9 Are returning foreign fighters future terrorists?

YES: returning foreign fighters are future terrorists

Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn

Introduction

One of the most fundamental questions in terrorism studies is how to define terrorism (see Chapter 1). This typical opening remark of many publications on the subject is often followed by the phrase, 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'. The definitional issue in relation to the phenomenon of foreign fighters is confronted with similar fundamental questions and extreme differences in points of view. It is, however, a question that has become increasingly relevant against the backdrop of today's foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq. It has been estimated that there are more than 30,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq of which about 4,000 originate from Western countries (Bakker and Singleton 2016). In recent years, most of them have joined groups that are on the lists of the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) or national lists of designated terrorist organisations. The so-called Islamic State (IS) and the organisation Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFaS) – formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra – are the two most important ones.

The question 'are returning foreign fighters future terrorists' is also highly topical, as an increasing number of foreign fighters are now returning to their home countries and more are likely to do so in the near future. Some have described these returnees as 'ticking time bombs' (Busse 2013), and the phenomenon of returning foreign fighters has contributed to higher terrorism threat levels in many Western countries (see, for instance, NCTV 2013). Terrorist attacks like the ones in Paris and Brussels with the alleged involvement of returned fighters have made this question even more pressing. In light of these developments, authorities and societies have to take a stand on their status: are they to be regarded as (future) terrorists or not? Obviously, the answer to that question has important legal implications for any returning foreign fighter as well as for the way societies look at the phenomenon of (returning) foreign fighters in general.

In this chapter, we will answer this question affirmatively when looking at today's (returning) jihadist foreign fighters. We arrive at this answer by studying returning foreign fighters from a historical and empirical perspective, from a legal perspective and from an ideological perspective. First, we will focus on the empirical evidence available about the involvement

of returned foreign fighters in terrorism in the past and the present. Second, we will look at what the ideology of jihadist foreign fighters tells us about the link between foreign fighting and terrorism. Third, we will address the question from a legal perspective by comparing the organisations that foreign fighters have joined with the UN and EU lists of designated terrorist organisations. These lists express the dominant political and legal position of UN and EU Member States vis-à-vis groups such as IS and JFaS, which has direct consequences for those who have joined these organisations after their return to these Member States. In the final part of the chapter, we will reflect upon these findings and their policy implications.

Foreign fighters: historical and empirical evidence

A first way to approach the question of whether returned foreign fighters are future terrorists is by looking at what has happened in past cases of foreign fighters returning from the battlefields. Have they been involved in terrorism after coming home, and have they been regarded as a (terrorist) threat? In order to answer this question, we first have to define the term 'foreign fighter' and explore a number of historical cases before looking into the current case of jihadist foreign fighters travelling to and from Syria and Iraq.

According to David Malet, whose study is seen as one of the most thorough and useful studies into the foreign fighter phenomenon, foreign fighters can be defined as 'non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts' (Malet 2013: 9). By stressing the idea that their primary goal is to fight in an insurgency and civil conflict, this would technically exclude persons who merely travel abroad to join a terrorist training camp. In his book, Malet studies some historical examples of foreign fighting, such as the Texas Revolution (1835–1836) and the Israeli War of Independence (1947–1949). He also investigates a textbook example of a conflict that attracted many foreign fighters: the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). That conflict saw an influx of thousands of foreign fighters, most of whom – more than 40,000 – joined the International Brigades or like-minded Communist groups on the 'Republican' side fighting against the 'Nationalist' side led by General Francisco Franco (Malet 2013). What this conflict and other ones have in common is that they call upon foreign fighters to protect a certain transnational identity that is perceived as being under attack.

In these historical cases, a link between foreign fighting and terrorism was not often made. Until the late 1980s, returning foreign fighters were not regarded as a future terrorist threat. This does not mean, however, that they have always received a warm welcome upon return. Many countries had legislation in place that criminalised the act of joining a force not fighting under their own national flag. As shown by David Malet, the United States was the first country which, by passing the Neutrality Act in 1794, made it illegal for citizens or inhabitants to be commissioned in other countries' military forces or work to recruit or enlist others (Malet 2013). Practices like this continued in later centuries. For instance, Dutchmen who joined the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War lost their citizenship (Vossen 2006). While these and other foreign fighters were often treated with suspicion, they were rarely explicitly linked to a potential terrorist threat.

The Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1988) was, in retrospect, perhaps the beginning of a new era in foreign fighting where the link with terrorism became more visible and frequently debated. Thousands of foreign fighters came to join the local Afghan warriors in their struggle against the Soviet Union. Many of these *mujahideen* – those who engage in jihad, also known as holy warriors – who travelled to the country were inspired by the words of Palestinian Sheikh Abdullah Azzam. Azzam argued that it was an individual obligation – *fard*

ayn – for all Muslims to join the struggle or jihad when the Islamic community – *ummah* – was threatened (Azzam 1987). This call upon a transnational identity was not new. What was different this time was that a group of foreign fighters was not only interested in the conflict itself, but also in violence elsewhere. A number of these *mujahideen* set up a transnational organisation which later became known as al-Qaeda: the group behind the largest terrorist attack seen to date, the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 (see Chapter 8). This link between the war in Afghanistan and the attacks on 9/11 inextricably connected the issue of foreign fighting to that of terrorism. And al-Qaeda was not the only group of veteran foreign fighters who turned to terrorism.

There are, in fact, several other examples of links between foreign fighters who joined jihadist groups and terrorism. Studies on foreign fighters in Afghanistan and places such as Bosnia and Somalia show how some returning foreign fighters became involved in terrorist activities upon return (Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker 2014). However, faced with a lack of reliable empirical data, it is hard to assess the scale of involvement of returned fighters in terrorist activity. We do not know the percentage of future terrorists among the total amount of returning foreign fighters, partly because we do not know the total number of foreign fighters who joined a conflict (see, for instance, Hegghammer 2013). Despite this shortcoming, most studies seem to agree on one thing: in the past, only a very small minority of returning foreign fighters was involved in terrorist activities in their country of origin (Hegghammer 2013; Roy van Zuijdewijn 2014). However, it should be stressed that almost all exceptions to this general rule are linked to jihadist foreign fighting. Moreover, the returning jihadist veterans also played an important role in the development of home-grown terrorism in Europe. They used Europe as a home base to support the violent jihad abroad but increasingly also in the countries in which they had settled.

The so-called Roubaix Gang is a telling example. This was a French jihadist network active in the 1990s that included a number of returned fighters from the Bosnian War (1992–1995). Christophe Caze and Lionel Dumont were among the leaders of this network, both French converts who had fought in that war. In 1996, they were arrested after a car filled with explosives was found in the proximity of a G-7 meeting in Lille (Nesser 2008). And there are many instances of returning foreign fighters who supported terrorist groups from their home country by spreading propaganda or recruiting people. Well known are the networks that were established in London, Milan and Madrid that were linked to al-Qaeda (Vidino 2006). Another example of future terrorist activities by former foreign fighters is that of persons who did not return to their country of origin but to another country from which they supported terrorist groups. Think of Abu Hamza al-Masri who travelled from his country of residence, the United Kingdom, to the battlefields in Afghanistan and Bosnia, and upon return became one of the key figures of the Finsbury mosque in London in the late 1990s (Egerton 2011). He has played a very important role in motivating young people to become jihadist foreign fighters. In 2015, he was convicted on many terrorism charges, including that of setting up a terrorist training camp in the United States (BBC 2015). While these are just a few examples, they show that returning foreign fighters can, indeed, become future terrorists.

Foreign fighting and terrorism today

Although the historical cases include some examples of returnees who became involved in terrorism, this was rather exceptional. Today, the question of a potential link between foreign fighting and terrorism seems to attract much more attention than it did in the past. Since late

2012, many authorities have publicly warned of the possible threat posed by returnees from Syria and Iraq. In April 2013, British Foreign Secretary William Hague said that

> [n]ot all of them are radical when they leave, but most likely many of them will be radicalised there, will be trained (. . .) And as we've seen this might lead to a serious threat when they get back.

> (McElroy 2013)

In several countries, threat levels were raised (see, for instance, NCTV 2013). Unfortunately, the threat turned out to be real. Three years later, we have witnessed several jihadist attacks in the West of which the most lethal one, the November 2015 Paris attacks, was perpetrated – among others – by returned foreign fighters.

List of recent attacks in the West that involved at least one returned foreign fighter among the perpetrators:

- Brussels, May 2014, Jewish Museum attack – death toll: 4
- Paris, January 2015, Charlie Hebdo – death toll: 12
- Paris, November 2015, Paris attacks – death toll: 130
- Brussels, March 2016, attack on airport and metro – death toll: 32

While the foreign fighter issue today is clearly dominated by what is happening in Syria and Iraq, there are other ongoing conflicts of a non-jihadist nature that attract foreign fighters as well. One interesting example is the conflict in Ukraine and its border zone with the Russian Federation. This has attracted a few hundred foreign fighters, not taking into account all the Russian military personnel who volunteered to join armed units (Rekawek 2015).

Whereas non-jihadist foreign fighters might also pose a potential threat to security, the jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are without doubt regarded as such. In a poll by the Pew Research Center in June 2016, surveying what European citizens think is the most important threat to their country, IS ranked number one in no less than nine out of the ten surveyed countries (Stokes et al. 2016). While the threat posed by IS is certainly not fully determined by returned foreign fighters, the latter do form a critical part of it as can be derived from both an increasing number of terrorist-related activities and some very lethal attacks involving returning foreign fighters. In addition to that, more than in the past, these activities and attacks are accompanied by (1) the organisation of a network of sleeper cells, (2) threats to send foreign fighters back home using asylum seeker routes to attack the West, and (3) calls upon jihadists worldwide to strike at home. These developments bring us to the ideological side of jihadist foreign fighting.

Ideological perspective

A second way to approach the question of whether returned foreign fighters are future terrorists is by looking into their ideology. The ideologies that foreign fighters adhere to are very diverse. They range from left-wing and right-wing ideologies, to political-religious and ethno-nationalist ones. These ideologies provide a collection of beliefs that determine the

goals, expectations and motivations of groups and individuals. These ideas also determine the strategies and tactics that are used by extremist groups and decide who is friend and who is foe, as well as the boundaries of the battlefield.

In most past cases, the battlefield and the home country were seen as two separate places, which meant that the battle did not continue in or was spread to the home countries. This holds in particular for foreign fighters fighting for an ethno-nationalist cause. But many non-ethno-nationalist foreign fighters also restricted their fight to a local or regional battlefield, even if their ideology is of a transnational nature. Think of the historical cases of Western European foreign fighters who took part in the Winter War in Finland (1939–1940) and left-wing revolutionary foreign fighters in Colombia (1960s-2016). In other words, they did make a distinction between the country or region in which the war took place and the rest of the world, including their country of origin.

This is different for jihadist groups who see foreign battlefields also as an opportunity to prepare for attacks elsewhere, including their countries of origin. Fawaz Gerges shows that the Arabs and other foreigners who fought the Soviet army in Afghanistan in the 1980s also used this as an opportunity to train and organise themselves to confront enemy regimes back home (the 'near enemy') (Gerges 2005). Moreover, some groups within the jihadist movement that emerged in Afghanistan developed a more global agenda. According to Gerges, in the mid-1990s, the leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, launched his globalist strategy of giving priority to attacking the 'far enemy' in the West. His second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, stated that 'battle today cannot be fought on just a regional level without taking into account global hostility' (quoted in Gerges 2005: 6). Hence, the West and the 'near enemy' – the perceived apostate regimes in the Islamic world – became part of the same global battlefield. This ideological development has made jihadists a potential threat beyond the conflict in which they fight. Hence, on the basis of their ideology, jihadist foreign fighters should be regarded as persons who might continue their fight after returning to their home country. Moreover, if they fought with a group that used terrorist tactics, they should be regarded as terrorists.

This holds in particular for those who joined the so-called Islamic State. IS adheres to a global jihadist ideology and, more so than al-Qaeda and other jihadist organisations, has put the global aspect into practice. Its leaders have repeatedly called for IS sympathisers to attack their home countries by any means possible. For instance, the late spokesman of IS, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, gave the following advice to Muslims living in the West:

> The best thing you can do is to make an effort to kill an infidel, French, American, or any other of their allies. . . . Smash his head with a rock, slaughter him with a knife, run him over with a car, throw him from a high place, choke him or poison him.
>
> (quoted from Schmid and Tinnes 2015: 8)

They also have threatened to send foreign fighters back to their countries of origin. Moreover, IS has set up a branch called Amn al-Kharji which is 'responsible for selecting and training external operatives and for planning terrorist attacks in areas outside of IS's core territory, including those within European borders' (Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2016). There are some indications that IS uses the refugee stream for the infiltration of (returning) foreign fighters into Europe (Schmid 2016).

This brings us to the most worrisome part of the ideology of jihadist groups in general and IS in particular: it is not just talk and empty threats, but also a deadly reality. IS has openly and actively turned the jihadist battlefield into a global one, in which the home

country is explicitly seen as one of the front lines. The organisation is sending people to the trenches at this front, explicitly selecting returning foreign fighters. In other words, to groups such as IS – harbouring the majority of today's foreign fighters – returning foreign fighters are supposed to remain fighters. And, as groups such as IS are generally regarded as terrorist groups and their fighters as terrorists, the returning fighters must be regarded as terrorists as well. The labelling of Islamic State as a terrorist organisation brings us to the legal approach to determine whether returning foreign fighters are future terrorists.

Legal perspective

When looking at the legal side of the question whether foreign fighters are future terrorists, we have to make a distinction between those who are fighting on the side of a group that is on a list of designated terrorist organisations and those who joined other groups. Such lists have many consequences for those on it and are not without controversy, as the criteria and procedures for putting organisations on such lists are not always transparent. However, they are widely used by many national governments, as well as by the European Union and the United Nations, in order to take legal action against terrorist groups: to establish sanctions against them – such as the freezing of their funds and the prevention of entry of their members to a country – or to deter others to support these groups financially, militarily or otherwise.

The European Union has two lists of designated terrorist organisations that provide for different sanctions for the two groups. The first is an autonomous list of groups and individuals involved in terrorist acts and subject to restrictive measures. The second list is the EU regime implementing UN Security Council resolution 1989 (2011) on the freezing of funds of persons and entities associated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, including IS. The UN has more than one list as well. On these UN lists are a number of groups that have attracted foreign fighters, some of which are also mentioned on the UNSC Resolution 1989 list. The most noticeable ones on the list are IS (listed as al-Qaeda in Iraq), al-Shabaab, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (listed as Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant) and other associates of al-Qaeda.

In many countries, foreign fighters who have joined one of the groups that are on the UN, the EU or national lists of designated terrorist organisations are automatically regarded as terrorists upon return. In these cases, from a legal perspective, their intentions for their return, as well as their future plans, do not matter much. If there is convincing evidence they joined a terrorist group, these countries will prosecute and convict them for membership of a terrorist organisation. This is different for foreign fighters who did not join a designated terrorist organisation. Today, this holds for instance for those who joined Kurdish militias in Syria and Iraq, or a Ukrainian or Russian separatist group in Ukraine. This is not to say that there are no legal implications for these returning foreign fighters. In some cases, they are arrested upon return if there are indications they were involved in war crimes.

In the past, many returning foreign fighters had to face legal consequences. A classic example is that of those who joined the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. As described in the earlier section on the historical perspective, many of them lost their passport and even their nationality. And although many countries raised questions about their loyalty, they were, in general, not expected to turn to violence against the government or the public in their home country and were not regarded future terrorists.

Today, this is very different for those who joined jihadist groups that are on lists of designated terrorist organisations, inspired by an ideology dictating that the home country is part of the battlefield, and that they have used returning foreign fighters to stage attacks back

home and have threatened to continue to do so in the future. Hence, with national laws and the lists of designated terrorist organisations in hand, many governments of the country of origin of foreign fighters, regard and treat these persons as future terrorists.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we have argued that returning foreign fighters are future terrorists. We approached this question from three different perspectives: a historical/empirical perspective, an ideological perspective and a legal perspective. We have shown that there are examples of foreign fighters who became terrorists in the past, that certain groups that foreign fighters join adhere to ideologies that permit or even advocate for terrorist attacks by returnees and that today's foreign fighters often already are terrorists as they have joined designated terrorist organisations.

Looking at the same three perspectives, it must be noted that the situation is quite complex and that a simple 'yes' or 'no' does not suffice to fully answer the question whether returning foreign fighters are future terrorists. Pointing at these nuances is typical for academics. However, the answer to the question whether returning foreign fighters are future terrorists allows much less nuance to those that are responsible for the security of others. Think of national political leaders, public prosecutors or analysts at intelligence services. In all these positions, the person who has to answer the question is confronted with incomplete information about the individual who has just returned. To them, the question of whether this person should be seen as a future terrorist is not only a difficult question, but also one with serious implications. A wrong answer to this question can have serious consequences regarding the safety of others. The current situation in Syria and Iraq indicates that most foreign fighters have joined terrorist organisations such as Islamic State. In the past years, attacks in Brussels and Paris have shown that some returning foreign fighters have, indeed, become implicated in terrorist attacks, including the most deadly one in recent years. In that particular context, and given the pressure to keep societies safe from terrorism, there is probably only one sensible answer: yes, returning foreign fighters should primarily be regarded as future terrorists.

In practice, this means that authorities in many countries are now starting up investigations when a fighter returns to see if he or she had been involved in terrorist activities in Syria and Iraq. If there are sufficient indications, this will lead to prosecution. In these cases, the returning foreign fighter is, in fact, not thought to be a future terrorist, but an actual terrorist. If there are no indications, there is still reason to see him or her as a potential terrorist threat. The leadership of the Islamic State and the foreign fighters themselves have made it very clear – both in their actions (attacks) and words (calls to attack) – that terrorist attacks by returnees are seen as legitimate and desirable. If grounds for prosecution are too thin, the returned foreign fighter should be closely monitored by intelligence and security services in order to see if he or she might get involved in terrorist activities. Against the backdrop of recent attacks and threats, 'better safe than sorry' has become the leading adage. Just waiting to see what happens is not an option, which leaves regarding returning foreign fighters as potential terrorists as the only policy option.

This, however, should not result in a deterministic view that all returnees will become terrorists. On the contrary, it is important to keep in mind that future terrorists will probably constitute a small minority of all of today's returnees. That is why it is essential to try to establish a reliable picture of returnees as quickly as possible to determine who should also be treated as a terrorist or a potential terrorist and who should be regarded as a penitent who needs to be helped to resume his or her normal life after returning home.

NO: terrorists returning home were not radicalised abroad

Richard Bach Jensen and Felix Lippe

Introduction

Politicians and the media, as well as some voices from academia, argue that the next great security threat to Western countries will be from people who have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight for jihadist groups who then return home and pose a threat to their societies. There are, indeed, more than 10,000 foreign fighters from the OSCE area (ICSR 2017). What is the danger that these individuals pose for Western societies, if any? Importantly, our point is not to argue that foreign fighters will never be involved in terrorist plots in the West or elsewhere. The intention of this chapter is rather to summarize the arguments that speak against this claim. Concretely, we argue that:

* the radicalisation of foreign fighters starts at home, and not abroad;
* not all foreign fighters become terrorists;
* it is home-grown conditions that lead to terrorism abroad and not the presence of foreign fighters;
* most contemporary foreign fighters return disillusioned.

Jihadists have often been compared to the anarchist terrorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even if the differences between the two groups outweigh the similarities, as we would argue, anarchists and Islamist extremists do have some things in common: both have denounced the modern nation state and both have often travelled great distances before carrying out their violent deeds (see, for example, Bach Jensen 2008). Distinct parallels also exist between the imagined community of Islamists and the social networks binding together Islamist fighters throughout the world and the informal networks and internationalism that functioned so effectively for nineteenth-century anarchists. By the turn of the nineteenth century, Italian anarchists had become the world's most famous international terrorists. Domenico Farini, the president of the Italian senate, noted that Italy had acquired an 'infamous primacy' in exporting 'political assassination', so much so that the prominent Parisian newspaper *Le Temps* had written that these 'numerous political assassinations' have 'defined Italians' (Farini 1961, 2: 1198). Italian anarchists assaulted the prime minister of Italy in 1894 and assassinated the president of France in the same year, assaulted the king of Italy in 1897 and assassinated the prime minister of Spain during the same year, murdered the empress of Austria in 1898, and finally succeeded in killing the Italian king in 1900.

Likewise, contemporary jihadism is currently perceived as one of the most serious, if not *the* most serious threat to European security. In the last few years, a series of European countries have experienced multiple terror attacks. On 13 November 2015, a coordinated series of suicide bombings was executed at different locations in Paris; 130 people died and hundreds were wounded during the attack (BBC 2015). A few months later, on 22 March 2016, a series of three suicide bombings hit Brussels, leaving 32 civilians killed and more than 300 injured, making it the deadliest terror attack in Belgium's history (McDonald-Gibson 2017). Again, a few months later, on 19 December, Anis Amri, a 24-year-old asylum seeker from

Tunisia, drove a stolen truck into a large crowd in a Christmas market. Twelve people died, 55 were hospitalised (Anis Amri 2016).

Even though individuals who had spent time in the conflict area in Syria and Iraq were involved in most of these attacks, we argue that the high number of foreign fighters from the OSCE area is not a good index for the likelihood of a terror attack in the West. Our point is that while certain (groups of) individuals are specifically trained and sent to commit terror attacks in the West (see ahead), the majority of the people who fall under the category 'returning foreign fighter' most likely will not be future terrorists.

The radicalisation of foreign fighters occurs at home, and not abroad

Many commentators have alleged that both jihadists and anarchists became radicalised abroad before returning home to carry out terrorist deeds. In both cases, this frequently made charge was almost entirely false. In the past and now, blaming radicalisation on foreign influences has served as a scapegoat to exonerate home countries from having to face their own social, economic and political failings. These failings were at the heart of the discontent that impelled a few individuals, who identified themselves as anarchists, to carry out terrorist deeds.

Contemporary opinion attributed these violent deeds to the radicalisation of naïve Italian emigrants when they travelled abroad. Shortly after the assassination of King Umberto in 1900, Italy's most influential newspaper cited approvingly a Berlin newspaper's assertion that 'poverty there [in Italy] is great and widespread, and emigration is unlimited, and the poor emigrants fall easily into the temptation of anarchism, which has its schools abroad and then launches its blows everywhere' (*Corriere della Sera* 1900). In November 1902, the prominent Rome newspaper *La Tribuna* provided another example of how deeply ingrained was the stereotype of the migrant as incipient anarchist terrorist. *La Tribuna* declared that the 'greatest part of the active anarchists' were 'Italians' but that 'their anarchist formation' was carried out 'under other skies'. The famous assassins 'Angiolillo, Sepido [*sic*; Sipido], Lucheni, Caserio, and Bresci were born in Italy' but their 'spirit and their consciousness became disordered in Switzerland, England, Spain and above all in the United States, everywhere, except among us [here in Italy]'. This proved, *La Tribuna* asserted, that 'the secret meetings, the schools of anarchism can flourish more easily elsewhere than among us, which is not a small reason for satisfaction' (*La Tribuna* 1902).

Among the 27 Italian anarchist terrorists, only three or four became anarchists after departing from Italy. The vast majority of Italian anarchists radicalised at home *before* departing abroad. Even in cases where conversion to anarchism occurred abroad, the underlying causes for this radicalisation were, in fact, at home. A partial exception can perhaps be found in Luigi Lucheni, who spent little time in Switzerland prior to his assassination attempt. Lucheni left the peninsula about 3.5 months before murdering the Austrian Empress Elisabeth in September 1898 while she was on a visit to Geneva. Lucheni journeyed to prosperous Switzerland looking for work after being fired from his job as a servant in Italy. For a brief spell, he frequented the meetings of the Salvation Army, but then fell in with the anarchists of Lausanne and apparently underwent a sudden conversion of faith to anarchism and propaganda by the deed, that is violent assaults on bourgeois society. Previously, he had been a staunch supporter of authority, including the Italian monarchy, and had worked for a time as the servant of an Italian duke who had formerly been his commanding officer in the army (Cappon 1998: 22).

The situation of Italians in Switzerland, marked by discrimination and abuse, being called 'macaronis' and other disparaging names, and hired for the lowest paying and most menial jobs, led to a good number becoming involved in strikes and other labour disputes (Cappon 1998: 23–4). All this helps to account for Lucheni's radicalisation, although his personal background was also a key factor. As a baby, his mother had abandoned him to an orphanage, and this primal hurt seems to have been an even greater source of unhappiness than his poverty and hard times in Switzerland (which the Swiss authorities denied). At his trial, Lucheni said he wanted to 'revenge my life' (Cappon 1998: 52–3, 60). The loss of his job, which was mostly his own fault, was also important in unmooring him from Italian society and forcing him into emigration and new life choices.

The vast majority of cases show radicalisation to have occurred at home, before leaving abroad. For example, three other Italian anarchist terrorists – who eventually all became infamous assassins – had been radicalised to a significant degree before leaving Italy and their extremism was only accentuated by or during their residence abroad. Two (Sante Caserio and Michele Angiolillo) of the three assassins of heads of state and government had been forced to leave Italy by conflicts with the authorities; the third (Gaetano Bresci) had also suffered from government persecution, although that was not the only reason he left Italy. Caserio fled to Switzerland and then France after being sentenced to 8 months in prison for distributing anti-militarist pamphlets to soldiers. In Switzerland and in the small town of Cette, France, where he worked for 8 months, Caserio interacted with local anarchists, although we know little about his dealings with them. He may also have had some brief connections with anarchists in Vienne and nearby Lyon.

Caserio, however, denied any anarchist conspiracy to kill the president of France, and no substantive evidence of such a conspiracy was ever uncovered. At his trial, Caserio complained about the life of those 'in the most wretched misery' who were forced to leave their countries to find work elsewhere – as he himself had been forced to do (*Dbai* n.d.; Truche 1994: 124–5; 163). But more crucial than his hardships in France and the influence of local anarchists seems to have been his strong pre-existing devotion to the anarchist ideal and his anger at the news that President Carnot had refused to commute the anarchist Vaillant's death sentence. In December 1893, Vaillant had bombed the French parliament, but this deed had been largely symbolic, causing relatively little injury and killing no one.

In the case of Angiolillo and Bresci, radicalisation had also begun earlier. Angiolillo had been disciplined in the army for spreading subversive propaganda and later was sentenced, once again for subversive propaganda, to 18 months in prison. The latter sentence convinced Angiolillo to flee Italy in 1895. Before Gaetano Bresci immigrated to the United States, he had been even more radicalised than Angiolillo by his harsh experiences in Italy. Bresci had gotten into trouble with the Italian police, had been listed as a dangerous anarchist and spent a long period of forced exile on a remote island under police supervision. At his trial, Bresci declared that one of the reasons he had carried out the assassination of King Umberto was 'to revenge myself, forced, after a very difficult life, to emigrate' (Petacco 1969: 91). But, according to one historian, the proximate cause of Bresci's emigration may not have been because of political persecution, but rather to get away from a romantic entanglement (Bresci was very much the ladies' man) or because of the welcoming letters of friends who had already left Italy (Petacco 1969: 21–2). His most recent biographer emphasises his general alienation, due not only to his reputation as a radical but also to quarrels with his brothers and his lack of work (Galzerano 2001: 117).

The notion that the radicalisation of foreign fighters starts at home rather than abroad is also true for the Islamist foreign fighters who left their home country to join the IS, as the

following two examples of known European foreign fighters, who represent two key figures in the pro-IS German-speaking jihadi scene, illustrate. Denis Cuspert aka Deso Dogg aka Abu Talha al-Almani had a very problematic childhood in Berlin Kreuzberg: his Ghanaian father is said to have left the family, and, apparently, Cuspert had a difficult relationship with his stepfather (Riedel 2015). As with many of the peers in his neighbourhood, Cuspert joined a street gang. However, this lifestyle did not bring the status he had hoped for, but rather several prison sentences (Riedel 2015). The rap career he opted for afterwards seems not to have worked too well either; before releasing his last album, he announced he would quit his music career because he was not satisfied with his success. He came into contact with the local Salafist scene, and in the Al-Nur mosque in Berlin, he met Pierre Vogel (a successful German Salafi preacher), a meeting that would leave a lasting impression on Cuspert (Riedel 2015). In 2010, he announced he would become a preacher. Two years later, after 'Millatu Ibrahim' (Abraham's Religion), a Salafist group founded by him and Mohamed Mahmoud from Austria, was shut down by the authorities, he managed to fly to Egypt and later to Libya, even though he was already under surveillance by the German security services (Vogel 2016). He went on to become one of the highest ranking Germans in the IS, responsible for German-speaking propaganda, but also involved in war crimes (Riedel 2015).

Before the two became partners in crime, Mohmed Mahmoud's (aka Abu Usama al-Gharib) journey to become a 'second Bin Laden' started in Vienna (IS Kämpfer Mohamed Mahmoud 2015). His father, an Imam and allegedly a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, sent him to a Saudi Arabian private school (Schreiber 2017). As a consequence, he learned German only when he was 12 years old, which might be one of the reasons he felt like a stranger during his youth (his battle name means 'the stranger'; Schreiber 2017). One of the preachers who regularly gave sermons at his father's mosque was later arrested for terrorism-related charges. One could thus make the point that Mahmoud was born into a radical milieu (Schreiber 2017). When he came of age, he made a trip to Syria and Iraq, where he claims to have undergone an al-Qaeda training camp.

Back in Austria, he founded the 'Islamische Jugend Österreich' (Islamic Youth Austria) and the 'Globale Islamische Medienfront' (GIMF; Global Islamic Media Front). After he drew the authorities' attention to his person and his activities, he was arrested and sentenced to 5 years in prison for membership in a terrorist organisation. While serving his prison sentence, he contacted Dennis Cuspert, with whom he would later found the Salafist group, Millatu Ibrahim, in Germany (Schreiber 2017). In order to avoid his deportation from Germany, he went to Egypt and later to Turkey, where he was arrested when he tried to enter Syria using forged documents. After spending a year in a Turkish prison, he joined IS in Syria. Like Denis Cuspert, Mohamed Mahmoud would become one of the most prominent European IS terrorists, involved both in propaganda and war crimes (IS Kämpfer Mohamed Mahmoud 2015).

These two short examples of the radicalisation process of two quite prominent European jihadis illustrate that the root causes of terrorist engagement lie within the environment in which the terrorists grow up. However, what these trips to the Middle East undoubtedly do provide is a professionalisation of the terrorist occupation, something that can be observed in the biographies of many jihadis from Europe.

Foreign fighting is not necessary for terrorism

In the case of the anarchists, according to available but far from complete information, over half of the Italian anarchists involved in terrorist acts from 1881–1914 (15 out of 27

total), had previously travelled outside of their native land prior to their violent deeds. The duration of their residence abroad had ranged from a few months to 9 years, with an average of about 3⅓ years per person. If the cases – apart from that of Lucheni – that we have discussed so far show that the immigrant experience formed at most a secondary cause of a subsequent terrorist act, other examples of anarchist violence show no linkage at all. Most significantly, one of the greatest of all Italian diasporas, the Italian emigration to Argentina, produced only one clear instance of a pre-war terrorist.

Of the individuals actively involved in carrying out the IS terror plots in Europe, 18 of the attackers had spent time in the conflict area under IS control. This is a remarkable number. However, it illustrates that foreign fighting is not a necessary precondition for the involvement in terrorist plots in the West: the majority of terrorists involved in plots in the West had not been foreign fighters. Most of the individuals were, however, specifically selected and trained to commit terrorist attacks in the West. There is evidence of a division under the command of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani (who was reportedly killed in August 2016), within the organisational structures of Daesh, responsible for the orchestration of terror attacks in the West (Callimachi 2016). The main target of this division was Europe, where attackers were specifically trained to commit suicide attacks. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, one of the Paris attackers, was a high-ranking operative of this group, and he selected and trained several individuals for different plots in Europe. Additionally, there are indications of further similar groups. As such, especially concerning their motivation, these (groups of) individuals differ from the majority of returnees, who were disillusioned by the life in or the fight for the caliphate and had to risk their lives to flee from IS (see ahead).

It is home-grown conditions that lead to terrorism abroad and not the presence of foreign fighters

In the anarchists' case, as the experiences of Polti and Schicchi earlier would suggest, London and Paris – but especially Paris – were important centres for radicals, and possible radicalisation, from the end of the 1880s onwards.[1] Political exiles flocked to the two cities, since France and Britain, as well as Switzerland, allowed greater freedom of expression than most other European countries and had long traditions of providing asylum. In Paris, however, the French police sometimes resorted to brutal measures to repress the anarchists. This abuse, together with the economic depression of the 1890s and the discredit into which the French government, tarnished by repeated corruption scandals, had fallen, embittered both native and foreign anarchists. These factors ultimately led to bombings and Paris's great 1892–1894 anarchist reign of terror.

In December 1885, Francesco Momo, born in Livorno, moved to Argentina at the age of 22. Despite this relative moderation and integration into Argentine society, which would seem to make him an unlikely candidate for becoming a terrorist, he travelled to Barcelona in April 1892, and about a year later accidentally blew himself up. This was in March 1893, while he was trying to construct an Orsini bomb, a weapon often used by the anarchists if they could not obtain dynamite. Paulino Pallás, a more successful terrorist who, in September 1893, threw a bomb at the Captain General of Catalonia killing and injuring several bystanders – and thus initiating the Spanish wave of anarchist terror – claimed that Momo had constructed the bomb that Pallás had used. This may, however, have been a ruse to protect the real suppliers (Bayer 1983; Núñez Florencio 1983). Clearly then, Spain, with all its poverty, myriad social problems and corrupt politics, had been decisive in making Momo into a terrorist.

In the case of Syria and Iraq, it has been pointed out that foreign fighters have joined a conflict which was already in existence. Bakker and Singleton (2016: 19), for example, show that the phenomenon of foreign fighters is a consequence of rather than vice versa: 'the foreign fighter phenomenon is essentially a symptom of the profoundly broken politics that afflict the Middle East today and are rooted in history'; furthermore they name the civil wars in Syria and Iraq as the two contemporary contributory factors to this phenomenon.

Most contemporary foreign fighters return disillusioned

A final point is that most of the foreign fighters who left from Europe or other parts of the world to Syria and Iraq to join IS returned disillusioned. One reason IS was so much more successful than their predecessors in recruiting fighters from all over the world is that they were able to offer a physical space, an actual caliphate, for internationals who wanted to join. On various social media platforms, Daesh disseminators have been promoting the good life under their command: kindergartens and schools for children (in which they learned doing math with the help of little Kalashnikov symbols; Molloy 2017), nice cars, good food and a house for every fighter (including a pool for the lucky ones; Roussinos 2013). This is corroborated by the observation that Daesh's foreign fighter recruitment reached its peak after the official proclamation of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the summer of 2014. So, while earlier Islamist terrorist groups like al-Qaeda had to rely on a theoretical narrative, Daesh has a concretisation of the utopian narrative to offer, which has also attracted individuals who fall prey to the idea of living in a state created by Muslims for Muslims, in which discrimination would not be an issue and where living conditions would even be better than in their home country (Moos 2016).

Now the ones who decided to follow the call and joined Daesh in the conflict area soon found out that life under Daesh rule was not as utopian as they thought: the men realised that the conflict was not as much 'everyone against Assad' as they thought, but consisted of a series of factions which were also fighting one another;[2] that Daesh, which in its online propaganda warned its sympathisers not to smoke tobacco,[3] used drugs to keep their soldiers' spirits up (Radden Keefe 2016) and that if anyone committed war crimes against Muslims, it was Daesh themselves. The women, on the other hand, were confronted with very bad hygiene conditions, especially in women's houses, the constraint of wearing niqab at a temperature of 45 degrees, dead bodies on their children's way from school and, in some cases, forced marriages (Bloom 2015). The majority of these people, who were not attracted by the idea of a global jihad against all infidels, but a better life in the caliphate or helping the civilians of Syria (by fighting Assad's troops), came back disillusioned by the actions of Daesh, and importantly, since global jihad was not their main motivation to leave, it will most likely not be something they will continue back in their home country, especially not in the name of Daesh (RAN 2016; Reed and Pohl 2017). One might even argue that for those who were fascinated by the idea of 'playing war' in the lawless wild west situation in the area of conflict in Syria and Iraq, it is quite unlikely that they would continue terrorist activities in their not-so-wild-west home countries.

Conclusion

Radicalised dissidents emigrated, but emigration did not produce anarchist radicals, or at least, anarchist terrorists. At most, the emigrant experience may have heightened a pre-existing radicalism or given a more precise configuration to its violent expression. The

claim by *La Tribuna* and other newspapers that life 'under other skies' created terrorists was wrong. It was also self-serving since it scapegoated foreign countries for anarchist violence rather than asking whether its sources might be found within a country's own myriad socio-economic and political problems. In the jihadi case as well, it was (personal) experiences at home that, if at all, can account for the radicalisation of the individuals who left for Syria and Iraq. Their travel there was only the consequence thereof.

Another point worth emphasising is that, in the pre-World War I era, travelling anarchists and revolutionaries almost always spread terrorism to countries and territories where local conditions already favoured its outbreak. Before 1914, in places where economic malaise and social repression exacerbated discontent and where government authoritarianism and brutality made peaceful protest and labour action ineffectual or impossible, revolutionaries and anarchists found an eager audience and fertile ground for extreme actions. These were the crucial factors in fomenting anarchist terrorism, not travelling or fighting abroad. Similarly, the conflict in Syria did not emerge because of foreign fighting, but had deeper and especially, local, roots, as we have shown. Finally, foreign fighters, who return disillusioned and are unlikely to pose a security threat in the future. What we can, therefore, conclude from this account is that the exclusive attention of authorities on foreign fighters is not only exaggerated, but also dangerous, given that the sources of terrorism are clearly home grown.

Discussion questions

1 Are foreign fighters who adhere to a transnational ideology more dangerous than foreign fighters who fight for a national cause?
2 Which factors determine why the situation today regarding jihadist foreign fighters is so much different from historical cases of foreign fighting?
3 Should returning foreign fighters who have been prosecuted and convicted for terrorist offences still be regarded and treated as future terrorists after their release from prison?
4 How can we improve research into the question of who might pose a terrorist threat and who might not?
5 Which legal actions have been taken by European governments in response to the rise of the phenomenon of (returning) foreign fighters?
6 Does joining a fighting force that is on the UN or other lists of designated terrorist organisations automatically make someone a terrorist?
7 What caused the Italian anarchists to carry out their violent deeds?
8 To what extent, if any, did residence abroad turn peaceful Italians into anarchist terrorists?
9 What is more important concerning the treatment of returnees: repression or reintegration?
10 Should a woman, who is lured to Syria to marry a fighter and live in the caliphate, be sentenced as a member of a terrorist organisation when she returns? What if she brings her children to the warzone?

Notes

1 The London *Evening News* (17 December 1897) estimated that the total number of anarchists of all nationalities in the British capital amounted to 8,000.
2 According to information collected by the second author during the observation of court trials involving IS returnees.
3 According to information collected by the second author in IS-related Telegram channels.

Further readings

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