

# Foreign Fighters in Syria: A Threat at Home and Abroad?

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### Clarissa Ward

Hello and welcome, thank you so much for joining us in what promises to be a really very interesting discussion. My name is Clarissa Ward. I have stepped in at the last minute for Frank Gardener - so if you came here to see Frank Gardener I'm terribly, terribly sorry. I'm Foreign Correspondent for CBS news and I've spent much of the last three years covering the conflict in Syria, both from inside Syria with the rebels, and from neighbouring countries. But we have some incredible guests here.

I start with on my left here we have Richard Barrett who is the Senior Vice President of the Soufan Group. Richard has an extensive background in intelligence, having worked for MI5, MI6. He also worked with the United Nations for many years and headed, and helped to found, the Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force, which is a coordinating body that aims to ensure effective counterterrorism cooperation. So he has a lot of experience following Al-Qaeda and the Taliban and all sorts of different groups, so he'll be able to offer a very important perspective on security. And I should say, sorry I sort of buried the lead here - what we are talking about today - which is 'Foreign Fighters in Syria', obviously a very compelling and hot topic right now, so it will be invaluable to have Richard's expertise on the security ramifications of what is undoubtedly becoming a growing trend.

Then we are very lucky to have, on my right here, Shiraz Maher, who is a Senior Research Fellow, and Head of Outreach at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization at King's College London. So Shiraz has actually just come back from Reyhanli, on the Turkish border with Syria, where many of these foreign fighters are essentially being funnelled through on their way into Syria. So he has a really invaluable perspective in terms of one-on-one contact with these types of fighters: finding out what motivates them, who they are, where they come from, why they choose to do this. So we're very lucky to have Shiraz here. He has also written a book, or is currently writing a book, on the intellectual history of Al-Qaeda, exploring the development of the global jihad movement and its political philosophy. So we're very lucky to have Shiraz with us.

And then last, but certainly not least, we have Raffaello Pantucci who is a Senior Research Fellow at RUSI [Royal United Services Institute]. He's an expert on counterterrorism and China's relations with its western neighbours, but he has extensive experience in the sorts of things that Shiraz does essentially: radicalization and security. He is also the author of a forthcoming book, which sounds fascinating, which looks at jihadism in the UK and it's called 'We love death, as you love life: Britain's suburban mujahedeen'. So some really fantastic speakers today and with that I will open it up, please to Richard.

## Richard Barrett

Thank you Clarissa, thank you. I want to look at this from the point of view of the world rather than very specifically Britain or Europe. But of course, before starting there are some basic things I would just like to say, albeit they're basic, because they're perhaps worth reminding ourselves, that the vast majority of people fighting in Syria against either the Assad regime or against the rebels are Syrians. I mean foreign fighters are an element of it, but the vast, vast majority are Syrians. Also, I would say that the great majority of foreign fighters are not Westerners. They are people from particularly the Middle East and North Africa, and places like that, and I think that's important to remember. The third thing is foreign fighters, even on the rebel side, are not just members of Sunni extremist groups, they may be fighting for the Free Syrian Army, they may be fighting for all sorts of different groups there, or may just be trying to do humanitarian work while fighting as well, so they're not all members of extremist groups. And of course they're not all Sunni. There are increasingly, and I'm sure Shiraz and Raff will comment more knowledgeably on this, but there are increasing numbers coming in from Iraq, from Iran and from Lebanon too, in addition to the Hezbollah fighters who are joining Assad and fighting on his behalf. So I think that's important to remember that context.

Basically of course, there are three questions that one has to ask about foreign fighters: Why do they go in the first place? Why do they stay and what happens to them while they stay? And then why do they come back? Those are clearly the three questions, and the main question for most members states, if I may call them that, most authorities around the world, is the last, is why do these people come back and what sort of threat do they represent by being back home? And how do we deal with it? And this is a great question of course which now so many countries - I think in one of Shiraz's studies there was 74, I think you quoted - but certainly everybody accepts that there are over 50 countries with nationals fighting in Syria. And this includes places like Switzerland for example, and Finland now - I think there's 20 or so from Finland - which are countries which have traditionally not been involved in this sort of fighting overseas, unless way back with mercenaries doing so and stuff like that: Switzerland of course being a case in point with a great tradition of mercenaries going to fight for other people.

I would also say that in my rather cursory examination and discussion with security authorities around the world, the reasons why people go - just to address that first question - are almost as many as the numbers of people who do go. The reasons are very particular, quite sort of individual and quite specific in many ways. As indeed I would say the general reasons why people join a terrorist group are very individual. And here I think there's an opportunity to make another very basic point, that by going to fight in Syria, even with an extremist group, you are not necessarily a terrorist - if you were a terrorist you would stay and home and you'd blow somebody up at home - so going to fight as a

foreign fighter does not mean you're a terrorist but of course it may be a step along the way of that radicalizing process.

And I think one of the outstanding trends that one sees in people going, particularly from the West but also from places like Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia, and Libya, Egypt and so on, is this idea of duty, a sense of duty: I have an obligation and a duty to go, it is towards my co-religionists if you like, but I have a duty. And that sense of duty which makes me go, gives me a sense of purpose. I now feel more important because I have the sense of purpose that I lacked before, it increased my sense of identity, which of course a lot of young people are struggling with a sense of identity, that in turn increases a sense of belonging to a group and that of course reinforces a sense of duty or responsibility. So there's that sort of reinforcing cycle.

And why people go - you may have a motivation which is pretty mixed up in your mind, you may just sort of say 'yes I should go' and then you get there and there is that process of why did I come, and that justification of why did I come, gets much influenced by what happens to you there. And a lot of what happens to you there is happenstance: that's the guy you meet on the border, or that's the guy whose telephone number you got, or that's the group that your friend joined who's persuaded you to come out as well. So not necessarily an established network, but again - and I would defer to the other two - I see a growing trend of networks in other countries recruiting people to go to Syria that I would say is an important development. Much more likely that you are going to get people going along that radicalisation process if they're already brought into a network even before they leave their home country - so that's something I think to watch. Of course, also I would like to make the point - and I think you'll agree - that a great many people who are going, are going with a sense of duty mixed in with a sense of humanitarianism - they'd like to help people there. [This is] very important and a lot of people go there, do their humanitarian bit and come out again, so how do you treat those people who come out? Do you say 'you were in Syria, you were helping the rebels in Syria, I'm going to take away your nationality, I'm going to confiscate your passport, I'm going to throw you in jail and interrogate you'? Well, that might be a good way to radicalize somebody in my view, and a not very effective way of finding out is this person [is] a threat, or a potential threat.

So in addition to that, the sense of duty and humanitarianism, I think there's also the sort of Facebook bravado, Facebook posing [is a] kind of motivation. But let's not exaggerate that too much, it's pretty squalid to go there, it's not particularly comfortable, you get involved in lots of things. It's very violent and dehumanising and brutalising. So fine you go out there and get a picture of you with a Kalashnikov or sitting on a captured tank or something, but probably then you'd want to push off if that's really your motivation. But nonetheless, I think some people do go there for that.

And then there's the sort of ideological motivation of going for some people [this] is much clearer, particularly perhaps in Saudis who've gone there and who are persuaded that this is an obligation as a Muslim to go and help. So, I'm conscious of the time, I don't really want to eat into their time,- but clearly what happens to you there. The second issue, you might go and join a group because they share your language, because there's a charismatic leader you want to go along with, you might join a group because it's the nearest group and they welcome you in and give you a gun – all sorts of reasons. But after a time of being there you start looking around and seeing what else is going on and there is quite a lot of people who actually change from one group to another – particularly the foreigners, not so much maybe the Syrians, but particularly the foreigners, so that too is a good indicator. If you know a lot about the groups, what does it mean to be a part of Afnad al-Sham or Jabhat al-Nusra or whatever, or way back down into the Free Syrian Army sort of groups. If you know what it means to be in that group or why someone joined that particular section of a group, it's very important to understanding to what extent they're radicalized or may be a problem down the road: particularly if they've made a choice once there of shifting from one group to another.

I would say that on the whole within Syria - and again I'd be very interested in what you say in particular Shiraz - the ideological – apart from ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant], if we leave ISIS to one side because it is to one side for the moment – the ideological backing of one group or another is not really terribly important in Syria. This group will fight with that group on a particular objective and they'll fight with them and so on, and it doesn't really matter what you're position is about Islam, whether you're particularly Salafist or what not, it's largely not irrelevant completely, but it's rather immaterial to the actions you take. I think that's one of the reasons why ISIS has been pushed out onto a bit of a limb. But the difficulty with ISIS being out on a limb is that it sort of makes people think the rest of them are pretty moderate then: that's not necessarily true. There are quite a lot of radical people in those other groups but they just don't agree with what ISIS is doing.

### Clarissa Ward

And ISIS, just to clarify is the Islamic State of Iraq...

### Richard Barrett

...The Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or whatever. It's important that they see their remit as being beyond Iraq into the whole of the Levant.

So just on that last question then: why do they come back? Is it because they have had enough? Is it because they need a rest and they will go back again? That's interesting if people keep on going back is that an indicator perhaps of radicalization. Or do they come out to look for other people to take in? These are all things that are noticeable. And I'd just compare that with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the group in Yemen, who are a very effective group - but now maybe moving more to the insurgent end of terrorism than the terrorist end of terrorism - but when they were more of a terrorist group they didn't want people coming out to join them, foreigners who didn't know anything from anything - they were just a security risk and a headache - but the groups in Syria generally do welcome foreigners. They like them, they find them simpatico, they find them good people, they can work with them, and they are generally happy to have them, or the ones that I've come across anyway. Obviously because [of] the situation in Lebanon, Iraq, in Jordan they are all very weak states, the situation in Syria has direct consequence for them. There are a lot of fighters from Jordan, from Iraq, from Lebanon in Syria. And not only is that a problem because those people will come out with a feeling of: 'ok maybe we should do something against our regime and take action there', but also Syria itself, the Syrians who are fighting - and I repeat the majority of people are Syrians - they are becoming more radicalized by this whole process of fighting Assad.

Kuwait, a lot of people go from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. I think the Saudi Foreign Ministry said there were 1200 back in January, so perhaps double that, and I think they said they had 300 in their rehabilitation programme, so that's the way they are treating them: interesting that they should see them as a problem. But also you've got people from central Asia, from Pakistan of course, Indonesia, Singapore even and all the other countries you can pretty much think of.

I'm going to skip over to a couple of points that I thought were important about when people come back to any state not just to [the] West, but to any state. Just as they go as individuals they come back as individuals and it's important to treat them as individuals: each one being different. How do you do that? How do you quantify the threat that they pose when they come back? You have to know more about them, you have to know why they went, what they did, and why they came back. But how are you going to do that? You're not going to do that as an immigration guy at the airport or as a policeman hauling them in. You're much more likely to find that out through the community, through their friends, through the mosque or whatever it is they do when they come back. Really important therefore that those principles of community policing and the work that's being done, particularly in this country but in many other countries, of engaging the community and working out what is this problem, what are the contours of it and how do we deal with it. The countries that put [the] most in [to] that are going to be [the] most successful in quantifying and dealing with this threat.

And I think that if the reaction of the state is: 'well, welcome home, let's talk about it', rather than 'we're very suspicious of you and we don't like you at all' I think then the likelihood, if young people are radicalized quickly, then maybe they can de-radicalize quickly as well.

So, I think I should leave it there, but just one other very basic thing, is of course there aren't western forces fighting in Syria. So the attitude of people fighting there is very much tied up to sectarianism, the awfulness of the Assad regime, or if they're tied up with the Assad regime then the awfulness of Sunni extremism, and so on. If the West cut a deal with Assad, so to try and bring the war to an end, will that change people's attitude? That is something we have to think about. And those people who've come back who want to move off to another front if they go to Mali, or Somalia, or even Afghanistan, Pakistan – border area, depending on what happens after the end of this year – then will they start coming into contact with western interest more directly and will that be an issue. It's very important for us all to plot these trajectories but not to try to fit everyone into the same pattern. Thank you.

### Clarissa Ward

Thank you very much. Shiraz:

### Shiraz Maher

I'll just start by giving a brief overview of what ICSR [The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization] at our centre at King's College has been doing and how that's given us a dataset that informs a lot of our work. About some time the middle of last year, or I should say a year ago, we began this idea of trying to estimate the number of people who had gone out to fight in Syria. And we did that three times over the course of last year: in April, in October, and again comprehensively in the middle of December. And all this is based on open-source material. And at some point during the summer we stumbled across a Danish guy who is in Syria, he's fighting, and that for us was the first time we'd come into contact with a foreign fighter. And through him very quickly and very early on we met through the internet a British guy who is out there fighting. Some of you may have seen him if you've been following this issue on Newsnight, a guy called Ifthekar Jaman who died there last December in Syria.

So we began the process at that point of learning really a lot more about the foreign fighters who were out there by doing two things. One, we began to collect their social media accounts wherever possible and we built a database which contains at its peak something like over 600 accounts that is not just of people who fight there but of people who support them, of their networks and so on. When you bring it right down to it,

foreign fighters were in the low 200s. And what that's allowed us to do is to take from there all kinds of basic information - again it's all open source, there's nothing that they haven't chosen to make public or put out there - and to build a profile of the types of people who go, and what the types of things are that matter to them, and to do the same on Twitter. Increasingly we are seeing larger numbers of people on Twitter and again we've taken and made a database of everyone they follow and everyone who follows them and again that begins to give you a little bit of information. I mean that alone produced over 18,000 data points. So you see how at its peak it's quite unmanageable. So we estimate from Europe at least there's some around or like 2,000 Europeans who have gone to fight as foreign fighters in this conflict. That is a cumulative figure that includes people that have returned back to the West and that includes people who have gone out there and died, so 2,000 is the overall. And we acknowledge that it's not an exact science but we kind of feel relatively confident with that figure. The largest numbers I think, as Richard mentioned, come from North Africa, if you take them as one band they are still the largest producers as it were of foreign fighters, then the Gulf States, then Europe following pretty intensely behind there.

So, what is the average profile? Well in one sense the average profile is no different to what we have seen with regards to previous conflicts in Afghanistan or Iraq, in this country. Which is traditionally men in their 20s, they are of South Asian ethnic origin, they have some connections to higher education, and they have some sort of connection to activist organisations - that's not to say extremists - but activist organisations that have some kind of international dimension. Which leads me to my next point which is probably, you can say, two types of individual who go to Syria.

The first guy is of the type that we've seen a lot of, and that has been arrested wearing numbers in the post-9/11 security environment here in so far as they were picked up on the edges of terrorist plots, they are known radicals, they have known associations. If you piece together their background and their history, characters that have been in the press a lot will pop up, like Omar Bakri Muhammad and Abu Hamza, these sorts of guys and their networks. So there is a group of people who go to Syria who are, or who have known radical associations, they have known connections to certain people and for them - if you want to think about it like this - Syria is like a finishing school. It's the war they've been wanting to have, it's given them that direct experience of the jihad that they've probably spent the last five or six years talking about and it's given them that opportunity to realize that fight that they've been itching for, for some time.

The second category, which is by far and away the largest category, is of people who actually don't have known associations; they don't have an extremist background. They're not the guys you can trace back to people who will have at some point been at least on the edges, if not more, of criminal or terrorist activity. These are guys who genuinely come



from conservative Muslim backgrounds that are orthodox but are not necessarily – as I say – of a radical nature. And we have seen some groups crop up in this environment where it's quite clear to us that the organization itself doesn't promote the idea of jihad in Syria or tell its members to fight jihad in Syria. But what has happened clearly is you have a grouping here of similarly minded young men, and someone independently, almost entrepreneurially, went out to Syria and made a connection by chance with a group there. Off the back of that, he then phones his mates through Skype back in the UK and tells them: 'it's great out here, I can make it easy for you, if you come down to Rehanli or Antakya or Kilis at this date and this time we'll send someone over, he'll pick you up'. So they've established essentially rat-runs between the countries and established a route. So for a lot of people you see, and a lot of academic literature talks [points] to this, a lot of it is just group dynamics – 'well my friends have gone, I should go and be a part of this' – it's known associations and people sort of move, or get mobilized off the back of those associations.

Ifthekar's a very good example of this, he's not someone who had a radical past, he was in fact if you look at him relatively well integrated before he went. And when I spoke to him, over a series of interviews I did on Skype, he explained quite clearly, and I think quite sincerely, that what principally motivated him to go to Syria was what he saw of the human suffering out there. And then, to give you an idea of the randomness of it, this guy has no connections, speaks no Arabic, flies to Istanbul, takes a bus down to the border area, meets a guy on the bus who is from Aleppo and tells him: 'I want to fight jihad in Syria' and the guy is sympathetic to that viewpoint and so as he crosses the border back into Syria to go home to Aleppo, he takes this guy with him. His brothers are meeting him and they're going to drive up to Aleppo – he takes this guy. When they get there he says: 'which group do you want to join?', and he says: 'Jabhat al-Nusra' so he takes him to the Jabhat al Nusra office in Aleppo and they reject him. And they reject him because they don't know him. And this is quite a big deal for a lot of the groups out there – they want you to have what they call taskhir – someone who will vouch you in, a reference essentially, you need to be brought into the group.

So he says he stood there and remonstrated and argued with them for two hours. And by his own admission he says he wept, he said: 'you know just put me on the front line, I don't care, you can take all my gear', and they kept saying: 'we think you might be British intelligence, we're not going to take you', so after this fails he says – and you've got to imagine, this is a 23-year-old guy from Portsmouth, he's walking through these hollow parts of Aleppo, completely destroyed, no life there - and he's thinking: 'I've got here, I've come this far and I'm not going to stumble at the last hurdle'. They tried to palm him off to Ghuraba al-Sham and our guy said: 'no, I don't want to fight with them. They're not religious enough for me, they let their members smoke', that's one of his big problems, he

said: 'I won't have come this far and then join Ghuraba'. So he's contemplating what to do and by chance [in] a coffee shop meets an Algerian from ISIS, and the Algerian man from ISIS says: 'I can take you to ISIS', and ISIS take him in, and off the back of that he spent about four months out there talking and communicating to his friends back in Portsmouth. Five of them then went over, along the route that I've described. The friend established it for them, they then fly out, he sends down a truck to pick them up, they cross easily.

At the same time, completely by coincidence, and again if you've followed it, you will have heard of the death of Anil Raoufi from Manchester a few months back. These three guys were just attracted to Ifthekar through the internet, and they flew out there and told him when they got there: 'look we're here, we want to come'. So you get to see through his story, almost as a case study, the different ways that people are going and what motivates them. How group selection works at the border was very random basically, and how people are ending up with the groups that they end up with.

So all of this then takes us back to this issue of what happens if these people return? I should say that when we talk to them there's not a single person out there who has expressed at any point a willingness to return to their home country. They all say they intend to stay in Syria, they intend to establish an Islamic state, and die in the process of its realization. That said, the figure that you may have heard about 250 returnees to this country, to the best of our knowledge is accurate - so clearly people do return, and people do come back. The academic literature on this, perhaps the most authoritative study was carried out by Thomas Hegghammer who counted and assessed and looked at previous conflicts to look at the rates of - you could say - continued jihadism of a returnee and what it comes down to. And he basically calculated that it's one-in-nine people [who] want to undertake or resume activity in their home countries.

So there are a few points to make on this. The first is clearly that from that figure alone the overwhelming majority will pose no threat. We risk exacerbating or provoking a conflict or confrontation with people when we don't need to. And I think, again Richard, again you were completely right. Some of the stuff coming out of the Home Office in this sense, saying that we will strip you of your passport, we will deny you citizenship, we will throw you into Belmarsh with a life sentence is entirely counterproductive. And the foreign fighters look at this with bewilderment, with confusion, with anger and suspicion, so it's very counterproductive.

The second thing to say about that one-in-nine figure is that, of course, if you use easy maths, and we say now 400 people from this country have gone, or returned, the cumulative figure is 400 for the UK, if you use easy maths which is one in ten, that is forty people that would be a threat potentially. So if we look at the pattern of terrorist activity

in this country one of the very fortunate things that happened was that on a number of occasions there were bombs put on the streets of the United Kingdom that failed to go off because of the incompetence of the bomb makers. People now in Syria are in a very permissive environment where they can learn those skills and become very good bomb makers so they're not going to be incompetent, they're not going to fail essentially in the way that others did in the past. And again there's literature that shows that if someone [who] has [had] active combat experience is involved in a terrorist plot, that plot is far more likely to succeed, which would make sense, and far more likely to be more deadly and more extreme in magnitude in the damage it will cause. And I think again all that makes sense. So even though the numbers might be low, it's still something that really needs to be considered and confronted and thought about in creative ways as to how we would begin to challenge and tackle that problem.

And the final point I would make on the one-in-nine figure is that it uses previous conflicts such as the Arab *mujahideen* who went to confront the Soviet Union. What's interesting about that is where the global jihad movement is today, it's in a very different place to where it was in the 1980s. In the 1980s they were fundraising in Florida, they were fundraising in New York, today their relationship with the West is far more confrontational, and it's far more combative. So I wonder – and this is just me thinking aloud, I don't really have an answer – to what extent that figure will change because the relationship between jihadist organizations, particularly of the type you find operating on the ground in Syria and the West, North American countries, is clearly not as cosy as it was previously. So that's something we need to think about.

And then, there's just one final point really I wanted to make, which is when we're talking about returnees as well and let's say we're looking at the other proportion of the eight-in-nine. We sort of mop our brow and say thank goodness, these guys are not going to be the terrorist, they're ok and we kind of wash our hands of it. What we've realized from conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan is that our soldiers who are well-trained, who are given lots of support, lots of assistance, still suffer in quite alarming proportions a number of mental health issues related with combat, combat-stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, all these types of things. And that's a real challenge that is on-going for soldiers once they return from active service. Now, we are faced with a situation where kids as young as 19, 18, the youngest Brit in Syria is 16 years old, who have gone over, who are given no training, who are given no counselling, no support and thrown into this incredibly violent, incredibly brutal, dehumanising chaos. Even if they return with the best will in the world, and even if they return and are not a threat, these are people who will face a number of serious challenges about reintegrating into society. And so we need to think of this not just in terms of a security threat, but as a much broader issue as well. So I'll stop there.

## Clarissa Ward

And I would just say Eric Harroun who was an American who converted to Islam and went to fight in Syria, actually died yesterday of a drug overdose in his home in Arizona, so your point is well taken about the psychological effects and indeed the psychological vulnerability of people who choose to go and follow a path like this anyway. Raff, over to you.

## Raffaello Pantucci

Thank you very much and I've got to follow two very difficult acts so I'll do my best within my capabilities. Anyway, I thought I'd focus on the aspect of the coming home and how we have seen the foreign fighter threat coming home in terms of a terrorist threat or posing a potential terrorist threat in the West in particular. Though I think there's a couple of points [that] have been made about how this comes back and where it comes back to, I think in the first place something Richard mentioned in terms of the numbers of foreign fighters that we see go out there, the overwhelming majority are from the Arab world and I think it's there that they're really going to have a big problem that they really haven't begun to really tackle yet, but I think that's a major issue and of course that has implications for UK and European national interests because of course we have interests in these countries as well.

But to look at the European case and the North American case in particular I was struck recently because I had the opportunity to talk to people close to security officials here in the United Kingdom and in the United States for about a week. And the fascinating thing for me was when I was talking to people in the United States there is a perception there that this is less of an immediate threat there. This is not seen to be the same sort of threat, which you find when you talk to security officials here in the United Kingdom and Europe where this is really seen as the big problem, in counterterrorism terms, that they are very agitated and very focused on. So I think there's an interesting dynamic there.

Why this is? I think frankly that proximity has a large part to play. The fact is it's very easy for a Briton or someone from Europe to get across the border in Turkey to Syria. It is a short car ride away for some countries, it is an Easy Jet flight over to somewhere in Turkey and then another Easy Jet flight to somewhere over there, and so it's a very easy trip to make. And so the simple facility of doing this means that it is going to be a bigger problem for the EU rather than for North America.

But then to look specifically at how this threat might come back I find, like Shiraz, we're academics, we like to look at history and understand what sort of happened in the past, and one specific thing I have tried to look at is trying to understand: how has the foreign fighter threat actually come back from other battlefields that we've seen historically? This is not the first time that we've seen Europeans, young Europeans, get motivated to join

and participate in jihadi battlefields. We've seen this happen repeatedly in history. Going back to Afghanistan, going back to Chechnya, going back to Bosnia, and the other sorts of wars in the former Yugoslavia, going back to Iraq and Afghanistan again more recently and even into Somalia and even a few over in to Mali, this is something we have seen historically happen repeatedly in many different directions. And in terms of the threat coming back, in many ways the first point has been made repeatedly by the others as well, is not everyone comes back to be a threat. I think the numbers that we see go out there are worrying, and in Syria in particular it's very worrying, but if we look at history not everyone who goes out to these battlefields comes back and poses a direct threat. However, in cases that they do, it tends to express itself in one of four different ways.

In the first case we have the individuals who come back as part of directed plots. These individuals who go out there, maybe originally their plan was to participate in a brave struggle to help an oppressed people, but once they're out there they connect with someone who redirects them and says: 'you know brother you're doing a wonderful thing here, you're really coming, you're helping the cause and it's great that you've come this far, but if you really want to make a difference, you should go back and do something at home'. And we've seen this happen historically. A good example of this is the 7/7 bombers here in the United Kingdom. Mohammad Sidique Khan, the leader of that group, had been back and forth to Pakistan to participate in training camps at least three times prior to being directed to come back to launch his attack in the United Kingdom. I don't think his original intention was to go participate in, join Al-Qaeda, and come back and launch a terrorist attack here. I think originally his intention was to participate in the jihad in Kashmir to find out what was happening there. But he was redirected because of people he met over there.

The second sort of shaped threat we've seen is in the form of individuals like Bilal Abdullah who was an Iraqi doctor here in United Kingdom who went over, was born here in the UK, or in Iraq – Shiraz actually met him – he was born here and spent some time in Iraq and then came back and was brought up and lived here, he ended up going over to Iraq while the American-led conflict was happening there and connected with the insurgency in some shape or form. He came back and decided to launch an attack here in the United Kingdom by leaving two VBIEDs (Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device) down on Haymarket and then the next day driving a truck into Glasgow International Airport. There is no evidence from what I've seen that he was directed to come back and launch this attack. However it was clear that he connected with people out there and it was clear that obviously he felt that it was his duty to punish the United Kingdom, in particular, for their actions in Iraq. And so this is the kind of threat which we see which is shaped, in some ways its connected to another sort of threat that we see nowadays, the lone actor threat, the individual terrorist who comes back, or the individual who is motivated by terrorist ideas to launch an attack but doesn't necessarily have the

command and control or direction that we see in some Al--Qaeda plots like the 9/11 for example.

The third sort of threat, and this in some ways is the longer term aspect to this problem and the one that I think will give us the longest tale which I think will be of concern for many years to come, is the fact that some of these individuals who go out there will come back and they may not decide that they want to launch terrorist attacks or participate in that. That may not be their role but they will be quite changed by their experience and they will become quite radical pillars of the community, who will become quite significant within the sort of community in which they're living and they will help pass on the ideas and the message of fighting jihad and going and participating in these sorts of conflicts to the community around them. They will become radicalizing agents; they will mean that the problems that we have of radicalization in this country will continue to be a problem for the next few years. And they will have the added advantage of having real battlefield experience and the battle scars to show for it. So people will be more impressed by them and may say well: 'brother so-and-so, this very impressive guy, he told me about his experiences there, maybe I want to go copy this'.

There's also the possibility that some of these individuals will end up becoming the sort of soft support network that you often find in the background of terrorist plots in the West. You know, terrorist plots tend not to exist in a vacuum; they tend to need a support network of people around them. Well if someone is being directed from a battlefield or from a foreign country somewhere to launch an attack here, the guy directing him remembers that he met brother so-and-so who now lives in London, well brother so-and-so might be a useful connection for him to go and hook up when he comes to town. So these sorts of individuals will sort of help proliferate and continue the radical milieu in the West for a while to come.

And the final aspect of the threat, which could come back, which I think is maybe a more immediate one that I think police forces in particular around Europe are beginning to see show up in odd places, is the idea of individuals coming back and becoming involved in criminal activity. So if we look at the sort of individuals and the profiles of individuals going out to Syria from the West, we do see there is a high proportion of people who have had some sort of criminal past. Be this in terms of gangs, being involved in gang activity, or in terms of being involved in Islamist activity or other things before. One of the Britons who died out in Syria, he was publicly identified – Mohammed el-Araj – had originally been arrested and served 18 months in prison during a protest at the Israeli Embassy back in February or January 2009. The community of people arrested at that time is really interesting, in fact a couple of other individuals arrested there at the same time ended up dying in Somalia fighting alongside al Shabaab. So you know, we have some of these individuals and I think this is the community of Islamists, the long-term Islamists

that I think Shiraz has referred to as his two groups. Some of these are becoming involved in Islamist activity here and then going over there to fight. But then also we're seeing criminals and some of these criminals are coming back here and basically going back to their own criminal ways to raise money to go back over again. There's another case in the UK of Choukri Ellekhlifi, who along with two of his friends, was going around Belgravia mugging people using a taser, they were doing this to raise money which they were using, he at least, to go over and fight in Syria. He also died there, having in fact trained alongside Mohammed el-Araj.

So these are sort of four different threats that we've seen happen historically and we've seen, we've already started to see, as I said in the fourth case, in Europe when we are looking at Syria.

While the criminal aspect is one thing we've seen showing up already, we've also seen an echo of how the threat might come back in a number of different cases in the European Union already. I think one of the cases which is worth mentioning, mostly because it's one of the loudest ones out there, is a group in Belgium which is Sharia for Belgium who basically this group is an offshoot of a British group called Al-Muhajiroun, it's essentially the local version of that. This is a very radical organization that used to exist in Belgium which I think has really provided the core of individuals who make up the Belgian foreign fighter cadre in Syria. And these individuals, while sitting in Syria have become quite adept at basically pumping out threats and shouting out about things they are going to do back in Europe. They repeatedly post messages on Facebook or send emails back to newspapers in Belgium saying: 'Muslims should watch out and not go to this place in Antwerp on this specific day because something might happen', and the implicit threat that's within there, and they've done this repeatedly. And I think there's a lot of bravado involved in this. I don't think we should necessarily see these individuals are plotting these attacks, I think they're shouting about it, and we've seen that in a lot of the other cases. A lot of the interviews we've seen with some of foreign fighters out there the way they shout about what they might come back and it's questionable to me that these are necessarily the ones who are going to actually do it. But we have seen some cases that are far more worrying.

Here in the UK, there was a case late last year in October where some individuals were arrested who are currently on trial so it's very difficult to know what happened, but the story that seems out in the public domain is that they were planning some sort of a Mumbai-style attack – I really don't know anything beyond that so I'll leave that one off to one side, however clearly the security services here are seeing a threat that is already coming back.

More open, or more is known about, a cell that we saw arrested back in January in France down in the Cote d'Azur. It was an individual called Ibrahim who was arrested, who had

been fighting in Syria when he was caught, and he was arrested with three soda cans which were filled with explosives and seemed to be the early stages of a bomb that he was trying to make. He also had material of how to make bombs, of how to make other bombs and he also had some firearms. Now he's an interesting individual because he was a person who had been out to Syria and had returned, but he was also part of a bigger community of radicals in France of which I think the French authorities had arrested 20 previously. These individuals had been linked to an attack – they'd thrown a grenade in a kosher deli in the outskirts of Paris sometime in early 2013, other individuals when the police had tried to arrest them they'd resisted arrest and ended up getting shot by police because they were resisting arrest, I think with guns. And when they looked into these guys' possessions they found explosives and weapons. And these individuals were also linked to a case of trying to hold up a McDonalds, I think somewhere else in France which they were doing to presumably raise money, although the understanding was they were trying to raise money to facilitate their travel to Syria. So the individual case we see here of an individual guy coming back here to try and launch an attack, again he was only arrested in January, so we don't know the full story yet, but he certainly had some sort of explosive device which he had made, which presumably he was going to use in France.

And another case to look at happened in November of last year, happened in Kosovo. It was a group of about six ethnic Albanians who were arrested. Originally they were arrested for trying to attack some American missionaries that were operating I think in Pristina and when the local authorities with the assistance of the American authorities had arrested these individuals and at least two of them had experience of fighting in Syria. These individuals managed to obtain guns and were planning to do something, or had already attempted to do something in their home country of Kosovo. Kosovo is of course not part of the European Union proper but it sits right in the heart of it.

Then to talk on the criminal side of it I've already mentioned a number of instances of the criminal activity that has come back from the battlefield in Syria, but we saw in January of this year another pair of arrests of former gang members in Holland who had been out to Syria and who returned and were arrested trying to conduct an armed robbery on a bank, I believe. They were caught prior to trying to do this attack but the understanding was that they were presumably trying to raise money again to go back out to Syria.

I'll quickly end, having laid out this potential threat picture to basically dial it down a bit and say that again while we are seeing a lot of people going out there and I think, for the numerical reasons that Shiraz pointed out, we have to worry about this because when we look at Syria and the numbers going out there and the numbers that we're seeing coming back, and we look at history and the proportion of individuals who do turn into some sort of threat we are dealing with quite a big problem in Europe when we're looking at Syria. But again not all of them are going to be a threat, so trying to identify methods of



establishing some sort of pathways for these individuals to demobilize or to return to some sort of ordinary life or to step away from these old lives if that's what they want to do is very important. And I think it's going to be very difficult for intelligence and security services job to map out this community of individuals and try to identify which are the ones that we really need to be concerned about and really might come back and pose one of these threats that I mentioned. And, you know, this is a very difficult picture to understand because I think a lot of it is about the connections that they're making out there and of course for the security services that's a very difficult picture to understand. It's already difficult to understand what is happening on the battlefield in Syria and the confusing dynamics between the different groups who are fighting with each other, or against each other, or against the regime, it's a very sort of confusing picture, but when you overlay on top of that which of these groups, or which of the individuals in these groups are interested in trying to launch attacks and those being the ones to focus on it becomes an incredibly difficult picture to understand. I will leave it at that.

