

# FACING UP TO FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Timothy Compston looks at the security issues raised by individuals coming back from fighting for IS and other extremist groups in Syria and Iraq to their home countries.

There is little doubt that the situation on the ground in the Middle East has changed markedly over the past year with the regime of President Assad regaining control of large swathes of territory in Syria with backing from the Russians and Iranians. As the tide has turned, this has led to an upswing in the number of foreign fighters with allegiances to groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – a jihadist alliance – being killed in the conflict; moving into the relative safety of Idlib

province near the Turkish border or fleeing the region completely. For his part the UN's special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, believes there may be 10,000 fighters in Idlib linked to al-Qaeda, many of which are from overseas, and the US estimates that 20,000 to 30,000 militants are now holed up there.

Added to this, across both Syria and Iraq, IS (Islamic State) – which was a big draw for foreign fighters – has seen its dream of a caliphate, that once held 10 million people, shattered with the US-led coalition declaring in

Returning fighters could activate previously dormant terrorist cells



March that the jihadist group had lost 98 percent of its territory. Raqqa which IS set up as its de facto capital is now firmly in the hands of an alliance of Syria Kurdish and Arab fighters and across the border the Iraqi Government has retaken key towns and cities, most notably Mosul. Against this backdrop the worry is that those who have gained weapons handling experience, and even knowledge of explosives, combined with their radical Islamist mindset, will channel their fanaticism into terrorist acts closer to home and so may pose a threat when they home.

## RETURN TO SENDER

Putting the potential security challenges posed by returning foreign fighters into some sort of perspective, research in 2016 by the International Centre for Counter Terrorism in the Hague suggested that between 3,922 and 4,294 individuals had travelled from EU member states to Syria and Iraq. In terms of the proportion of those who have so far returned, figures quoted in a European Parliamentary Research Service study – *Return Of Foreign Fighters To EU Soil* – published earlier this year show that the UK is top of the league table with 50 percent of those who have left now back home. This contrasts with countries like the Netherlands and France where the percentage is much lower, coming in at 18 and 12 percent respectively.

A recent report released by Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre (JTIC), considering the terrorism risks in Europe suggests that returning foreign fighters are likely to drive an increase in the terrorist threat. This will manifest itself on the ground, JTIC believes, via the, potential, transformation of radical Islamist support networks into operational structures involved with attack plots. Commenting on the report's findings Otso Iho, senior analyst at JTIC, reckons that, in a five to 10-year outlook, European countries will face an elevated terrorism threat posed by radicalised convicts, returned foreign fighters, and other returnees who have direct ties to the legacy of Islamic State.

Looking in more detail at the nature of the challenges ahead, Iho points out that: "Foreign fighters are likely to hold substantial credibility in Islamist networks that are already prone to support groups like Islamic State." The upshot of this is the potential for their input and leadership, says Iho, to move groups that have previously held a supportive role – from financing to propaganda – to adopt an operational one. This could mean setting up cells, acquiring weapons, providing safe houses for explosive building and recruiting militants for attacks in Europe. Iho reiterates the concerns that are now being expressed by many analysts about the expertise foreign fighters have gained and how this might now be applied at home: "These skills include: the construction of viable IEDs – learned in Iraq and Syria where Islamic State has produced IEDs on an industrial scale – expertise in assault weapons and the use of new weapons types or technologies such as drones," concludes Iho.

Despite growing concerns regarding the impact of foreign fighters – and their families – in many ways it is a security challenge that, thankfully, outside of a small number of incidents has still to be realised. For example, Europol's EU Terrorism and Situation and Trend (TESAT) 2018 report underlines the fact that recent jihadist attacks are still being committed

primarily by homegrown terrorists who have been radicalised without having travelled to join a terrorist group abroad.

The percentage of individuals returning is, of course, likely to increase as there is growing pressure coming from those who have captured foreign fighters in the region for countries to take back more of their own citizens. A case in point is the fact that, when visiting Stockholm in February, Nasrin Abdullah, general commander of the Kurdish YPJ – or Women's Protection Unit – told Sweden's TT newswire that it was every country's responsibility to prosecute and jail its own citizens and if European countries did not accept their citizens it would be a big problem for the Kurds: "We don't actually know what we will do with the prisoners. According to our constitution, they are not allowed to be executed, so they'll probably have to stay where they are," she said. It is thought that the YPJ is holding around 300 foreign IS fighters from 40 different countries.

Of course it is not just in the West where the spectre of foreign fighters targeting their countries of origin for attack is high on the agenda. Moving East, the man in charge of Russia's FSB security service, Alexander Bortnikov, warned last December – when addressing a meeting of the National Anti-Terrorism

## FOR THOSE WHO JOINED ISLAMIC STATE THROUGH 'NAIVETY' REHABILITATION IS THE BEST SOLUTION

Committee – that former militants from what he referred to as "bandit units" in Syria are a real threat, following the defeat of Islamic State, with many of them likely to seek to return to Russia. This was a message reinforced five months later when the head of Russia's Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, told his counterparts from the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) – a Russian-led security bloc – that the question of terrorists returning from Syria and other Middle East countries is of vital importance and asked them to focus on border control: "We are especially concerned with the issue of fighters returning from areas of actual armed conflicts," said Patrushev. In terms of numbers, thousands of Russians and citizens from other parts of the former Soviet Union have travelled to Syria and Iraq, with some estimates putting the number at 9,000, of which 4,000 are from Russia alone.

There are also worries that beyond male fighters their extended families – wives and children – may prove a longer-term threat if they slip back under the radar. A new report from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King's College London, suggests that the number of women and minors linked to IS returning to the UK has been vastly underestimated.

So, what can be done to minimise the dangers? For the authorities it may be preferable if as many of those as possible who left to fight for groups like IS never come back and are instead dealt with on the ground in Syria and Iraq. The reality is that the police and security services have limited resources

and are already having to keep a close eye on those deemed a threat before returnees are factored into the equation. Of the British citizens who have travelled out to the region as many as 15 percent – or 130 individuals – may already have died during the fighting including drone strikes targeting high-threat individuals like British IS recruiter Sally-Anne Jones.

### MORAL MAZE

Last year, when he was the UK's Minister for International Development, experienced diplomat Rory Stewart, who has spent time in Iraq and Afghanistan, told the BBC that there very difficult moral issues to weigh up here, but stressed in stark terms that ultimately Britons who were fighting in Syria and Iraq for IS believe in an "extremely hateful doctrine", which uses violence and brutality: "We have to be serious about the fact these people are a serious danger to us and unfortunately the only way of dealing with them will be, in almost every case, to kill them." This strong message was repeated by Gavin Williamson the current Defence Secretary shortly after taking up his post when he said that: "A dead terrorist can't cause any harm in Britain".

When individuals make it back to Britain, former Minister for International Development, Rory Stewart did acknowledge that, in this eventuality, they should be arrested and tried in accordance with normal British law. Offering his perspective on the situation with returnees when he was the UK's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, Max Hill QC – who is now the director of public prosecutions – told the media that he believed that for those who joined IS through 'naivety' rehabilitation was the best route: "For those who travelled, but who travelled out of a sense of naivety,

possibly with some brainwashing along the way, possibly in their mid-teens and who return in a sense of utter disillusionment. We have to leave space for those individuals to be diverted away from the criminal courts."

On mainland Europe, Belgium has been on the receiving end of several attacks by a terrorist cell linked to foreign fighters returning from Syria, most notably the bombs that exploded at an underground station and Brussel's International airport, killing 32 people in March 2016. According to the Brussels-based Egmont Institute, against the backdrop of the worst terrorist incident in its history, the authorities have now moved from an *ad hoc* approach to returnees to a much more comprehensive policy including: pre-trial detention

## RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS ARE LIKELY TO DRIVE AN INCREASE IN THE TERRORIST THREAT

and a three to five-year prison sentence. Also attracting attention is the fact that, as the Egmont Institute points out, in Belgium prisoners are spread out among the general prison population – unlike other countries – and carefully monitored and assessed in terms of radicalisation. In addition, there are disengagement programmes to help them return to society.

Looking ahead, it will be interesting to see whether a surge in the number of foreign fighters returning to their home countries results in a spike in terrorist activity and radicalisation or whether there is the potential for rehabilitation to help individuals to follow a more constructive path ●

### Timothy Compston

is a journalist and PR professional who specialises in security issues. He studied International Relations and Strategic Studies at Lancaster University, is PR Director at Compston PR and a previous Chairman of both the National Committee and CCTV PR Committee of the British Security Industry Association.

**The Kurdish YPJ is understood to be holding around 300 foreign IS fighters from 40 different countries**

