CTED TRENDS REPORT

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THE CHALLENGE OF RETURNING AND RELOCATING FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS: RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

CTED | UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL COUNTER-TERRORISM COMMITTEE EXECUTIVE DIRECTORATE

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Research shows that, historically, relatively few returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) posed a direct threat. However, those that did were responsible for some of the most lethal terrorist attacks carried out over the past three decades. FTFs have also played a critical role in creating and strengthening terrorist groups, and radicalizing and recruiting terrorist networks.

- The current FTF wave has clear differences with previous ones. Studies indicate that it is larger, more global, and more diverse in terms of age, gender and experience in the conflict zones. These differences make the potential challenges associated with returnees and relocators significantly bigger, but also more complex.

- The actions of a small proportion of returnees and relocators from the current conflict zones have demonstrated their increased lethality, both as attackers and as attack planners. Research suggests that such cases remain relatively rare, but it is difficult for States to assess which FTFs may pose a threat, or act as radicalizers, recruiters, and creators or reinforcers of terrorist groups in the future.

- Despite military progress and enhanced counter-measures by Member States, the fate and location of a sizeable proportion of FTFs appears to be uncertain. Identifying and locating these remaining FTFs remains a critical priority for the international community and is a major focus of the measures in Security Council resolution 2396 (2017).

- Research suggests that returning and relocating FTFs are likely to remain a significant long-term challenge, requiring Member States to balance repressive and "soft" responses. Many States have struggled to secure criminal convictions for FTFs, while imprisonment may delay, but not necessarily reduce the threat that they pose. The current FTF group is also relatively young and includes children of FTFs who may have been trained and indoctrinated by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da'esh).

- As a result, Council resolution 2396 (2017) calls on Member States to improve judicial procedures and the collection and sharing of information and evidence, while developing tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies, including programmes addressing radicalization in prisons and focused on the needs of children associated with FTFs.

- In view of the long-term, complex nature of the returnee and relocator challenge, the research community can continue to play a vital role in helping to identify new or emerging terrorist trends and good counter-terrorism practices. However, this research must be global in its scope and encompass Member States or regions most affected by, and least able to respond to, the FTF threat.

SCOPE OF REPORT

The present report was prepared by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)[1] in accordance with Security Council resolution 2395 (2017). This reaffirms the essential role of CTED within the United Nations to identify and assess issues, trends and developments relating to the implementation of Council resolutions 1373 (2001), 1624 (2005) and 2178 (2014), and other relevant resolutions.

Council resolution 2395 (2017) also recognizes CTED's relationships with, inter alia, academia; think tanks; and international, regional and subregional organizations, and notes their value in promoting an analysis of emerging threats, trends and developments.

The present report seeks to provide counter-terrorism policymakers, practitioners and experts with an analysis of the latest research into some of the challenges presented by one such trend: **the return and relocation of ISIL FTFs from Iraq and the Syria.** It primarily draws on the work of academia and think tanks (particularly members of CTED's Global Research Network (GRN)), but includes information from international, regional and subregional organizations. Launched in 2015, the GRN is a network of over 100 leading research institutions from across the globe. Resolution 2395 (2017) reiterates the importance of CTED's work with GRN members to identify and assess issues, trends and developments.[2]

This report is for informational purposes only and does not necessarily represent the views or official positions of CTED, the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) or any of its members.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two-and-a-half years, countermeasures introduced by Member States and military operations against ISIL have succeeded in reducing, and then all but halting, the flow of FTFs to the conflict zones of Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.[3] By early 2018, ISIL had reportedly lost control of 98 per cent of the territory it had previously controlled in those two States.[4] However, despite concerns that ISIL's military reverses would result in a "flood' of returnees, many States have instead received a "steady trickle".[5]

In part, this appears to be due to the FTF contingent within ISIL not behaving as anticipated. Research suggests that a higher-than-expected proportion of FTFs remained in the conflict zones to defend the "Caliphate" and subsequently perished on the battlefield,[6] while military operations and Member States' countermeasures made exiting the conflict zones more difficult. Recent assessments have concluded that FTFs who remain in the conflict zones are likely to stay and "fight to the death",[7] while some researchers have suggested that returning and relocating FTFs are "a more

1 Guided by Security Council resolutions 1373 (2001) and 1624 (2005), the Counter-Terrorism Committee works to strengthen the capacity of United Nations Member States to prevent terrorist acts, both within their borders and across regions. It was established in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States. The Committee is assisted by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), which carries out the policy decisions of the Committee, conducts expert assessments of Member States, and facilitates the delivery of counter-terrorism technical assistance.

2 See January 2018 GRN Newsletter for more information.

3 Sixth report of the Secretary General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) (S/2018/80 (2018)).

4 News Release of the Combined Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve, February 2018.

5 Peter Neumann (ICSR), cited in "ISIS Fighters Are Not Flooding Back Home to Wreak Havoc as Feared", The New York Times (2017).

6 Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes & Clifford The Travellers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq - Program on Extremism, The George Washington University (2018).

7 Coolsaet Anticipating the Post-Daesh Landscape - Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations (2017).

manageable problem than initially anticipated".[8]

However, the challenge posed by FTFs remains significant. Thousands of FTFs had already left the conflict zones prior to ISIL's military decline, and hundreds more have recently been detained attempting to do the same.[9] Most significantly, the fate of a large proportion of the ISIL FTF contingent remains unknown: there is a large discrepancy between the total number of FTFs and those recorded as having been killed or detained, or having returned or relocated.

Determining what proportion of this group consists of undetected returnees or relocators, while also continuing to manage the long-term risks posed by FTFs who have returned or been detained, will be a long-term challenge for the international community. This report seeks to provide policymakers with an in-depth, research-driven look at the nature of this challenge.

- *Section I* of the report examines the FTFs who travelled to Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, and why their diversity and varied experiences make it so difficult to determine their future behaviour.
- *Section II* looks at the current location of these FTFs, and the impact of returnees and relocators as attackers and attack planners so far.
- *Section III* analyses the potential future impact of FTFs by considering previous FTF mobilizations, and some of the issues that further complicate Member States' responses.
- Lastly, the *Annex* contains a summary of CTED's work on FTFs, the resources and guidance available to Member States struggling with the issue of FTFs, and identifies the next steps to be taken in accordance with Council resolution 2396 (2017).

8 Barrett Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees - The Soufan Center (2017).

9 "Syrian militia says large number of IS foreign fighters held", The Washington Post (2018).

I. FTFs in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic

Who are FTFs?

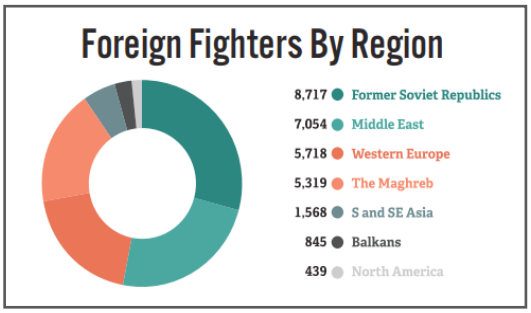
In its resolution 2178 (2014), the Security Council defines "foreign terrorist fighters (FTF)" as follows:

> ***". . .individuals who travel to a State other than their State 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".***[10]

While this definition is relatively new, the FTF phenomenon is not. Researchers have identified Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic as the destination for the largest modern FTF mobilization, which began with the travel of FTFs to Afghanistan in the 1980s.[11] Conservative estimates suggest that around 30,000 FTFs travelled to Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, while others have reported a figure greater than 42,000.[12]

Apart from its size, the current FTF mobilization differs from its forerunners in two further ways:

1. As the graphic below illustrates, it is truly global. ISIL, Al-Qaida and associated groups have attracted FTFs from as many as 120 Member States.[13]



Source: The Soufan Center[14]

2. It is also more demographically diverse. Whereas previous FTF waves consisted almost exclusively of military-age men, the current mobilization included large numbers of women and children (both accompanying family members and travelling independently).[15]

10 S/RES/2178 (2014), para. 6.

11 Coolsaet Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave - Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations (2016).

12 Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families, EU Radicalization Awareness Network (2017).

13 Ibid.

14 Barrett Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees - The Soufan Center (2017).

15 Holman & Moore Remainers and Leavers: Foreign Fighters after the "Islamic State" - Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (2017.)

Table 1: Sample of foreign women and children with ISIL

COUNTRY	TOTAL[171]	WOMEN	CHILDREN
Germany[180]	~900	~190	56[181]
Indonesia	~600	113[182]	
Italy[183]	110	6	
Kazakhstan[184]	~500	>200 women	and children
Kyrgyzstan[185]	~500		>130
Kosovo[186]	~300	44	27
Malaysia[187]	91	12	17
Morocco[188]	1,623	~275	
Netherlands[189]	280	>90	> 90
Russia	3,417		>350[190]
Spain	204	21[191]	
Sweden[192]	267	~70	45[193]
Switzerland	~70	7	
Tunisia[194]	~3,000	~100	
UK	~850	>100[195]	50[196]

Source: The Soufan Center[16]

Researchers have highlighted three inter-related factors that contributed to the unique nature of the current FTF mobilization:

1. **The relative ease with which individuals could travel to the Syrian Arab Republic**. Researchers have suggested that FTFs were likely to be less ideologically committed at their point of departure, because of the potential for relatively spontaneous travel.[17]

2. **The variety of motivations for travel, and how they changed over time**.[18] Researchers have contrasted travellers in the early stages of the conflict with those who travelled after June 2014 who, unlike their predecessors, may have seen an obligation to live in ISIL's "Caliphate" and therefore had no plans to return home.[19]

3. **Changes in the availability, use and security of information and communications technologies (ICT)**.[20] This allowed terrorist groups in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic to promote their propaganda faster and to a wider, more global audience. FTFs could also maintain regular contact with their family and friends, encouraging further travel and mobilizing the transfer of money in and out of the conflict zones.[21]

Because of these differences, it has been difficult for Member States and the research community to rely on historical data to assess the likely impact of FTFs who return or relocate from the current conflict zones.

FTF experiences in the conflict zones

To make a better assessment of this impact, researchers have first sought to understand the experiences of FTFs in the conflict zones.

16 Barrett Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees - The Soufan Center (2017).

17 Hegghammer & Nesser Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West - Perspectives on Terrorism (2015).

18 Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their Families, EU Radicalization Awareness Network (2017).

19 Seth Jones (RAND Corporation), quoted in "As IS crumbles, experts warn of threat posed by foreign fighters", The Times of Israel (2017).

20 Gates & Podder Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State - Perspectives on Terrorism (2015).

21 Duyvesteyn & Peeters Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilizations (1980-2015) - International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (2015).

Exposure to violence

The most immediate impact of the arrival of thousands of FTFs in the conflict zones of the Middle East was to trigger and exacerbate conflict. ISIL, the destination for the majority of FTFs, has been responsible for widespread sexual and sectarian violence[22] and helped fuel "the largest humanitarian crisis since the creation of the United Nations".[23]

As a result, most, if not all, FTFs will have been exposed to violence - including acts of extreme violence, such as beheadings and suicide bombings – and many will have gained combat experience and varying degrees of weapons and explosives training.

Due to the global nature of the FTF contingent, FTFs will also have developed close relationships with like-minded individuals from across the world.[24] Indeed, researchers have suggested that the current wave of FTFs is likely to be **"the most operationally experienced, lethally skilled and highly networked group of FTFs to date."**[25]

Varied experiences

However, research has also highlighted the varying experiences of FTFs in the conflict zones. Shifts in power dynamics and tactics during the conflict, particularly from 2013 onwards, have led to suggestions that there are two generations within the current FTF wave.[26] Not all FTFs - including many women travellers - will have served in frontline or combat roles or received significant weapons training, while FTFs will have spent varying lengths of time in the conflict zone. A 2017 study showed that, while Swedish FTFs have spent an average of 16 months in the conflict zone, their stays varied from one month to several years.[27]

Multiple roles and outcomes

These varied experiences and the diversity of the current FTF group mean that there are many potential outcomes for FTFs. Many researchers have developed typologies to illustrate these different outcomes, with one example included below:

1. The "martyr" - an FTF killed on the battlefield;
2. The veteran - an experienced FTF who continues to fight in other theatres of conflict;
3. The recruiter - an FTF who returns home and recruits others to fight;
4. The reintegrated fighter - an FTF who returns home and disengages from terrorist activity (for multiple reasons);
5. The terrorist - an FTF who seeks to conduct terrorist acts against his or her country of origin.[28]

However, such categories may fail to reflect the complexity of the potential challenges posed by FTF returnees and relocators. Firstly, such categories are not mutually exclusive. A "veteran" or relocating FTF may also act as a recruiter, or plan and direct terrorist attacks against his or her country of origin.

Researchers have therefore attempted to identify sub-categories. For example, "reintegrated fighters" may include individuals who have disengaged because they have become disillusioned, but also those who have disengaged but are not disillusioned with the broader terrorist ideology.[29]

22 Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria (A/HRC/27/CRP.3 – 2014).

23 Statement of Stephen O'Brien, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, to the Security Council, 10 March 2017.

24 Byman What happens when Arab foreign fighters return home - The Brookings Institution (2015).

25 Shanahan & Khalil Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Day After - Lowy Institute for International Policy (2016).

26 Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families, EU Radicalization Awareness Network (2017).

27 Gustafsson & Ranstorp Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq - Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies (2017).

28 de Roy van Zuijdewijn The Foreign Fighters' threat: What history can (not) tell us - Perspectives on Terrorism (2014).

29 Clarke & Amarasingam Where do ISIS fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls? - The Atlantic (2017).

This points to a further limitation of typologies – no FTF category (except for the "martyr") is static. As the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) noted in February 2017, "**The threat from returnees may remain dormant and not appear until later, e.g., following a triggering event**".[30]

Regardless of the terminology used to describe returning or relocating FTFs, research has indicated multiple ways in which FTFs may pose ongoing risks to Member States, including:

1. **Conducting terrorist attacks;**

2. **Planning and directing terrorist attacks (regardless of whether they return, relocate, or try to remain in the conflict zones);**[31]

3. **Relocating "veteran" FTFs who create new terrorist organizations or reinforce existing groups in a third country;**[32]

4. **Returning FTFs who use their status and credibility to radicalize and recruit new terrorist networks (including from within prisons).**[33]

30 Assessment of the terror threat to Denmark, PET (2017).

31 Vidino, Marone & Entenmann Fear thy neighbour: Radicalization and jihadist attacks in the West - Program on Extremism, George Washington University; Italian Institute for International Political Studies; International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (2017).

32 Clarke & Amarasingam Where do ISIS fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls? - The Atlantic (2017).

33 Renard Europe's "New" jihad: Homegrown, Leaderless and Virtual - Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations (2017).

II. Impact of returnees and relocators so far

Researchers have next attempted to determine the current locations of returning or relocating FTFs, and what impact returnees and relocators have had so far.

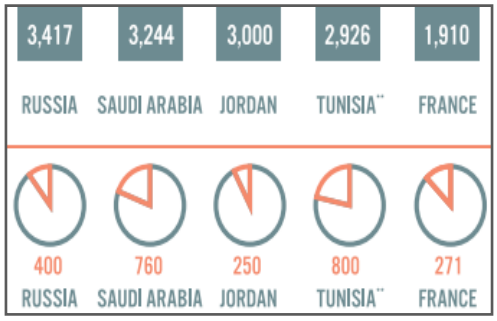
Where are FTFs now?

As noted in *Section I*, estimates of total FTF numbers vary significantly, and it is difficult to obtain reliable statistics on the number of FTFs killed on the battlefield. Consequently, the research community has struggled to accurately determine the proportion of FTFs who have returned, relocated, or perished in the conflict zones. However, drawing on the figures provided by Member States, some researchers have generated indicative figures.

Returnees

In October 2017, a report looking at 33 of the around 120 countries impacted by the FTF phenomenon concluded that at least 5,600 citizens or residents had returned home.[34]

Returnee rates to countries with highest number of FTFs



Source: The Soufan Center[35]

A November 2017 study, based on figures from 79 countries, calculated that nearly 7,000 FTFs had died on the battlefield and a further 14,900 had left the conflict zones. Of this latter group, only 36 per cent (5,395) were currently imprisoned, **while 46 per cent (6,837) had returned home without entering the criminal justice system**.[36]

Despite the difficulty of establishing the fate of a significant proportion of the ISIL FTF contingent, researchers and Member States have identified certain patterns within those known to have returned. For example, in some Member States, **fewer women than men have returned**. Denmark has noted that, although women represent one-eighth of its total travellers, as of February 2017, they represented one-third of the remaining Danish FTF contingent in the conflict zones.[37] In Sweden, women accounted for 24 per cent of total travellers, but, as of September 2016, 40 per cent of those still in the conflict zones.[38]

34 Barrett Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees - The Soufan Center (2017).

35 Ibid.

36 Cragin Foreign fighter "hot potato" - Lawfare (2017).

37 Assessment of the terror threat to Denmark, PET (2017).

38 Gustafsson & Ranstorp Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq - Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies (2017).

Relocators

While there is a degree of certainty regarding the proportion of FTFs who have returned, there are few accurate figures for the number of FTFs who have relocated from the conflict zones to a third country. Both researchers and Member States[39] have highlighted the risk that relocating FTFs may strengthen ISIL affiliates and have suggested several potential destinations for relocating FTFs, notably in East and North Africa[40] and South, South-East and Central Asia.

Perhaps most significantly, researchers have highlighted the presence of FTFs in the Philippines, specifically during the May 2017, siege of Marawi City. Reports suggest that 10 per cent of frontline ISIL-affiliated fighters involved in the siege were foreign, including individuals from at least eight different countries.[41] However, it is unclear whether these individuals had returned or relocated from the Middle East or had sought to travel to the Middle East, but had been re-directed by terrorist recruiters towards a more local conflict.[42]

The impact of returning and relocating FTFs so far

Much of the research published during the early stages of the conflict suggested that although returning FTFs posed a real danger, there were mitigating factors and policy options that could reduce that danger.[43] A study published in mid-2015 indicated that the "blowback rate" for the current FTF wave was low. An estimated 0.0027 per cent of FTFs returning to "the West" had been involved in terrorist plots, and only one terrorist attack had been carried out by a returnee from Iraq or the Syrian Arab Republic.[44] Researchers attributed this to the proactive approach taken by Member States, but also noted that ISIL had not committed a substantial proportion of its resources to out-of-area operations.[45]

FTFs as attackers

Subsequent analysis has highlighted the increased involvement of returnee or relocator FTFs in terrorist attacks and the impact of that involvement on their lethality. A study of 510 ISIL attacks perpetrated outside the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq up to 31 October 2017 found that FTFs had participated in more than 25 per cent of the attacks, including **87 attacks conducted by FTFs outside of their country of origin**.[46] Research into attacks carried out in the West between June 2014 and June 2017 indicated that although only 18 per cent of attackers were known FTFs, the attacks they carried out were among the most lethal (leading to an average death toll of 35 deaths per attack).[47]

FTFs as planners

In addition to their direct involvement in terrorist attacks or plots, **FTFs have also been central to the development of a new type of terrorist methodology: attacks directed from afar by "virtual planners"** who use secure communications to remotely guide attackers (often single perpetrators) and play a key role in the conceptualization, target selection, timing and execution of attacks.[48]

Researchers have identified numerous terrorist plots and several attacks driven by FTF virtual planners (including

39 20th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (S/2017/573).

40 Shanahan & Khalil Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Day After - Lowy Institute for International Policy (2016).

41 Gunaratna The Siege of Marawi: A Game Change in Terrorism in Asia - Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (2017).

42 "Terror in Indonesia: The Threat Posed by Returning Islamic State Fighters", The Sydney Morning Herald (2017).

43 Byman & Shapiro Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq - The Brookings Institution (2015).

44 Hegghammer & Nesser Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West - Perspectives on Terrorism (2015).

45 Ibid.

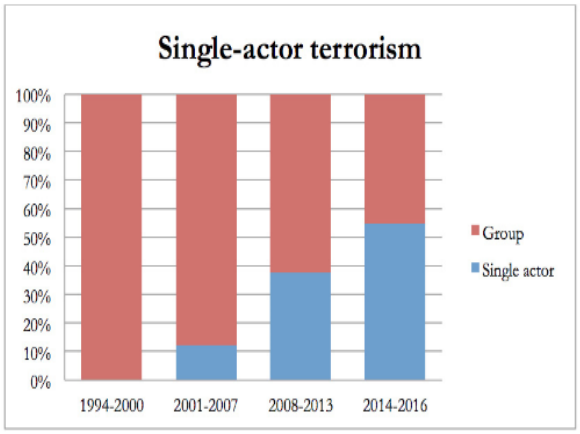
46 Cragin Foreign fighter "hot potato" - Lawfare (2017).

47 Vidino, Marone & Entenmann Fear thy neighbour: Radicalization and jihadist attacks in the West - Program on Extremism, George Washington University; Italian Institute for International Political Studies; International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (2017).

48 Gartenstein-Ross & Blackman ISIL's Virutal Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation - War on the Rocks (2017).

one French FTF reportedly involved in at least 12 terrorist plots in France),[49] including attacks or plots in Australia, Indonesia, the United States and Europe.[50]

This innovation has contributed towards an increase in terrorist attacks conducted by single actors which, according to 2016 figures, were now more common in Europe than plots involving groups.[51] The same study notes the strategic logic behind this shift: between 2014 and 2016, **plots in Europe involving a single perpetrator – including those "remotely controlled" by FTFs – were significantly less likely to be detected and prevented by Member States than those involving groups**.[52]



Terrorist attacks in Europe: 1994-2016[53]

FTFs radicalizing/recruiting/reinforcing

Although substantial and substantive research has been conducted into FTFs from the current mobilization as attackers or attack planners, significantly less data is available on the two other outcomes identified in *Section I*: relocating FTFs creating or reinforcing terrorist organizations and returnee FTFs radicalizing and recruiting new terrorist networks. This 'data gap' reflects the clandestine and long-term nature of both challenges; the full impact of FTFs as radicalizers, recruiters and reinforcers may not become apparent for some time.

49 Vidino, Marone & Entenmann Fear thy neighbour: Radicalization and jihadist attacks in the West - Program on Extremism, George Washington University; Italian Institute for International Political Studies; International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (2017).

50 Arianti & Singh ISIS' Southeast Asia Unit: Raising the Security Threat - Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (2015).

51 Nesser, Stenersen & Oftedal Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect - Perspectives on Terrorism (2016).

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

III. Future impact of FTFs

To assess the extent to which the current wave of FTFs will continue to plan and conduct terrorist attacks, and act as radicalizers, recruiters or reinforcers, researchers have considered how past FTF mobilizations behaved once a conflict ended or the conditions that encouraged travel were no longer in place.

Impact of previous FTF mobilizations

Attack planning/execution

There is a large body of research on the most visible and alarming aspect of the historic FTF problem; returning or relocating FTFs planning and carrying out terrorist attacks. One influential 2013 study concluded that few FTFs travelled with the intention of returning and conducting a terrorist attack and that only a small minority of FTFs "acquir[ed] that motivation along the way". However, it also found that **FTF involvement increased the probability that a terrorist plot would be executed and that it would kill people**.[54]

Despite disagreements as to how best to categorize FTFs and the true scale of the threat they pose, there is broad consensus within the research community as to the "seemingly paradoxical" challenge faced by Member States:

> ***"Most foreign fighters do not prove a threat on return, but those who do are highly dangerous and have been involved in a substantial proportion of the domestic plots in the West, including the most serious attacks."***[55]

Given the nature of this challenge, the research community has attempted to understand what separates the minority of FTFs who have carried out terrorist attacks on their return from the majority who have not.

Potential indicators

Analysis of previous FTF mobilizations has highlighted one critical factor in understanding what distinguishes these two groups: the extent to which a host terrorist organization prioritizes attacks outside the conflict zone. For example, one European study of data from 1994 to 2014 concluded that the historic threat posed by FTFs with combat experience was "limited",[56] given that two-thirds of returnee FTFs involved in terrorist plots had only received training.

Other research suggests, however, that this may be attributed to FTFs' choice of host terrorist group. For much of that period, attacks against the West were a strategic priority for Al-Qaida and some of its affiliates. As a result, FTFs who reached Al-Qaida training camps were often re-directed away from locally focused activities and trained to conduct high-profile attacks upon their return.[57]

In the context of the current FTF wave, this helps explain why researchers have differentiated between the "two generations."[58] Those who arrived *and* returned earlier in the conflict are less likely to have fought for or with terrorist groups who prioritized attacks outside the conflict zone.

However, FTFs located in the conflict zone from 2014 onwards, or for longer time periods, are not only more likely to have fought for or with ISIL or Al-Qaida-affiliated groups. They may also have greater levels of training and opera-

54 Hegghammer Should I Stay or Should I go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice Between Domestic and Foreign Fighting - American Political Science Review (2013).

55 Zammit Australian foreign fighters: Risks and responses - Lowy Institute for International Policy (2015).

56 de Roy van Zuijdewijn The Foreign Fighters' threat: What history can (not) tell us - Perspectives on Terrorism (2014).

57 Zammit Australian foreign fighters: Risks and responses - Lowy Institute for International Policy (2015).

58 Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families, EU Radicalization Awareness Network (2017).

tional experience,[59] and may feel greater resentment towards Member States fighting against ISIL, having personally suffered from anti-ISIL military operations.

Creating or reinforcing terrorist organizations

There is also a sizeable body of research on the historic role of FTFs in creating or reinforcing terrorist organizations. Researchers have looked in particular at the hitherto largest modern FTF wave - travellers to Afghanistan - and have emphasised the highly influential roles played by veteran FTFs in creating or reinforcing terrorist groups across the world.

Most obviously, this includes Al-Qaida (the predominant global terrorist threat for much of the ensuing two decades), but also many locally or regionally focused groups, including in North Africa[60] and South and South-East Asia. These "veteran" returnees were also part of subsequent FTF waves. FTFs who had fought in Afghanistan also travelled to Bosnia and Chechnya, where their military experience often acted as a "force-multiplier" and their choice of tactics helped "shift national conflicts into supranational ones".[61]

Radicalizing/recruiting new terrorist networks

Other FTF veterans remained engaged with terrorism as recruiters, radicalizers and facilitators, playing a pivotal role in subsequent foreign-fighter mobilizations,[62] and in the growth in size and geographical spread of terrorist groups. One researcher has noted, for example, that although the "second generation of Al-Qaida" had no contact with Afghanistan or with the fight against the Soviet Union, they were recruited, radicalized and trained by the veterans of the first generation.[63]

Many researchers have emphasised that terrorist recruitment usually occurs through offline social networks.[64] Studies have repeatedly demonstrated the influence of charismatic individuals on terrorist recruitment and radicalization,[65] and research into the current FTF wave has identified recruitment "hotspots" centred on small networks of extremists.[66]

Although FTFs have not always been at the centre of these networks or "hotspots", their magnetism and experience have allowed them to play highly influential roles, despite their relatively small numbers. The size of the current FTF wave suggests that there will be a much larger group of such individuals with the potential to act as "entrepreneurs or network builders" in the future.[67]

Future FTF-related challenges

> ***"The next challenge is to uncover the identity of those who left the so-called caliphate, find out where they have gone, assess what risk they pose, and take whatever action is possible to protect the public from harm."***[68]

Given the potential future impact of the current FTF mobilisation, the research community has also identified some of the challenges that will continue make it so difficult for Member States to respond effectively.

59 Focus on Returnees, AVID (2017).

60 Bassou Returning foreign terrorist fighters: An imminent threat to manage - OCP Policy Center (2017).

61 Galperin Donnelly, Sanderson & Fellman Foreign Fighters in History - Center for Strategic & International Studies (2016).

62 de Roy van Zuijdewijn The Foreign Fighters' threat: What history can (not) tell us - Perspectives on Terrorism (2014).

63 Bassou Returning foreign terrorist fighters: An imminent threat to manage - OCP Policy Center (2017).

64 Hegghammer The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View - Perspectives on Terrorism (2016).

65 Bryson For Caliph and Country: Exploring how British Jihadis Join a Global Movement - Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (2017).

66 Heinke German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and its Implications - Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2017).

67 Hegghammer The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View - Perspectives on Terrorism (2016).

68 Barrett Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees - The Soufan Center (2017).

Firstly, as the available data on returnees and relocators (*Section II*) makes clear, **the current fate or location of a significant proportion of FTFs is unknown.** This has been a persistent feature of official figures provided by many Member States. In January 2018, one State noted that around 50 per cent of its FTFs remained unaccounted for.[69]

In addition to the obvious challenges of data reliability in a war zone, Member States have also noted the difficulty of identifying individuals leaving the conflict zones as FTFs and their potential use of stolen or forged travel documents.[70]

Resolution 2396 (2017) calls on Member States to strengthen measures to prevent the transit of terrorists. These include ensuring that identity documents are not forged, employing evidence-based risk assessments, screening procedures, and the collection and analysis of travel data to identify individuals who posed a terrorist threat. It also underlines the importance of strengthening international cooperation, and calls upon Member States to improve the exchange of operational information and financial intelligence in relation to FTFs.

Secondly, the available data for the current FTF wave (*Sections I and II*) illustrates **the size of the challenge facing Member States**. Assessing the risk posed by FTF returnees is both difficult - owing to the many potential motivations for outward travel and subsequent return - and resource intensive. For example, in 2014, the Australian security services estimated that it would cost the equivalent of $7.4 million per year to monitor one returnee.[71] Yet for many Member States, **returnees are just one element of a much broader terrorist threat**, each of which requires significant resourcing.

Resolution 2396 (2017) calls on Member States to help build the capacity of other Member States to address the threat posed by FTF returnees and relocators and their accompanying family members, prioritising those Member States most affected by the threat.

Thirdly, even if Member States succeed in locating returning or relocating FTFs and assessing the risk they pose, research has highlighted **the difficulty of securing a criminal conviction** relating to their activities in the conflict zone. Specific challenges in this area include the availability and gathering of evidence and the conversion of intelligence into admissible evidence.[72]

Consequently, it takes time to develop a brief of evidence; some returnees will not meet the required evidentiary threshold, while those that do may only be prosecuted for relatively minor offences, meaning that prison sentences imposed on FTFs can be relatively short.[73] A 2016 European Union report noted that the average prison sentence for all terrorist offences (not limited to FTFs) across the European Union was five years (lower than the reported average for the previous two years).[74]

69 "Minister admits half of UK's ISIL jihadists are unaccounted for", The Daily Telegraph (2018).

70 Sixth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) (S/2018/80).

71 Byman & Shapiro Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq - The Brookings Institution (2015).

72 Paulussen & Pitcher Prosecuting (Potential) Foreign Fighters: Legislative and Practical Challenges - International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (2018).

73 Reed & Pohl Tackling the Surge of Returning Foreign Fighters - International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (2017).

74 European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2017.

Resolution 2396 (2017) calls upon Member States to share best practices and technical expertise with a view to improving the collection, handling, preservation and sharing of relevant information and evidence, including information obtained from the internet or in conflict zones. It also underscores the need for Member States to strengthen international judicial cooperation, and to consider strengthening the implementation of respective bilateral and multilateral treaties concerning extradition and Mutual Legal Assistance.

Lastly, in view of the above challenges, there is a risk that **imprisonment may only delay the threat posed by these individuals, not reduce it**.[75] FTFs may regard their time in prison as an opportunity to continue the "struggle",[76] and create new networks or organizational structures with the intent of conducting operational activity upon their release.[77]

As a result, Member States have continued to investigate the appropriateness and effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for incarcerated FTFs, but also develop non-custodial programmes targeted at returnees assessed to pose less risk, and FTF family members. Many of these programmes have therefore incorporated a gender dimension, and more recently, also focused on measures to rehabilitate and reintegrate younger children returning from conflict zones.

Council resolution 2396 (2017) encourages Member States to develop tools that can help address radicalization to violence and terrorist recruitment in prisons, and calls upon Member States to develop and implement comprehensive and tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies with respect to FTFs, emphasising that women and children associated with FTFs require special focus.

CONCLUSIONS

Member States face the potential return or relocation of an FTF group that is larger and more global than any of its predecessors, but also more diverse in terms of age, gender, and experience in the conflict zones. Effective responses will therefore require not only increased capacity and strengthened international cooperation, but also a more nuanced approach, which recognizes the complexity and diversity of returning and relocating FTFs, and their families.

The parts of Council resolution 2396 (2017) highlighted above reflect just some of the elements that will be critical in the development of a coordinated and comprehensive international response to the challenge posed by FTF returnees and relocators.

The research cited in the present report also makes it clear that the challenge will require a long-term response. Although the impact of returning and relocating FTFs has not been as significant as many feared, FTFs returning or relocating from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic have already demonstrated their potential lethality, both as attackers and as attack planners.

75 Heinke German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and its Implications - Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2017).

76 Neumann Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalization and De-radicalization in 15 countries - The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (2010).

77 Neumann & Basra The Crime-Terror Nexus in the United Kingdom and Ireland - The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (2017).

In addition to this overt threat, returnees and relocators (like their predecessors) are likely to seek a central role in creating or strengthening terrorist groups and in radicalizing and recruiting for new terrorist networks.

These ongoing risks, combined with the limited effectiveness of many current in-prison rehabilitation programmes and the relative youth of the FTF group (including children trained and indoctrinated by ISIL in the conflict zones), mean that many FTFs will remain a *potential* problem for years to come.

The global research community has an important role to play in continuing to identify terrorism trends and in analysing Member States' policies to identify good practices in responding to the returnee and relocator threat. In view of the vital need for evidence-based research that is regionally diverse and generates insights into all States and regions most impacted by the FTF phenomenon, the research community will continue to benefit from Member States sharing information on their national challenges (where appropriate).

ANNEX

Response of the Committee and CTED

Since 2014, the Counter-Terrorism Committee and CTED have guided and supported Member States in their efforts to address the FTF threat in accordance with the relevant Council resolutions, particularly resolution 2178 (2014):

- In 2015, CTED published three reports on the implementation of resolution 2178 (2014) by the 77 Member States most affected by the FTF phenomenon[78]
- In December 2015, in order to help establish an effective global strategy against the FTF threat, the Committee adopted a set of guiding principles - the **Madrid Guiding Principles (S/2015/939)**[79] - which provide clear, practical and actionable guidance on stemming the flow of FTFs
- In November 2015, the Committee held an open meeting on FTFs with CTED's Global Research Network (GRN), focused in part on rehabilitation and reintegration strategies
- On 1 July 2016, the Permanent Missions of Italy and Spain to the United Nations held a joint event on "Criminal Justice Aspects of Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration – Lessons from the Madrid Special Meeting of the [Counter-Terrorism Committee] and the Madrid Guiding Principles"
- In August 2017, CTED updated its ***Technical guide to the implementation of Security Council resolution 1373 (2001) and other relevant resolutions,*** which includes guidance on addressing the FTF threat. The ***Technical guide*** will shortly be issued in all six official languages of the United Nations and will also be available on the Committee's website[80]
- In November 2017, the Committee held a second open meeting with the GRN. The discussions focused in part on the evolving threat posed by returning and relocating FTFs.

Next steps

Security Council resolution 2396 (2017) requests that the Committee and CTED review the Madrid Guiding Principles, in light of the evolving threat of FTFs, particularly returnees, relocators and their families.

In this regard, the Committee plans to hold a special meeting to review the Madrid Guiding Principles in the autumn of 2018, with the support of international, regional and subregional organizations; Member States; and civil society.

The resolution further requests that:

- CTED continue to identify new good practices and to facilitate delivery of technical assistance, especially to the most-affected regions
- CTED continue to collect and develop best practices on the systematic categorization, collection and sharing of biometric data by Member States, in coordination with UNODC, other relevant United Nations bodies, INTERPOL, and the private sector
- The Office of Counter-Terrorism, in close cooperation with CTED, review the United Nations Capacity-Building

78 See S/2015/338, S/2015/683, and S/2015/975 (available on the Counter-Terrorism Committee's website).

79 The Guiding Principles may be consulted at https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Madrid-Guiding-Principles_EN.pdf.

80 https://www.un.org/sc/ctc.

Implementation Plan to Counter the Flow of FTFs, in order to ensure that it effectively supports Member States to implement the priority measures set forth in the resolution.

Those priority measures are:

- The establishment of effective advance passenger information (API) systems
- The development of Passenger Name Record (PNR) capability
- The development of effective biometric data systems
- The improvement of judicial procedures
- The development of comprehensive and tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies.

The Committee and CTED will continue to work with other United Nations entities; international, regional and subregional organizations; the private sector; and civil society, including academia, to assist Member States in their efforts to implement these measures.

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