

Do Returning Foreign Fighters Represent A Significant Danger to Their Home/Returning Countries?

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Abstract: The ‘foreign fighters’ phenomena is nothing new. Throughout history, many foreign fighters have travelled to foreign countries to join the fight with whom they have sympathetic attachment or ideological attachment. Among those foreign fighters many return to their home countries, many get killed during the fight, and some may travel elsewhere. The returning foreign fighters represent a significant danger and security threat to their home/returning countries. Studies show that there are reasons to assume the returnees as potential threats and one of the important reasons is they are radicalized with extreme world views. This research essay aims to offer an understanding on how they can pose potential threats for their home countries. This essay comprises of three parts. Firstly, it presents the concept of foreign fighters. Then, the essay offers discussion on and the trends of foreign fighters. Finally, it portrays the threat perception of returnee foreign fighters with relevant examples. The essay concludes with providing insights on possible future trends of foreign fighters as well as future research indication.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The ‘foreign fighters’ phenomena is nothing new. Throughout history, many foreign fighters have travelled to foreign countries to join the fight with whom they have sympathetic attachment or ideological attachment. Among those foreign fighters many return to their home countries, many get killed during the fight, and some may travel elsewhere. The returning foreign fighters represent a significant danger and security threat to their home/returning countries. Studies show that there are reasons to assume the returnees as potential threats and one of the important reasons is they are radicalized with extreme world views. In recent times since the Syrian conflict broke out, a large number of foreign fighters across the world have travelled the conflict zones to fight for IS and Iraq has also inspired many foreign fighters to travel there since the US invasion. However, some recent research works have been done on the returnee foreign fighters, the trend of terrorist attacks across the world, and on the status of IS. These research works show very interesting results and they do not support that returnee foreign fighters can pose great danger to their home/returning countries considering the present realities. This research essay aims to offer an understanding on how they can pose potential threats for their home countries. This essay comprises of three parts. Firstly, it presents the concept of foreign fighters. Then, the essay offers discussion on and the trends of foreign fighters. Finally, it portrays the threat perception of returnee foreign fighters with relevant examples. The essay concludes with providing insights on possible future trends of foreign fighters as well as future research indication.

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II. WHO ARE FOREIGN FIGHTERS?

People who travel the foreign lands to join conflicts and insurgencies are being referred as 'foreign fighters'. It refers the combatants who take part in conflict, trainees who receive training from insurgent groups, and those who assist in the combat in some form (Zammit 2015, p. 3). Sometimes these fighters are also being termed as foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) (Renard & Coolsaet 2018, p. 3). United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 also focuses on foreign terrorist fighters (FTF). The Muslims who volunteered to travel and join the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and other parts of the Middle East are labelled as Jihadist foreign fighters (Malet 2018, P. 6). On the other hand, the United Nations termed these fighters as 'combatants on foreign soil' (Borum & Fein 2017, p. 248).

Moore and Tumelty define foreign fighters as "non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict zone to participate in hostilities" (Moore & Tumelty 2008, p. 413). The definition of Moore and Tumelty seems to be a comprehensive one entailing all the possibilities-identity, motivations, and role. Borum and Fein refers four broad categories of actions of support by the foreign fighters and these are- direct action, operational support, movement support, and logistical support (Borum & Fein 2017, p. 250). So, a foreign fighter can provide crucial support in the conflict and play important role, and in the process he/she gets the on ground experience of insurgency.

III. THE INFLUX OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Though the involvement of foreign fighters in various conflicts has a long history, the recent trend of foreign fighters has become a major security concern for the international community. Arguably, in recent times, one of the major manifestations of foreign fighters influx happened in Afghanistan in 1979 during the Soviet Union invasion (Zammit 2015, p. 3). That time many Muslims from all over the world travelled to Afghanistan to fight for them. Those foreign fighters were seen as the true believers of jihadist ideology.

The trend of foreign fighters influx continued in the conflict of Iraq and Syria and these two conflicts motivated unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters to join the fight. Since 2012, the Syrian conflict alone inspired around 30,000 foreign fighters to fight against the Assad regime and they helped the Islamic State in an effort to replace the Assad regime (Dawson & Amarasingam 2017, p. 191). People from nearly 80 countries have travelled to Syria and majority of those fighters came from the Middle Eastern countries (Borum & Fein 2017, p. 255; Zammit 2015, p. 4). Large number of fighters (4,000-5,000) came from Europe (UK, France, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands) and other parts of the West (US, Canada, and Australia) (Renard & Coolsaet 2018, pp. 3-25; Dawson & Amarasingam 2017, p. 191). According to David Malet the total number of foreign fighters in Syria-Iraq conflicts in 2010s are around 40,000 (Malet 2018, p. 9). Apart from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, US invasion of Iraq, and Syrian conflict there are few other events which actually contributed in the surge of foreign fighters and those events are- Bosnian war (1990s), Chechnya (1990s-2010s), Somalia (1990s-2010s), Yemen (2010s), and Ukraine (2010s). All these conflicts involved either local or transnational terrorist groups (Al-Qaeda, Al Shabaab, Donbass International Brigade, AQI, and ISIS) and in the process attracted thousands of jihadist motivated foreign fighters from across the world. Another significant aspect of the foreign fighters influx is the involvement of women and according to Borum and Fein the number of women foreign fighters from western countries in Syrian conflict is 550 (Borum & Fein 2017, p. 256). Child foreign fighters is also another feature of those ongoing conflicts. Many children were born in the conflict zone and many travelled with their parents. Sometimes these children are used as child fighters.

IV. THREAT FROM THE RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Although studies show the numbers of foreign fighters who travelled from their home country to foreign lands to join the conflict in various capacities but it is very clear how many of them returned back to their home country, or how many of them moved to another conflict zone, or how many of them have been killed during the conflict. However, there are some evidence which testifies the return of foreign fighters to their home countries. According to Renard and Coolsaet around 1500 foreign fighters have returned to their European countries out of around 5000 fighters who travelled Iraq and Syria since 2012 (Renard & Coolsaet 2018, p. 3). The surge of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq created two-dimensional security threats for their home countries as well as for the host countries (Zammit 2015, p. 4). Foreign fighters try to find the ideological linkages with IS or Al-Qaeda and at the same time, they have sympathetic mind to help the people in distress in conflict zones.

Security experts and policymakers were trying to find out ways to deal with the situation. As because it is quite evident that those foreign fighters are being radicalized with extreme ideologies, some of them got training, some worked as trainer, some of them participated in direct conflict, some provides other assistance, they could build a network, and some might have travelled just to express solidarity. So the experts and

policymakers fear that returning foreign fighters can pose serious security threats for the home countries. According to Thomas Hegghammer 46 percent terrorist plots in Western countries between 1990 and 2010 were done by the foreign fighters (Hegghammer 2013, pp. 2-3). Again Thomas Hegghammer's *Jihadi Plots in the West* (JPIW) suggests that around 11 percent returnee foreign fighters become domestic terrorists (Malet & Rachel 2018, p. 10). Terrorist attacks plotted by foreign fighters cause serious destruction and fatalities (Schuurman et al. 2014, p. 92).

The returnee foreign fighters can pose threats to their home countries in many ways such as- plotting terrorist attacks in the home countries, mobilizing local terrorist groups, creating and leading new terrorist groups, recruiting and radicalizing other people, developing terrorist networks, fundraising, creating training facilities, and generating public support by showing the heroic participation in foreign conflicts. Even the foreign fighters can radicalize other individuals in prison settings. If the home countries do not have separate kind of prison settings for the foreign fighters or already radicalized persons they these prisoners can easily contaminate other inmates and even the fighters can recruit new members from the prison.

Some terrorist attacks took place in European countries were plotted by the returnee foreign fighters, such as in 2014 shooting occurred at Brussels' Jewish Museum by Mehdi Nemmouche who was a returnee foreign fighter and had training with IS in Syria (Zammit 2015, p. 4). Four people were killed in this event and the event is termed as the first successful terrorist attack in Europe by a returnee foreign fighter (Renard & Coolsaet 2018, p. 3). Several other terrorist attacks took place in Europe by the returnee foreign fighters. The Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015 and the Brussels attack in 2016 are the other events plotted by returnee fighters (Malet & Rachel 2018, p. 10; Zammit 2015, p. 4; Renard & Coolsaet 2018, p. 3)

V. CREATION OF NEW TERRORIST OUTFITS

Al-Qaeda is one of the notorious terrorist organizations responsible for many terrorist attacks in many places of the world. This Al-Qaeda was formed by the Saudi and Egyptian veterans who fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan as foreign fighters (Zammit 2015, p. 3). The foreign fighters participated in Afghanistan were called as Afghan veterans for their heroism. That time those veterans could easily returned back to their home countries and the governments were not aware of the possible security threats that time. The Afghan veterans then formed local terrorist organizations in their own countries. Afghan veterans from Indonesia played leading role in creating Jemaah Islamiyah (Zammit 2015, p. 3). The same kind of thing happened in Bangladesh.

According to Ali Riaz, there are five generations of Bangladeshi militants and the first generation of militants was led by the Afghan veterans those who took part in the Afghan war from Bangladesh (Riaz 2016, p. 4). Around 3000 fighters joined the war in batches and they returned back after the war ends in 1989 (Riaz 2016, p. 4). In 1992 those Afghan veterans formed Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami- Bangladesh (HuJI-B). Since then Bangladesh has been experiencing extremist activities and later on few other terrorist outfits emerged one after another. In 2016, one of the deadliest terrorist attack took place in Holey Artisan Bakery cafe of Dhaka in Bangladesh that killed 22 individuals and most of them were foreign nationals (Rabbi, 2018). Five militants conducted the terrorist attack and later IS released the photographs of the militants with black flag (BBC, 2016). These five militants are assumed to have close link with IS. So, the foreign fighters veterans are clearly responsible for introducing terrorist activities in Bangladesh and the government is still struggling to tackle the situation.

VI. OVERTHROWING RULING REGIMES

Studies suggest that veteran fighters can mobilize and play crucial role in spreading jihadi movement. The Egyptian and Algerian veterans of Afghan-Soviet conflict attempted to overthrow the ruling regimes upon returning home (Zammit 2015, p. 3). In Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiyah wants Islamic rule and this terrorist organization is held responsible for 2002 Bali bombing. In Bangladesh, Jamaat - E- Islami is religious based political party wanted to change regime on various occasions and they wanted to establish an Islamic government based on Islamic law. Allegedly, this party has affiliation with Pakistan based Jamaat - E- Islami party and other organizations in Middle East. But currently this party has no registration with the National Election Commission to run its political activities and their top leaders have been trialed for treason against independence and sovereignty of Bangladesh (Gulf Times 2013). Returning foreign fighters have been shaping the threat perception as game changer in other regions also (Tammikko, 2018). In Pakistan, returning foreign fighters are the members of Lashkar e-Toiba, Islamic Jihad Union, and Tehrik-i-Taliban and all these are very close to Al-Qaeda (Zammit 2015, p. 3). These terrorist groups are blamed to destabilize the Kashmir region as they have been supporting the Kashmiri freedom movement. They are also blamed to provide training and arms to Kashmiri locals to fight with Indian security forces.

VII. RETURNING CHILD FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Australia has also experienced the flow of fighters joining in fights in foreign land. The Syrian conflict has inspired many Australians to join the Free Syrian Army, and Jabhat al-Nusra the Syrian al-Qaeda outfit since the outbreak of war in 2012 (Zammit 2015, p. 9). Between 2014 and 2015 another batch of Australian foreign fighters have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join IS. According to the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) around 110 Australian foreign fighters have travelled to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq and they are currently engaged in fighting, around 30 of them returned back to Australia, and 20 died during the conflicts (Zammit 2015, p. 7; Wroe 2017; Rudd 2017, AFP). But the Australian government has been concerned with the returning of 70 children from the conflict zones who travelled with their parents (Wroe 2017). The status of these 70 children is not clear whether they radicalized or not, whether they received any training, whether they participated in fighting, and what is their mental state. This kind of situation certainly pose a national security threat and at the same time create public resentment. However, the Justice of Australian assures that Australian government has taken the issue seriously and they would take all possible measures to handle the situation (Wroe 2017; Rudd 2017). This is not only for Australia, child foreign fighters are may return to their respective home countries. This young generation of child fighters have experienced the toughness and roughness of terrorist fighting and they need continuous monitoring upon their arrival to their home countries. Now the Australian government is focusing more on no-coercive countering violent extremism (CVE) approach to prevent terrorist activities.

Although, the recent research works provide strong counter-arguments on the threat perception of foreign fighters. The foreign fighters have returned mainly in two phases since the Syrian conflict started in 2012, the first phase was 2013-2014 and the second phase was 2015 (Renard & Coolsaet 2018, p. 3). The recent returnees are mainly women and children, and it seems that the foreign fighters veterans are unwilling to return back to their home countries. On the other hand, countries have enacted stricter law regarding the returnee foreign fighters, especially the European countries after the Paris attack and Brussels attack have adopted stricter judicial response. Countries like Germany, Belgium, and Netherlands have started systematic prosecution as these countries represent one-third of European foreign fighters and returnees. Other countries have started to seize passports of those travelling fighters. According to Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, only seven terrorist attacks in Europe between 1994 and 2007 involved returnee jihadist and none of them were foreign fighters, they just received training from abroad (Renard & Coolsaet 2018, p. 4). According to Aseem Qureshi, between 2001 and 2014 around 66 persons found engaged in local terrorist activities in the United Kingdom and out of those 66 only 2 were foreign fighters (Renard & Coolsaet 2018, p. 4). David Malet and Rachel Hayes conducted a research on the time period of returnee foreign fighters and their terrorist plots in home countries. According to them only three percent of returnee foreign fighters have engaged in domestic terrorist plots within the 36 months of their return (Malet & Rachel 2018, pp. 9-10).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Foreign fighters phenomena is a real thing. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a jihadi-inspired foreign fighters trend began which continued in the Bosnian war, Chechnya, Iraq and in the recent Syrian conflict. Those who travelled to the conflict zones have shown great loyalty towards jihadist ideology and sometimes they joined Al-Qaeda and sometimes IS. During their stay at the conflict zones, they get chance to make their extreme belief more firm, they meet with lots of other radicals, they get training and guidance, and they participate in direct fight. All these aspects of a foreign fighter deserve great attention by the home or returning countries. Examples also suggest what they are capable of once they return home or any other place. And the same time it is also evident that IS is losing its grip in Syria thus cannot attract foreign fighters like before. On the other hand countries have become more aware of this fact and are preparing themselves to tackle the situation. But the threat perception of foreign fighters cannot be neglected. Now the experts are researching on foreign fighters phenomena, they are dealing with each and every terrorist plots, they are also examining the time frame and such studies would certainly help governments to formulate effective policy and strategy. More studies are also required on women foreign fighters and child foreign fighters to understand the situation.

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