



On July 31, 2015, the Program on Extremism (PoE) at the George Washington University's Center for Cyber and Homeland Security (CCHS) hosted a discussion on the threats and dynamics of the American and European foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) phenomenon. Director of CCHS Frank Cilluffo moderated a panel that included PoE Director Dr. Lorenzo Vidino, Director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence at King's College London Dr. Peter Neumann, and senior analyst at the Real Instituto Elcano in Madrid Dr. Fernando Reinares. The panelists engaged in a lengthy examination of the threat of FTFs, while comparing and contrasting threats and government responses in the US and Europe.

Lorenzo Vidino: Challenges in the United States

While the exact numbers are unknown, there is no question that there are more FTFs hailing from Europe than the US: compared to an estimated 4,000-5,000 European FTFs, there are approximately 200 Americans who have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq—only a few dozen of which have managed to reach the conflict area. No European country is immune to the contemporary FTF phenomenon. Particularly staggering are the numbers in some small countries, such as Belgium or Kosovo, which have seen hundreds of their citizens travel to Syria and Iraq.

The larger number of FTFs hailing from Europe is explained by several concurrent factors. First, it is logistically easier for Europeans to reach Syria via Turkey. The journey could require as little as 100 Euros and an identification card. For Americans, the trip is significantly longer and more expensive.

Second, the European FTF phenomenon is largely facilitated by relatively diffuse mobilization/recruitment networks operating in the real, non-virtual world. These networks are composed of informal but relatively large clusters of people who know each other from the same neighborhood, school, mosque, or various Salafist circles. These networks facilitate face-to-face, peer-to-peer interaction, a more personal and effective radicalization process than purely virtual

communication. Consequently, clusters of European FTFs are not distributed evenly throughout each country, but tend to come from the same towns. These dynamics are not completely absent in the US, where there have been some small mobilization clusters (Minneapolis, St. Louis, New York/New Jersey). But the scale of this phenomenon is substantially smaller than in Europe. Further, a number of Islamist groups instrumental in mobilizing people for Syria in Europe, namely al Muhajiroun and Sharia4, do not enjoy a significant presence in the US. In substance, the US does not have the extensive “jihadist scene” that has produced such large scale mobilization in Europe.

To a large degree, social media networks in the US take the place of these face-to-face networks. Thus, the US is home to a spectrum of ISIS-inspired radicalization: from individuals radicalized and mobilized solely via interactions online, to clusters of people radicalized together, yet lacking the size and sophistication of their European counterparts. Despite the existence of this spectrum, there remains the misperception that all American FTFs are scattered individuals radicalized only on social media.

Many European countries have been improving components of their counter-terrorism arsenal in order to counter the FTF threat, particularly by enacting legislation that strengthens punitive measures. The US, on the other hand, has a solid legal framework but has fallen somewhat short of developing a coherent countering violent extremism (CVE) approach, something authorities on both sides of the Atlantic consider crucial. As a recent report by the Program on Extremism (PoE) underscores, the US has not devoted appropriate resources and political will to enacting the CVE measures it has often publicly touted as necessary.

Peter Neumann: The European Problem

The 4,000-5,000 Europeans who have traveled to Syria and Iraq represent 20% of the total FTF population. While the larger countries supply higher aggregate numbers, smaller countries are more heavily affected by this phenomenon. To date, ICSR has compiled a database of roughly 700 social media profiles of FTFs in Syria and Iraq. Based on communication with the administrators of 100 of these profiles and fieldwork on the Turkish-Syrian border, ICSR scholars have discerned three key trends in jihadist mobilization.

First: There is no monolithic profile of the European FTF. As the conflict in Syria and Iraq has evolved, so too have FTF motivations. Early in the conflict, the majority of European FTFs heeded the call of radical preachers online and traveled to Syria in an effort to defend the Sunni population against genocide at the hands of Bashar al-Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah. This narrative of the duty to defend the Sunni community against an existential threat has been a strong mobilizer in jihadist rhetoric throughout history. However, the rise of ISIS led to a shift in motivations and narrative. After the declaration of the caliphate and a string of military victories

in the summer of 2014, the motivation shifted to the development of the caliphate and the “Islam vs. the West” narrative re-emerged. This narrative drew more extreme recruits.

Second: Online recruitment is not the most important factor in the mobilization process. ISIS’s slick propaganda videos of suicide bombers and beheadings are not unprecedented. The primary driver for mobilization is the bottom-up initiative of individuals directly communicating with fighters on the battlefield, a process that creates a powerful sense of personal connection and identification. For example, a Muslim youth living in a deprived suburb in Paris is far more likely to get excited about violent jihad when he sees a peer with a similar background and identity lionized as a hero in Syria. When the individual is able to communicate with the fighter, the level of commitment and loyalty is magnified. This personal connection is extremely difficult to replicate via anonymous online communications.

Third: The nature and degree of the threat posed by the FTF returnee is not always immediately clear. Of the European FTFs who have traveled to Syria and Iraq in the last 3.5 years, approximately 10% have been killed, and 25-40%--an aggregate of about 250 individuals--have returned to their country of origin. Returnees can be broadly categorized into three principal groups: disturbed, dangerous, and disillusioned. The disturbed and dangerous pose the greatest risk to society: the disturbed have been brutalized and traumatized but are not necessarily ideologically motivated, while the dangerous possess military training, international connections, and the motivation to carry out attacks. Precedent dictates that the dangerous make up about 10-25% of total returnees. The disillusioned dominate the returnee population and highlight the need for reintegration programs. However, the largest group of returnees remains undecided on their long-term actions. As a result, the threat from this group will play out over a long period of time. The capacity to monitor and manage this threat presents a major challenge to European authorities, especially as smaller countries continue to be overwhelmed by the returnee population.

Fernando Reinares: Jihadist Mobilization

While the FTF phenomenon is a challenge for European societies, the recent wave of “jihadist mobilization” is a larger problem, encompassing those radicalized in response to the conflict in Syria and Iraq and those arrested as a result of their jihadist sympathies, in addition to the FTF threat. Western Europe has not been uniformly affected by this jihadist mobilization. Rather, those (generally central and northern European) countries with a large population of second and third generation Muslims have shown a higher incidence of jihadist mobilization than those (like Spain or Italy) where a second generation is only now coming of age.

The Spanish example corroborates this connection between jihadist mobilization and second-generation Muslims. Since 2012, Spanish authorities have made over 100 terrorism-related arrests, of whom more than half were Spaniards. This arrest record contrasts sharply with the

period between 1996 and 2012, in which Spaniards represented less than 5% of those convicted on terrorism-related offenses. Additionally, women are now among those arrested, and the percentage of cases involving converts and young-adults have risen. Of those Spaniards arrested on terrorism charges, 77% hail from Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish enclaves in North Africa with large second-generation Muslim populations. However, it is imperative to note that Spanish, and more generally European, jihadists are remarkably diverse, and thus cannot be categorized as coming from a monolithic socio-economic background.

These shifting dynamics suggest that there is more to jihadist mobilization than social class and educational level. Rather, Western Europe is experiencing a generalized identity crisis affecting large numbers of second-generation Muslims. Jihadists offer a solution to this problem, associating violence with the Muslim identity. Compared to al-Qaeda's underground culture, ISIS's caliphate model has more effectively satisfied this identity crisis. To counter this pull, European authorities should undertake efforts to make the Muslim identity compatible with other national, gender, and ethnic identities, while also confronting and countering the identity offered by jihadists.

