The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat:

Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon

In light of Islamic State's decreasing military power and growing emphasis on a decentralised operational strategy, the threat posed by foreign fighters is shifting, with some aspects becoming less threatening as others become more salient. This Policy Brief provides a concise outline of four main threats related to the issue of foreign fighters with the aim of clarifying the parameters of the phenomenon in its current manifestation: the travel of foreign fighters, their return to their countries of residence, the threat posed by lone actors and sympathisers who carry out attacks at home, and finally, an increasing polarisation of society. It is argued that policymakers need to take into account the second and third order effects that targeting one of these aspects may have on the others in order to effectively counter a multi-dimensional phenomenon.

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About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Introduction

Increased terrorist activity in Europe over the past few years, termed by some a "crisis of jihadism",[1] has kept policymakers across the continent busy. As argued by a Europol report in November 2016, "[t]he EU is currently witnessing an upward trend in the scale, frequency and impact of terrorist attacks in the jurisdictions of Member States".[2] What began, for Europe, mainly as a problem of foreign fighter travel has, against the backdrop of concurrent sociopolitical phenomena, slowly broadened to include many other aspects – terrorist attacks on domestic soil, political polarisation of groups within society, anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiment, and the rise of populism and nativist movements, to name a few.

As the foreign fighter phenomenon further evolves, policymakers need to adapt to a changing threat. With a decreasing number of foreign fighters leaving Western Europe, some aspects of the foreign fighter phenomenon may become less threatening as others become more salient. This Policy Brief provides a concise outline of four threats related to the issue of foreign fighters, with the aim of clarifying the parameters of the phenomenon in its current manifestation: the travel of foreign fighters, their return to their countries of residence, the threat posed by lone actors and sympathisers who carry out attacks at home, and finally, an increasing polarisation of society. The main argument set out in this Policy Brief is that these four aspects of the threat are distinct but interconnected, and form part of the same continuum. Thus, changes in one of the aspects have an impact on the others, and policies designed to counter one aspect of the foreign fighter threat may have second and third order effects on the other aspects. As such, policies need to take into account the linkages between the four threat dimensions in order to be effective.

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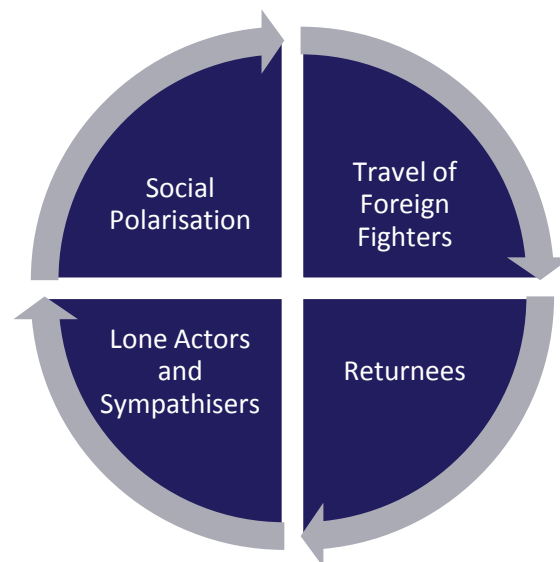
[1] T. Hegghammer, "The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 6 (2016), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/566/html.

[2] Europol, "Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks", Review held by experts from Member States and Europol on 29 November and 1 December 2015, 18 January 2016, https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/changes-in-modus-operandi-of-islamic-state-terrorist-attacks.

The Travel of Foreign Fighters to Conflict Theatres

With so-called Islamic State (IS) losing territory in Syria and Iraq, the number of foreign fighters leaving to join the group is decreasing: U.S. intelligence assessments suggested that the number of foreign fighters crossing the border from Turkey fell from 2000 each month to about 50 in September 2016.[3] Likewise, governments in France, Germany, Belgium and the UK have reported fewer foreign fighters leaving their territories compared to previous years.[4] However, as of October 2016, 15,000 foreign fighters were estimated to remain in Syria and Iraq.[5] Similarly, as of April 2016, approximately 2000 foreign fighters who travelled from European countries were thought to remain in conflict zones.[6] Hence, the question of why foreign fighter travel poses a threat remains relevant.

The primary fear of governments is that the travel of foreign fighters contributes to their radicalisation and the acquisition of capabilities to carry out terrorist attacks.[7] Not only may foreign fighters learn how to handle weapons and explosives, or to use techniques such as beheadings or suicide bombings, they also establish links to jihadist organisations worldwide.[8] Perhaps most significantly, foreign fighters commit severe crimes in conflict theatres and contribute to the use of terrorism in the wars they join.[9] Infamously, it was British citizen Mohammed Emwazi who beheaded the American journalist James Foley in August 2014 in the first such video released by IS.[10] Hereafter, videos emerged showing the decapitation of journalists and aid workers and documenting the mass murder of Syrian and Kurdish soldiers as well as Coptic and Ethiopian Christians.[11] In many of these videos, foreign fighters from all over the world

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[3] G. Witte, S. Raghavan and J. McAuley, "Flow of foreign fighters plummets as Islamic State loses its edge", *The Washington Post*, 9 September 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/flow-of-foreign-fighters-plummets-as-isis-loses-its-edge/2016/09/09/ed3e0dda-751b-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html?utm_term=.5dae2699acd5.

[4] Ibid.; T. Mehra, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2016), https://icct.nl/publication/foreign-terrorist-fighters-trends-dynamics-and-policy-responses/; M. Bewarder and F. Flade, "Manche kommen zurück, „um sich zu erholen"", *Welt Online,* 28 November 2016, https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article159797782/Manche-kommen-zurueck-um-sich-zu-erholen.html.

[5] Interpol, "INTERPOL Chief warns of dangerous gaps in global screening for foreign terrorist fighters", 21 October 2016, https://www.interpol.int/News-and-media/News/2016/N2016-136.

[6] About 47% of a European foreign fighter contingent of 3,900-4,300 people were estimated to remain abroad. B. van Ginkel and E. Entenmann, eds., "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 2 (2016), https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf.

[7] D. Weggemans, E. Bakker and P. Grol, "Who Are They and Why do They Go?: The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no 4 (2014), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/365/718.

[8] D. Byman, "The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 8 (2015), http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1031556?journalCode=uter20.

[9] T. Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad", *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010), http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023.

[10] S. Mekhennet and A. Goldman, "'Jihadi John': Islamic State killer is identified as Londoner Mohammed Emwazi", *The Washington Post,* 26 February 2015, "https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/jihadi-john-the-islamic-state-killer-behind-the-mask-is-a-young-londoner/2015/02/25/d6dbab16-bc43-11e4-bdfa-b8e8f594e6ee_story.html.

[11] Ibid.

– including European countries – were featured[12], contributing to the realisation that Western foreign fighters were committing atrocities abroad.[13] While the threat posed by foreign fighters to Western citizens has often been the primary focus of Western governments, the violence they commit against the population of their host nations must not be overlooked. Indeed, according to the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, the majority of victims of Islamist terrorism worldwide over the past 15 years have been Muslims.[14]

With IS' power in Syria and Iraq decreasing, foreign fighters may also choose to travel to third countries and join other conflicts in places where thorough surveillance is impossible, as is the case with Libya, which has seen an increased influx of foreign fighters over the past two years.[15]

The Return of Foreign Fighters to their Countries of Residence

With IS' territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria increasingly within reach, officials in Europe are worried about a surge of returning foreign fighters. The newly-appointed EU Commissioner for the Security Union, Julian King, recently warned that, "[r]e-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".[16] Similarly, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove cautioned that the EU would struggle to handle the predicted 1,500-2,000 foreign fighters that may return if ISIS is driven out of its strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa.[17] As of April 2017, approximately 20 to 30 percent foreign fighters had left Iraq and Syria,[18] and, as of April 2016, an estimated 30 percent of the EU foreign fighter contingent at the time had already returned to their countries of residence, equalling about 1,200 people.[19]

Motivations of returning foreign fighters are diverse. While some are disillusioned with terrorist practices and life in conflict zones, others may return with the aim of carrying

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[12] P. Allen, J. Hall, L. Brown, A. Dolan and D. Martin, "ISIS' International Death Squad: Jihadist Executioners in Beheading Video Include Two Britons, Two Frenchmen and a German", *The Daily Mail,* 17 November 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2837742/Now-two-Frenchmen-German-jihadist-identified-ISIS-executioners-sick-beheading-video-Extremist-killers-came-Europe.html.

[13] E. Bakker and J. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, "Jihadist Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Western Europe: A Low-Probability, High-Impact Threat", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 6, no. 9 (2015), https://icct.nl/publication/jihadist-foreign-fighter-phenomenon-in-western-europe-a-low-probability-high-impact-threat/.

[14] M. Farivar, "Most Terrorism Victims Are in Muslim Majority Countries", *Voice of America News*, 25 August 2016, http://www.voanews.com/a/most-terrorism-victims-are-in-mulim-majority-countires/3478905.html.

[15] UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed to Libya and neighbouring countries, including off the coast of Libya, by foreign terrorist fighters recruited by or joining Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities", S/2016/627, 18 July 2016, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/627.

[16] "'Mosul offensive may see violent ISIS militants going back to Europe' – EU security commissioner", *RT*, 18 October 2016, https://www.rt.com/news/363125-isis-mosul-militants-europe/.

[17] C. Vallance, "Collapse of IS will lead to attacks, say EU officials", *BBC News*, 18 October 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37691490.

[18] Z. Fellmann, T. M. Sanderson and M. Galperin Donnelly, "Foreign Fighter Fallout. Their Strategic Impact", Center for Strategic & International Studies, April 2017, http://foreignfighters.csis.org/fallout_foreign_fighter_project.pdf.

[19] B. van Ginkel and E. Entenmann, eds., "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union" (2016).

out terrorist attacks, with reports suggesting that IS may systematically export terror cells to Europe.[20] Indeed, the November 2015 attacks in Paris as well as the attacks in Brussels in March 2016 were carried out by IS returnees, underscoring the threat of capable and radicalised fighters forced to relocate as IS progressively loses control over its territory. Yet another group of returnees, as argued by Clarke and Amarasingam, could be termed the "disengaged but not disillusioned".[21] Those include fighters who have returned from the battlefield for pragmatic reasons, such as family events or battle fatigue, while still subscribing to the overall jihadi ideology.

The threat of returning foreign fighters is further compounded by the refugee crisis: although it cannot be generalised that terrorists systematically hide among the flow of refugees when trying to enter Europe,[22] the fact that several of the perpetrators of the Paris attacks in November 2015 did enter Europe by posing as refugees highlights the threat posed by limited control over the migratory flow.[23]

In addition, returnees may also pose a threat if they do not plan to carry out attacks themselves, but initiate or engage in logistical, financial, or recruitment cells, or become leaders in extremist societies.[24] More charismatic and educated returnees, for instance, may have a status as bridge builders, developing strategies for transnational recruitment. More practically, returnees may be involved in the facilitation of travel of new foreign fighters.[25]

It is important to note that returnees who carry out attacks in their countries of residence are a small minority of cases. Analysing the role of foreign fighters in Western terrorist plots, Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser found that approximately 1 in 360 returnees perpetrated an attack after their return.[26] Conversely, a study by German intelligence services found that approximately half of German returnees remained engaged in extremist or Salafist environments.[27] Hence, while the export of terror may not be the primary goal of most returnees, they may continue to pose a threat mainly by upholding and performing secondary functions within extremist networks.

Security services of EU countries will need to identify which returnees continue to pose a threat and develop targeted strategies to counter that threat. With some services more able to deal with returnees than others,[28] countering the threat of returning

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[20] R. Callimachi, "How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers", *The New York Times*, 3 August 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/world/middleeast/isis-german-recruit-interview.html.

[21] C. Clarke and A. Amarasingam, "Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls?", *The Atlantic,* 6 March 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/isis-foreign-fighter-jihad-syria-iraq/518313/.

[22] Europol, "Changes in Modus Operandi of Islamic State Revisited", November 2016, https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/changes-in-modus-operandi-of-islamic-state-revisited.

[23] "Paris attacks: Who were the attackers?", *BBC Online*, 27 April 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34832512.

[24] Europol, "TE-SAT 2016. European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016", 2016, https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/europol_tesat_2016.pdf.

[25] For a more elaborate account of the role of facilitation in connecting potential foreign fighters to the insurgent entity they want to join, see T. Holman, "'Gonna Get Myself Connected': The Role of Facilitation in Foreign Fighter Mobilizations", *Perspectives of Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (2016), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/497/html.

[26] T. Hegghammer and P. Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440/html.

[27] M. Bewarder and F. Flade, "Manche kommen zurück, „um sich zu erholen"", 28 November 2016.

[28] C. Clarke and A. Amarasingam, "Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls?", 6 March 2017.

foreign fighters on an EU level will prove challenging, and motivated fighters may try to exploit free movement within the Schengen borders to avoid detection.

Attacks by Lone Actors and IS Sympathisers

With its fortunes decreasing in Syria and Iraq, IS has shifted its strategy to increasingly target Western countries by calling on its supporters in the West to carry out attacks on soft targets in their home countries.[29] Lone actors, sleeper networks and home-grown radicalised individuals who do not join terrorist organisations abroad have been identified as a risk by European officials.[30] As EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator De Kerchove confirmed, "[i]t would be a big mistake to just believe that the threat is coming from outside. We have a lot of people prone to radicalisation inside Europe".[31] The threat of lone actors and sympathisers crystallised after the attacks on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in January 2015,[32] in which one of the perpetrators was prevented from traveling to Syria to join IS prior to the attack. Since then, attacks perpetrated by individuals who had not previously fought with IS abroad have become more common: the Nice attack in July 2016, attacks in the German cities of Ansbach and Würzburg in the same month, the attack on a Berlin Christmas market in December 2016, and the London Parliament attack in March 2017 are examples of sympathisers carrying out attacks in Europe on behalf of IS without previously having fought with the organisation in foreign conflict theatres.

Plots by IS sympathisers can be considered a threat for two reasons: they are more frequent and more likely to come to execution than plots involving returned foreign fighters.[33] At the same time, it is difficult for security services to track the activities of such individuals, making their behaviour highly unpredictable.

Increasingly, IS has sought to exploit this weakness by calling on its supporters to carry out attacks at home if they cannot travel to the caliphate. In May 2016, a message by IS spokesperson Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani rallied supporters to "[g]et prepared, be ready ... to make it a month of calamity everywhere for the non-believers ... especially for the fighters and supporters of the caliphate in Europe and America".[34]

This has been accompanied by articles in IS propaganda giving instructions on how to carry out attacks, such as the "Just Terror" section in Rumiyah, IS' latest English language publication, and instructional videos, such as "How to slaughter the disbelievers", released by IS in November 2016.[35]

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[29] "Islamic State calls for attacks on the West during Ramadan in audio message", *Reuters*, 22 May 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamicstate-idUSKCN0YC0OG.

[30] Europol, "Changes in Modus Operandi of Islamic State Revisited", November 2016.

[31] A. Sandford, "Europol warns of ISIL's evolving terror threat in Europe", Euronews, 2 December 2016, http://www.euronews.com/2016/12/02/europol-warns-of-isil-s-evolving-terror-threat-in-europe.

[32] Rob Wainwright, head of Europol for instance declared: "what the events in Paris [....] show is that there is also a threat, clearly, from sleeping networks, dormant networks, that suddenly can reawaken". UK Home Affairs Committee, "Oral evidence: Counter-terrorism in Europe", HC 933, 13 January 2015, http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/counterterrorism-in-europe/oral/17575.html.

[33] T. Hegghammer and P. Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West" (2015).

[34] "Islamic State calls for attacks on the West during Ramadan in audio message", *Reuters*, 22 May 2016.

[35] H. Ingram, "Jihadist Threat in 2017", *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 11 January 2017, http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australian_outlook/jihadist-threat-in-2017/.

Beyond disseminating propaganda material that calls on supporters to carry out attacks, IS is believed to rely on a network of "virtual planners"[36] to groom remote sympathisers into potential attackers and transmit operational and technical knowledge. The attack on a priest in the French town of St.-Étienne-du-Rouvray in July 2016, for instance, is thought to have been directed by a French member of IS' virtual planning cadre. This strategy of relying on facilitators to inspire and direct attacks remotely may become more central to IS' modus operandi in the future, due to the organisation's increasing need to adapt to territorial loss.

Social Polarisation

High profile terrorist attacks targeting European cities, the refugee crisis and concomitant rise of populist sentiment across Europe are creating societal fault lines across the continent. Terrorist activities of Europeans on European soil, in particular, are thought to negatively affect cohesion in society, fostering extremism and a vicious circle of violence and counter-violence.[37]

In 2016, public opinion polls continued to rate immigration and terrorism as the most important issues facing the EU at present, far ahead of socioeconomic issues such as unemployment, the economic situation and crime.[38] Examining the perceived link between migration and terrorism, another poll found that, in eight out of 10 European nations surveyed, 50 percent of the population or more believes that incoming refugees increase the likelihood of terrorism in their country.[39]

Security concerns connected to terrorism and migration have also highlighted the divisions between right and left-wing parts of society: people placing themselves on the right of the ideological spectrum have been found to hold more negative attitudes toward Muslims and minorities in general, to be more concerned about refugees and to show more scepticism with regard to a diverse society.[40] This attitude manifests itself in the rise of populist political parties and groups, which cater to anti-Muslim sentiment through central aspects of their platforms. For instance, The German Party *Alternative für Deutschland* – polling as the third-strongest party in the country at the time of writing[41] – has recently confirmed its stance on the matter, adopting the telling phrase "Islam is not part of Germany" in its manifesto.[42]

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[36] B. Moreng, "ISIS' Virtual Puppeteers", *Foreign Affairs*, 21 September 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-09-21/isis-virtual-puppeteers.

[37] European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU's Response", 15 January 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/documents/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation/docs/communication_on_preventing_radicalisation_and_violence_promoting_extremism_201301_en.pdf.

[38] European Commission, "Standard Eurobarometer 86", Autumn 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/76426.

[39] R. Wike, B. Stokes and K. Simmons, "Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs", Pew Research Center, 11 July 2016, http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/07/11/europeans-fear-wave-of-refugees-will-mean-more-terrorism-fewer-jobs/.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Forsa, " Wenn am nächsten Sonntag Bundestagswahl wäre …", http://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/forsa.htm, accessed 28 March 2016.

[42] H. Horn, "The Voters Who Want Islam Out of Germany", *The Atlantic*, 27 May 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/05/afd-germany-anti-immigration/484700/.

It is important to recognise that these tensions in society may foster radicalisation. Among many other drivers,[43] the radicalisation process among EU foreign fighters appears to be related to the "secular nature" of Western European countries in combination with "a sense of marginali[s]ation among immigrant communities".[44] Increased societal tensions can exacerbate this sense of marginalisation, especially when mainstream political voices adopt populist rhetoric in order to secure right-wing political support.

The Interconnectedness of the Four Threats

The four threat dimensions should be acknowledged as mutually re-enforcing parts of the same problem. Tackling them thus requires consideration of the unwanted impact that policies targeting one may have on the others.

For instance, countering the travel of foreign fighters comes with serious challenges. If policy only aims at preventing individuals from traveling to Syria and Iraq, for instance by revoking their passports, the risk that some of those people prepare terrorist attacks at home as lone actors remains. Countering lone actor terrorism is, in turn, particularly challenging for intelligence services: lone actors' actions are difficult to discern, as they rely on little communication with others. Similarly, differentiating between extremists who actually plan to carry out an attack and those who do not can be problematic.[45] Countering one threat dimension – foreign fighter travel – thus merely shifts the problem, making another threat dimension – terrorism by lone actors or sympathiser groups – more salient.

Other suggested policies attempt to counteract the foreign fighter threat by allowing individuals to leave but not to return. For instance, the mayor of the Dutch city Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, suggested that individuals should not be stopped from traveling to Syria and Iraq in order to join IS, as long as they give up their Dutch passports, thereby preventing them from returning to the country.[46] Although this may seem to solve the threat posed by radicalised individuals at home, it does not address the possibility that a person may further radicalise abroad and plan to carry out or facilitate attacks in their countries of residence or in third countries. It likewise ignores the threat that such a policy would effectively legitimise the export of individuals contributing to international violence and terrorism in foreign conflict theatres. Additionally, foreign fighters who are not allowed to return home may move to a third country and organise themselves in a place where thorough surveillance is impossible.

[43] L. Dawson and A. Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no.3 (2017), pp. 191-210, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2016.1274216.
[44] The Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updates Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq", 2015, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate1.pdf.
[45] E. Bakker and B. de Graaf, "Lone Wolves How to Prevent This Phenomenon?", ICCT Expert Meeting Paper (2010), http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Bakker-deGraaf-EM-Paper-Lone-Wolves.pdf.
[46] "Aboutaleb: 'Wil je naar Syrië? Ga, maar kom niet terug'", *De Volkskrant*, 26 November 2014, http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/aboutaleb-wil-je-naar-syrie-ga-maar-kom-niet-terug~a3798576/.

Such dynamics have already been witnessed in Libya[47] and are expected in the case of Tunisia in the future. [48] And even if foreign fighters resettle temporarily to third countries, it is likely that they will retain some links back to their original countries of residence.

Trade-offs also exist in how to deal with returning foreign fighters. States have generally adopted a variety of policy measures targeting returned foreign fighters, ranging from administrative, to preventive, rehabilitative and criminal justice measures. [49] Out of these, restrictive, security-centred measures, mostly found in the administrative and criminal justice domains, have so far dominated the policy response in European countries. [50] While a number of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes exist across EU countries, there is a lack of knowledge on the success of such programmes in reducing terrorism-related recidivism, mainly due to a lack of evaluation research.[51] Administrative measures, such as travel bans, area restrictions, reporting requirements and restrictions on the possession of communication devices, have increasingly been instruments of choice for governments faced with difficulties in obtaining evidence of criminal behaviour sufficient for prosecution.[52] While these measures have widely been criticised for infringing on individual human rights, [53] they can also increase social polarisation as Muslim groups may feel that their communities are the ones suffering most from such human rights infringements. Beyond these concerns, the adoption of security-centric measures that prevent reintegration of foreign fighters may actually make matters worse in the long run. In a recent study of past foreign fighter cohorts, Malet argues that most foreign fighters reintegrate if given the chance to do so, and that policies of home and host states preventing reintegration are the primary cause for persistent military activity of past jihadist fighters.[54]

Conversely, if policymakers predominantly emphasise preventative and rehabilitative solutions to deal with returned foreign fighters, they may risk losing political support in Europe's increasingly polarised societies and inadvertently push constituents into the arms of right-wing political parties across Europe advocating for a tougher stance on terrorism. Thus, such an approach may increase social polarisation, which, in turn, can indirectly lead to more radicalisation, as Muslim communities feel increasingly marginalised. Naturally, the opposite holds true as well: politicians emphasising security-centric approaches to deal with returnees may appease right-wing voters but alienate Muslim communities and left-wing voters in the process.

Conclusion

[47] N. Gaouette, "U.S. general: Number of ISIS fighters in Libya doubles", *CNN*, 8 April 2016, http://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/08/politics/libya-foreign-fighters-isis-doubles/.
[48] T. Mehra, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses" (2016).
[49] Ibid.
[50] B. van Ginkel and E. Entenmann, eds., "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union" (2016).
[51] B. Schuurman and L. van der Heide, "Foreign fighter returnees & the reintegration challenge", Ran Issue Paper, November 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_foreign_fighter_returnees_reintegration_challenge_112016_en.pdf.
[52] B. Boutin, "Administrative Measures against Foreign Fighters: In Search of Limits and Safeguards", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 12 (2016), https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ICCT-Boutin-Administrative-Measures-December2016-1.pdf; T. Mehra, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses" (2016).
[53] B. Boutin, "Administrative Measures against Foreign Fighters: In Search of Limits and Safeguards" (2016).
[54] D. Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2015.1032151.

As the previous analysis has shown, defining the problem in a one-dimensional way – as mainly concerning either foreign fighter travel, returnees, lone actors or social polarisation – not only disregards the dynamics at play but, more importantly, renders potential remedies ineffective. The four-dimensional model presented in this Policy Brief aims to provide policymakers with an analytic lens through which to view the phenomenon, helping to highlight not just the different dimensions of the threat but the ways in which they are interconnected. As such, the only way to protect society from this increasing threat is to adopt a holistic approach that takes into account and addresses the multiple dimensions. Policymakers need to realise that a focus on security also entails preventative and rehabilitative programmes, as these counter different threat dimensions of the phenomenon as a whole. Likewise, successful counter-terrorism strategies need to address both the local and international level: the surveillance of homegrown networks and sympathisers on one side and cooperation with third states and improved border control mechanisms beyond the EU on the other side are equally important. This also holds true for the 'soft approaches' to the phenomenon: community engagement on the local level needs to be implemented alongside larger counter-narrative strategies targeting distinct parts of terrorist groups' audiences.[55]

Advocating a holistic approach to counter the threat posed by foreign fighters is not new; why then, are states still struggling to coordinate the different aspects of their counter-terrorism policies? Challenges to implementing such an approach lie, for instance, in their multi-agency character. When policymakers deal with problems as they arise, knee-jerk efforts led by one stakeholder may supersede multi-agency planning. Institutionalised communication between different government actors, between government and civil society, as well as with municipalities, is therefore paramount to ensuring that efforts are being coordinated to tackle the threat from all sides and on all levels of governance. Similarly, a comprehensive approach relies on proactive policymaking, taking into account future trends and developments, rather than just providing short-term solutions to present threats. Failure to adopt a holistic approach will, at best, simply not provide protection from all aspects of the threat, and, at worst, fail to identify both the unintended consequences of one-dimensional policy approaches and the displacement effect on terrorist actions.

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[55] See, for example, H. Ingram, "A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016).

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The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon

Alastair Reed, Johanna Pohl and Marjolein Jegerings
June 2017

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