Countering Foreign Fighter Flows

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Estimates of the number of foreign fighters engaged in the civil war in Syria and/or the insurgency in Iraq range between 10,000 and 18,000. Although the concern in Western countries that these foreign fighters may turn into domestic terrorists if and when they go home makes an assumption that is not yet proven - that those who decide to go away to fight the Syrian or Iraqi governments will be equally motivated later to fight their own - the risk is certainly there. This is particularly true for those who went off to fight after mid 2014, when the likelihood of their ending up with the Islamic State (ISIL) or Jabhat al Nusra (JaN) increased considerably, and was well known to them before they set off.

But there are a few things to remember: first most foreign fighters are from other Middle East and North African countries, and that is where the greatest risk of consequent terrorism lies; second, ISIL for one has been careless with its foreign fighter contingent, having thrown large numbers into Kobane to face almost certain death in a battle of no purpose, rather than use them against overseas targets; third there is no clear evidence of a directed plot in the West by either ISIL or JaN; fourth, ISIL and JaN are going to some lengths to recruit new forces from overseas, while giving those supporters who can't come only the very vaguest of instructions to kill whoever they can however they can wherever they can; the networks they have set up are so far one-way routes.

The threat however is real, and the likelihood of terrorist attacks, particularly against coalition partners, increases from ISIL with every set back that it suffers, and, from JaN, with every ISIL success. The Charlie Hebdo attack demonstrated that the terrorist 'spectacular' is now defined by the response, rather than the act itself, and the asymmetry of terrorism remains its greatest appeal.

Prevention can best be achieved by leveraging the disadvantages of ISIL and JaN rather than by attacking their strengths. The decision to join these groups is generally an emotional one, and taking away passports or banning travel are not dissuasive, even if they are effective. Nor are state-run counter-narrative appeals, which have been shown to reach very few - if any - potential travellers. Parents, friends and peers are more likely able to ensure that an individual does not progress too far down the road of admiration for ISIL or JaN. It is still extremely rare that a recruit will travel without discussion with and encouragement from someone else in his circle.

Increasingly recruitment networks assist foreign fighter travel, and comprise people who do not make decisions based on emotions. These networks should be targeted before anything else.

But above all, it is important to build social resilience to terrorism and to project clarity of purpose. The reaction to terrorist attacks is completely disproportionate to their impact, and the government should be doing what it can to wind down the fear mongering. Also, the desired coalition end state in Syria and Iraq is totally obscure. It appears predicated on the assumption that ISIL and JaN can be completely obliterated, leaving no mark on society or its infrastructure. There has to be far greater effort to understand the regional drivers of conflict and deal with them, than agonize over the reasons why people emerging into adulthood may feel rootless and angry.

Broadly speaking, there are currently two policy approaches to deterring people from fighting in Syria or dealing with them when they come back. One is to stigmatize all participation and to threaten those who go with legal or administrative consequences, confiscating passports or even revoking nationality. The other is to do everything possible to help returnees to reintegrate. In some countries these two policies exist side by side.

Penalizing travel may discourage fighters from returning who have become disillusioned or even disgusted by what they have seen, or feel they have done what they set out to do and just want to go home. This is a shame as such returnees are unlikely to pose a threat, particularly in the short term, and can be effective messengers when it comes to countering the appeal of extremist groups in Syria and Iraq. But the problem remains of how to sift out those who may just return to their old lives or perhaps need some help to reintegrate, from those who pose a risk to society.

There are several countries that have initiated programs to help extremists reintegrate, particularly if they have not participated directly in violent acts. The Saudi rehabilitation program is probably the most elaborate and best known, and although few countries will be able to provide the facilities that exist in Saudi Arabia, national or community level rehabilitation programs are an important adjunct to more traditional security measures. By having close access to returning fighters, trained personnel are able to assess the risk they pose to society, including by examining the likelihood that they have returned with psychological damage or post-traumatic stress disorders. As more women travel to join extremist groups, States will have to decide whether they need to adapt existing programs or introduce new ones to meet the new requirement presented by their return.

The role of families appears to be a significant factor in the success of reintegration programs, just as they often appear to be a factor in a person's decision to travel abroad to fight. If the family cannot offer a welcoming and steadying environment for a returnee, and there is no other community structure, the risk of recidivism or of the returnee developing psychological problems increases.

The international community is united in recognizing the need to collect and exchange information about foreign fighters, but the mechanisms for doing so are not well developed. Turkey has often complained that it receives too little information too late about foreigners suspected of planning to cross the border into Syria in order to join an extremist group. This situation has improved considerably however since early 2014, and by the end of the year, Turkey had well over 7,000 names of foreigners on its stop list.

Raising awareness of the realities in Syria, and removing the image of 'jihadi cool' associated with the war, as perpetuated through social media, can be an effective way to increase the resilience of vulnerable individuals. However, as with any strategic communications campaign, it is important to know how a target audience

receives its news. The reliance of potential foreign fighters on individual posts from Syria to understand what is going on there makes them largely immune to and unimpressed by any sort of broad outreach. Media and policy makers sometimes overlook this fact, and underestimate the impact of what is happening in these other bubbles even as they overestimate the impact of what is happening in their own.

Much has been made of the proselytizing power of social media such as Twitter or Facebook as it relates to violent extremist ideology in general and foreign fighters in Syria in particular, and suggestions are often made to prevent extremists from exploiting this access. Many private sector service providers are ready to take down inappropriate content when notified by the authorities or the public, but there are legal implications in their doing so, and it is not always clear where to draw the line between incitement to violence and freedom of expression. Furthermore, extremist groups are technically capable of ensuring that their systems are robust enough to avoid such counter action, or to limit its impact

The consideration of the threat posed by returning foreign fighters, and the design of policies for dealing with them, would undoubtedly benefit from a close study of their reasons for going and for coming back. Returning fighters could play a significant role in helping the State or their community to understand the true nature of ISIL and JaN and so mitigate their appeal. A returning fighter will have a great deal of credibility in radical circles at home, and if he argues against participation in the war, and against the al-Qaeda narrative more generally, this is likely to be more effective than anything a government can do.

In all cases, the challenge of dealing with returning foreign fighters requires a 'whole of government' approach that includes law enforcement and security organisations working with social services and local authorities, as well as with communities and the private sector. Policies have to emerge from an understanding of the principal factors that create foreign fighters, the consequences of being there, and the pressures that send people back home.