

Islamic State's Foreign Fighters: there and back

Premise

Since the beginning of Syrian conflict, six years ago, approximately 31-42,000 jihadi foreign fighters have joined the so-called Islamic State (IS) and other jihadi groups. Between 6,500 and 7,500 of them arrived from Europe, the others arrived mainly from Arab countries and from Asia. Since 2015, because a series of battlefield losses and the worsening of the situation on the ground, the flow has suddenly reduced, creating a self-reinforcing spiral of weakening for the IS. From a peak of 2,000 would-be foreign fighters per month during the 2014-2015 period both for the Islamic State and other armed opposition groups, the number of fighters joining these organizations in Syria has decreased to 50 per month.¹

Even if the number of people departing for Syria, Iraq and Libya has been dropping, the security threat is not diminishing² in the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

Estimates of the fighters remained in the war zone in Syria and Iraq vary wildly from 10,000 to 30,000.

Changing strategy: losing territorial entity, returning home and self-made terrorist.

The IS' downfall brings with it a completely new range of complications. Attention now goes to the risks that disbanded foreign fighters pose globally. In other words, the physical end of the IS would increase the terrorist peril faced by the International Community.

In general, the radicalized men and women, who served as foreign fighters, come back and connect with the extremist groups or individuals in their home countries, creating a worrying situation for the domestic security of the countries. Some of them are going and will go back, or will move to Europe, North Africa and Middle East, posing a peril that many governments still seem unable to contrast.

The contemporary extremists from Syria, Iraq and Libya - radicalized, equipped and trained - will be a dangerous threat in the near future, a sort of "ticking time smart-bomb". Those who have already been employed for a long time with IS, have been exposed to extreme combat experiences and established many contacts. The terrorist threat is actually transmuting into a more perilous new stage. In other words, the long-term security threat may be the establishment of a new phase characterized by two series of action: one in which would-be fighters choose to conduct attacks at home rather than travel abroad – amateur terrorist attacks may be a new chapter in the IS' "offensive" to Europe –, and one in which veteran jihadi foreign fighters seek out new spaces for conflict.

A report published by the LOWY Institute³ describes the future foreign fighters into four categories:

1. The jihadist foreign fighters who choose to stay in Syria, Iraq and Libya;
2. The jihadist foreign fighters who leave in order to continue jihad in another theatre, either at home or somewhere else;

1 Griff Witte, Sudarsan Raghavan, James McAuley, *Europe: flow of foreign fighters plummets as ISIS loses its edge*, The Washington Post, 9 September 2016, in https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/flow-of-foreign-fighters-plummets-as-isis-loses-its-edge/2016/09/09/ed3e0dda-751b-11e6-978,1-49e591781754_story.html?utm_term=.cb6421fe02b7

2 Wil M. van Gemert, head of the operations department at Europol.

3 Lydia Khalil and Rodger Shanahan, *Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Day After*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, in https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/khalil_and_shanahan_foreign_fighters_in_syria_and_iraq_final_web_1_20916_0.pdf

3. The jihadist foreign fighters who seek to return to their home-country;
4. The jihadist foreign fighters who go to a third country of refuge.

Strategic approach including the Foreign Fighters: hide and plan, recruit and train, hit and inspire

This substantial change in strategy is pragmatic, realistic and the logic consequence on the one hand of the evolution of the battlefield and, on the other hand, the new approach announced by Abu Mohammad al-Adnani⁴ – killed by a US drone attack in August 2016 – who was the second most powerful leader in the Islamic State. He suggested a shift in strategy⁵: from the territorial consolidation of the Islamic State to the individual and ideological expansion outside the Islamic State's boundaries. This could be synthesized on three double pillars: hide and plan, recruit and train, hit and inspire.

Many evidences show IS's changing strategy:

- Terrorist cells developed in foreign countries over the past two years.
- Returning foreign fighters.
- Inspired individuals (lone-wolves) who responded to the IS's call to conduct attacks in their home countries.

Moving from the Islamic State

Many of the terror attacks conducted abroad over the past year, underline that returning foreign fighters would be just one part of the IS's greater strategy to remain relevant after losing ground control.⁶

Countries of the European Union are not the only ones that face this threat; IS fighters could run away to other North Africa countries such as Turkey, Egypt or Tunisia, after being driven from their Syrian, Iraqi or Libyan strongholds. It is reported that some foreign fighters who leave Sirte, on the one hand are heading south to possibly join the group of Boko Haram and, on the other hand some others are going west to Tunisia⁷. Even if in silence and without the western media attention, the conflict is moving from Syria to North Africa where there are many active groups – in particular in Tunisia where they are working in order to create the bases of a caliphate.

In Tunisia – the main source of foreign fighters to the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Libya – the flows to the front lines have dropped because it has become more problematic; the consequence is a shift of the threat of jihadi extremism from an external danger to a domestic threat. It indicates that foreign fighters do not disappear; on the contrary, there is a new risk that appears.

Furtherly, there have been claims that jihadists have been penetrating into Europe and North Africa using new ways. In this dynamic, IS has urged many potential followers in European and North African countries to conduct attacks at home, underling that their role is more advantageous as attackers and suicide bombers in their home countries than as fighter in Syria.

The records are relatively minor, and even though the main attacks in Europe have involved individuals who have fought in Syria – or moved within migrants flows from Syria –, the majority of terror events in Europe, in particular the attacks conducted by individuals, have involved those who

4 He planned the terror attacks in Paris in November 2015, and at the Brussels airport, in 2016.

5 Robin Wright, *After the Islamic State*, The New Yorker, 12 December 2016, in <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/after-the-islamic-state>

6 Eric Schmitt, *Caliphate in Peril, More ISIS Fighters May Take Mayhem to Europe*, The New York Times, 17 September 2016, in https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/us/politics/caliphate-in-peril-more-isis-fighters-may-take-mayhem-to-europe.html?_r=1

7 Gaaloul, researcher at the Tunis-based International Center of Strategic, Security and Military Studies, The Washington Post, 9 September 2016, in https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/flow-of-foreign-fighters-plummets-as-isis-loses-its-edge/2016/09/09/ed3e0dda-751b-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html?utm_term=.cb6421fe02b7.

had not taken part to jihad in Syria, Iraq and Libya, and have been proselytized through other means⁸, such as in prison, in radical mosques or through the Web.

In addition, we must consider that the jihadist foreign fighters will play an important role:

- As model for future would-be jihadists.
- In propaganda and recruitment activities because of their ascendant (in particular on younger generations), deriving from the “romantic” and successful jihadi narrative.
- In facilitation, fundraising, and radicalization activities.

The other foreign fighters: females and children

Al-Qaeda do not accept female fighters in their ranks, Islamic State does it.

Male and women's motivations for jihad are not different, in particular the aspiration to be part of a global *Ummah*, the Muslim community; it indicates a necessity to take part actively to the modern jihad and represents, at the same time and even if highly debatable, an alternative picture of empowerment that IS use to appeal to other women.

The result is that a small but significant quantity of young Muslim women joined the Islamic State, in particular during the period 2014-2015. Approximately 10 percent of foreign fighters from European countries, North America and Australia are women; 200 of these it is assessed are between eighteen and twenty-five years old. For such women, the Islamic State may give the idea to represent an exit from a reality where to be an equal citizen requires leaving own religion.

From this point of view, the IS criticism toward national character in favor of a faith-based identity gained consensus.

Part of these women joined female units operating in Syria and Iraq, such as the “Khansaa Brigade”, the all-female IS morality police, where there are women from across the world: Saudi, Tunisian, many from Europe, such as British and French.

For the woman who joined the police unit, they attended the required training activities based on a 15-day weapons course and religion lessons, taught mostly by Moroccans and Algerians, and focused on the laws and principles of Islam. It is reported that foreign women had more freedom of movement, more disposable income and small benefits.

Another part of these women accepted to be married with jihadi fighters contributing to the Islamic State as wives and mothers. It is assessed that, within the “caliphate” are living an estimated 31,000 pregnant women.

Children within the Islamic State play an analogous role.

Child soldiers are not new to war and conflicts, but Islamic State considers their role as central to guarantee the organization's long-term achievement, and consider them a better choice as fighters because of their indoctrination and desensitization since birth.⁹ In particular, because they lack fully formed moral compasses and can be convinced to conduct acts of brutality and violence without difficulty.

In general, although there are no detailed and corroborated information about how many children are involved, it is assessed that the involvement of children is extensive within the Islamic State territory, where the group sent the children to various religious and military training camps, in harmony on their age. At the camps, they are educated about the Islamic State's interpretation of sharia law and to how to handle a weapon; furtherly, they are even trained in how to fight and to decapitate humans.

8 Kim Sengupta, *War against Isis: Security services bracing for possible return of thousands of jihadists as group loses territory*, The Independent, 5 September 2016, in <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/isis-war-syria-iraq-foreign-fighters-western-jihadists-return-europe-uk-terrorism-security-services-a7227341.html>

9 Lizzie Dearden, *Isis training children of foreign fighters to become 'next generation' of terrorists*, The Independent, 22 November 2016, in <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-training-children-of-foreign-fighters-to-become-next-generation-of-terrorists-a7162911.html>

It is also reported that children are sent into battlefield and front lines, in order to be used as human shields and to provide blood transfusions for the Islamic State fighters.¹⁰

In Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State trained and is training children of foreign fighters to become the “next generation” of fighters and suicide bombers, which may pose a future security threat to states. Islamic State is believed to have about 1,500 child fighters: the majority is from Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Morocco, but there are also subjects from European countries.¹¹

Possible strategic approach: what to do?

Considering threats and opportunities, what emerges is the need of:

- Long-term view;
- Long-term commitment to co-operate in counter-terrorism strategies with other countries;
- Implement a coordinated policy to confront the impending crisis;
- Make changes to security legislation in anticipation of returning jihadi foreign fighters;
- Develop the capability to track and keep track of suspect IS’ followers at home and jihadi Foreign Fighters moving to other countries;
- Watch closely and for a long time the jihadi foreign fighters;
- Maintain the focus on managing Foreign Fighters trying to leave the IS stronghold;
- Take in consideration that countries and communities external to the Islamic State are both sources for recruitment and strategic long-term targets.

10 Kate Brannen *Children of the Caliphate*, *The Foreign Policy*, 24 October 2014, in <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/24/children-of-the-caliphate/>.

11 Lizzie Dearden, *Isis training children...*, *Ibid*.