

Dealing with "European foreign fighters": what strategies?

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Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, there are been growing worries about the threat posed by European citizens (or residents) travelling to conflict zones, the so-called "foreign fighters". **Their number has been unprecedented in comparison to previous conflicts and has become a hot security issue.** According to Europol TE-SAT Report 2015, by late 2014 the overall number of people that departed from the European Union (EU) may have reached between 3000 to 5000.

Many studies show that individuals become foreign fighters for a range of very different motivational reasons, not only religious (duty to fight in order to defend Islam under attack; Islam the only path to justice; the Sunni/Shia divide), but also personal (feelings of humiliation; revenge; boredom; intergenerational tensions; search for a meaning in life; disillusion towards national government responses or adventure quest), ideological (anti-westernization positions, attraction to nationalist and pan-Islamic narratives), and "humanitarian" (the brutality of regimes, the protection of victims). Therefore, there are not common indicators such as socio-economic status, poverty or lack of education, or personality characteristics (psychic fragility) generally considered primary motivational drives. **They are very young, they are less likely to be known to the authorities, and furthermore there are many girls among them.**

This means that being so young, **much more emphasis is needed to be placed in the preventive realm, with regard to their families, schools and communities;** while traditional methods of intelligence and law enforcement-based approaches seem to be not sufficient to detect and contain the phenomenon.

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The EU institutions and member states show a sheer awareness that **foreign fighters can pose many threats to peace and security in numerous ways.** They can attempt to recruit others to join the fight (who is more credible than someone who has been on the frontline?). In the conflict zones they can acquire more advanced terrorist and fighting skill-sets and significantly expand their transnational extremist networks. The biggest threat is related to the so-called "blowback effect" that could take place upon their return to European countries, because volunteering for war is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy. Indeed, once back, they as inspirational figures can export the extreme ideology of global jihad and carry out attacks in European countries.

Because of the transnational dimension of the foreign fighters' phenomenon, terrorism risks can no longer be contained within a single country, whereby the EU is automatically implicated. However, **within the EU, security matters in general and counter-terrorism in particular remain still in the Member States' remit.** Member States have stepped up their efforts, using various kinds of approaches, including criminal law, administrative measures and "soft tools", such as counter-radicalization campaigns. Some (as France and Spain) have dealt with the issue largely through repressive measures. Some others (as Denmark, United Kingdom and Netherland) have made recourse to extensive and long-

established counter-radicalization structures, specifically redirected to deal with the issue of foreign fighters.

With regard to **repressive measures**, important legislative differences exist from country to country, but there some common patterns may be singled out. According to CSS study *Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Responses in Eleven Countries* (Zurich, March 2014) in most countries, planning to travel to conflict zones is not a crime, unless there are clear indications that the individual aims «to join a terrorist organization or to commit crimes or has already committed preparatory crimes».

With regard to **counter-radicalization structures**, in almost all European countries great attention is paid to **the role of the family**. Family members can provide key-forms of support to, or have a positive influence on, the potential foreign fighter and, in many cases, can help also for rehabilitation, reintegration and, to a lesser extent, de-radicalization. But, it should be noted that the family can equally pose a risk factor, consisting in neglecting their members or influencing (and even promoting) violent extremist ideologies. There have been several cases of siblings travelling to Syria either together or one soon after the other, and pairs of brothers have acted in the attacks in Paris of January and November 2015. However, in general, families have tried to make strong opposition and to maintain contact with their sons, to entice them to come home.

The **EU has coordinated Member States activities regarding the prevention of radicalization, the detection of suspicious travels, criminal justice response and cooperation with third countries**. Given the widely shared feeling of insecurity in the wake of terrorist attacks in recent years, EU is seeking to strengthen its role. The 2005 EU Strategy for “Combating Radicalisation and Terrorism” has been revised in June 2014. The European Council and the European Commission have indicated the need to broaden the spectrum of preventive measures and counter-radicalization. The EU Commission-established “Radicalisation Awareness Network” (RAN) has worked to promote and share best practices aimed at countering radicalization. A RAN paper (*Report Cities Conference on Foreign Fighters to Syria*, the Hague, January 30, 2014) argued: «Only repression... will not solve the problem. Prevention, signaling and providing programmes to help (potential) foreign fighters to leave the path of violent extremism are necessary as well. These actions are often organised on a local level. For instance, first line practitioners, such as teachers and youth workers, can be trained to recognise and refer those who are being influenced to go on jihad. Also, families can be partners in both detecting potential fighters and convincing them to deploy their engagement in a non-violent way. Finally, exit-programmes that have proven to be effective, can be tailored to the target group, for instance by employing formers or practitioners as acceptable intermediaries or coaches».

The RAN “Declaration of Good Practices for Engagement with Foreign Fighters for Prevention, Outreach, Rehabilitation and Reintegration” provides general principles related to engaging with social environments in order to build resistance to the phenomenon of foreign fighters. All of the 21 good practices there listed, testify to the complexity of the phenomenon and the need to approach it with a range of measures. Each individual case is different, and there is no “one-size fits all” approach. Various approaches are therefore suggested: raising awareness among first line practitioners working with vulnerable individuals or groups at risk of radicalization; supporting family members of foreign fighters; engaging and empowering communities at risk in order to establish a trust-based relationship with authorities and to create resilience within communities; establishing exit strategies (de-radicalization and disengagement).

In short, the intervention measures necessary and the point at which to intervene should be determined case by case. Engaging with potential foreign fighters and their environs will require dialogue and engagement with a wide range of actors from the micro to macro level, such as families (both immediate and wider), friends, community members, religious leaders, teachers, local authorities, police and intelligence services.

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How to deal with the foreign fighters' phenomenon before, during and after armed engagement? What has been done so far seems not to be enough.

To meet this challenge there should be **an approach that involves the entire social system**. National governments and public administrations at local level should be supported by civil society, NGOs, religious and ethnic communities with their representative organizations, media, having also in mind the ever-growing role played by ICTs. While being necessary approaches modeled on national specificities (cultural, social, and political ones), in addition to cooperation at the local and national levels, are necessary common efforts pursued in Europe and internationally. The complexity of the phenomenon requires prevention activities enlarged to an undifferentiated public. Moreover, **in the formulation of public policies, special attention is needed to their impact on social cohesion in our societies increasingly pluralistic, ethnically and religiously segmented**.

The **resilience of societies to the radicalization must be built on the affirmation of the rights and fundamental freedoms, equal opportunity and justice, with an ongoing commitment that actually removes the difficulties of access to an education free from ideological constraints, contrasts exclusion, inequality, with more attentive social policies, and removes discrimination, through cultural dialogue**.

Though there are no political formulas that reset the terrorism risks also linked with geo-political factors, more just and cohesive societies are the best support to security measures that alone may not be sufficient.