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EUROPEAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ: ARE THEY LIKELY TO ATTACK UPON RETURN?

Abstract

The study examined the likelihood whereby EU citizens who were or still are fighting in the Syrian civil conflict or the Iraqi insurgency could perpetrate an attack upon return. A comparative analysis was conducted among the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Belgium in terms of capability, intent and opportunity of their foreign fighters and returnees to pose a threat. It is argued that independent attacks by returnees are more likely to happen in France than in the UK, Germany and Belgium due to the fact that French extremist networks appear to have distanced themselves from Syria-related issues in order to avoid being banned and go undetected by the authorities.

KeyWords

Foreign fighter, returning fighter, returnee, plotter, jihadist, terrorist plot, independent attack, Daesh.

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INTRODUCTION

The EU authorities have estimated that between 5,000 and 6,000 European citizens and residents went to fight in the Syrian civil war.¹ That amount of foreign fighters in just one conflict is unprecedented. During the 2000s for example only 200 Europeans joined the insurgency in Afghanistan and 100 in Iraq.² The difference with respect to the Syrian conflict and the last outbreak of Iraqi insurgency has probably to do with the increasing use of social media we have recently seen in other events such as the Arab Spring in 2011, although this time globalization is having a negative effect. Indeed, the jihadist organizations operating in Syria, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, and in Iraq, such as Daesh (also known as ISIS or ISIL), are playing a critical role in driving the information network of Western foreign fighters.³ The increase of Europeans travelling to Syria or Iraq might also be accelerated by itself. Some potential foreign fighters who were hesitating to travel may now perceive that joining the insurgency in Syria or Iraq is religiously legitimate because thousands of Muslims have already taken the decision. The call to fight against al-Assad regime by theologians such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is one of the most influential Sunni clerics in the world, increased the flow of foreign fighters to Syria in May 2013.⁴ A second wave of fighters probably arrived when Daesh conquered the second largest city of Iraq, i.e. Mosul, and then proclaimed itself a caliphate in June 2014. In any case, some potential fighters may now believe that they have the duty to help those 'brothers' who have gone to fight the Assad regime, whereas others may instead be persuaded by friends or relatives that already became fighters. Most of the individuals from the EU who travelled to Syria were from France ($\approx 1,550$), the United Kingdom (≈ 700), Germany (≈ 720) and Belgium (≈ 450).⁵ The fact that the highest number of

1 THE TELEGRAPH. More than 6,000 European jihadists in Syria, EU official says, 2015.

2 HEGGHAMMER, Thomas. Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting, *American Political Science Review*, 2013, p. 5.

3 KLAUSEN, Jytte. *Twittering the Jihad: Social media networks of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq*, *Studies in conflict and terrorism*, 2014, p. 19.

4 ZELIN, Aaron. How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade, *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, 2013.

5 LISTER, Charles. *Returning foreign fighters: criminalization or reintegration?* Brookings, 2015

fighters are from France may lead the reader to suspect that its Muslim community is less integrated than for example that of the UK and the lack of integration is their incentive to leave the country. However, a recent study indicates that British Muslims, compared with the French, feel less positively about the West as well as its influence in the Muslim world and they are also more likely to prioritize loyalty to their community and perceive hostility toward Islam.⁶ Moreover, it does not seem coherent neither that France, with the highest number of foreign fighters, has proportionally less returnees than the rest of the countries studied, nor that having less returnees, the country has suffered more plots. All these apparent incongruences and more are deeply analyzed throughout the paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employs the Differential Association Theory to help explain the behaviour of foreign fighters and returnees. This theory was created in 1974 by Edwin Shuterland and its roots are found in the Social Learning Theory, whereby learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context and can occur purely through observation or direct instruction.⁷ Shuterland used the theory in the field of criminology. He argued that the techniques and motives of criminal behavior are learned in interaction with other persons in intimate personal groups.⁸ In the same line, authors Taylor Armstrong and Jonathan Matusitz have studied the terrorist group Hezbollah on the basis of the Differential Association Theory and concluded that its members develop combat skills and learn violent behavior by interacting with one another.⁹ Fortunately, the inherent psychological features of every individual prevail over the social environment and therefore just a limited number of Muslims decide to join the Syrian or Iraqi insurgency and even less returnees plot attacks upon return. Put in other words, many young Muslims may meet someone who tries to brainwash them, but just a minority is persuaded to wage jihad.

As a starting point, it is possible to conclude from data collected by the expert on terrorism Thomas Hegghammer that one in twelve (around 8.5%) of the European foreign fighters who went abroad between 1990 and 2010 came back interested in

6 JACOBSON, David. *Surveying the Landscape of Integration: Muslim Immigrants in the United Kingdom and France*. *Democracy and Security Journal*, 2014.

7 BOUNDLESS. *Bandura and observational learning*, 2015.

8 LANIER, Mark. *Essential Criminology*, Westview Press, 2014, p. 132.

9 ARMSTRONG, Taylor. *Hezbollah as a Group Phenomenon: Differential Association Theory*, *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 2013.

perpetrating attacks.¹⁰ For this period of time, Hegghammer calculated the total number of Europeans who went abroad to join an insurgency and how many of those war veterans were behind jihadist plots in Europe. Another study published by the Center for Security Studies of ETH Zurich University has paid particular attention to the case of foreign fighters in Syria. The authors argue that Belgium and Germany have set up tailored initiatives aimed at the reintegration of returnees who are not prosecuted, whereas in France and the United Kingdom there appear to be little efforts to reintegrate foreign fighters upon return.¹¹ Overall, in order to weight the level of threat posed by returnees, the authorities should evaluate them on a case-by-case basis and find out why they went to Syria, what they did or happened to them there, and why they returned. The main reason why most of the foreign fighters have gone to Syria would be to defend its Muslim community either by fighting or by providing humanitarian aid.¹² However, some of the fighters who join Daesh are sent to Iraq by the organization, regardless their intention is to stay or not in Syria. From statements made by some Muslim clerics such as Ammar al-Hakeem, Head of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, one can deduce that foreign fighters compose about 30% of Daesh forces in Syria and 10% in Iraq.¹³ In addition, a second and sometimes complementary reason why many fighters have joined the conflict would be to live in a 'caliphate' under the strict application of Sharia.

Once the individuals who travel to Syria or Iraq are integrated in a terrorist organization, they are susceptible to further radicalization by interacting in groups. Thus, the initial idea of just helping Muslims who are under attack could suddenly turn to the perception that conducting attacks in Europe is legitimate. In this line, it is necessary to distinguish between individuals who joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which only has the purpose of defeating the Assad regime, and those who ended up in jihadist groups such as Daesh or al-Nusra, which have an anti-Western ideology. Furthermore, foreign fighters who experience a stressful event or situation of an exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature may suffer from Post-traumatic stress disorder, which is already one of the main causes of violent behavior in conventional war veterans.¹⁴ Many of the Europeans fighting in Daesh have a greater probability of experiencing this sort of trauma than if they had joined another organization since that one is by far the most violent of all of them. Finally, some individuals are stripped

10 HEGGHAMMER, Thomas. Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting, *American Political Science Review*, 2013.

11 CSS ETH ZURICH. Foreign fighters: an overview of responses in eleven countries, 2014.

12 BARRET, Richard. Foreign fighters in Syria, *The Soufan Group*, 2014.

13 REUTERS. Saddam's former army is secret of Baghdadi's success, 2015.

14 MACMANUS, Deirdre. Aggressive and Violent Behavior Among Military Personnel Deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan: Prevalence and Link With Deployment and Combat Exposure, *Oxford Journals*, 2014.

of their radical views as a consequence of having left the group rather than that being a cause for leaving.¹⁵ However, most of the returnees are disappointed and the reason for coming back is because what they have seen in Syria or Iraq did not match what they expected to find.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

The sampling frame was generated through a comparative analysis among those countries with the higher number of foreign fighters, namely France, United Kingdom, Belgium and Germany. France has particular interest because it has suffered the deadliest jihadist attacks since 2012 (161 fatalities) and the highest number of attempted or successful attacks to date (seven plots).¹⁶ For the purposes of this paper, the definition of ‘foreign fighter’ used refers to those individuals who join the insurgency in the Syrian Civil War or the Iraqi insurgency and lack citizenship of these states. Moreover, to avoid recurrences, the term ‘citizen’ included both nationals and residents of a given country. The study therefore focuses on the threat those foreign fighters pose to their respective countries, not to other Member States. However, it is also considered that the likelihood that returnees perpetrate attacks abroad is related with both cooperation among security services and EU legislation. In addition, when the number of returnees arrested is mentioned, it does not refer to individuals just held for interrogation, but those also charged with terrorist offences. All in all, the countries were analysed by studying a series of factors in terms of perceived capability, intent and opportunity of their foreign fighters and returnees to become a threat to the national security. The table below shows key-parameters (n° of individuals abroad, returned, monitored and arrested / sentenced) detailed for each of the countries studied.

COUNTRY	ABROAD	RETURNED	MONITORED	ARRESTED / SENTENCED
Germany	405	230	106	30
Belgium	260	150	50	7
France	1153	213	≈ 120	90
UK	300	350	-	121

¹⁵ HOLMER, Georgia. What to do when foreign fighters come home, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 2015.

¹⁶ Data obtained from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

Variable definitions

First of all, '**capability**' is defined as the ability returnees have to commit an attack, either on their own, in a casual group or in a cell already established in the country. Cells and groups provide the degree of organization needed to conduct complex attacks that jihadists operating alone do not have. The worst attacks in Europe in the last decade, i.e. the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the 7 July 2005 London bombings¹⁷, the Charlie Hebdo shooting and the November 2015 Paris attacks, were carried out by cells. Additionally, the mere fact that returnees have some sort of connection with terrorists is a source of encouragement, assistance or even instructions to conduct attacks and, for this reason, solo-jihadists (those with network ties) seem to be more effective operatives than lone-wolf jihadists (those acting in isolation). Indeed, solo-jihadists were behind five of the seven individual plots that caused fatalities in the EU between 1995 and 2015.¹⁸ Thus, the capability to attack depends on the amount of foreign fighters who travelled to Syria or Iraq as well as the existence of radical Islamist cells or groups in the homeland. On the one hand, those countries with more foreign fighters are likely to have more returnees and, therefore, a higher number of them who may try to join one of those groups, create another one or contact possible jihadist cells. However, none of the variables are independent from each other and the cases that do not follow the tendency were deeply evaluated. On the other, cells or groups may contact and recruit returnees in order to perpetrate attacks.

Secondly, to evaluate the intentions of each returnee is the most important challenge and, at the same time, the most difficult one. The term '**intention**' refers to whether returnees are interested in resuming their former lives or they show apparent signs of having gone through a radicalization process that may lead them to attack at home. Those returnees that authorities say they are still involved in radical environments were considered in this study as would-be jihadists who may commit crimes at any moment. Several different aspects needed to be examined, namely the policy adopted to deal with them, how much the Muslim community is integrated and what sort of organization the returnee belonged to as well as its intentions. Countries adopting repressive measures instead of preventive ones will likely face more cases of returnees who feel mistreated by their Government and may seek revenge. The establishment of communication paths with the families of those returnees is necessary to get an idea of the extent they may have been radicalized, especially bearing in mind that it is sometimes not possible to interrogate them directly. The degree of integration

¹⁷ Documents found by German authorities on a terrorist suspect arrested in Berlin in May 2011 have suggested that Rashid Rauf, a British al Qaeda operative, played a key role in planning the attacks.

¹⁸ Data obtained from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

the Muslim community has in the country is also an important aspect to take into account since that is the environment foreign fighters will be exposed to upon return. Moreover, whether or not the returnee had joined a terrorist organization and this one threatens the country may influence the person depending on how much he or she feels identified with the group, but only threats related to the Syrian or Iraqi conflicts were considered. The intentions of some jihadist groups at the same time may be influenced by the military intervention of a given country in the US-led coalition against Daesh.

Finally, the efficiency of each country to identify and track dangerous returnees as well as share that information with other Member States and Turkey (through which most of the fighters reach Syria) will have a direct impact on the opportunity jihadists have to perpetrate attacks. The concept of ‘**opportunity**’ is defined as the possibility returnees have to go unnoticed by the security services when they plot an attack. Once the foreign fighter is identified, he or she may still be abroad, have died or have returned to the EU, perhaps unnoticed. However, during the last two years all the countries studied in this paper provided Turkey with information about 4,700 suspects and Turkish authorities deported 830 Europeans.¹⁹ The European Commission and Member States are also putting pressure to implement a tool called the ‘Passenger Name Record’ in order to force air carriers to provide security agencies with information about passengers flying between the EU and any country from outside. One of its measures for example, the travel itinerary, could be of great value to identify returnees considering that those who travel by plane usually make stopovers in different countries to conceal the origin of their journey, i.e. Syria. But even if the proposal succeed, foreign fighters still have a range of other means of transport such as car, coach, train or ferry, which are in fact increasingly used by them. The current Schengen Agreement allows travelling within the EU without being subjected to border checks. This section also addressed the itinerary foreign fighters use to travel to Syria, considering that they are likely to return through the same or similar routes that were successful and are known by them. In addition, most of the countries are experiencing problems when it comes to collecting the evidence needed to prosecute individuals suspected of having committed a terrorist attack. The different responses each of the countries studied have given to this problem were also analyzed and challenged.

¹⁹ HURRIYETDAILYNEWS. Turkey sends back 830 European jihadists, 2014.

Hypotheses and research questions

- Hypotheses

A series of hypotheses were tested in order to weight how much the degree of radicalization returnees have may increase according to the sort of organization they joined in Syria or Iraq and the country of their nationality or residence.

H-1: Returnees who joined a terrorist group in Syria will be more susceptible to adopting a criminal behavior than those who joined the FSA.

NOTE: The hypothesis assumes that the majority of the foreign fighters in Iraq belong to Daesh.

H-2: Only a minority of the foreign fighters from the EU who joined the insurgency in Syria or Iraq will go back to their respective countries interested in perpetrating attacks between two and twelve months from their return.

NOTE: The two-month minimum was obtained by calculating the average of time that took most of the returnees already arrested to perpetrate or plot an attack, when the information was available. The hypothesis also considers that no more than 10% of the returnees will pose a threat, based on the already mentioned counting of European foreign fighters that plotted an attack upon return between 1990 and 2010.

These two hypotheses were tested through dataset analysis to find out the number of returnees involved in plots as well as their background.

- Research questions

The study aimed at finding the answer to two main questions in order to conclude which countries should be especially on alert to the threat of returnees and where security measures need to be focused on.

RQ-1: How likely is that foreign fighters from the countries studied could perpetrate an attack in the homeland if they have returned or are expected to return from Syria or Iraq?

For this first question, social network analysis was used to link returnees with terrorist organizations, extremist groups or other foreign fighters. Moreover, content analysis was conducted to evaluate the existence of de-radicalization programs in the countries studied and examine to what degree the return of foreign fighters is under control. Returnees that continue operating in the extremist scene, whether they establish suspicious connections or they just start recruiting or disseminating extremist material, were considered potential threats. However, the performance of the last two activities is less bound to the likelihood of attack than the first one.

RQ-2: What are the most likely targets that returning jihadists could attack in their countries?

For the second question, dataset analysis was used to find out what kind of targets returnees have so far chosen to attack. Content analysis was also conducted to examine how returnees may fit into the strategy that terrorist organizations operating in Syria or Iraq have. The typical scenarios that the study looked for in the data were Jewish places and satirical magazines/artists that publish content on the prophet Muhammad, although public spaces and landmarks were also taken into account.

BACKGROUND

Jihadists have today fewer opportunities to attack in the EU because most of the governments have already become aware of the threat that jihadism entails, and legislation, cooperation and investment on counter-terrorism have been undertaken. However, the authorities have to keep in mind that returnees are more effective operatives than jihadists without experience of fighting abroad due to the motivation and expertise acquired. Tentative estimates point out that around 67% of the plots that caused fatalities in the West between 1990 and 2010 were carried out by war veterans.²⁰ In relation to the returnees of the countries studied, three French citizens, two British and two Belgian have attempted to conduct some sort of terrorist attack, and five French as well as two Belgian have already achieved it. The Jewish Museum of Belgium shooting perpetrated by an ex member of Daesh is a good example to realize that the threat that returnees pose is real. On 24 May 2014, the 29 years-old French national of Algerian origin Mehdi Nemmouche attacked at the museum in Brussels, killing four people. Nemmouche was raised by his grandmother in 'La Bourgogne', a neighbourhood in Roubaix-Tourcoing, France. He had served several jail sentences: the first one in 2004 for violence, the second one in 2006 for driving without license, the third one in 2007 for rebellion and the rest from that year to 2012 for a series of robberies.²¹ Despite he was noticed for extremist Islamic proselytism during his last sentence, he was eventually released in December 2012 and left for Syria that month.

It has therefore been argued that Nemmouche was radicalized in prison. However, we cannot dismiss the possible influence that his uncle, who was known by the French security services for his extremist Salafi connections and included in the so-called 'List S' (the highest level of warning France has in terms of national security), may have

20 HEGGHAMMER, Thomas. Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting, *American Political Science Review*, 2013, p.11.

21 WEITZMANN, Mark. Who is Mehdi Nemmouche and why did he want to kill Jews, 2014.

over him. What seems to be clear is that the case of Nemmouche does not match the typical model of foreign fighter who joins the insurgency just to defend a Muslim community in the context of a real war. His criminal record indicates that he already was an alienated individual who probably wanted to join a terrorist group in order to find a sense of meaning, identity or belonging in his life. The French DGSJ (General Directorate for Internal Security) has suggested that Nemmouche may have been a jailer of four journalists kidnapped by Daesh.²² In fact, one of those journalists even assured that the jihadist, who was supposedly known as “Abu Omar the hitter”, had tortured him. Finally, Nemmouche returned to Europe in March 2014 doing a fragmented journey via Istanbul – Singapore – Kuala Lumpur – Bangkok – Frankfurt. Once in Frankfurt, German authorities notified the French upon his arrival at the airport but they were not asked to arrest him.

The second attack carried out by a returnee was the Thalys train attack in France. Last August, a 25-year old Moroccan called Ayoub El Kahzzani open fired in a train with 554 passengers traveling from Amsterdam to Paris via Brussels, where he boarded.²³ This is therefore the first attack executed by a returnee with the intention to cause mass casualties. El Kahzzani was equipped with a 9mm pistol together with an AKM assault rifle including a total of nine magazines and 270 rounds of ammunition, among other weapons.²⁴ Fortunately, his rifle jammed, some passengers subdued him and just four people were eventually injured. The attacker, who had been living in Spain, France and Belgium, was considered by these countries as a potential threat and, in fact, he was included in the French ‘List S’. This means that El Kahzzani had been radicalized before leaving for Syria. In addition, as many foreign fighters, he did not travel to Syria from the country he used to live. Instead, he took a flight from Berlin to Istanbul last May and returned to Albania in June²⁵, but it is unclear whether or not he joined any jihadist organization in Syria.

The third and final attack was executed mostly by Daesh returnees on November 13, 2015, in Paris. Daesh claimed responsibility and said that it was in retaliation for the French intervention against the group in Syria and Iraq. Terrorists conducted a series of shootings and suicide bombings in the Bataclan Theatre, near the ‘Stade de France’ and in several bars and restaurants across the city, killing a total of 130 people.²⁶ Seven out of the nine attackers were returnees: four French, one Belgian and two individuals

22 CNN. Was Belgium shooting suspect Western hostages’ captor?, 2014.

23 BBC. France train shooting: Hollande thanks ‘heroes’ who foiled gunman, 2015.

24 FOXNEWS. Suspect in France train shooting watched jihadi video prior to attack, French authorities say, 2015.

25 THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD. French prosecutor says train gunman Ayoub el Khazani had terrorist intent, 2015.

26 <http://www.rte.ie/news/2015/1120/747897-paris/>

who posed as Syrian refugees. Bilal Hadfi was a 20-year-old French citizen who had been living in Neder-over-Hembeek, Belgium. Apparently, he was radicalized early in 2014 and fought with Daesh in Syria for more than a year.²⁷ Samy Animour was another French citizen, from Paris and 28 years old who became radicalized before travelling to Syria.²⁸ Omar Ismail Mostefai, a 29-year-old French citizen of Algerian origin from the Paris suburb of Courcouronnes, also became radicalized before going to Syria in 2013.²⁹ The last French returnee was Foued Mohamed-Aggad, a 23-year-old from Strasbourg who travelled to Syria in 2013.³⁰ However, the ringleader of the cell was not French, but Belgian. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a 28 year-old of Moroccan origin had grown up in the Brussels district of Molenbeek and joined Daesh in 2013.³¹ Finally, the two terrorists who posed as refugees entered the EU together through the Greek island of Leros in October last year.³² One of them was M. al-Mahmod and the other's name has not been identified yet, but both probably fought with Daesh. All in all, with the benefit of hindsight, the Charlie Hebdo shooting pointed out that more of the same was going to occur and the only successful attack committed by a returnee until that moment (the Jewish Museum of Belgium shooting) indicated that organizing an attack in a certain country and executing the plot in a different one was an effective strategy.

In addition to the attacks previously mentioned, a total of five plots have been disrupted in the EU, namely three in France, one in the UK and another one in Belgium. In October 2013, four returnees were detained in London, UK. Despite they were initially thought to be planning a gun attack in the country, charges were only brought against two of them: a British national of Turkish origin called Erol Incedal and a British national of Algerian origin called Mounir Rarmoul-Bouhadjar, both 26 years old and from South London.³³ The pair, friends since they were young, had apparently spent time in a jihadist compound on the border between Turkey and Syria where they learnt about weaponry and improvised explosive devices. However, due to the fact that most of the trial was behind closed doors, it is not clear whether or not they entered Syria, which terrorist group they contacted with or why they returned to the UK.

27 BBC. Paris attacks: who were the attackers? 2016

28 *Ibid.*

29 THE WASHINGTON POST. Paris attacks were carried out by three groups tied to Islamic State, official says, 2015

30 CNN. Paris attacks: 'I would have killed him', Bataclan bomber's father says, 2015.

31 DAILY MAIL. We wish he had burnt to death, say family of bomb ringleader, 2015.

32 BBC. Paris attacks: BBC names Stade de France bomber as M al-Mahmod, 2015.

33 PANTUCCI, Raffaello. The British foreign fighter contingent in Syria, CTC Sentinel, 2014.

Incedal was mainly raised by his brother (who was diagnosed with a mental disorder), whereas his sister died fighting for the PKK, a terrorist group operating in Turkey. During adolescence, he used to be expelled in both primary and secondary school, became involved in gangs and was given a three month action plan for an attempted theft at the age of just twelve.³⁴ It therefore seems that Incedal, as Nemmouche, was already alienated before deciding his travel to Syria. In fact, Incedal probably radicalized when he met some of the sons of Abu Hamza, not because they used to carry out frauds and armed robberies on post offices, but because Hamza is a jihadist found guilty of eleven terrorism charges and sentenced to life in the US.³⁵ Finally, both Incedal and Bouhadjar were sentenced for possessing a bomb-making manual. The court was not able to find enough evidence of a terrorist plot in spite of the fact that both had apparently discussed by email doing terrorist acts and Incedal had the address of a property belonging to Ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The same month Incedal and Bouhadjar were arrested in the UK, October 2013, French authorities detained a 23-year old returnee called Lyes Darani in the northern French city of Lille. The suspect had in his possession a bomb-making manual, a letter containing a pledge to commit a suicide attack and a copy of the Inspire Magazine published by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.³⁶ Darani had just returned from Syria through Lebanon where he had prepared an attack and was inquiring about targets in France.³⁷ The only available information in the open sources about his past is that he worked in a funeral parlour and details about his stay in Syria or his plot in France remain unknown. The jihadist was charged with criminal conspiracy in connection with a terrorist undertaking.

Last year, in March 2014, a returnee who was plotting to bomb on the French Riviera was arrested. The 23 year-old French national of Algerian origin, Ibrahim Boudina, was caught with 950g of TATP (Triacetone Triperoxide) and a weapon in his apartment of Mandelieu-La-Napoule, France.³⁸ Boudina was charged with criminal association with intent to commit a terrorist act and also linked to the Cannes-Torcy cell, a jihadist group operating in France since the mid-1990s and dismantled in 2012. That year, in September, Boudina had fled to Syria. Once there, he allegedly joined al-Nusra and eventually drifted to Daesh.³⁹ In January 2014 the jihadist tried to reenter the EU through Greece, although border police found a USB stick in his possession

34 THE TELEGRAPH. Erol Incedal jailed for three-and-a-half years over bomb-making manual, 2015.

35 THE TELEGRAPH. Erol Incedal: The son of a communist and a philanderer, 2015.

36 THE LOCAL. Several 'planned terrorist attacks' foiled in France, 2014.

37 *Ibid.*

38 KOHLMANN, Evan. Profiles of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. CTC Sentinel, 2014.

39 *Ibid.*

with bomb-making instructions and he was deported to France. Boudina's intentions seemed to be clear: one of his friends warned French authorities that the jihadist considered the place he lived as a 'Zionist area' which would be a target for him if he could not do jihad on Islamic soil.

One plot more was foiled in 2014. An ex-member of Daesh who had in mind to carry out a shooting attack was arrested in July in Creteil, Paris. The 20 years-old returnee, called Mohamed Ouharani, was charged with criminal association with links to a terrorist organization.⁴⁰ The last plot foiled dates from January 2015, when two ex-members of Daesh who prepared an imminent attack against police officers were killed by special forces in Verviers, Belgium. The jihadists of Belgian nationality, Redouane Hagaoui (22 years old) and Tarik Jadaoun (24 years old), had returned from Syria just a week before, belonged to a group comprised of at least five individuals more and they had probably been providing documents and weapons to returnees, perhaps under the leadership of Daesh.⁴¹ Police found military weaponry and bomb-making materials in their flat that gives an idea about the degree of capability the cell had. However, as in most of the previous cases mentioned, no information on the returnees has been made public in order to protect ongoing investigations.

ANALYSIS BY COUNTRY

Germany

Out of the 720 foreign fighters that travelled to Syria, last reports indicate that 85 of them have died, 230 have returned to Germany and at least 90 are still active in the extremist scene posing therefore a domestic threat.⁴² This leaves a total of 405 who are supposedly still abroad. Assuming that the proportion of jihadists who return and those that continue operating in Germany remains similar during the rest of the Syrian conflict, it is reasonable to expect that at least 40% of the future returnees could pose a threat and thus try to perpetrate an attack in the homeland. These returnees could also try to recruit potential jihadists, something certainly not difficult because of the significant spread of salafism in the country: the number of salafist supporters

40 METRO NEWS. *Terrorisme: un projet d'attentat déjoué cet été en Ile-de-france*, 2014.

41 CNN. *Belgium terror cell has links to ISIS, some members still at large*, 2015.

42 HEINKE, Daniel. *ICSR Insight: German foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2015.

is around 7,500 and there are some 50 salafist-controlled mosques.⁴³ It is worth to stress that the nucleus of German foreign fighters in Daesh belonged to the Millatu Ibrahim salafist organization before travelling to Syria. The group, which was founded in a mosque of Solingen (North Rhine-Westphalia) and had around 50 members, was banned in 2012 for its involvement in riots protesting the publication of Mohammed caricatures.⁴⁴ Despite Millatu Ibrahim moved to Denmark, some of its members have remained in Germany and created another group called 'Tauhid Germany', which was also banned last March. None of the groups have reportedly tried to recruit returnees, but German intelligence agencies do well to track them since they may constitute a bridge between returnees and other salafists.

Most of the Germans that travelled to Syria joined Daesh and nearly 70% of a total of 249 foreign fighters studied by the authorities had committed crimes such as violent acts and offenses against property before they left the country.⁴⁵ German fighters have an average age of 26.5 years old, they are mainly from states such as North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse or Berlin and about 80-85 % are from Muslim immigrant families.⁴⁶ So far, only 30 returnees have been arrested and just two have been convicted.⁴⁷ Germany's approach to returnees can be defined as a combination of repressive and preventive measures. The German Criminal Code used to punish only the formation of, participation in and support for a terrorist organization, leaving foreign fighters the opportunity to travel to Syria without any sort of impediment. Since June 2015 a new anti-terrorist law makes it a crime to travel outside the country with the intent to receive terrorist training and creates national identity card as well as passport restrictions on foreign fighters, among other changes.⁴⁸ The authorities can confiscate passports of nationals if they pose a threat, order residents not to leave the country and replace national identity cards by a document not valid to travel outside Germany. With respect to the confiscation of passports, it may lead to believe that forcing would-be jihadists to stay in the country instead of 'waging jihad' would frustrate them and maybe increase their intention of perpetrating an attack in the homeland.

43 STEINBERG, Guido W. *German Jihad: On the Internationalization of Islamist Terrorism*, 2013.

44 HEINKE, Daniel. ICSR Insight: German foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2015.

45 *Ibid.*

46 THE MEIR AMIT INTELLIGENCE AND TERRORISM INFORMATION CENTER. Foreign fighters from Western countries in the ranks of the rebel organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad in Syria, 2014, p. 55.

47 THE GUARDIAN. *How do you deradicalise returning ISIS fighters?*, 2014.

48 LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. Germany: New Anti-Terrorism Legislation Entered Into Force, 2015.

Nonetheless, if potential jihadists were allowed to leave the country, they would have fewer opportunities to be de-radicalized and authorities would lose their track without the guarantee of finding them in case they return.

For their part, the German security services perform a doubled function. On the one hand, they often approach individuals suspected of planning to leave the country informing them that authorities are aware of their plans and reminding them what implications their actions have. On the other, they notify police, city councils and offices for foreigners about individual cases.⁴⁹ Counter-radicalization programs have also been implemented across Germany. The Berlin-based Centre for Democratic Culture runs HAYAT, a national counseling program available to individuals who are seeking to go, have gone to, or have returned from Syria as well as to their relatives and friends.⁵⁰ Other programs however involve experts from the local Muslim community as they are who know best the salafist narrative and therefore how to argue against it, but addressing relationships and opportunities rather than ideology has proved to be more effective. In addition, Muslim communities in Germany seem to be integrated: in the last survey only 9 % of respondents said they had no contact with non-Muslims.⁵¹ So far, no returnees have plotted an attack in Germany. This is probably not only because harmless returnees are offered to go through counter-radicalization programs instead of jail and because the Muslim population is in general integrated into the society, but also due to the country's decision not to take military action in Syria or Iraq as well as its commitment to host the highest number of Syrian refugees in Europe.

However, some returnees are indeed dangerous and the Government has set up several measures to reduce their threat. Border police has for example improved its ability of detecting returnees. Despite there is no information publicly available on the specific routes used by German foreign fighters to travel to Syria, a document published by Daesh points out that travelers in general should buy a two-way flight ticket for an indirect holiday country like Spain or Greece and, once there, buy another ticket to Turkey.⁵² The same document also explains that some people are starting to use ferry, car or bus with the purpose of avoiding border checks in their way to Turkey. For this reason, the European Commission and Member States along with several agencies are preparing a list of common risk indicators whereby certain travelers entering the Schengen area will be subjected to identity checks.⁵³ In this line, German citizens who

49 CSS ETH ZURICH. *Foreign fighters: an overview of responses in eleven countries*, 2014, p. 11.

50 KOEHLER, Daniel. *Family Counselling as Prevention and Intervention Tool Against 'Foreign Fighters'*, The German 'Hayat' Program, 2013.

51 THE LOCAL. *57 percent of Germans feel Islam is a threat: poll*, 2015.

52 DAESH. *Hijrah to the Islamic State*, 2015, p. 5.

53 EU COUNCIL. *Foreign Terrorist Fighters - Application of the Schengen Border Code - Follow-up - Update on progress on the preparation of risk indicators*, 2015.

are known to have left for Syria are already included in the Schengen Information System (SIS) among other databases. All these changes have increased the number of investigations German security agencies are conducting and some 106 returnees suspected of having fought with Daesh are being investigated in 68 preliminary or criminal enquiries.⁵⁴ Finally, non-EU citizens may see their visa revoked. These people have therefore to leave Germany, something that could be counterproductive for other countries by letting a citizen re-enter their territory if authorities are not warned about him or her.

Belgium

Since the Syrian civil war began, around 450 Belgian citizens have travelled to Syria, 150 have returned home (at least 100 of them with combat experience) and 40 may have been killed, which leaves a total of 260 still abroad.⁵⁵ Belgium exceeds by far the rest of the EU countries in the number of foreign fighters per capita, with 40 per one million inhabitants. There is however a discrepancy in how much salafism is rooted in Belgium. On the one hand, in 2012 the head of the State Security Service said that perhaps there were a few thousand salafists of which a few hundred were militants.⁵⁶ On the other, in 2013 researcher Bilal Benyaich argued that Brussels alone would have between 9,600 and 13,500 salafists.⁵⁷ In any case, what seems to be clear is that thousands of Muslims in the country are extremists, figures definitely high because the Muslim population in Belgium is measured in hundreds of thousands whereas most of the other countries studied have thousands of extremists among millions of Muslims. The reason why Belgium has a high proportion of foreign fighters is probably because the organization most of the first fighters belonged to, Shariah4Belgium, had a long period of time (two years) to enhance its capability for recruiting and sending jihadists to Syria until it was ban in 2012. In addition, due to the fact that Shariah4Belgium used to operate openly in Belgium, those members who left for Syria may keep in touch with less radicalized people at home.⁵⁸ The existence of these connections would give dangerous returnees the possibility to create a cell or group with other salafists, with the consequences that this entails.

54 THE LOCAL. More than 6,000 have left Europe for Isis jihad: EU, 2015.

55 REUTERS. Belgian police kill two in raid on suspected Islamists, 2015.

56 LA LIBRE BELGIQUE. Belgian State Security Head Points to Salafist Threat, 2012.

57 HET LAATSTE NIEUWS. Je denkt dat je hier veilig bent, 2013.

58 VAN VLIERDEN, Guy. How Belgium Became a Top Exporter of Jihad. Jamestown Foundation, 2015.

The majority of the Belgian foreign fighters, maybe 70 % by mid-2014, seem to have joined Daesh. Affiliations however changed over time because many of them initially joined a small group called 'Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen' but then they moved to al-Nusra and ended up in Daesh.⁵⁹ The average age of these jihadists is 25 years old, about 90% are from Muslim immigrant families and most of them grew up in cities such as Brussels, Antwerp, Vilvoorde and Mechelen.⁶⁰ To date, at least seven returnees have been arrested and 45 foreign fighters sentenced, although most of them may still be in Syria, Iraq or dead.⁶¹ Belgium combines a mixture of preventive and repressive measures to deal with the phenomenon of foreign fighters, although the overall approach is slightly more repressive. The current criminal code punishes actions that constitute taking part in the activities of a terrorist group, but the commission of those actions is difficult if not impossible to prove due to the lack of evidence from the battlefield. For this reason, the Belgian Government announced in January 2015 a series of measures against foreign fighters.⁶² The measure that may have the greatest impact is the consideration of travelling abroad for terrorist purposes as an offence. Here it is important to distinguish between leaving the country with the aim of receiving terrorist training or to join the insurgency in a specific conflict. Whereas those individuals who seek training are likely to use the skills acquired anywhere (potentially in their respective countries), those who want to participate in a war abroad may not necessarily have in mind to perpetrate attacks elsewhere. This does not mean that the latter are not terrorists, but some of them may be less radicalized and dangerous than the former and, therefore, the criminalization of travelling abroad for these particular individuals would negatively affect any attempt to deradicalize them. Moreover, considering that the security services cannot identify all the aspiring foreign fighters, it is necessary to stress that the measure could lead them to conceal their intentions even more and also discourage their families to contact authorities.

Other measures announced that seem to be more effective than the criminalization of travelling are the temporary withdrawal, refusal to issue or invalidation of identity cards as well as passports, and the stripping of citizenship for any terrorist offence. This last one however is probably less relevant than the first two because most of the fighters are Muslims of second or third generation, i.e. Belgian nationals. The measure also seems an attempt to just pass the problem to the other country the individual holds nationality, which may have even more returnees, less capability to track them and look for cooperation instead of more potential threats. In any event,

59 *Ibid.*

60 ZELIN, Aaron. Y. *The Clear Banner: Belgian Fighters In Syria and Iraq – November 2014*, *Jihadology*, 2014.

61 BBC. *Sharia4Belgium trial: Belgian court jails members*, 2015.

62 MICHEL, Charles. *Attacks in Tunisia: the Prime Minister mobilizes the Government to combat terrorism*, 2015.

this kind of measures are not applied randomly, but Belgian authorities take action according to a list produced by the 'Coordination Unit for Threat Assessment' on individuals who seek to travel or have travelled to Syria.⁶³ In theory, the country's radicalization strategy aims at reintegration when the returnee or potential foreign fighter does not pose a threat. Those municipalities with high levels of individuals who leave for Syria such as Vilvoorde have created units that combine police work with community engagement from a variety of entities, namely mosques, schools, social services, etc.⁶⁴ Furthermore, several initiatives to prevent minors from going to Syria such as protective custody have also been implemented. The approach adopted by the Belgian authorities is apparently being successful because only four out of the 150 returnees have plotted an attack in Belgium so far. However, many second and third generations of Belgian Muslims may not be integrated into the rest of the society. In 2013 a survey showed that 60% of Muslim youths believe that they will never be integrated and more than 50% had been victims of racism.⁶⁵ Thus, efforts should be focused on identifying the context where many young Muslims feel discriminated against at school or work in order to subsequently challenge the current social policies regarding the Muslim community.

The security services also play a key role by assessing the level of threat returnees pose and around 50 of them are being or have been monitored.⁶⁶ Sharia4Belgium, the key organization in the recruitment of foreign fighters, was dismantled in 2013 and its leader sentenced last February.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, according to the last figures released by the ICSR, more than 150 Belgian citizens have gone to Syria in just three months. This increase in the number of foreign fighters suggests either that Sharia4Belgium has not been successfully dismantled, or that another group is recruiting inside the country. In any case, it seems that Belgian police is keeping a firm grip on any movement related to the phenomenon of foreign fighters and, for example, two recruiters and some returnees among 16 jihadists have been recently arrested.⁶⁸ Moreover, air travel security is already tightened at airports. Belgians may therefore choose instead to travel by car or bus through the Balkans to the Bulgarian or Greek borders and access Syria from the North-west.⁶⁹ The problem is that little can be done to stop them from leaving

63 CSS ETH ZURICH. Foreign fighters: an overview of responses in eleven countries, 2014, p. 7.

64 *Ibid.*

65 KERN, Soeren. The Islamization of Belgium and the Netherlands in 2013. Gatestone Institut, 2014.

66 THE GUARDIAN. The Belgian connections to Islamic radicalism, 2015.

67 BBC. Sharia4Belgium trial: Belgian court jails members, 2015.

68 PRESS TV. Belgian police arrest 16 over militancy in Syria, 2015.

69 INTERNATIONAL BUSSINESS TIMES. How Foreign Fighters Joining ISIS Travel To The Islamic State Group's Caliphate, 2015.

the country if they are not arrested before departure because once the borders are reached, the Schengen Agreement do not allow authorities to conduct identity checks. What can be improved however is the security at certain facilities. Terrorist attacks such as the Toulouse Shooting in 2012, the Jewish Museum of Belgium Shooting in 2014 and the 'Porte de Vicennes' Siege last January have made clear that Jews are one of the main targets jihadists have. Indeed, the highest budget item among the last investment measures agreed upon by the Belgian Government has been allocated to the protection of Jewish community sites.

France

France leads the list of European countries with the highest amount of foreign fighters standing at nearly 1550, of which 119 have died and 213 returned.⁷⁰ As if this were not enough, 521 individuals are willing to leave France and 65 individuals have reportedly left Syria and Iraq,⁷¹ which may soon imply an increase in the number of returnees. Leaving aside that some foreign fighters belonged to the Cannes-Torcy group, the majority of them are not linked to any French macro-network or vocal organization such as Forsane Alizza. Recruiters in France have largely remained in small, loose and decentralized groups with a clear idea: the quieter they are, the greater the chance to go unnoticed. As a consequence, most of these groups have been able to operate longer and French police only started to dismantle them since mid-2014. Some salafi mosques may have also encouraged young Muslims to join the jihad in Syria. The head for example of the local Muslim union in a town called Lunel, where several foreign fighters had been recruited, refused to condemn their participation in the Syrian war. This is just one case, but if we bear in mind that there are about 2,000 pro-islamisation mosques and 12,000 salafists in France⁷², the negative impact these associations may have on the Muslim community could be significant. The problem is aggravated when returnees enter in contact with other salafists. Evidence exists against French jihadists who have returned from Syria and subsequently joined a recruitment cell. The key point is that combat veterans are more likely to be considered as an 'authority' by salafists and therefore engage this audience easier than those who never waged jihad.

70 HOLMAN, Timothy. *The French Jihadist 'Foreign Legion' in Syria and Iraq*, The James Town Foundation, 2015.

71 ASSEMBLEE NATIONALE. *Commission d'enquêtê sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes*, 2015.

72 PRICE, Roger. *A concise history of France*, Cambridge, 2014, p. 406.

The majority of the French foreign fighters are believed to be joining Daesh and, to a lesser degree, al-Nusra. A report recently produced by a parliamentary commission shows that these individuals have an average age of 27 years old, around 20% are converts, and most of them are from the regions of Ile-de-France, Rhone-Alpes, Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur, Languedoc Roussillon, Nord Pas De Calais and Midi-Pyrenees.⁷³ The same source also points out that more than a half of the fighters were unknown to the intelligence services before they left for Syria, which imply a lack of serious criminal records. If so, the threshold of violence this group of individuals is able to experience may be lower than those who already committed felonies and, therefore, the former could return sooner or in greater numbers than the latter. However, it is also necessary to consider that France's approach towards foreign fighters, which is mainly repressive, may discourage them to return. Around 90 returnees have been arrested and 75 sentenced so far.⁷⁴ French prosecutors have charged individuals for travelling abroad to become foreign fighters or participate in training camps under criminal provisions with enhanced penalties.⁷⁵ Since last January, authorities are also allowed to ban would-be foreign fighters from leaving the country, confiscate therefore passports as well as identity cards and stop non-citizens from returning if they pose a threat.⁷⁶ These last measures seem to be proportionate, but the fact that many of the returnees are arrested and charged may not create the best environment for de-radicalization.

In fact, there appear to be no efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate any foreign fighters upon return.⁷⁷ No counter-radicalization programs exist neither at the national nor the local level. Fortunately, the French Prime Minister has announced the creation by the end of this year of a pilot programme in Paris aimed at rehabilitating returnees who are not prosecuted and voluntarily accept the assistance.⁷⁸ What France has already established however is a hotline with the families of aspiring foreign fighters who are, ultimately, another victim more in many cases. The service has proved to be successful after receiving in just one year around 1,900 calls of which a quarter concerned minors.⁷⁹ There is also a radicalization cell running since last October, but it is a pilot project that only covers the region of Paris.⁸⁰ The high numbers of youths desiring to wage jihad in Syria may lead someone to relate it with the possibility that

73 ASSEMBLEE NATIONALE. Commission d'enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes, 2015.

74 THE TELEGRAPH. French police arrest five in anti-jihadist cell raids, 2015.

75 CSS ETH ZURICH. Foreign fighters: an overview of responses in eleven countries, 2014, p. 10.

76 DAILY MAIL. France to stop would-be jihadists from travelling, 2015.

77 CSS ETH ZURICH. Foreign fighters: an overview of responses in eleven countries, 2014, p. 10.

78 VICE NEWS. France Plans to Send Returning Jihadis to a Rehabilitation Center, 2015.

79 *Ibid.*

80 THE LOCAL. France vs Denmark: How to deal with jihadists?, 2015.

the Muslim community was not integrated, but this is far from true. A recent study shows that French Muslims are likely to believe that France has a positive influence on their community, to agree about the idea of loyalty to the state over the Muslim world, and to disagree with the view that the government is hostile to Islam.⁸¹ Nonetheless, radicalization may be latent in certain 'banlieues' or suburbs of cities such as Paris. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims currently live in its so-called sensitive urban zones, areas characterized by high rates of unemployment and school failure which are the breeding ground for the spread of salafism. In any case, one thing is certain: French returnees are behind most of the plots so far, five out of eight. It is also important to take into account that France is one of the few European countries that have launched airstrikes in Iraq and Daesh has recently called for terrorist attacks in French soil.⁸² Overall, no counter-radicalization programs, military intervention against Daesh and direct threats from this organization are necessary ingredients for increasing the probability of another serious attack in France.

Despite the approach taken by the government will not likely give the best results in the long term, the threat returnees may pose is taken seriously. The security services question all the foreign fighters known to have returned and most of them are kept under surveillance. To date, there are about 161 terror-related legal proceedings ongoing against 547 individuals suspected of being involved in jihadist activity as well as 3,000 that the authorities consider surveillance targets.⁸³ French police has dismantled several recruitment groups, most of them in the Paris region and southern areas such as Toulouse, Lyon and Lunel. The cooperation between France and Turkey also proved to be efficient when for example Mourad Fares, an ex-member of Daesh and al-Nusra responsible for having recruited from abroad most of the first French foreign fighters, was arrested and deported by Turkish authorities.⁸⁴ More recently, in January 2015, the police dismantled in Lunel a group formed by five jihadists (two of them returnees) and certainly active in the recruitment of foreign fighters with around 20-30 from this location sent to Syria or Iraq, a high number considering that the town only has a population of 26,000 inhabitants. However, it is unclear whether or not this group has been definitely dismantled because another three people have apparently left Lunel for Syria last June.⁸⁵ The investigation of recruitment cells is therefore key to finding out the whereabouts of potential foreign fighters in order to have a more clear picture of their intentions but, inevitably, many of the them

81 JACOBSON, David. *Surveying the Landscape of Integration: Muslim Immigrants in the United Kingdom and France*. 'Democracy and Security Journal', 2014.

82 PRESS TV. *ISIL terrorists threaten to launch attacks in France and Belgium*, 2015.

83 THE NEW YORK TIMES. *France Vows Forceful Measures Against Terrorism*, 2015.

84 REUTERS. *Suspected recruiter of French jihadists for Islamic State in custody in Paris*, 2014.

85 MIDI LIBRE. *Lunel : trois disparitions inquiétantes, peut-être parties en Syrie*, 2015.

manage to leave the country. At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, French foreign fighters used to travel through Tunisia. Nowadays, they usually drive or take a bus to Spain and from there a flight to Turkey, as for example the wife of Amedy Coulibaly did early this year.⁸⁶ Cooperation and information sharing between France and Spain and in general among all the EU countries are the best instruments to distinguish returnees from other travelers just interested in visiting Turkey whatever the reason. Finally, the last line of defense from returnees is tactical, and France has temporarily deployed troops across the country as well as police officers in Jewish schools.

United Kingdom

The last case analyzed in this study is that of the UK. From there, around 700 citizens have travelled to Syria or Iraq, 50 died and 350 returned over the last three years of conflict,⁸⁷ leaving a total of 300 individuals still abroad. Britain has always been one of the European countries with more Muslims indoctrinated into salafism, especially through famous preachers such as Abu Hamza and Abu Qatada. There are some 100 salafist mosques in the country and about half of the new mosques opening every year between 2009 and 2013 were salafi-controlled, increasing a total of 50% during that period.⁸⁸ However, Need4Khilafah is the salafist organization most related with the radicalization of British foreign fighters and his leader, Anjem Choudary, has been recently charged with inviting support for Daesh.⁸⁹ Despite Need4Khilafah was banned last year, it has not been possible to prove that its members recruited and sent individuals to the Syrian civil war. Recruitment in the UK has apparently been conducted through small cells or individuals probably linked to Need4Khilafah⁹⁰, but information on recruiters is not available on the media. What seems to be clear is the potential gathering hub this organization provided to both salafists and jihadists. Indeed, almost half of the terrorist attacks (23 out of 51) carried out by Britons during the last 20 years have been linked to Need4Khilafah and its forerunners, namely Al-Muhajiroun and Islam4UK.⁹¹ The remnants of these organizations may not only

86 LA VANGUARDIA. Yihadistas franceses van y vienen al Estado Islámico por El Prat, 2015.

87 EXPRESS. How 700 Britons have joined Islamic State jihadis...but half are already back in UK, 2015.

88 BOWEN, Innes. Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam, 2014.

89 KERN, Soeren. UK: Anjem Choudary Charged With Supporting Islamic State, Gatestone Institute, 2015.

90 THE INDEPENDENT. Gateway to terror: British Islamic preacher Anjem Choudary 'sent hundreds to join al-Qa'ida in Syria, 2013.

91 DAILY MAIL. The extremist group behind most of the UK's terror plots: Al-Muhajiroun

continue with their activities, but also put dangerous returnees in contact with salafists more moderated.

Most of the British foreign fighters used to join al-Nusra during the early stages of the Syrian conflict, but now the majority of them belong to Daesh. These individuals are 23.5 years old in average and they come from cities such as Portsmouth, London, Brighton and Coventry, among others.⁹² The approach of the UK to the problem is slightly more repressive than preventive. Around 114 returnees have been arrested and at least seven are already convicted.⁹³ British criminal laws punish to travel abroad in order to commit or prepare a terrorist offence, to obtain training in terrorism or to pledge allegiance to a terrorist organization.⁹⁴ Other measures include the confiscation of passports, for up to one month, the temporary exclusion order, which is a ban from returning until the individual is identified in order to control his or her way back, and the stripping of citizenship, which does not require judicial approval and has immediate effect.⁹⁵ The first two seem to be proportionate but the last one, apart from bypassing the judge, applies to naturalized citizens who may not hold a second nationality. Despite the British Home secretary should reasonably expect that a different citizenship could be obtained,⁹⁶ the measure leaves individuals technically stateless. It is important to bear in mind that the other country might not accept the request of nationality on the same grounds the UK stripped it or, in any case, its grant may not be immediate. For these reasons, it would be better to deprive of British citizenship once the new one is already acquired elsewhere.

The UK has a counter-radicalization strategy since 2007, although it was at the end of last year when a program called 'Channel' was specifically launched to deal with aspiring foreign fighters. Channel is a flexible and voluntary intervention program implemented at the local level through which individuals at risk of radicalization are subjected to a tailored set of initiatives such as mentoring schemes.⁹⁷ The program has received around 2,000 referrals since 2012, but it has not been applied to returnees

network linked to half of attacks by Britons over past 20 years, 2015.

92 THE GUARDIAN. The toll of extremism: 50 Britons killed fighting for Syria and Iraq militants, 2015.

93 BRANDON, James. Rise of Islamic State Reignites British Radicalization Threat, 2015.

94 LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. Treatment of Foreign Fighters in Selected Jurisdictions: Country Surveys, 2015.

95 CSS ETH ZURICH. Foreign fighters: an overview of responses in eleven countries, 2014, p. 16.

96 UK PARLIAMENT. Deprivation of British citizenship and withdrawal of passport facilities, 2015.

97 CSS ETH ZURICH. Foreign fighters: an overview of responses in eleven countries, 2014, p. 15.

yet.⁹⁸ Overall, the counter-radicalization strategy had been apparently effective until 2009, when a study showed that 83% of British Muslims were proud to be British and 77% strongly identified with the UK.⁹⁹ Local authority coordinators work along with mosques, faith groups and community organizations. Nevertheless, another study published in 2014 found that British Muslims felt that the UK had a negative influence on their community, they were hardly committed to be more loyal to the state than to the Muslim world and also likely to believe there is hostility in the government's treatment of their religion.¹⁰⁰ The evidence therefore suggests that British Muslims are more radical now than they were just six years ago. By comparing both results, it appears that the decrease in the level of integration the Muslim community had in 2009 matches the beginning of a steep increase in the number of salafist mosques that occurred the same year. Both the British military intervention against Daesh and the continuous beheadings of British citizens make the situation worse. The UK is the only EU country intervening in Syria as well as in Iraq and the only one whose citizens have been kidnapped and beheaded by Daesh, more precisely by a British foreign fighter. Therefore, although just two returnees have attempted to commit an attack so far, this low number of plots has probably to do with efficient intelligence and police work rather than another reason.

Indeed, the British intelligence agencies are deeply involved in the investigation of foreign fighters and for example up to half of the Security Service casework has a Syria component.¹⁰¹ The Kent police and the Border Force also work closely to disrupt the foreign fighter flow through the English Channel, but the number of individuals using this route to avoid airports is increasing. After arriving to France they drive to Italy and eventually take a ferry to Libya or Tunisia in their way to Syria.¹⁰² The UK, apart from using the Passenger Name Record on flights coming from anywhere outside the EU, has an 'advantage' that the other countries studied do not have: it does not belong to the Schengen territory. This allows British airports and ports to use the Advance Passenger Information System (basic data required) on every person arriving or departing from the UK. Once an individual is back in the UK, he or she is required to participate in an interview with police officers that may lead to the imposition of measures such as attending more interviews, notifying

98 UK PARLIAMENT. Counter-terrorism: foreign fighters, 2015.

99 NANDI, Alita. Developing Ethnic Identity Questions for Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study, 2009.

100 JACOBSON, David. Surveying the Landscape of Integration: Muslim Immigrants in the United Kingdom and France. *Democracy and Security Journal*, 2014.

101 PANTUCCI, Raffaello. The British foreign fighter contingent in Syria, *CTC Sentinel*, 2014.

102 AL ARABIYA. British ISIS recruits are taking a 'new route' to reach Syria, 2015.

any change of address and taking part in de-radicalization activities.¹⁰³ Returnees willing to cooperate may be of great value to find out the identity and whereabouts of other foreign fighters or even recruiters. In any case, little can be found on the media about the recruitment cells British police has dismantled. It is also unclear whether or not the leader of Need4Khilafah, Anjem Choudary, collaborated with the Security Service or the agency just allowed him to continue operating with the conviction that he would engage potential jihadists whom identify and monitor. Both possibilities however seem plausible because the police foiled most of the jihadist plots (three out of four) conducted by individuals linked to Choudary since his first organization was founded in 2009.

DISCUSSION

One of the hypotheses this study aimed to test was related with the idea that those returnees who joined a terrorist organization in Syria or Iraq are more likely to radicalize further than those who fought in a group of different nature. The assumption is based in the Differential Association Theory. Foreign fighters that join Daesh or, to a lesser extent, al-Nusra, are exposed to high levels of serious criminality, namely war crimes such as beheadings, rapes, tortures and mass executions.¹⁰⁴ Some of the Europeans do not tolerate them and leave the organization in a relative short period of time, whereas others find the cruelty of those actions justified, stay there longer and may pose a threat if they return. All the returnees who have plotted an attack and their membership are known belonged to Daesh, but this may result from the pure fact that most of the fighters joined that organization. It is also important to understand why the majority of the fighters are currently in Daesh instead of Al-Nusra or the FSA. A first reason may lie in the fact that those who actually want to defend the Syrian population have joined the organization with more power, i.e. Daesh, with the ideas of 'more can be done' and 'efforts are not in vain'. A second reason why many fighters join Daesh may just be for the sake of living under the Sharia of a 'caliphate'. This last group of individuals, apart from having in mind to settle there, may be more radical than the previous one and therefore likely to return later if they do so. Based on data published by the ICSR¹⁰⁵, only 18% of the British fighters and 33% of the Belgian travelled to the conflict area after Daesh proclaimed itself a 'caliphate', whereas 60% of the Germans and 66% of the French joined jihad after the same announcement.

103 UK GOVERNMENT. Counter-terrorism and security bill, 2014.

104 UNITED NATIONS. UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: No end in sight for Syrian civilians, 2015.

105 THE WASHINGTON POST. Foreign fighters flow to Syria, 2015.

A survey of returnees would probably help to get an idea about how many of them became fighters for each of the reasons previously explained.

Another hypothesis tested implied that no more than 10% of the returnees will try to plot an attack in the homeland. The assumption is based in the one-in-twelve radicalization rate deduced from a study where Thomas Hegghammer quantified the Europeans that became foreign fighters and plotted attacks upon return between 1990 and 2010. Fortunately, four years and a half after the Syrian conflict started no more than 4% of the returnees have been involved in a jihadist plot [See figure 1]. The reason why today there are less plots conducted by returnees than in the past is because many European Governments have created counter-radicalization programs, increased the number of intelligence analysts specialized in the jihadist threat and filled empty gaps in counter-terrorist legislation. Cooperation among countries have also improved in many aspects but the fact that all the attacks perpetrated so far by returnees occurred or were organized in a different country than their own suggests that there is a long way to go. In any case, the increase or decrease of returnees not only depends on European policies but also on the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts themselves. Considering that most of the foreign fighters belong to Daesh, the defeat of the organization in Iraq together with the end of the Syrian war could lead many foreign fighters to return. However, for the purposes of this study, it is assumed that none of the conflicts will disappear within the following twelve months so the flow of returnees is expected to remain similar. The chart below shows the overall number of Belgians, French and British who have returned so far and those who plotted an attack.

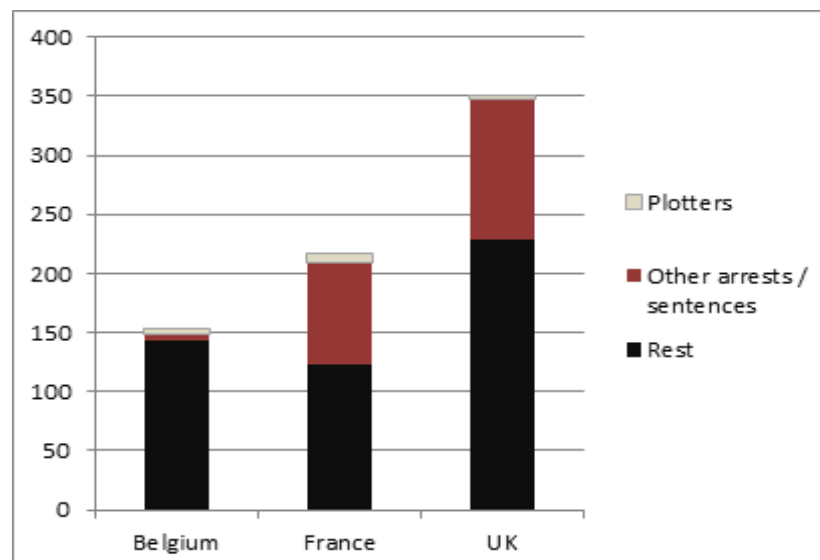


Figure 1 - Countries by ratio returnee / plotter.

The main research question this study attempts to answer is about the likelihood that foreign fighters from the countries studied could perpetrate an attack upon return. As it was mentioned at the beginning of the paper, that probability of attack

depends on several variables, namely capability, intention and opportunity. Capability refers to the ability returnees have to perpetrate attacks, intention to whether or not they have radicalized further and opportunity to their possibility of going unnoticed by the security services. Starting with capability, it has been already mentioned that France has the largest number of foreign fighters among all the countries evaluated in the study. Rather than this being related with the level of integration its Muslim community has, it is more likely to happen as a consequence of the lack of de-radicalization programs, how fighters have been recruited and the country's policy towards the Syrian conflict. Firstly, the country does not have neither a national de-radicalization program nor one locally established in those regions where most of the fighters are recruited. Considering that there are hundreds of individuals seeking to travel to Syria, if they are not offered to take part in de-radicalization activities as a way of retrieving their passports, some of them could start thinking about attacks in the homeland as for example Ibrahim Boudina did. Secondly, French foreign fighters have not been recruited through any macro-network or vociferous organization that draws the attention of the intelligence agencies, but through small and quiet groups that have been therefore able to operate longer before the police dismantled them. Finally, the French Government has supported the Assad opposition more than the rest of the countries by for example supplying weaponry to the FSA. This may have reinforced in some of those fighters the idea of legitimacy in joining the insurgency in Syria.

It is also worth to stress that all the independent plots that succeed were not executed in group, but individually. Organization and division of functions are essential to conduct complex operations, but a small attack is easier by acting alone. The security services find more difficult to identify and monitor individual plotters than groups or cells because the former establish less suspicious communications to intercept. At the same time, attacks perpetrated alone are usually less lethal than those committed by a group. In fact, the foiled plot that would probably have caused the highest number of casualties was that of the Belgian cell dismantled, which consisted of five individuals who had military weaponry and were about to perpetrate an attack. Throughout this paper it has been argued that the remnants of former recruitment or extremist networks in the homeland to which foreign fighters are somehow linked may serve as a meeting point between returnees and other salafists. Those extremist networks on which links to recruiters of fighters have not been found are likely to be avoiding contact with Syria-related issues, hence returnees have little chances to approach them. Sharia4Belgium for example used to operate in Belgium and Need4Kalifah in the UK, but no networks linked to recruiters have recently existed in France. Coincidence or not, most of the plots by Belgian and British returnees were conducted in group, whereas all the French returnees that plotted an independent attack operated alone. In addition, France has the highest ratio returnee / plotter (3.7%), followed by Belgium (2.6%) and the UK (0.57%). It is important to mention that more foreign fighters do not necessarily imply more returnees and more returnees do not always lead to more plots.

As an example, French foreign fighters double the British and German in number but fewer of them returned to France and more returnees plotted an attack.

Moving to intentions, the reason why France proportionally has the lowest number of returnees is probably because the French policy towards foreign fighters is more repressive than those of the other countries studied. Around 35% of the French fighters have been sentenced so far, followed by the Belgian (30%) and, to a small extent, the British (2%) and the German (0.87%). Moreover, those French citizens that return may be sentenced with enhanced penalties for travelling abroad to become foreign fighters, something that does not precisely encourage them to come back. In a similar way, the reason why France has the highest number of plotters is likely to reside in the fact that the country does not have a de-radicalization and re-integration program for returnees, whereas Germany, Belgium and Britain not only have those programs in one way or another, but they also work with community engagement. France at least has a hotline with the relatives of would-be fighters but, in the long run, efforts are useless if they receive no treatment. At first sight then, French returnees are more susceptible to continue being active in the extremist scene than fighters returning to the other countries. However, returnees may pose a high threat to Germany as well. It is important to keep in mind that more than a third of its returnees are still active in radical environments and two thirds of a sample analysed from its foreign fighters had criminal records. This last group of individuals is especially worrisome because they are likely to spend more time in Syria or Iraq, participate in more offences and therefore radicalize further than those who respected the law before becoming a fighter.

Fortunately, the approach Germany has towards their foreign fighters and returnees includes both preventive and repressive measures in a balanced proportion. The UK instead and, to a lesser degree, Belgium, have policies slightly more repressive than preventive. This difference in how all these countries from the EU tackle extremists has to do with their past of terrorism incidents. France has suffered during many years attacks carried out by the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA) and recently by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Daesh. The UK has also experienced one of the worst jihadist attacks in Europe, the 2005 London bombings, and Belgium the more recent Jewish Museum shooting. In Germany, except the 2011 Frankfurt Airport shooting that targeted a US Air Force bus, no terrorist attacks occurred in the country since 1996. All these incidents have led the UK, France and Belgium to toughen their criminal codes and laws on terrorism and, therefore, foreign fighters. On the one hand, Germany for example has only criminalized to travel abroad with the purpose of receiving terrorist training, whereas the UK also punishes to leave the country in order to perpetrate or plan a terrorist offence. On the other, in France and Belgium just travelling outside to become a foreign fighter is forbidden. It has already been mentioned that the last measure could reduce the efficiency of the counselling and de-radicalization programs these countries have by discouraging the families or friends of foreign fighters, would-be fighters or returnees to seek help.

In relation to the administrative measures, all the countries studied consider the confiscation of passports and identity cards as the best option to prevent their citizens from going to Syria. However, the treatment of those who return differs. Belgium and the UK for example permit the stripping of citizenship, which may be relatively fair if no minors are affected. The problem is that the UK has taken the measure to the extreme and allows its application to citizens that may not have a second nationality, leaving them stateless until they find a new one. Despite any possible emotional effect the measure could have on the person is 'irrelevant' as long as the loss of nationality and the deportation take place at the same time, harsh treatment toward returnees in general may create a sense of repression among them, their families or friends. Better said, it may increase the feeling of exclusion that already exists. A significant part of the British Muslim community thinks that the Government is being hostile towards their religion. The spread of salafism has been used in this study to analyse the ease with which dangerous returnees could recruit other salafists to plot an attack, but the same measure can also be employed to confirm how much Muslims are integrated. Indeed, the number of salafist mosques in the UK increased by 50% between 2009 and 2013.¹⁰⁶ In Belgium, around 1.5% of the Muslim community is salafist and more than a half of its youths believe that they will never be integrated. German and French Muslims instead seem to feel respected by their societies and just 0.16% and 0.25% of them are salafists, respectively. Nevertheless, the wave of attacks occurred last year in France may increase the number of those who stigmatize Muslims creating therefore an environment of distrust that may lead them to feel that they are not accepted by the society. In a similar way, German neo-Nazis are threatening the Syrian refugees in their country. If they continue to do so, the violence could escalate further and some returnees would probably not exclude terrorism as an option to defend their community, which is the same reason why they became fighters.

Finally, opportunity is another aspect necessary to conclude how likely is that returnees perpetrate an attack. Most of the countries studied for which information is available appear to be acting accordingly with this paper's evaluation of the threat that foreign fighters in general pose to them. The police in France is for example monitoring most of the returnees who have not been arrested or sentenced, whereas Germany tracks a half and Belgium only a third. This measure, i.e. the number of returnees who are monitored, can also be used to get an idea about how many of them may be dangerous because they have been considered by the security services as individuals that need to be under surveillance, at least for some time. However, it is important to bear in mind that the measure may not be totally reliable because some of the countries studied could undertake precautionary mass surveillance involving a certain proportion of returnees who are not necessarily suspicious, as France do. The UK in fact has already established a preventive measure called the 'temporary

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exclusion order' whereby any foreign fighter that tries to board a flight back home is investigated before departure. Another important system the UK uses is the 'Passenger Name Record' on any flight coming from outside the EU. The problem is that most of the fighters seem to be avoiding airports. Except French returnees, who probably fly to Spain and then cross the Pyrenees, the others namely German, Belgian and British returnees are likely to take a car, bus or ferry to leave Syria and then travel by land through Europe. Hopefully, the new border checks on travellers entering the Schengen area will prevent many fighters from returning unnoticed.

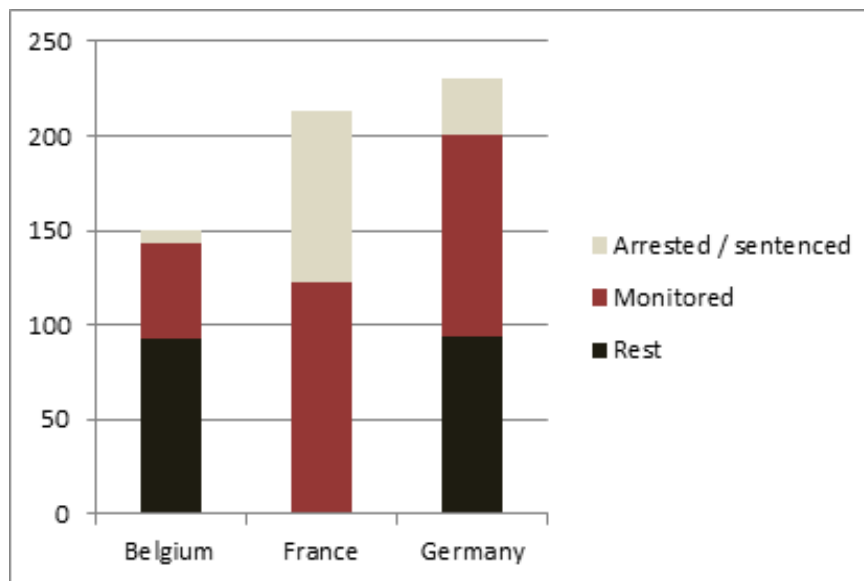


Figure 2 – Countries by ratio returnee / monitored.

A secondary research question this study tries to find an answer for is about the most likely sort of targets that returnees could attack. From the data collected about the plots executed by returnees it is possible to deduce that the targets they have chosen so far are diverse, but those with an anti-Semitic component prevailed. The bloodiest independent attack, carried out by Mehdi Nemmouche, was against the Jewish Museum of Belgium. Ibrahim Boudina, who was arrested in France, considered where he lived as a 'Zionist area' that he could attack, which implies that he would have probably chosen a Jewish place as objective. Nonetheless, not all the plots were planned against Jews. Redouani Hagaoui and Tarik Jadaon, arrested in Belgium, had prepared an imminent attack to kill police officers. The Thalys train attack took place in a train heading to Paris. Despite this attack failed because the jihadist's rifle jammed and passengers subdued him, it gives an idea about how serious is the threat that some returnees pose. It is unclear whether or not the attacker had previous training in the handling of weapons because he probably stayed less than two months in Syria. What seems to be clear is that the attack could have been a mass murder with dozens maybe hundreds of deaths (the train was not in a station) if it was executed by a group of terrorists coordinated and well equipped. Finally, the November 2015 Paris

attacks showed that terrorists can strike almost anywhere. In any case, the most likely scenarios of attack continue to be Jewish places and also satirical artists that publish on Muhammad, as they have been target in plenty of attacks such as the Charlie Hebdo shooting. Both France and Belgium are already protecting public Jewish places.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has evaluated a series of key aspects, namely capability, intention and opportunity in order to determine how likely is that French, Belgian, British and German returnees could perpetrate an attack in the homeland. The results were compared with the counter-terrorism measures that their respective countries are currently undertaking with the purpose of concluding whether or not they are the most suitable to address the returning of foreign fighters and suggest improvements if there is room for them. First of all, Belgian, British and German returnees seem to be more able to commit an independent attack than the French ones. The remnants of recruitment or extremist networks that in France are not linked whatsoever to foreign fighters may enable them in the other countries to engage dangerous salafists upon return. This task is not difficult for the returnees as they are often considered an 'authority' by other extremists. Once they have created a group, prepared the plot and acquired weaponry or explosives, they are more able to conduct an attack than a jihadist operating alone because of the organization and division of functions. Secondly, French returnees appear to have a greater intention to conduct an attack than Belgians, British and Germans do. France is the only country that does not have a de-radicalization and re-integration program for those fighters who return. Many of them have probably radicalized further and some may even suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of having fought with hardline groups such as Daesh. Others may not initially have in mind to plot an attack, but if the reason why they left for Syria was just because they felt alienated in France, their frustration or disaffection could turn them violent due to the inexistence of programs that could channel those feelings. Finally, Belgian and German returnees apparently have more possibilities to carry out an attack than French and British ones. Belgium is the country that monitors less returnees despite it has foiled one of the most serious plots. France, however, tracks most of the individuals who have not been arrested and the UK has a geographical location that somehow limits the number of routes fighters can use to come back, hence the authorities are able to control their return better than any of the other countries studied. It is also important to consider that more capability means less opportunity and vice versa, i.e. jihadists operating alone go unnoticed by the police easier than groups. Overall, France is likely to experience most of the independent plots, although they would probably be planned individually implying therefore more attacks but less devastating if accomplished. Belgium, Germany and, to a greater extent, the UK are likely to face a lesser number of plots that would

probably be planned in group, thus entailing less attacks but more devastating if they were executed. In addition, the most likely scenarios or objectives that returnees could choose for their attacks are Jewish places and authors of satirical publications on Muhammad.

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