Western Foreign Fighters

Innovations in Responding to the Threat

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STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

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1. Introduction

There are fears among Western governments about the growing threat posed by so-called 'foreign fighters' active in countries such as Syria and Iraq. It is now thought that over 3,000 Europeans have travelled to Syria, whether to fight or deliver humanitarian assistance. The profile of this cohort differs from the norm; there are a higher proportion of women, they are younger, and they are less likely to be known to the authorities. Both the nature and scale of the threat, therefore, are putting pressure on traditional intelligence and law enforcement-based approaches.

"3,000 Europeans have travelled to Syria, whether to fight or deliver humanitarian assistance"

Given the heinous nature of the attacks carried out by ISIS – not least the murder of a number of British and American hostages – it is not surprising that Western governments have taken a firm and resolute stance, including contemplating removing the citizenship of foreign fighters to prevent them returning home. Undoubtedly, intelligence and police-led responses will need to form the cornerstone of our response.

But they will not suffice on their own. If recruits are younger and unknown to the authorities, much more emphasis will need to be placed in the preventive realm with those people closest to these young people; their families and communities.

One of the other striking features of ISIS is its mastery of online communication and propaganda; it is skillfully using the online space to get across its message. In contrast, we have been slow to the table, spending more time talking than doing, which means that in reality ISIS is winning the war of ideas online. This cannot continue.

The speed at which ISIS has emerged and the rapid decline of stability in Syria and parts of Iraq have caught many Western governments and societies off guard. But there have also been pockets of inspired innovation. This report is not a comprehensive account of everything happening across Europe and North America; instead it aims to frame the problem and shine a light on some of the most promising new practices in the hope of speeding up the improvement process. It therefore focuses on those areas of policy not covered elsewhere and does not take on the debate about legal responses, for instance.

"In responding to this challenge we must be balanced and proportionate; so often when we don't manage to do that, we simply end up creating the next problem"

The question of foreign fighters has been preoccupying Western governments over the past year or so, but the jury is out on whether this is – as some have claimed – the most important and serious security challenge facing our societies. To be sure, there are many characteristics of the phenomenon that necessitate a rethink of our traditional approaches, something that this report hopes to contribute towards. In responding to this challenge we must be balanced and proportionate; so often when we don't manage to do that, we simply end up creating the next problem.

2. The nature and scale of the problem

There are fears among Western governments about the threat posed by so-called 'foreign fighters' active in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Somalia and Mali. Foreign fighters – defined as individuals joining conflict in countries outside the West[1] – are growing in number.

While Western governments have long expressed fears over the threat posed by individuals seeking to travel abroad to engage in terrorism-related offences, the ongoing conflict in both Syria and Iraq has resulted in an unprecedented level of mobilisation. The corresponding attractiveness of the Syrian conflict to potential foreign fighters has resulted in a heightened security threat to European and North American citizens and interests both at home and abroad.

This is not the first instance of foreign fighters joining conflicts outside of their countries. There are many historical precedents for this, such as the flow of rebels into Afghanistan in the war against the soviet-backed regime in the 1980s,[2] and the influx of fighters to the Russo-Chechen conflict that began in 1995.[3] However, the Syria-Iraq conflict has generated foreign fighter mobilisation on a scale not seen before.

Although conflicts like Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan went on for much longer, none mobilised as many foreigners as Syria in the same period of time. Indeed, for a number of smaller countries – Denmark and Belgium, for example – the number of residents that have gone to fight in Syria may already

exceed the combined total for all previous conflicts.[4] One of the reasons that Syria has attracted higher numbers is because of its proximity and ease of entry. While a young Muslim in Denmark may be angered at the treatment of Muslims in Burma, finding your way there is more difficult than Iraq or Syria, which are bordered by stable NATO members.

How many have gone?

Given the clandestine nature of the activity and the fact that it can be difficult to track individuals across land borders, statistics are tentative. A widely respected report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) estimated that there were somewhere between 5,000 and 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria from 74 nations.[5] The ICSR report estimates that almost one-fifth (18%) of the foreign fighter population in Syria are Western Europeans, with most recruits coming from France (63–412), UK (43–366), Germany (34–240), Belgium (76–296) and the Netherlands (29–152).[6] The most prominent non-European Western countries are Australia (23–205), Canada (9–100) and the US (17–60). However these figures are dated now. New estimates, such as those of a US intelligence official from September 2014, put figures at 15,000 foreign fighters with 2,000 from the West.[7] Numbers are being adjusted on a regular basis as further information becomes available. For example, estimates of EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, about the number of foreign fighters in Syria from the 28 EU member states have increased from 500 to over 3,000[8] over a relatively short period of time.[9]

The fighting force in Syria is highly multinational. Nearly all Western countries are affected by this problem; including those have not traditionally had issues with Islamist extremism, such as Ireland. A recent report by Richard Barrett of the Soufan Group provides one of the most comprehensive collations of the available statistics on countries of origin.[10] He estimates that they have travelled to Syria from at least 81 countries. The following table – re-produced from his report – provides official government estimates from a number countries. While these numbers almost always significantly underestimate the real scale of the problem, the dataset provides a useful comparative analysis of the relative extent of the problem across countries.

Table 1. Estimates of foreign fighter numbers, some have returned or died (Source: R. Barrett, 2014)

Country	Estimated number who have travelled to Syria
Algeria	About 200
Australia	About 250
Belgium	About 250
Canada	About 30
Denmark	100
Finland	Over 30
France	Over 700
Germany	270
Indonesia	30–60
Ireland	25–30
Kosovo	100–120
Kyrgyzstan	Several
Morocco	About 1,500
The Netherlands	120
Norway	40–50
Russian Federation	Over 800
Saudi Arabia	About 2,500
Singapore	One
Spain	51
Sweden	About 30
Switzerland	About 10
Tunisia	About 3,000
Turkey	About 400
UK	About 400
US	Dozens (70+)

The report also provides a list of other countries from which citizens or residents are reported to have gone to fight in Syria. This has been translated into the map below, underscoring the severity of the phenomenon as a multinational problem.[11]

Figure 1. Highlighting the scale of the problem: countries with foreign fighter nationals (Source data: R. Barrett, 2014)
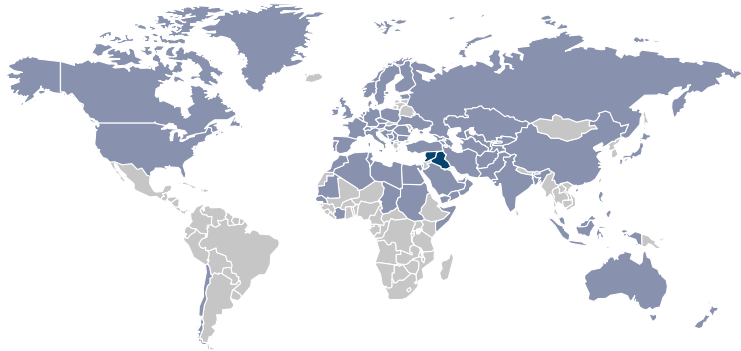
Turkey has largely operated an open door policy thus acting as a crucial and easily-accessible transit route for foreign fighters into Syria, especially as visas are issued on arrival. The proximity of Syria to Europe has made it particularly attractive and low airfares into Turkey make crossing the border into the rebel-held territory of northern Syria much easier. In addition, ICSR research suggests that one of the primary means by which foreign fighters, especially British nationals, enter Syria is under the guise of aid or humanitarian work. The relevance of this is that it further complicates a distinction between legitimate aid agencies and groups that are facilitating the transfer of foreign fighters.[12]

The geo-strategic significance of the Middle East is also relevant. This is especially true of Iraq as former core of the ancient Abbasid caliphate.[13] According to the Syrian Observatory for Human rights, a reliable data-gathering source for the conflict, following ISIS's 'declaration' of a caliphate

in June 2014 there was a surge of recruitment in the following month. Estimates state 1,000 out of 6,300 recruits were Western. A second surge occurred in September following US President Obama's commitment to launching airstrikes to target the group.[14] In both incidences ISIS called on Muslims to join the 'holy war' and this ideological facet created a strong incentive for people to join.

There are a variety of ideological profiles among rebel factions within Syria, and the choice of group is not always an active one on the part of the potential recruit. Some have little or no knowledge of the different groups before they travel, and reports from returning fighters suggest that the recruitment process is as much to do with which group calls at your safe house on the day you happen to arrive, as it is to do with a predetermination on the part of the individual.[15] Regardless, there are similarities; initially motivations stemmed from opposition to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but more recently have turned into sectarian conflict across the region.

Who are they?

Data on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of Western foreign fighters are patchy. It has been estimated that 6% of foreign fighters from EU countries are converts to Islam, many are second or third generation immigrants, very few have a prior connection with Syria, and almost one-fifth (18%) are women.[16] These numbers vary significantly between source countries. Efforts to prevent individuals leaving are hampered by the fact that a large proportion of those going have not previously been under the focus of security services. Many Europeans and North Americans do not have prior experience or training.

The average age-range drawn from across Western countries is 18–29, much younger than in previous conflicts such as Afghanistan where the typical age range was 25–35.[17] Raffaello Pantucci has suggested that the conflict in Syria remains primarily attractive to teenagers,[18] although the average age of French foreign fighters is 27 whilst estimates of both Belgian and UK nationals place the average ages at 23.5.[19]

Socio-economic studies have been conducted into the backgrounds of some foreign fighters using public records.[20] There is no singular pattern

for socio-economic status or personality, and indicators such as poverty or a lack of education are not generally considered primary motivational forces. For example Ibrahim al-Mazwagi, the first British Jihadist killed in Syria, previously held employment and was enrolled at university before fighting in the Katiba al-Muhajireen Battalion.[21]

There have also been examples of husbands and wives travelling, such as the late Christian-born and US-raised Yusuf Ali and his wife Amira Ali, both 22.[22] Although relatively less is known about women who travel, their numbers are increasing, and previous estimates have placed them somewhere between 10–15% of those leaving from Europe. It is thought that 30 have travelled from Sweden,[23] 50–60 from the UK[24] and 63 from France.[25] Again, there is no single profile; females as young as 15 have travelled, such as German-born Sara who married shortly after her arrival to Syria.[26] It is thought that some join all-female units to ensure that women in ISIS-controlled areas abide by strict doctrine, with others traveling in the hope they will marry and start families.[27]

Family ties have also been an important factor. There have been several cases of siblings travelling to Syria either together or soon after one another.[28] Generally, however, Western travelers have been met with strong opposition from their family members, many of whom may make contact with their children and try to encourage them to return.[29]

Why are they going?

Just as there is no single profile of violent extremists, there is no one discernible 'type' of foreign fighter. From ignorant novices who view the trips as a rite of passage, to die-hard militants looking for combat and martyrdom, and individuals who go for humanitarian reasons but get drawn into conflict, individuals become foreign fighters for a range of reasons: boredom; intergenerational tensions; the search for greater meaning in life; perceived adventure; attempts to impress the local community or the opposite sex; a desire for increased credibility; to belong or gain peer acceptance; revenge; to redress local and regional grievances; family members encouraging each other; or misguided conflict experience expectations.

"From ignorant novices who view the trips as a rite of passage, to die-hard militants looking for combat and martyrdom, and individuals who go for humanitarian reasons but get drawn into conflict, individuals become foreign fighters for a range of reasons"

Many early travelers to Syria went to protect the local population from Assad – not necessarily because of animosity towards the West. Certainly, Syria has generated a higher degree of interest and commitment among not just potential foreign fighters, but also among wider publics appalled by the humanitarian abuses carried out by the Assad regime. Indeed, most Western governments have condemned the regime. Moreover, social media activity around the Syrian civil war appears to have generated a sense of personal involvement and passion that can readily translate into action; specifically through creating an information bubble that excludes outside voices.[30]

Whilst top-down propaganda campaigns with high-production values are still being used to great effect, social media has allowed the spread of content outside of traditional information hierarchies. The opportunities to understand motivations for travel are therefore unprecedented. An ICSR database draws on 12 months of research into the social media profiles of 190 European and Western fighters. It shows that this is the first conflict in which large numbers of Western fighters have been documenting their involvement in real-time.[31]

The research also reveals that large numbers of Western fighters get their information about the conflict from unaffiliated, broadly sympathetic individuals called 'disseminators' and not from official channels provided by fighting groups. Of their sample-size, ISIS followers made up 61.4%, al-Nusrah 17.5%, and other groups 2%. Foreign fighters from the UK comprised 23.4% of the total study, with French, German, Swedish, Dutch

and Belgian individuals making up a respective 14%, 12.3%, 8.8%, 7%, and 5.3%. Non-European Westerners stood at 7%.[32]

What do they do when they get there?

Of course, not all those travelling to Syria are 'fighters'; some will fail to get to the frontline, others will be there on humanitarian grounds, and there are also reports of young Muslims travelling to Syria to simply start a new life in what they see as a 'pure' Muslim society under Sharia law. Just as there is no one discernible 'type' of person travelling to Syria, there is no one particular activity that individuals engage in.

Of those that are successful in getting to the frontline, not all will join ISIS or al-Qaeda aligned groups, such as al-Nusra. Studies have shown, however, that ISIS does draw the majority of recruits. The Atlantic Treaty Association found that 85% will join ISIS,[33] whilst an ICSR study estimates this percentage at 61.4%.[34] Anecdotal evidence suggests that the group an individual joins will be randomly determined by their date of arrival at the Syrian border; their lack of knowledge means they are recruited by whichever group or respective travel-facilitator turns up first at their safe house.[35]

In more recent times, ISIS has been successful for a number of practical reasons. It has tended to be better organised, better resourced, more able to accommodate foreigners (including Westerners) who do not speak Arabic. Ideologically, as a group it has an explicitly international agenda more likely to appeal to Westerners, as opposed to the Free Syrian Army, which is fighting a narrow domestic battle within Syria.

There is also evidence to suggest Western fighters are considered 'useless' as they lack combat-experience in contrast to other foreign fighter cohorts, such as battle-hardened fighters from Chechnya.[36] As a result, is has been reported that Westerners are often used for suicide missions.[37] However, the videos depicting the murders of American and British hostages – James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines, Alan Henning, and Peter Kassig – depicted a British fighter as their murderer.[38] This is a reminder that Westerners do not necessarily play auxiliary roles in places like Syria and Iraq. In some cases, Westerners have often been at the forefront of the worst and most violent attacks, such as the Westgate Mall shooting in Kenya and the In Amenas attack in Algeria.[39]

3. Extremist narratives and calls to action

Extremist groups operating in and around Syria-Iraq and disseminators and recruiters operating from outside the country have developed a sophisticated suite of narratives to appeal to young Muslims in the west, whether aimed at convincing them to bear arms or deliver aid. The following table summarises the main types of narratives, messages, calls to action and draws from specific examples.

Table 2. Main types of extremist messages, narratives, calls to action and examples

Narrative	Messages / Calls to action	Examples
Humanitarian	**Brutality of the regime** • They are attacking civilians • They are seeking to starve their foes • They are deliberately killing children • They are raping women • They are mutilating the bodies of the fallen • They are desecrating holy places	Al-Qaeda linked group Jabhat al-Nusra have engaged in civilian projects and catering to basic needs of locals, engaging in effective humanitarian programs to win the hearts and minds of people.[40]

Humanitarian (continued)	**Heroism of the fighters** • They are protecting the vulnerable • They are welcomed as liberators	
Ideological	**Islam is under attack** • There is a vast global war on Islam and all true Muslims • Islam is being attacked by the 'near enemy' (apostate regimes) • Islam is under attack from the 'far enemy' (the West) • Most regimes and leaders that claim to be Muslims are in fact tools in the hands of the enemy **Islam is the path to peace** • Only Islamic societies are truly just • Democracy is a sham and is incompatible with Islam **Duty to fight** • It is the religious duty of all who claim to be Muslims to defend Islam and fight to consolidate a pure Islamic Caliphate of Sharia law	This religious narrative is regularly pushed by groups such as ISIS.[41] Fighters will often post images of their comrades once they have been killed, alongside a short obituary declaring the individual's martyrdom.[42] There have also been documented audio-videos accounting biographies of ISIS 'martyrs.' In contrast they often post images or videos of those killed opposing them, often beheaded. Fighters have also been drawn into ideological and religious debates online with their detractors, and released videos glorifying jihad.[43] Additionally, cases of females travelling to or attempting to travel to Syria and Iraq for seemingly ideological reasons has increased. [44,45] Women have been criticised of having a 'naïve romanticisation' of ISIS.[46]
Identity	**Denigrating those unwilling to travel** • What you're doing now is pointless • Those that stay behind are cowards, using excuses not to fight	There are examples of disabled foreign fighters encouraging others to fight. Dutch national, al-Somali, was used as a poster boy and hero.[47] British born foreign fighter Ibrahim al Mazwagi married a Swedish Muslim in Syria before he was killed. There are also many examples of foreign fighters' children 'pledging support'. The masculinity of fighting is often seized upon, with some foreign fighters comparing those that travel to those that don't, 'Males vs men.'

| Identity (continued) | **This will make you a better person**
• You will go there a boy and come back a man
• You will gain the respect of your peers as a hero or become a martyr
• You could have a family while there
• Your family can be a part of the 'movement'
• Camaraderie
• There is no friendship like that found in war
• On the battlefield, all Muslims are brothers and sisters

You will have an adventure
• War is exciting
• War is cool, a real life computer game | Many women are now travelling to 'act as cheerleaders' for a 'pure' Islamic state' and are encouraging other women to follow. Although many do not physically fight, they are seen as strengthening the jihadi narrative.[48, 49]
Much propaganda plays on popular culture, especially relating to video games. Go-pro cameras, which provide the viewer with a point of view vision of what the fighter is doing, match almost exactly that shown in popular video games such as Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto.[50, 51] Jihadists have mocked up video game covers mimicking 'Call of Duty' Game. Memes have also proven popular within this context.[52]
Some videos of foreign fighters highlight the acceptance that family members have shown.[53] There are examples of foreign fighters who have retained strong tastes for Western brands and popular culture, for example a female fighter tweeting about Nutella[54] and foreign fighters mourning the death of Robin Williams.[55] |

One of the key features of the conflict in Syria has been the fact that it has played out in real time online via social media. Foreign fighters have tweeted about everything from the conditions of daily life (food from back home, their houses, internet cafes, relaxing at the end of the day) to Go-Pro footage from the frontline. In an age where we all choose to share more information than ever before, it is perhaps not surprising that jihadist fighters are doing the same. Go-Pro footage is being compared to online gaming tournaments for mimicking their first-shooter perspective. This immersive technique makes them appealing to their targeted-generation.[56] Furthermore, the growth of online activity gives us unparalleled insights into the individuals

involved, their network of relationships and the narratives and messages they are seeking to transmit to fellow fighters and those they seek to recruit.

Although the internet is not the only tool for radicalisation, it is certainly a point of information, inspiration and communication that helps to connect people and ideas. It is also at the forefront of propaganda efforts. As Osama bin Laden commented, "It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles."[57]

"The growth of online activity gives us unparalleled insights into the individuals involved, their network of relationships and the narratives and messages they are seeking to transmit"

The material comes from three sources:

- *The groups themselves*: The formal propaganda wings of the armed movements will engage with potential supporters, produce propaganda and provide justification for their actions

- *Their supporters*: There are many groups, pages, twitter accounts and others providing support and encouragement to groups that employ foreign fighters. They will glorify the actions of the group, celebrate its martyrs and produce large quantities of propaganda

- *Individual fighters*: Some foreign fighters are tweeting their experiences and building up a personal following separate from the leadership of the organisations they are fighting for, the most famous of these is the late Omar Hammami, the American Jihadist in Somalia.[58] Others are encouraging people to follow and providing tips[59] and some, such as the late Abu Fulan al-Muhajir tweeted their experiences from Syria in English giving their followers a sense of the daily life of a fighter; rations, weapons cleaning and morning coffee[60]

As with all online activity, there are varying levels of professionalism, from highly edited and storyboarded films to a large volume of amateur footage showing combat operations. That said, the most compelling propaganda by those encouraging others to fight shares a number of key attributes: it tends to use video rather than text, takes full advantage of the linguistic skills of members (sometimes even translating suras into European languages), makes good use of music and resonates with Western youth culture. In addition to this, the importance of a call to action cannot be underestimated; stressing inadequacies of those that don't go; an enemy; that it is fun; or that it will make you a better or more compelling person.

4. Countering and disrupting extremist messages

One of the most striking things about groups fighting in Syria and Iraq – especially ISIS – is the strength of their online presence; they understand the power of information, high production values, strong arguments, compelling imagery and an attractive proposition for their viewers. They have skilfully used the tools of the internet to their advantage. As well as the group's own centrally controlled propaganda machinery, a surprisingly high number of Western foreign fighters are actively using social media. For these users, social media represents both an essential source of information and inspiration, and they in turn inspire potential recruits back home with stories of their exploits.[61]

The ability of these groups to reach broad audiences in Europe makes it vital to ensure young people have the information and skills to build their resilience to these messages, as there are few things that can be done to prevent them being able to access them.

There are a number of different approaches that can be taken.

Removal of content

The internet is a central tool for groups recruiting young people to travel to Syria-Iraq to fight. While there has been considerable focus on this fact, very little attention has been paid to ways to counter these messages.

The traditional response of governments and law enforcement agencies has been to attempt to remove content through a 'take-down' strategy. For example, the Metropolitan Police Service's Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit (CTIRU) has taken down thousands of websites over the last few years.[62] This approach is limited due to the speed of upload (there are 120 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute), the fact that extremists have migrated from using their own websites towards hosting their content on social media platforms, and while most material may be offensive it is often not illegal.

"With greater effort and coordination by governments, social media platforms and search engines, more disruption could be caused to ISIS"

There is some cause for optimism for the take-down approach. In the wake of videos depicting the murder of American and British hostages by ISIS, Twitter and YouTube came under considerable pressure to close accounts linked to ISIS or that were distributing the videos. Within a matter of days of them taking such action, they had made considerable headway, such that many key ISIS-related accounts have migrated away from Twitter in favour of other platforms, such as Diaspora.[63] The example requires further study, but it suggests that take-downs can be effective when applied quickly and aggressively. It is likely that widespread disgust at the murders also increased reporting by normal Twitter users, which could have made this work easier.

We don't know how many accounts were closed, but the actions of Twitter caused a level of disruption that caused ISIS to regroup.[64] This suggests that with greater effort and coordination by governments, social media platforms and search engines, more disruption could be caused to ISIS and similar groups through a more aggressive and sustained take-down strategy.

Public information campaigns

It has been found that one of the key factors in the radicalisation of young Muslims in the West is political ideology and grievance, perceived injustice and violence against Muslims around the world. The conflict in Syria – and government's perceived effective or ineffective response to it – will be important in influencing potential radicalisation.[65] It is therefore important that the first message governments publicise is what they are doing (e.g. aid, assistance, cooperation with international partners) rather than what they are opposing. Governments need to mount public information campaigns about their work in conflict zones, such as Syria and Iraq.

"There is also evidence to suggest that some foreign fighters expect to find adventure but underplay the risks and the grim realities of life on the frontline. It is therefore important for governments to communicate the risks of travel as well as prosecution"

There is also evidence to suggest that some foreign fighters expect to find adventure but underplay the risks and the grim realities of life on the frontline. It is therefore important for governments to communicate the risks of travel as well as prosecution. A number of former foreign fighters have spoken out and should be encouraged to do so, although care should be taken over their personal safety. For example, in November 2013, a young man from the UK talked about the horror of returning to his parent's home country of Syria to fight with the FSA.[66] Meanwhile, Abdeluahid Sadik Mohamed, a 28 year old Spanish national who fought with ISIS told security services that he was told to carry out a suicide mission, and that he changed his mind about fighting after being involved in an attack on Abu Ghraib prison.[67]

We cannot ignore the very real desire among many to do something to help the people of Syria. It is therefore vital to offer practical alternatives for those moved to assist, in order to reduce the number travelling to help on the ground. The case studies below highlight such efforts in Belgium, the UK and Australia.

'Helping the Syrian Population? Yes, But How?', Belgium

Published by the Belgian Ministry of the Interior, the document 'Helping the Syrian Population? Yes, But How?' provides practical guidance and information dissuading Belgian citizens looking to travel abroad to Syria. The pamphlet highlights reasons why people should reconsider travel to Syria,[68] including that the Syrian population does not want foreign fighters but international aid and humanitarian relief; travelling abroad poses a serious risk; those who travel will become a burden to Syrian society; and they will bring suffering to their own families.[69]

'Syria Travel Information and Advice', UK

The 'Syria Travel Information and Advice' campaign is run by a number of police forces around the country. It aims to disseminate information about a range of issues, such as the dangers of travelling to Syria and the potential for prosecution for those that are planning to do so. Published and disseminated in a passport style booklet,[70] it also includes practical advice for those looking for peaceful alternatives to help the people of Syria and further contact information to the national anti-terrorism hotline.[71]

'Ongoing Violence in Syria: Important Information for Australian Communities', Australia

Australian government publicises information via its 'Resilient Communities' initiative, which – amongst other materials – hosts fact sheets on Syria. These fact sheets provide overviews of existing government-led humanitarian activities in the region and how Australians can get involved in helping the people of Syria. This includes donating to international aid agencies; engaging in peaceful legal protest activities; writing to government representatives in Australia; and using social media responsibly to voice concerns and to challenge the Syrian regime.[72]

Public statements by community leaders

Muslim communities are sometimes criticised for not speaking out against extremism and violent extremism. Whether or not this criticism is fair, it would be accurate to say that communities have been vocal on the issue of Syria, especially as the actions of ISIS have accelerated in recent months and the scale of the problem has become clearer.[73] These kinds of messages may not convince the committed hardcore not to travel, but will reach the wider constituency of young people that are potentially at risk.

These efforts can also help to unite communities. For example, cross community outcry after the murder of David Haines and Alan Henning was resolute, and because it brought different communities together – Muslim and non-Muslim – there was a notable increase in volume and reach. This unity is in and of itself a counter-narrative to the ideology of groups such as ISIS that focus on difference and exclusion.

Imams Online, UK[74]

Imams Online is a website endorsed by the Mosques and Imams
National Advisory Board (MINAB) that provides information for
Imams and other Islamic leaders on safeguarding, civil leadership,
interfaith relations and employment opportunities. In July 2014 the
site published an open letter,[75] signed by over 100 UK Imams and
Islamic scholars from across the various denominations of Islam, urging
British Muslims not to travel to Syria or Iraq to participate in conflict.
The letter calls for "British Muslim communities not to fall prey to
any form of sectarian divisions or social discord" and "to continue
the generous and tireless effort to support all of those affected by the
crisis in Syria and unfolding events in Iraq, but to do so from the UK
in a safe and responsible way."

Active Change Foundation's '#NotInMyName' Campaign, UK

Young Muslims from London's Active Change Foundation ran
a video[76] and social media campaign[77] reframing the anti-Iraq war
slogan, Not in My Name. The aim of the campaign was to show
community solidarity against ISIS and their actions. It was designed
to counter online extremist propaganda by supporters of ISIS that is
disseminated on social media. It also intended to give a voice to those
who support Islam, but not ISIS. The social media campaign gained
momentum on YouTube with over 200,000 views and the hashtag
spread globally on Twitter.

Community leaders in Syria have called upon Westerners not to
travel. For example, the National Coordination Body for Democratic
Change, a Syrian opposition group, issued a statement urging all foreign
fighters in Syria to leave the country, regardless of whether they are pro
or anti-government. Hassan Abdul Azim said, "The coordination body

calls on all non-Syrian parties that are taking part in the fighting on Syrian territory, no matter what party they are fighting beside, to leave the country immediately."[78]

There are also growing calls for the media to reassess its approach to coverage of ISIS and related stories. First, there is a danger that the media is contributing to a perceived social norm that young British Muslims travel to Syria. Social norms are an incredibly powerful influencer of behaviour, especially for young audiences.[79] Second, in many cases the media is playing into the propaganda aims of ISIS by proliferating imagery that portrays them as strong, successful and as soldiers rather than criminals and terrorists. The use of images from videos of the murder of hostages also causes intense distress to their families.[80] Third, there is a danger that a disproportionate focus on religion as a driver ignores the evidence on motivations and also elevates foot soldiers into warriors. As Mehdi Hasan put it, 'moral outrage, disaffection, peer pressure, the search for a new identity, for a sense of belonging and purpose' are the drivers of radicalisation, not Islam.[81] The news that two recently departed Britons had ordered 'Islam for Dummies' from Amazon before leaving underscores this point.[82]

Counter-narratives

As well as a take-down strategy, there is a need to increase content that counteracts the messages of extremists; so-called 'counter-narratives'. This constitutes a wide and poorly defined spectrum of activities, but for the purpose of this report it refers to products, such as films, animations, branded merchandise, or spoken word, that present messages and ideas intended to deconstruct, challenge or ridicule extremist ideas or the use of violence. They might also constitute 'alternative narratives' rather than challenge, in other words; what we stand for, rather than what we are against.

Counter-narratives aimed at those considering travelling to Syria would need to answer directly or closely the radicalising and recruitment narratives of foreign fighter groups. This might include the following messages:

"Counter-narratives aimed at those considering travelling to Syria would need to answer directly or closely the radicalising and recruitment narratives of foreign fighter groups"

- *You are being duped – don't be taken in by their propaganda*: The idea of betrayal is an especially strong and compelling one for young people. This message could focus on how potential recruits are being misled by propaganda for example, images of dead children taken from other places and presented as happening in the theatre of conflict

- *We are not all in this together – there are as many divisions as bonds between different Islamic factions*: Highlighting the vicious infighting between and within groups could go a long way towards countering the message of camaraderie. This could consist of examples of foreign fighters finding themselves under fire from other Islamic groups rather than the 'enemy', or even examples of foreign fighters who were betrayed and murdered in the conflict zone by the very groups they traveled to join

- *This is not an Islamic struggle – you do not have a 'duty' to fight*: This could include messages about why fighting is not justified within Islam, why it is not a 'just war', and therefore bringing into question the Islamic duty to fight

- *You are useless and you'll get in the way – do something more constructive instead*: This message could be unpacked in a number of ways: local fighters explaining that foreign fighters will be a liability on the frontline, and may not be allowed to fight anyway; citizens explaining that their need to protect foreigners will put them in danger; refugees on the indulgence of foreigners wanting to have adventure when there are women and children starving in refugee camps. This message could also give very clear 'calls to action': collect money, raise awareness, work for political dialogue, lobby your political representatives, etc

- *Conditions on the frontline are terrible – it is not the adventure you are expecting*: This message could focus on the reality of poor conditions on the ground, including testimonies from returned foreign fighters, and accounts from journalists or locals in Syria-Iraq. It could include a 'call to action' linked to the adventure motivation, such as volunteering in other Islamic/Muslim majority countries or regions

- *You will not win*: Polling of fighters leaving the FSA showed that declining prospects for victory was the most important factor. About half of the surveyed ex-fighters felt it was impossible to win in the current environment. This has led many to switch to Islamist groups; they don't necessarily agree ideologically with them, but they are better organised and have a better chance of defeating Assad.[84] Changing the tone of media coverage of ISIS will be important, stressing not their power at a time when they are making considerable territorial gains, but their deficiencies such as the illegitimacy of their self-proclaimed caliphate

"While governments have been quick to talk up the need for counter-narratives, they have been slow to move into action"

While governments have been quick to talk up the need for counter-narratives, they have been slow to move into action; funding is not forthcoming, and completed products gather dust in filing cabinets because nervous government Ministers refuse to sign off on their release. As a result, counter-narratives are a small and struggling cottage industry in comparison to ISIS's high-tech production and distribution network. Efforts are few and far between, small scale and tend to be hampered by a paucity of technical and marketing skills, which means that good content languishes on YouTube or Facebook unable to find an audience. There are a few notable exceptions:

Abdullah-X,[84] **UK**

Initially a primarily offline initiative working with young people at the grassroots level, the Abdullah-X project moved online creating a website, and disseminating videos through the YouTube channel. Videos[85] aim to counter the increasing prevalence of extremist content on such platforms, with subject topics such as 'More considerations on Syria and Iraq'[86] which explores the rationale behind what's going on in Syria in a digestible manner for youth, and 'The real meaning of jihad.'[87] All videos aim to critically engage viewers in current issues, educate them as to the real meaning behind certain Islamic ideas and terminology.

Using targeted Facebook, Twitter and Google marketing techniques, concise but compelling content and an engaging visual style, the Abdullah-X counter-narrative videos reached over 50,000 viewers over a 6-week trial period and videos had a high retention rate from viewers. By directly addressing issues relevant to young Muslims the channel garnered impressive subscription, sharing and discussion figures when compared to other counter-narrative content online. The platform continues to grow and distributes videos regularly, with twelve at time of writing.

Active Change Foundation,[88] **UK**

The Active Change Foundation (ACF) is a London based NGO that works on issues related to violent extremism, gang violence and hate crime. Through engagement with young people thought to be 'at risk' of participating in violent extremism (including travel to Syria), the ACF attempts to steer them towards more positive life choices. The ACF have also held a number of events to raise funds for humanitarian causes and awareness of the conflict in Syria as an alternative conduit for those wanting to help. Alongside these efforts they have created a video entitled "The Truth About Jihad in Syria"[89] in which Hanif Qadir, the CEO and co-founder of the ACF, explains why fighting in Syria is counter-productive based on his experiences of jihad in Afghanistan.

Alternative 'call to action'

It is difficult for 'messaging' to compete with the call to action that is offered by extremist groups in Syria-Iraq; they offer angry young people a chance to do something. As anthropologist Scott Atran pointed out in testimony to the US Senate in March 2010: "… what inspires the most lethal terrorists in the world today is not so much the Quran or religious teachings as a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends, and through friends, eternal respect and remembrance in the wider world." He described wannabe jihadists as "bored, underemployed, overqualified and underwhelmed" young men for whom "jihad is an egalitarian, equal-opportunity employer … thrilling, glorious and cool."[90]

Some community organisations provide activities for young people to give them an alternative avenue for their frustrations. For example, the Active Change Foundation is providing opportunities to connect young people with community projects on the ground in Syria-Iraq.[91]

Critical thinking

As previously mentioned, two British men who have travelled to Syria-Iraq ordered 'Koran for dummies' and 'Islam for Dummies' from Amazon shortly before they left,[92] a reminder that many of those being radicalised and recruited do so without a period of critical assessment of the arguments being put to them in the name of Islam. A classified briefing note on radicalisation, prepared by MI5's Behavioural Science Unit revealed that, "far from being religious zealots, a large number of those involved in terrorism do not practice their faith regularly. Many lack religious literacy and could … be regarded as religious novices." The analysts concluded that "a well-established religious identity actually protects against violent radicalisation."[93] Initiatives such as JIMAS, included below, seek to do just that.

JIMAS,[94] UK

JIMAS is a charity organisation that focuses on educating young people to develop a better understanding of the Islamic faith at universities, colleges and mosques. JIMAS encourages "an organic, home-grown, indigenous following of Islam, which is relevant to British Muslim concerns" and also works to improve community relations and contribute positively to civil society.[95] As part of this activity JIMAS attempts to counter the religious misinterpretations often advocated by extremists and has produced a number of videos refuting the flawed justifications for violent jihad in Syria-Iraq[96] and committing suicide attacks.[97]

It is important to tackle the political, social and cultural drivers of radicalisation. In the Spring of 2015, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue will launch a critical thinking campaign, Extreme Dialogue, in Canada and Europe.[98] Comprising of a series of short films telling the stories of those personally affected by violent extremism – including formers and survivors of attacks – and tailored online resources to turn the films into talking points within schools, youth centres, and community groups, Extreme Dialogue is based on the assumption that talking about extremism demystifies it and opens up connections between young people and adults where there are currently divisions, and that helping young people to develop their own views about the subject enhances their resilience to extremist messages.

> "One of the ways in which governments and the private sector can improve the situation is by funding capacity building and training in skills, such as use of social media, content production, communications, and campaigning"

One of the challenges in relation to counter-narrative work is the skills gap; those most qualified to be credible messengers rarely have the skills to turn their messages into compelling and effective counter-narratives capable of reaching the right people at scale. One of the ways in which governments and the private sector can improve the situation is by funding capacity building and training in skills, such as use of social media, content production, communications, and campaigning. The AVE network helps to up-skill its members, as well as connecting them so they can learn from one another and find ways to work together.

Against Violent Extremism (AVE),[99] Global

AVE is a unique global resource developed as a partnership between Google Ideas, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the GenNext Foundation. AVE's network brings together former extremists and survivors of violent extremism, including former members of radical Islamist groups. AVE mobilises its members, individuals with the credibility to tackle violent extremism and share de-radicalisation strategies most effectively. AVE has created a marketplace where the needs of small, local grass-roots initiatives can be met with capacity building and addressing skills-gaps.

AVE acts as a conduit through which small non-profits and projects working in the field of violence prevention and de-radicalisation can outline their skills-gaps and reach out to members (including private sector, public sector, academics and volunteers) with said skill-sets. AVE members played a seminal role in the capacity building of the FREE Initiative,[100] the first pan-European resource to offer practical guidance on countering far-right extremism. FREE captured the stories of both formers and survivors' experiences in video and disseminate these via their website as part of their online toolkit for professionals working in far-right violence prevention.

5. The threat from returnees

The most significant threats posed by western foreign fighters are within
conflict zones and their surrounding regions; ISIS has devastated large parts
of Syria and Iraq, terrorising and brutalising local populations. It has also had
an indirect impact in the West; kidnapping and murdering European and
North American journalists and aid workers, bringing terror to their families
and friends back home and leaving Western societies shocked by their
extreme levels of depravity.

The scale of the problem

As the number of those travelling to fight has increased, concerns have
grown about the potential threat they pose when they return home.[101]
It has been difficult to accurately measure the numbers of returnees across
countries. While an EU counter-terrorism official estimated these figures at
300 returnees to Europe,[102] an ICSR report approximated the number of
UK-returnees in April 2014 as over 250,[103] Belgian estimates place figures at
60–70 returnees,[104] with over 100 German returnees according to the Interior
Minister.[105] More recently, there have been reports of Europeans wanting to
return home from Syria but unable or too scared to do so.[106]

The immediate risks posed by returning foreign fighters

Thomas Hegghammer has studied the activity of returning jihadist foreign fighters from North America, Western Europe and Australia between 1990 and 2010. He concludes that whilst most Western jihadists prefer fighting abroad a minority may attack at home after being radicalised.[107] In his dataset, no more than one in nine foreign fighters returned to perpetrate attacks in the West (107 returnees out of 945 foreign fighters); this represents a low proportion, but compared to other potential indicators, this also means that being a foreign fighter is a high risk factor for becoming a violent extremist at home.

> "There are practical reasons why returnees can pose a danger; even those who have not fought on the frontline might have received training or engaged in military exercises providing them with operational competency to mount an attack"

Hegghammer also found that the presence of foreign fighter returnees increased the effectiveness of attacks in the West; whereas only 26% of all plotters are known to have foreign fighter experience, around 46% of all plots (49 of 106) included at least one veteran.[108] For executed attacks, the rate is 58% (14 of 24) and for executed attacks with fatalities it is 67% (8 of 12). Almost one-third (29%) of plots with veterans reached execution and 16% caused fatalities. For plots without veterans, the corresponding rates were 18% and 7%.[109] According to Hegghammer, 'this tentatively suggests that the presence of a veteran increases – by a factor of around 1.5 – the probability that a plot will come to execution, and it doubles the likelihood that the plot will kill people". He points to anecdotal evidence that veterans often act as 'plot entrepreneurs'.[110]

There are practical reasons why returnees can pose a danger; even those who have not fought on the frontline might have received training or engaged in military exercises providing them with operational competency to mount an attack, and they will have made numerous valuable international contacts. The combination of operational expertise and insight into Western societies can be potent. As former US Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, explained "In their roles as terrorist planners, operational facilitators, and operatives, these individuals improve the terrorist groups' knowledge of Western and American culture and security practices, which can increase the likelihood that an attempted attack could be successful".[111]

There are three types of terrorist threat emanating from foreign battlefields: directed plots by individuals sent back with instruction; terrorist plots conducted by individuals who decide to carry out attacks without direction; and networks of individuals that provide support and infrastructure for other terrorist plots. To date, there has only been one successful attack in Europe, when Mehdi Nemmouche murdered four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. It is alleged that Nemmouche, a French national, had fought alongside ISIS before returning to Europe.[112] Recently, there have been a number of successful prosecutions for attempted plots with links to foreign fighters.[113]

Medium- to long-term threats posted by returnees

Immediate concerns are rightly focused on returning fighters intent on mounting an imminent attack. For them, intelligence and law enforcement responses are essential. However, returnees from conflict zones – such as from Syria and Iraq – pose a wider range of risks that must also be managed via community-based approaches.

Spending prolonged periods in a conflict zone can leave significant psychological scars. Much of our knowledge about this comes from conflict-induced trauma suffered by regular armed forces. There is the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among those returning from conflict zones – whether they have fought or not – which can leave them traumatised, vulnerable to radicalisation, and potentially a danger to themselves or society.

"There is the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among those returning from conflict zones – whether they have fought or not – which can leave them traumatised, vulnerable to radicalisation, and potentially a danger to themselves or society"

PTSD affects a sizeable minority of combatants. A study of US veterans who had fought in Iraq-Afghanistan and accessed US Department of Veteran Affairs medical services on returning home found that 40% experienced "some to extreme overall difficulty in readjusting to civilian life within the past 30 days".[114] This included problems confiding or sharing personal thoughts and feelings; dealing with strangers; making new friends; keeping up non-military friendships; getting along with relatives; getting along with spouse or partner; getting along with children; finding or keeping a job; doing what is needed for work or school; taking care of chores at home; taking part in community activities; belonging in 'civilian' society; taking care of health; enjoying or making good use of free time; finding meaning or purpose in life. The types of problems they experienced since homecoming included: more problems controlling anger; thoughts or concerns about hurting someone; drinking or using drugs more; dangerous driving noticed by others; divorce or separation; legal problems; job loss; problems accessing adequate health care; and losing touch with spirituality or religious life.[115]

While PTSD is at the far end of the spectrum, those returning from conflict zones can also be subject to a wider range of impacts related to trauma:[116]

- *Physical:* Trouble sleeping, overly tired; stomach upset, trouble eating; headaches and sweating when thinking about war; rapid heartbeat or breathing; existing health problems become worse; experiencing shock, being numb, unable to be happy

- *Common mental and emotional reactions:* Bad dreams, nightmares; flashbacks or frequent unwanted memories; anger; feeling nervous, helpless or fearful; feeling guilty, self-blame, shame; feeling sad, rejected or abandoned; agitated, easily upset, irritated, annoyed; feeling hopeless about the future
- *Behavioural reactions:* Trouble concentrating; edgy, jumpy, easily startled; being on guard, always alert, concerned too much about safety and security; avoiding people or places related to the trauma; too much drinking, smoking or drug use; lack of exercise, poor diet or health care; problems doing regular tasks at work or school; aggressive driving habits[117]

Psychologists working with returning foreign fighters also report some suffering from moral damage rather than PTSD: Their belief systems have been altered by what they have seen in Syria-Iraq, which leads them to question their moral image of the world and belief systems. They might also be left with a sense of betrayal after being exposed to the reality of the conflict, or be disillusioned with the radical cause itself. These reactions are, in a sense, a good thing; they offer an opportunity for intervention. But left unsupported, these individuals are also vulnerable.

While the scale of the threat posed by those returning from Syria is not yet known, the potential is significant. There are signs that some countries are struggling to cope with the challenge posed by returnees. For example, Richard Barrett has pointed to the fact that by the end of April 2014, the French authorities were almost overwhelmed as "The counter terrorist prosecution service in Paris was handling 50 cases of conspiracy with a further 26 individuals in pre-trial detention. The number of people under surveillance was growing, and the security services were feeling the strain".[118]

Intelligence and criminal justice responses need to be complemented by community-level preventive measures to stop the problem at source or help to reduce the threat from returnees through effective rehabilitation and reintegration.

6. Community-based preventive and remedial measures

A number of alternative approaches are being developed across Europe to prevent potential foreign fighters from leaving and minimising the threat they pose when they return. The innovations outlined aim to strengthen the knowledge and capacity of those closest to the individuals concerned – families and communities – to play a proactive role alongside traditional players, such as the police, government services, and intelligence agencies.

Telephone hotlines

Telephone hotlines have been established in a number of Western countries, providing worried parents, relatives and peers a direct route to report concerns of travel to someone that can provide initial counselling and support where there are concerns of radicalisation.[119] The design and structure of hotline services varies across different countries. While some hotlines are government-led, others are civil society-run to report risk without raising the suspicion of law enforcement or government agencies. Support hotlines also offer varying degrees of supplementary services, such as referrals to further resources or structured multi-agency support.

In France, the national support hotline set-up by the Ministry of the Interior provides an example of a government-run hotline to report risk of radicalisation;

National Support Hotline, France

In light of the unprecedented numbers of French citizens travelling to Syria and Iraq, the French Ministry of the Interior launched a national support hotline in April 2014.[120] The aim of the hotline is to enable family members of 'at risk' individuals to report concern to authorities.

Since its establishment, the hotline (open from 09.00–17.00 Monday to Friday) and an accompanying online submission form has received nearly 400 reports from members of the public across France. Of the 387 cases reported, 283 were made using the telephone hotline with the remainder submitted through the online contact form.[121]

Analysis of the reports indicate that 95 involved minors (around one third of all cases), while 167 reports involved young women or girls (just under 45% of all cases). Half of all the 'profiles' reviewed involved religious converts, while 79 of the individuals referred travelled abroad to foreign conflict zones before authorities were able to intervene.[122]

Family support programmes

There is a growing recognition that families and communities can make an important contribution to prevention efforts; many recruits are very young and still living at home with their parents; there is a higher proportion of foreign fighter recruits without previous criminal charges which means they are hard to identify;[123] they often exhibit few signs before they travel that would trigger agency awareness of their intentions; and local social networks appear to be playing an important role in recruitment, with groups of friends often travelling out together.

"Many parents and community members lack the knowledge and skills to be able to perform a preventive role effectively and need support and guidance"

Many parents and community members lack the knowledge and skills to be able to perform a preventive role effectively and need support and guidance from government agencies. They struggle to understand why their children are being radicalised and may not recognise the signs. Some parents are relieved when wayward children take a heightened interest in Islam, but fail to spot when their behaviour becomes problematic.[124] They need to understand how to monitor and respond to the situation to prevent it escalating, thus avoiding the need for it to require law enforcement or intelligence intervention.

Many of the communities from which foreign fighters originate have troubled relationships with the police and authorities, which can make them nervous about coming forward. They worry that the authorities will overreact, escalate reported concerns too early, or that they will come under suspicion themselves.

One of the most established family support services is Hayat,[125] an initiative run by the Centre for Democratic Culture (ZDK) in Berlin and part of a nation-wide counseling network on radicalisation established by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). It is now expanding to other countries in Europe and North America.[126] It is leading the way in providing support for families and communities. It works closely with the authorities, but is strictly independent. Hayat works on three levels:

- *Ideological level:* Educating relatives about radical narratives. Hayat provides families with guidance to "recognise provocation, how to deescalate conflicts, and how to create compromises while respecting the faith of the relative and showing clear boundaries", to enable families to undermine the black-and-white reasoning often found in radical ideology

- *Pragmatic level:* Emphasis is placed on the "discontinuance and/or prevention of courses of action that individuals or groups have established in order to achieve their goals". This includes advice on the "disruption of hierarchies and in-group trust"

- *Affective level:* There is a need for at risk individuals to be emotionally supported and that requires the "establishment of an alternative reference group". The programme uses emotional bonds to sow seeds of doubt. The counselling targets the relatives on the basis that they represent the affective environment of the radicalised person[127]

According to the German Ministry of the Interior, about over 100 of the 230 who have gone from Germany have returned home. Of these, 17 have allegedly participated in active combat and preliminary investigations have been opened against 6 of them. Hayat was launched at the end of 2011 and by December 2013 had handled a total of 53 cases of which 39 were still ongoing. In at least 8 cases, there was a "very high security relevance and danger"; in 16 cases, foreign-country relevance was detected; and in 8 cases a clear foreign fighter background existed.[128]

The initial contact made with the program was mostly carried out by women (mothers, sisters, teachers, friends) in 33 cases (62%), of which about 25% had an immigrant background. A further eleven men, 3 couples and 8 institutions also contacted the counselling team. The majority of the cases dealt with male radicalised or radicalising persons and in 12 cases with daughters, sisters or mothers. The age range of the individuals of concern was 12–46 years. In the majority of cases, "there has been an advanced to high level of radicalisation with links to internationally operating and violent Salafi networks."[129]

One of the most challenging aspects of Hayat's work relates to the support and advice it provides to families who remain in touch with their children while they are in Syria-Iraq, many of whom have access to phones, email and social media accounts. Some have even spoken to journalists from the frontline.[130] This is an extremely distressing task for parents, and requires sound advice. Parents must assume that their children's communications are being monitored, so should avoid any comments that could jeopardise their personal safety. In such cases, Hayat advises families on how to keep channels of communication open and remain non-judgmental in order to

make it easier for their child to return home should they decide to at a later date. In these circumstances, parents are effectively negotiating for their children's lives.[131]

Role of women and mothers

In many cases, there is an enhanced role for women in preventing young people travelling to fight in Syria and Iraq; they tend to have a strong influence over their sons and as primary care providers often spend more time with their children than their fathers. As Sajda Mughal of the Jan Trust in the UK said, "Women are agents of change, particularly mums in the home. They are the ones who can nurture and safeguard their children."[132]

"In many cases, there is an enhanced role for women in preventing young people travelling to fight in Syria and Iraq"

UK police forces have launched a national campaign to appeal to women – mothers, sisters, girlfriends, and friends – to look out for young men vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment to travel to Syria-Iraq, outlined in the box below. They are urged to be vigilant, given information about worrying signs of behaviour and views, and the campaign has publicised contact details for community police contacts and the national anti-terror telephone hotline.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Helen Ball, said at its launch, "We want to ensure that people, particularly women, who are concerned about their loved ones are given enough information about what they can do to prevent this from happening. We want to increase their confidence in the police and partners to encourage them to come forward so that we can intervene and help. This is not about criminalising people. It is about preventing tragedies."[133]

Women's 'Syria Awareness' campaign, UK

Counter-terrorism police launched a national community outreach campaign in cities across the UK (London, Cardiff, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Southampton, Nottingham, Norwich, Bristol and Luton).[134] Launched April 2014, the campaign calls for the assistance of the female family members of young Muslims in identifying the signs of radicalisation or preparations to travel.[135]

The campaign, primarily targeting women, urged those with concerns to call the UK's non-emergency 101 number, where they would be referred to 'Prevent' anti-terrorism engagement officers. Officers – or individuals from a community agency – followed-up by meeting them and offering support. However, the mistrust of government in some communities has led many to criticise that this message is not clear and is coming from the wrong source.[136]

Information for the purpose of the campaign was disseminated on social media and through pamphlets at various ports throughout the country with the aim of discouraging travel.[137] The pamphlet encourages donations to humanitarian agencies and helps people make informed choices about which charities to support that work in Syria-Iraq.

Exit and rehabilitation programmes

Individuals returning from places such as Syria have a complex set of needs that are often not met through either the criminal justice systems or within the community. In some countries, specialist 'Exit' programmes have been established to help returnees to change their ideas and behaviours, thus reducing the threat they pose to themselves and the rest of society. Those who want to reform are the 'low hanging fruit', and it is vital to have schemes in place to respond to their needs through tailored de-radicalisation and disengagement schemes. Returnees need three main types of help:

- Psychological support, trauma counseling, treatment for PTSD
- Practical help finding employment, getting back into education, or gaining access to housing and benefits to ensure they have a stable home life
- Assistance with relationships and networks to provide both emotional support and diversion from more harmful contacts

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"In some countries, specialist 'Exit' programmes have been established to help returnees to change their ideas and behaviours"

Much has been learned over the last two decades about running Exit programmes, particularly within the context of de-radicalising and disengaging extremists, and best practices and lessons learned should be applied to the challenge of reintegrating returning foreign fighters:[138]

- Only tailor made programmes will work. Not all those returning from Syria-Iraq will be violent or have suffered mental health traumas, and individuals' needs will vary widely. Programmes need to be matched to the exact needs of each person
- Preventive measures are essential alongside repressive ones – returnees need to build relationships of trust and confidence in order to create a supportive network, as well as needing help with psychological, identity and practical issues
- Engagement must be coordinated throughout the system by a capable, trusted intermediary – not just trusted by the recipient, but also by all partners that will be involved in the intervention to ensure that agencies, families, and community groups share information and work together in the best interests of the individual
- It is useful for the person providing the support to speak the same language as the recipient and share similar cultural reference points

East Jutland Police & Municipality of Aarhus, Denmark

One of the most comprehensive support services aimed at both preventing and re-habilitating those engaged in violent extremist groups, the 'Aarhus model' is the result of long-term multi-agency cooperation between East Jutland Police District and the Municipality of Aarhus and a range of other local and national agencies in Denmark.

In addition to preventing individuals at risk of potential travel to Syria-Iraq through awareness raising and mentoring schemes (amongst other measures), authorities in Aarhus have begun structured interventions with a number of returnees from the Syria-Iraq conflict to help them transition away from radical milieus and promote reintegration into Danish society.[139]

Following an initial risk assessment and screening process to identify signs of trauma and radicalisation, the Aarhus initiative provides guidance to recently returned foreign fighters looking for a structured support framework. These services may include medical treatment, counselling and psychological support, advice on education, employment and housing services, mentoring and the re-establishment of community networks.

Encouraging foreign fighters to come home

Given the truly heinous actions of ISIS, it is not surprising that governments across Europe have adopted a firm and resolute response, looking to ban foreign fighters from returning home, prosecuting those who do come back, and removing citizenship from those with dual nationality. While those guilty of crimes must be held accountable, this blanket response misses some important opportunities to strengthen national security that could be achieved by actively seeking to bring back those who are scared and disillusioned.

"Balanced messaging might just convince some to return home to face justice, rather than opt for a life on the run with a terrorist organisation"

First, they can offer intelligence and insight on ISIS. Second, refusing them re-entry will only make enemies of them for life; we could instead compete for their loyalty rather than leaving them to fall into the hands of another set of recruiters. Third, reformed foreign fighters are perhaps the most effective counter-narrative against the ISIS brand.

Instead of shutting them out, European countries should reach out to those who want to come home by establishing a clearing house near the Syrian border in Turkey to process and return them. We know that many are trapped, having had their passports, mobile phones and credit cards confiscated. For those that have not managed to get out of Syria, governments could launch an information campaign to inform them of their return options. This does not mean letting criminals off the hook; those guilty of crimes should be prosecuted on their return. But balanced messaging might just convince some to return home to face justice, rather than opt for a life on the run with a terrorist organisation.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

We are seeing unprecedented numbers of so-called foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq, including from countries in Europe and North America. The biggest impact is undoubtedly in these two countries and the wider region, but there are legitimate concerns about the ways in which this conflict could impact back home, whether through the radicalising potential of ISIS online propaganda, or the risk posed by returning foreign fighters. We also know from previous conflicts that individuals come home well connected and trained, and the last time something similar happened al-Qaeda was formed.

Policy responses to date have understandably focused on the immediate needs of intelligence and law enforcement, with many Western countries adopting an aggressive and resolute stance. While this is understandable, it is important to face facts: we cannot arrest our way out of the problem, we don't have the resources to mount surveillance operations against all suspected or returning foreign fighters, and we cannot stop most foreign fighters from coming home.

We therefore need a more nuanced approach on a number of different levels. Western governments should complement existing approaches with a number of policy innovations:

Governments, the private sector and communities must battle for the hearts and minds of young people through large-scale investment efforts to counter extremist narratives online.

- Governments must continue to exert pressure on social media companies and search engines to lead coordinated and timely drives to remove extremist content online – efforts over ISIS content in response to hostage murder videos shows what is possible when this is done effectively
- Governments and communities should work together to run public information campaigns against groups like ISIS
- Community and religious leaders should continue to speak out
- Governments, the private sector and communities should work together to ensure counter-narrative products are being produced and effectively targeted online
- Governments should lead efforts to produce and disseminate critical thinking campaigns in schools and community settings

Governments should commit considerable investment to preventive programmes aimed at strengthening the role played by families and communities in preventing radicalisation and travel to Syria.

- Governments should establish national telephone helplines
- Governments should fund nationwide family support programmes along the model of Hayat

> Governments and communities need to work together to minimise the risk posed by returning foreign fighters.

- Governments should fund national Exit programmes for the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters
- Governments should also appeal to foreign fighters who are scared and disillusioned but worried about coming home through an information campaign within Syria and a clearing house near the Syrian border in Turkey

"The challenge requires a more nuanced and multi-layered response drawing on the full range of talents and capacities of government, families, communities, and the private sector"

The situation in Syria has developed rapidly and taken many Western governments by surprise. Given events on the ground, the involvement of Western foreign fighters in some of ISIS's most barbaric attacks, and the very real fear of returnees, it is not surprising that many governments and politicians have talked tough, and tended to focus their efforts on intelligence and law enforcement. However, the challenge requires a more nuanced and multi-layered response drawing on the full range of talents and capacities of government, families, communities, and the private sector. The pace of change has forced governments to act quickly, which has resulted in some interesting policy and practical innovations, outlined in this report. It is now time to share those lessons across borders to enhance national security efforts to minimise the risks posed by foreign fighters.

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