalition that included Belgium, Denmark, Italy and Spain, whereas Germany opposed intervention and the UK fell somewhere in-between (after British Prime Minister David Cameron failed to gain support for intervention from the British Parliament). Opinion polls suggest that the European public, however, is strongly opposed to military intervention. In 2013 on average 72 per cent of Europeans were opposed to an intervention in Syria by their governments, an increase from 59 per cent in 2012.²⁶ Issues regarding the EU's sanctions mechanism towards Syria are also controversial. In May 2013, after two years, large parts of the EU's arms embargoes on Syria were lifted on France's initiative, in order to allow for the supply of arms to rebel forces in Syria.²⁷ But in October 2014 EU sanctions towards Syria were expanded again, targeting 63 companies and more than 200 people.²⁸

A second political issue, intimately linked to the Syrian war, is migration and refugee policy. By the end of 2014, 150 000 Syrians had declared

²⁵ Sinkkonen (note 13), p. 6.

²⁶ German Marshall Fund of the United States, 'Survey: US, European and Turkish publics oppose intervention in Syrian conflict, favor democracy over stability in MENA region', *Transatlantic Trends*, 6 Sep. 2013, <<http://trends.gmfus.org/survey-u-s-european-and-turkish-publics-oppose-intervention-in-syrian-conflict-favor-democracy-over-stability-in-mena-region/>>.

²⁷ SIPRI, 'EU arms embargo on Syria', 13 Nov. 2013, <http://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/eu_arms_embargoes/syria_LAS/eu-embargo-on-Syria>. See also the discussion on Syria in chapter 2 and on arms embargoes in chapter 15, in this volume.

²⁸ Fairless, T., 'EU broadens sanctions over Syria', *Wall Street Journal*, 21 Oct. 2014.

asylum in the EU (but out of 9 million displaced Syrians, two thirds were still in Syria and over 3 million had fled to Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey).²⁹ Germany has received the highest number of claims, whereas Sweden has accepted the highest number of refugees and asylum seekers per capita.³⁰ Some EU member states have not accepted any, or have accepted very few, Syrian refugees since the start of the war. In the public opinion survey, *Transatlantic Trends 2014*, on average, 60 per cent of Europeans said they disapproved of their own government's handling of immigration from other countries.³¹ This led to the third issue, the growth in popular support for Euro-sceptic, far-right political parties, as shown in the European Parliament elections in May 2014 and many national elections. In Sweden, for example, the increase in refugees has corresponded with a significant increase in support for the xenophobic political party, the Sweden Democrats. Similarly, in Germany during October–December 2014 weekly demonstrations in Dresden involved a growing number of protesters—reaching 17 000 on 22 December—under the flag ‘Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West’.³² In France, the Collective Against Islamophobia recorded a total of 691 Islamophobic acts in 2013, an increase of 47 per cent compared to 2012. In the UK, the Metropolitan Police recorded 500 Islamophobic hate crimes in 2013.³³ Following the terrorist attack in Paris in January 2015, right-wing movements in France, Greece and Sweden were quick to retaliate in rhetoric and violent acts against European Muslim communities.³⁴

Conclusions

There are at least four potential negative security consequences linked to European foreign terrorist fighters. First, regional stability and human security is threatened in the areas where the fighters operate. Second, the fighters pose a potential threat to European states on their return. Third,

²⁹ European University Institute, Migration Policy Centre, ‘Syrian refugees: a snapshot of the crisis in the Middle East and Europe’, Oct. 2014, <<http://syrianrefugees.eu/>>.

³⁰ OECD, ‘Executive summary’, *International Migration Outlook 2014* (OECD Publishing: 2014), p. 13.

³¹ German Marshall Fund of the United States, ‘Transatlantic trends: mobility, migration and integration’, 2014, <http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2014/09/Trends_Immigration_2014_web.pdf>, p. 5.

³² Dearden, L., ‘Germany anti-Islam protests: 17 000 march on Dresden against “Islamification of the West”’, *The Independent*, 23 Dec. 2014.

³³ Ray, E., ‘It’s time to take action against Islamophobia in Europe’, *EurActiv*, 12 Sep. 2014, <<http://www.euractiv.com/sections/languages-culture/its-time-take-action-against-islamophobia-europe-308389>>.

³⁴ E.g. ‘Anti-Muslim acts have soared in France since Paris attacks, group says’, *Al Jazeera*, 23 Jan. 2015, <<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/1/23/france-sees-increase-in-antimuslim-attacks.html>>; and ‘Attackerna har blivit grövre än tidigare’ [The attacks have become more serious than before], *Aftonbladet*, 28 Jan. 2015.

European right-wing Islamophobic political groups may use the threat of foreign terrorist fighters to radicalize Europeans against Muslims. Fourth, a potential general reduction in European civil liberties and freedoms may arise as result of 'knee-jerk' national political and legal responses to the threat. The challenge for those tasked with upholding European security is to address each of these four potential security threats in an effective and balanced manner.