



## **Foreign Fighters - The Perils and Perks of Western Policy Responses**

by Rudine Emrich



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The "Global War on Terror" is over, U.S. President Obama announced in May 2013, saying American military and intelligence agencies will no longer wage war against a tactic but will instead focus on a specific networks determined to destroy the U.S. Nearly two years later, terrorism continues to be a serious concern for national security in the West, much of the Middle East and parts of Africa. In the U.S. and Europe, especially homegrown terrorism has increasingly posed a threat to societies.

**While the threat of foreign fighters is not new, its scope is unprecedented.**

Among Western governments, there is ubiquitous consensus about the potential danger stemming from returning foreign fighters who joined terrorist organizations in Syria and northern Iraq. While the threat of foreign fighters is not new, its scope is unprecedented. U.S. intelligence agencies estimate that in recent years, more than 15,000 militants from over 80 nations have traveled to Syria.<sup>1</sup> According to the latest report of the International Center for Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, Western Europe accounts for 4,000 militants with France making up a little over a fourth of the total. It is estimated that the United States accounts for merely a few hundred of these fighters.<sup>2</sup> Overall, even the anti Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s did not attract as many foreign fighters. In fact, no previous conflict has attracted as many foreign fighters as Syria over a similar amount of time.

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### The Challenges of Effective Policy-Making

Many Western governments find themselves incapable of coping with the numerous challenges posed by this phenomenon. The need for a common approach was emphasized by U.S. President Obama's speech at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) session held in September 2014, which aimed to adopt a resolution that enshrines the collective commitment of the world community to meet this challenge. However, even though the UNSC unanimously adopted such a resolution, Obama rightly recognized that: "lofty rhetoric and good intentions will not stop a single terrorist attack".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> President B. Obama, Remarks by the President at U.N. Security Council Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/>

<sup>2</sup> Neumann, Peter R., Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s, retrieved from: <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>

<sup>3</sup> President B. Obama, Remarks by the President at U.N. Security Council Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/>

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Western governments' shortfalls in managing the foreign fighter phenomenon are epitomized by the various distinct approaches implemented that often lack a clear strategy. However, as the number of foreign fighters steadily increases and incidences as the recent attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Jewish supermarket in Paris make the threat of terrorism very vivid, calls for a common and effective strategy have grown louder. Yet, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of violent extremism. Rather than designing an identical policy for different Western countries, a common effort should be made to identify best and worst practices while appreciating the different local contexts, challenges and societal structures playing into the emergence of violent extremism. The pressing question that arises amongst policy makers is, of course, a complex one: How are returning foreign fighters best dealt with in order to minimize the chances of them posing a threat to national security and fueling extremism in the West?

Throughout Europe, policy makers have attempted to formulate policies targeted at returning foreign fighters, drawing on very repressive to more moderate approaches. Recent attacks such as the Jewish Museum shooting in Belgium in May 2014 or January's Charlie Hebdo attack in France have increased public demands for harsher punitive measures in order to deter radicalized citizens from committing violent acts. Politicians have often responded in kind, for example by calling for the restoration of the "national disgrace" status in France, which would strip convicted jihadists of their civic liberties. France abolished the status in 1951, which served as punishment for collaborators after World War Two.<sup>4</sup>

Other examples of harsher policy approaches to foreign fighters can be found in Germany and the Netherlands: For instance, while suspected foreign fighters in Germany can have their passports confiscated, the Dutch government maintains the ability to revoke the citizenship of Dutch nationals who have been convicted of a terrorist offense, given they also hold another nationality. In its newest draft bill, the German government proposed the implementation of a surrogate identification card for suspected foreign fighters. Up until now, even if a suspect's passport had been confiscated, German militants could still make their way to Syria by travelling via Turkey with their identification cards.

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<sup>4</sup> Lichfield, J. French Prime Minister announces 736m euros to combat terrorism in wake of Charlie Hebdo attacks, Independent UK, January 21, 2015, retrieved from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-prime-minister-announces-736m-euros-to-combat-terrorism-in-wake-of-charlie-hebdo-attacks-9992520.html>

According to the bill, suspects will have to submit their identification cards to officials and will receive a surrogate instead, which will not allow them to leave German soil. Further, the German government proposes to allow the data retention of phone records to increase national security, thereby fueling concerns about drastic infringements of civil liberties. In the U.K., Home Secretary Theresa May meanwhile suggested to introduce measures such as freezing bank accounts and taking away social benefits from alleged foreign fighters.<sup>5</sup>

### The Deficiencies of Current Approaches

All of the above mentioned examples show the variety of different strategies that policy makers throughout Europe have drafted to cope with the challenges foreign fighters pose. The effectiveness of the each of these policies is inconclusive. Experts and civil society groups in the U.S. and Europe increasingly warn against the counterproductive effects of more repressive measures to address the issue. In the UK, e.g., the International Center for Study of Radicalization and Political Violence reported that London's Mayor, Boris Johnson, proposed that "all the British fighters in Syria should be presumed guilty unless proven innocent". In response, the Center cautioned against "blanket punishments" which would make foreign fighters, who want to return feel trapped and isolated, thereby pushing them into further radicalization or make them regroup elsewhere.<sup>6 7</sup>

Realizing that harsh measures might potentially backfire, Belgian's core cabinet ruled against tougher laws targeted at foreign fighters: In 2013, the Belgian Minister of the Interior, Joëlle Milquet, proposed to criminalize the act of travelling to Syria to join the conflict. In her opinion, this would be much easier to prove compared to the difficult task of proving that a terrorism crime has been committed once a foreign fighter returns. Interestingly, however, the

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<sup>5</sup> E. Bakker, C. Paulsen and e. Entenmann, "Dealing with European Foreign Fighters in Syria", International Center for Counter Terrorism The Hague, 16 December 2013, retrieved from: <http://www.icct.nl/publications/>

<sup>6</sup> Maher, S., Neumann, P. ICSR Insight – Offering Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq a Way Out, 26, August 2014, retrieved from: <http://icsr.info/2014/08/icsr-insight-offering-foreign-fighters-syria-iraq-way/>

<sup>7</sup> Shapiro, J., Byman, D. Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid- The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq, Foreign Policy at Brookings, Number 34, November 2014, retrieved from: <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/11/western%20foreign%20fighters%20in%20syria%20and%20iraq%20byman%20shapiro/be%20afraid%20%20web.pdf>

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nation's core cabinet rejected her proposal by arguing that the law included too many potential counter-effects because "the families of the youngsters wanting to leave would be discouraged to report radicalization. [Furthermore] [a] prison sentence would deter the youngsters to return, forcing them into hiding and making it difficult to detect them; [Besides] such a prohibition could be understood as a signal that opposing the regime of Syrian President Assad is not justified, which is not in conformity with the Belgian and European position."<sup>8</sup>

In order to formulate effective policies that embrace a holistic approach to countering violent extremism, governments face the challenging task of finding measures which assess the threat emanating from each returnee and act accordingly. This includes embracing alternative, more inclusive approaches next to conventional punitive measures. Different ideas have been put forward suggesting what a program targeted at mitigating the factors of radicalization could look like. Many of those initiatives adhere to community-based approaches.

Several European countries, including Sweden, Denmark and the UK, have followed the U.S. example and designed more inclusive strategies.<sup>9</sup> The Danish city of Aarhus, for example, launched a rehabilitation program for returnees from Syria in 2013. By integrating those who return from the battlefields in Syria and northern Iraq, Danish authorities hope to mitigate the risk of terror attacks being plotted by returnees.<sup>10</sup> The program includes assistance with finding housing and employment, as well as receiving medical and psychological services. Local police officials claim that the city's soft-handed approach is effective. Indeed, while in 2013 the city had seen 30 young men depart to Syria, in 2014 the number dropped to only

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<sup>8</sup> E. Bakker, C. Paulsen and e. Entenmann, "Dealing with European Foreign Fighters in Syria", International Center for Counter Terrorism The Hague, 16 December 2013, <http://www.icct.nl/publications/>

<sup>9</sup> Qatar International Academy for Security Studies (QIASS), Countering Violent Extremism: Community Engagement Programmes in Europe, February 2012, retrieved from: <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/QIASS-CVE-Paper-Phase-II-Paper-I.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Haeussler, R., Empathie statt Strafe fuer Rueckkehrer, Tagesschau, January 14, 2015, retrieved from: <http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/dschihadisten-daenemark-101.html>

<sup>11</sup> Faiola, A., Mekhennet, S. Denmark tries a soft-handed approach to returned Islamist fighters, Washington Post, October 19, 2014, retrieved from: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/denmark-tries-a-soft-handed-approach-to-returned-islamist-fighters/2014/10/19/3516e8f3-515e-4adc-a2cb-c0261dd7dd4a\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/denmark-tries-a-soft-handed-approach-to-returned-islamist-fighters/2014/10/19/3516e8f3-515e-4adc-a2cb-c0261dd7dd4a_story.html)

one. In response, Jorgen Ilum, Aarhus's police commissioner, stated: "we believe that the main reason is our contact and dialogue with the Muslim community".<sup>11</sup> However, apart from this isolated statistic, there has been no in-depth evaluation of the program to assess whether there is a causal link between the rehabilitation program and the lower number of Aarhus's young men departing to Syria.

### Countering Violent Extremism- a U.S. Strategy in Review

Another example of such a community-based approach is the U.S. government's Countering Violent Extremism Strategy (CVE). In 2011, after several terrorist attacks had been carried out by radicalized American Muslims, the Obama administration responded with this policy aimed at addressing the underlying causes and ideologies that enabled the emergence of violent extremism in the U.S. The CVE strategy is built on close cooperation of security services with families, communities and local institutions. It focuses on supporting community-based programs as a tool to make potential victims of radicalization more resilient and to establish a relationship of trust with communities that might be targeted for recruitment.<sup>12</sup>

The Montgomery County Model demonstrates how the U.S. government tries to put its CVE strategy to practice by engaging in community-led partnerships. In order to facilitate public safety, the county's executive officers and law enforcement officials collaborate with faith leaders, schools, health officials, and the county's emergency management team. Firstly, the collaboration aims at building the community's awareness about issues of public safety, including violent extremism, through workshops. While expertise on these issues is being cultivated within the communities, the cooperating entities try to pool community resources to prevent individuals from entering a path of violence, thereby creating an internal early warning system. Lastly, through the close collaboration between the government and community experts, the government hopes to increase its ability to intervene in a timely manner whenever counseling might be necessary to deter an individual from committing violent acts.<sup>13</sup>

**One major point of contention between experts relates to their discord in identifying the conditions that allow violent extremism to flourish.**

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<sup>12</sup> Department of Homeland Security, Countering Violent Extremism, retrieved from: <http://www.dhs.gov/topic/countering-violent-extremism>

<sup>13</sup> The World Organization for Resource Development and Education, The Montgomery County Model, retrieved from: <http://www.worde.org/programs/the-montgomery-county-model/>

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Although the Obama administration's policy response was perceived as fairly innovative at the time, today critics find that it has not brought about the desired outcomes. According to their assessment, CVE turned out to be an extremely diffuse and complex field of practice that needs more specific and targeted approaches than those currently employed.<sup>14</sup> More generally, the critics argue, the major shortcomings of approaches to countering violent extremism are epitomized by a lack of a clear, common definition of what it actually means and what it should entail as well as the absence of benchmarks that allow for an evaluation of the success of the strategy's outcomes.<sup>15 16</sup>

One major point of contention between experts relates to their discord in identifying the conditions that allow violent extremism to flourish. Often referred to factors include social, economic, political and psychological ones. However, because a consensus on the nature and interplay of the complex causes of violent extremism is lacking, a lot of assumptions about the origins of violent extremism are made, which then constitute the basis for counter interventions such as CVE. Unsurprisingly, the effectiveness and relevance of programs like these are hotly debated as they lack evidence-based evaluations and validity.

Today, policy makers responsible for programs such as CVE face a dilemma: Recent incidences such as the attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris strengthen the call for the expansion of measures to counter violent extremism. At the same time, this field of practice desperately needs a clear direction. In light of the recent developments, the Obama administration has announced that it will host a summit in February 2015 to re-examine its CVE practices in the U.S. It is evident that the scheduling of the summit reflects the Obama administration's increasing concern with the threat that foreign fighters pose to U.S. national security. Moreover, it also elucidates the government's belief that the CVE strategy as such is an essential response to the evolving threat that foreign fighters pose.

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<sup>14</sup> Heydemann, S. PhD, Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice, Insights, United States Institute of Peace, Spring, 2014, retrieved from: [http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Insights\\_Spring\\_2014.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Insights_Spring_2014.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Crowley, M., No Answer for Homegrown Terrorism? – Obama's Plan to Combat Radicalization is a Flop, Critics Say, Politico, January 8, 2015, retrieved from: <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/01/homegrown-terrorism-obama-administration-114100.html>

<sup>16</sup> Heydemann, S. PhD, Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice, Insights, United States Institute of Peace, Spring, 2014, retrieved from: [http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Insights\\_Spring\\_2014.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Insights_Spring_2014.pdf)



Applying more analytical rigor will constitute a crucial but challenging part of a revised, more informed and effective strategy. Above all, a more precise definition of CVE as well as an analysis of the underlying assumptions must play a vital role in reviewing the policy. Furthermore, clear objectives and benchmarks must be established in order to conduct a thorough evaluation of the current practices being implemented.

### The Importance of Inclusive Approaches

Despite recent incidences that remind us of the imminence of the threat posed by returning foreign fighters, it is essential to not get caught up in a state of panic and immediately revert to harsh punishments. Research has demonstrated that only one in nine of those returning to their home countries will actually pose a threat to national security.<sup>17</sup> Apart from the question whether returnees will eventually commit a violent attack, many foreign fighters return to their home countries disillusioned, worn out and psychologically disturbed. Thus the potential and importance of inclusive policy approaches such as the CVE strategy should not be underestimated.

Current developments across Europe show a dangerous trend of increasing right-wing populist movements and anti-Islam sentiments. It is therefore crucial to ensure that any approach toward curbing violent Islamism in Europe will avoid putting Muslim citizens under general suspicion. Instead of mainly looking at their Muslim population through a prism of security, governments should work closely with these communities on the basis of dialogue and engagement. Policy programs should not only consider punitive legal approaches but also draw on the idea of inclusion in order to increase the resilience of vulnerable communities and mitigate the risk of radicalization by returnees.

Further, while intelligence sharing between European and U.S. governments is a crucial component of a holistic strategy to mitigate the Jihadi threat, it is important for governments, parliamentary oversight bodies as well as a critical civil society to protect the delicate balance between privacy concerns, free speech and preventive security measures.

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<sup>17</sup> S. Maher and P. Neumann, "Boris Johnson's proposal for British fighters in Syria and Iraq is dangerous and counterproductive", The Independent, 26 August 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/>

**Because returnees are perceived to have a particular level of legitimacy due to their experiences abroad, their voices are a powerful tool when attempting to dissuade other young men from becoming foreign fighters.**

In terms of re-integration, efforts by European governments like the Danish one show possible alternative approaches governments could employ in order to minimize the risks of further estrangement and marginalization- factors that might eventually lead to committing violent acts. Those who are willing to re-integrate should be given a chance with the help of counseling and educational or training programs.

Further, giving those who return a possibility to share their experiences from abroad might make a valuable contribution to deterring possible foreign fighters from leaving their home country in the first place. A good example of how the government can make use of returnees in order to provide credible dissuasion comes from the Middle East itself: Saudi Arabia has recently launched a deterrence initiative in which the government lets returning fighters talk about their experiences abroad via a television broadcast.<sup>18</sup> Personal stories can shed a light on the harsh realities of the conflict and counter the media strategies implemented by organizations such as the Islamic State. Because returnees are perceived to have a particular level of legitimacy due to their experiences abroad, their voices are a powerful tool when attempting to dissuade other young men from becoming foreign fighters.

Farah Pandith, the first ever Special Representative to Muslim Communities for the U.S. Department of State has also suggested that letting peers and idols of young men speak up against violent extremism might help to create a counter-narrative that they find credible and easy to relate to.<sup>19</sup> All of these approaches can be valuable components of a holistic strategy that aim at countering violent extremism. However, rather than merely adding additional components to existing approaches to bolster national security, governments urgently need to invest in the evaluation of their strategy in order to establish what works and what does not.

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<sup>18</sup> Shapiro, J., Byman, D. Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid- The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq, Foreign Policy at Brookings, Number 34, November 2014 , retrieved from: <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/11/western%20foreign%20fighters%20in%20syria%20and%20iraq%20byman%20shapiro/be%20afraid%20%20web.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Media Conference Call, Farah Panidith on Violent Extremism, January 9, 2015, retrieved from: <http://www.cfr.org/france/media-conference-call-farah-pandith-violent-extremism/p35944>

### Looking Ahead

Ultimately, any effective approach to counter the threat posed by foreign fighters must be backed by a strategy founded on an understanding of the underlying causes of extremism. Therefore, it is important to understand why returning fighters left their home country in the first place, what happens to them during their time abroad and for which reasons they return.

Certainly, accurate predictions are difficult to attain when dealing with issues that arise from highly complex social dynamics. Nevertheless, in order to ensure effective results, policy responses should not be based on mere assumptions. A thorough analysis will enable states to assess to what extent returnees will pose a threat to national security on a case-by-case basis and allow for resources to be deployed accordingly. Simultaneously, when critical evidence suggests that a returnee poses a serious security threat upon his return, he should be monitored closely with the help of increased cooperation and exchange of information between states. However, instead of waiting for foreign fighters' return, governments have to stay active and invest their resources not only in rehabilitation but also prevention programs. As the manifestation of the positive effects of prevention programs will not be immediate, it will require governments' long-term investment and commitment in order to achieve visible changes. A balanced and holistic approach therefore includes law enforcement, an information campaign targeting vulnerable groups, as well as close cooperation and engagement with Muslim communities and local authorities to provide an effective and sustainable solution for mitigating the risk of terrorism and preventing others from becoming foreign fighters.

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