

Disentangling the EU Foreign Fighter Threat: the Case for a Comprehensive Approach

Alastair Reed and Johanna Pohl

Islamic extremists returning from fighting in Iraq and Syria pose a massive problem for European policymakers. But there are no quick fixes.

As the battle for Mosul in Iraq rages on, many experts and policymakers have already begun to focus on what the inevitable defeat of Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) will mean for Europe. Across the corridors of power in Brussels there is a widespread fear that the collapse of the organisation will lead to a surge in foreign fighters returning to Europe. In October, the EU Commissioner for the Security Union, Sir Julian King, [warned](#):

Re-taking the Islamic State stronghold in northern Iraq can lead to a scenario in which violent militants would return to Europe ... This is a very serious threat and we must be prepared to face it.

Similarly, EU Counterterrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove [cautioned](#) that the bloc would struggle to handle the predicted 1,500–2,000 foreign fighters who may return if Daesh is driven out of its strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa, in Syria. On the other side of the pond, the new US administration has already taken steps to address, among other things, the potential danger posed by returning foreign fighters by attempting to [introduce an entry ban](#) affecting seven majority-Muslim countries.

As the events in Syria and Iraq unfold, it is clear that Europe's foreign fighter problem is far from over and that, in fact, the worst is most likely yet to come. In this context, now more than ever, it is crucial that policymakers get to grips with the complex nature of the foreign fighter phenomenon in

order to design and implement effective countermeasures.

Even though security circles have been grappling with the foreign fighter phenomenon for a long time, the eruption of the conflict in Syria has seen the issue rise to greater prominence in the public consciousness. With an unprecedented number of foreign fighters from numerous countries [attracted](#) to the conflict, policymakers are viewing the problem with a sense of urgency. This is despite a lack of clarity about the evolving threat and its various manifestations.

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Mirroring the development of the threat, the initial focus on foreign fighters – those who left to join conflicts abroad – shifted to include those who have returned from conflict theatres and then those who did not leave their home countries. Often, this shift featured a blurring between terrorism and other issues: for instance, media coverage of recent terror attacks frequently alluded to the supposed [mental health problems of the perpetrators](#), despite scant evidence of the presence and nature of those problems. Similarly, the refugee

crisis has been framed as providing terrorists with a [free pass to enter the EU](#), while, in reality, terrorists posing as refugees remain [rare exceptions](#). Both narratives, propagated chiefly by the mainstream media, further confuse the debate.

The EU still lacks an agreed definition of what a foreign fighter is; rather it uses the terms 'Terrorist', 'Foreign Fighter' and 'Foreign Terrorist Fighter' interchangeably. On top of this, individual member states' own definitions [vary](#) widely. This lack of clarity has not only led to much confusion, it has also resulted in a lack of a shared perception of the foreign fighter threat.

What we have seen, as European governments seek to address the threat, are a series of piecemeal policies designed to tackle various issues perceived to be related in a wider sense to the phenomenon of foreign fighters. While many such measures are straightforward and implemented in numerous affected countries – such as legislation prohibiting the financing of terrorism – others appear vague both in terms of their aims and the ways to achieve them.

Among these vague measures that seem to target not only terrorism and extremism, but also a growing public perception of insecurity, is the UK's proposed Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill. It was [branded](#) as 'confusing' by a parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights in July for using overly broad definitions of extremism and largely covering offences that fall under already existing laws.



Floral tributes outside the Bataclan Theatre in memory of the victims of the November 2015 Paris attacks. The alleged mastermind behind the attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, fought with Daesh in Syria before returning to Europe. *Courtesy of Adam Davy, PA Archive/PA Images.*

Similarly, the ongoing and costly [deployment](#) of military troops in France's main cities under its *Vigipirate* national security alert system, and even the ['burkini ban'](#) briefly implemented in parts of the country last year, attest to uncertainty regarding the concrete objectives of counterterrorism measures. And, not least, political expediency plays a crucial role in confronting the problem of foreign fighters.

In this environment of knee-jerk reactions, there appears to be little understanding of the threat's multiple dimensions and, more importantly, how these are interconnected. Unless we tackle the totality of the threat using an integrated approach, we may simply displace activity. Likewise, tackling one

aspect of the threat will necessarily impact the others, and, in turn, may have unintended consequences.

How Do We Do It Better?

As the previous examples illustrate, a lack of understanding is leading to quick fixes, rather than strategic solutions, to respond to arising security needs. To counteract this lack of understanding and the resulting incoherence, it is helpful to conceptualise the threat connected to foreign fighters as four distinct but interlinked aspects. [These](#) must be tackled collectively in order to be successful.

First, the travel of foreign fighters to conflict zones remains a major source

of concern, largely because of the likelihood that they will become more radicalised in the process, in addition to the training and experience they will gain in the field.

An often under-acknowledged aspect is the violence against civilians they may carry out in their host country. We have seen foreign fighters inflict the most barbarous acts of terrorism on the local civilian populations, but preventing this has, with [few notable exceptions](#), rarely been the primary concern of Western governments.

As Daesh continues to lose ground in Syria and Iraq, we might not just see a reversal of the foreign fighter flow, but also new flows to emerging hotspots. Increasingly, Daesh is likely to direct

resources to its affiliates across Africa and Asia.

Second, the return of foreign fighters to their home countries is widely seen as the greatest threat. Returnees may come back to carry out attacks themselves, or facilitate logistical, financial and recruitment activity at home. [Reports](#) of centrally dispatched terrorist units as well as returnees having been involved in large-scale attacks, such as Paris and Brussels, underline the potential threat from returning foreign fighters, even though individuals may follow [different pathways](#) upon their return.

While the overwhelming fear of policymakers and the public alike is returning foreign fighters planning acts of terror in their home countries, the reality is that this only represents a minority of cases, with many more seeking to leave behind a life of extremist violence.

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Thomas Hegghammer's analyses of foreign fighter-related attacks, for instance, assert that merely [one in nine returnees](#) perpetrated attacks in the West between 1990–2010, with that number decreasing vastly for the Syrian conflict, to [one in 360](#). Thus, for the majority of returning foreign fighters, assistance in returning to normal life and dealing with mental illness such as post-traumatic stress disorder is a more necessary policy response.

Third, the fear generated by the foreign fighter phenomenon has negatively impacted social cohesion across Europe and has fed into the increasing polarisation over the refugee crisis. In fact, in many tabloid headlines the two have become irresponsibly conflated.

With populism [on the rise](#) in many European countries and the US, anti-Muslim sentiment has been central to the political campaigns of the far right. For instance, The German

party Alternative für Deutschland – [polling](#) as the third-strongest party in the country – has recently confirmed its stance on the matter, adopting the phrase 'Islam is not part of Germany' [in its manifesto](#).

Reassuring increasingly fearful voters, while not alienating Muslim communities, will remain a balancing act for politicians in the years to come. However, this balancing act will only become more difficult in the coming years, if we also see a rise in violence by left-wing extremists in reaction to the rise of the right.

Lastly, an increased risk is posed by lone actors and home-grown terrorists who do not travel to conflict areas abroad. These commit attacks in nominal affiliation with terrorist groups in their countries of residence. There are those who, having been prevented from travelling to Syria or Iraq, subsequently choose to carry out an attack in their home country, as was the case for one of the perpetrators of the [Charlie Hebdo attack](#) in January 2015. Then there are those who never intended to travel, but were inspired by the foreign fighter phenomenon to carry out lone-actor attacks in their home country. Such attacks have been on the rise in recent months: the June 2016 nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, and two attacks in Würzburg and Ansbach, Germany the following month are believed to have been carried out by lone perpetrators.

Daesh has long encouraged such lone-actor attacks, with spokesperson Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani [calling](#) on supporters to carry out attacks in their home countries in May 2016.

Linking the Four Dimensions

Tackling these four interlinked threats requires systematic consideration of the law of unintended consequences – targeting one threat may have a negative impact on the others. For example, if policy aims to prevent people travelling to Syria and Iraq, for instance by revoking their passports, there is a risk that those people will prepare terrorist attacks as lone actors in their home country.

On the other hand, there is a serious risk that if people are allowed to travel

to Syria and Iraq, they will contribute not only to violence there but also assist in the planning or preparation of terrorist attacks back home or in a third country.

And even if policymakers prioritise domestic over foreign security by allowing foreign fighters to leave, but not return, the threat may simply evolve as they move to third countries and organise themselves in places in which thorough surveillance is impossible. This issue of where Daesh fighters will go, as they are driven out of its strongholds is a growing concern.

The only way to tackle the foreign fighter phenomenon is a comprehensive approach that addresses all dimensions of the threat, while focusing on its most salient aspects. Thus, a priority on rehabilitating returned foreign fighters needs to go hand-in-hand with emphasis on security-centric measures, such as the surveillance of homegrown networks and sympathisers, to prevent both travel abroad and attacks at home. Security cooperation with third states, as well as improved border control mechanisms beyond the EU, are essential in monitoring and counteracting the displacement of foreign fighters. Lastly, and perhaps the most difficult dimension, is the potential inherent in the foreign fighter phenomenon to divide the West's increasingly multiethnic societies.

Refraining from grand security policy gestures to appease conservative voters requires true leadership in the face of upcoming elections and populist parties on the rise. Nevertheless, sober judgment of which policy measures do, in fact, address the foreign fighter phenomenon in a comprehensive manner is the only way to be effective in countering it.

Dr Alastair Reed

Acting Director of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague.

Johanna Pohl

Programme Assistant at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague.