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Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Scale of the Problem and the Threat to Europe

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Europeans constitute about one-fifth of the foreign fighters in the ranks of radical Islamist and terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq. Some of them could be poised to return to Europe to conduct terrorist attacks. In order to minimise the threat of such attacks, prepared by veterans of Middle Eastern conflicts, European security institutions should rapidly intensify their counter-terrorist preventative activities and tighten their intelligence cooperation with Middle Eastern and Persian Gulf states, which are also threatened with similar attacks. It is also necessary to train the Syrian rebels for intelligence collection and delivery of information on the European Islamists fighting in Syria and Iraq.

The Scale of the Problem. Addressing the UN Security Council summit on 24 September, U.S. President Barack Obama stated that more than 15,000 foreign fighters had joined terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq, mostly the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN, The Support Front for the People of Sham).¹ The largest group amongst them consists of volunteers from Middle Eastern countries such as Tunisia (3,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Jordan (2,000), Morocco (1,500), Lebanon (1,000) and Libya (500). According to EU estimates, about 3,000 of the foreign fighters are from Europe, and are mostly French, British, German or Belgian. These estimates include those who are now fighting in Syria and Iraq, those who have died while fighting, and those who have already returned to their home countries. Data on foreigners (mostly Iraqi, Iranian or Lebanese, but also Afghan and Shia) fighting alongside Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's troops, who have successfully supported the regular Syrian army in the civil war, are not available. One can only assume that, because of the involvement of hundreds of Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite militia and members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, they number about 10,000. The scale of foreign fighter mobilisation for the war in Syria has already surpassed that of the mobilisation for the Afghan jihad against the intervening Soviet troops when the mujahedeen were supported by up to 20,000 foreign volunteers. Some of them later joined Al-Qaeda, which was relocating to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, others gravitated towards other jihadi fronts, for example to Bosnia, or joined the already existing Middle Eastern jihadi organisations in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. Some of them went on to launch terrorist activities in Western Europe.

The Threat to Europe. More than 90 jihadi terrorist plots were hatched in Western Europe between 1994 and 2010, and, according to Thomas Hegghammer, the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment's (FFI) director of terrorism research, over 260 people were involved in them. Some 60 of these were veterans of wars in Afghanistan, Algeria, Bosnia and others, and they often played prominent roles in their European terrorist cells. These wars and the suffering of the Muslims, for which the radicals blamed the broadly defined West, often played a motivational role in their decisions to start terrorist activity, either in their European home countries or as foreign fighters in Muslim countries engulfed by armed conflicts. The latter category comprises about 700 documented cases of European Islamist foreign fighters who between 1990 and 2010 travelled to wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and Iraq. The

¹ K. Rękawek, "The Islamic State and Al-Qaeda: Two Different Threats," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 117 (712), 29 September 2014.

available data indicate that their presence in conflict zones had no decisive on affect the outcome of any given war, but that the chances of a successful terrorist attack increased when they were later based in Europe.

The mobilisation of Europeans for the war in Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2014 is already four times greater than the overall Islamist mobilisation in Europe for foreign wars between 1990 and 2010. If the existing trend continues, Europe could expect that up to 300 of the 3,000 currently or previously active in the war in Syria and Iraq will return to their home countries and commence terrorist activities. This figure, roughly one in 12, is similar to the 60 out of 700 who did the same between 1990 and 2010. It is possible that both the Islamic State and JN will incite them before they return home to carry out terrorist acts in Europe. This threat has become even more pronounced, since neither of the two organisations, especially in the light of international coalition bombings of jihadists in Syria, shy away from expressing their desire to strike at the West. In addition to that, the UK, France and the Scandinavian countries have already arrested returning foreign fighters suspected of preparing terrorist plots, and a French returnee is accused of the shooting in the Jewish Museum in Brussels on 24 May, in which four people died.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The arrests of returning foreign fighters who involve themselves in terrorist activities, and the successful attack in Belgium, do not mean that this relatively insignificant group of future terrorists, who are to return to Europe over a period of many months or years, will be able to coordinate spectacular terrorist attacks on a continental scale. Thus their actions will not constitute a strategic threat to the security of the EU Member States. Simultaneously, however, the return to Europe of thousands of foreign fighters forces the local security services and police forces to deal with the challenge of monitoring them in order to pin down the potential Syria and Iraq veterans involved in terrorism. This dispersal of counterintelligence and police resources, which have been concentrated on the threat from the Al-Qaeda linked jihadists, separatists or left-wing and right-wing extremists, will allow some of the returning foreign fighter plots to succeed. Possibly some of these plots will be carried out by the so-called lone wolves, i.e., individual veterans of Middle Eastern conflicts who, because of their preparation and training, might be individually capable of preparing hard to detect and more or less spectacular terrorist attacks.

In order to limit the threat, the EU Member States should invest in preventive measures aimed at limiting the number of those travelling to the Middle East conflict zones. An example of best practices in this field is the British project Channel, which involves not only the police and border guard but also local authorities, schools, health service, NGOs, local communities and more. Their activities are aimed at the identification of individuals exposed to radicalisation, and the subsequent prevention of their involvement in terrorist activities. Similar aims govern the Danish approach, in which both the Ministry of Social Affairs and the security services play prominent roles, in cooperation with NGOs and local community leaders, such as imams at mosques. The German Hayat programme has a different structure and relies on a de-radicalisation model based on the exposed and threatened individual's family, and which is supported by non-governmental organisations.

Apart from the preventive measures, the EU Member States should enhance their intelligence cooperation with Turkey, which serves as the entry point to Syria for most of the foreign fighters, and support its efforts in sealing its southern border. A similar enhancement should also be carried out in relation to the EU's cooperation with Middle Eastern and Gulf states, whose citizens constitute around two-thirds of the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Due to their historical experience with returnees from Afghanistan, and because of the number of their citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq, these states are most threatened by terrorist activities carried out by veterans returning from the Islamic State and the JN. Additionally, these organisations could use their Jordanian, Saudi and Lebanese members to prepare clandestine networks in their native countries, and then launch them into action as a prelude to a full scale jihadi invasion of Middle Eastern countries neighbouring the Islamic State's caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Dismantling such networks and the arrests of returning Arab foreign fighters by their native countries' security services could result in interesting information on the European foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, and their potential terrorist plans in Europe. Similar information could also be obtained via enhancement of cooperation with Syrian rebels who, co-financed by the EU and adequately prepared by the European security services to collect data on foreign fighters, might become the best source of knowledge on the Islamic State and JN, and their terrorist plans.