

CANADIAN AND BRITISH POLICY TOWARD RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR COUNTERING ISLAMIC STATE'S NARRATIVE?

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In recent months, western intelligence officials and policy makers have been continuing to grow increasingly concerned that a new wave of terrorism will soon sweep over Europe, driven by the civil war in Syria and the continuing instability in Iraq. Many of these concerns stem from upwards of 3,000 foreign fighters travelling from Western countries to swell the ranks of the Islamic State (IS) and the fear of 'blowback' ("Islamic State crisis," 2014). Ultimately, the concern is that westerners who have joined the Islamic State will return further radicalized, battle-hardened, and influenced by extensive radical networks and that they might be more likely to commit terrorist attack on their home soil. The recent attacks on the Jewish Museum in Brussels, allegedly committed by a French national returning from fighting in Syria, seems to confirm that these fears may indeed be founding in reality.

Faced with this pressing issue, Western governments have begun deliberating means of dealing with fighters who seek to return home. Of these, Canada and the United Kingdom have adopted arguably the most intransigent approach. As of September 2014, the Canadian government began invalidating the passports of Canadians who had left, or who were suspected of planning to travel, to join extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, effectively prohibiting those who have already left from returning to Canada. Moreover, and in a constitutionally untested move, new legislation has been enacted by parliament giving the government authority to revoke Canadian citizenship from Canadians holding dual nationality, who have been convicted of major crimes – including terrorism – in Canada or abroad (Bell, 2014).

Similarly, David Cameron, who previously stated that that British citizens fighting alongside the Islamic State, "posed the biggest threats to Britain's national security," (James and Osborn, 2014) announced plans to cancel the passports of returning foreign fighters for at least two years, and to deny them re-entry to the United Kingdom unless they are willing to subject themselves to

strict police supervision (Groves, 2014). In no uncertain terms, the British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Philip Hammond, has stated that returning IS fighters could face the first treason trials since the Second World War, and that those who leave to join the ranks of the IS may be even rendered stateless (Morris, 2014). While it is clear that appropriate steps must be taken to mitigate the threat posed by foreign fighters, policies such as the ones proposed by the United Kingdom and implemented in Canada might represent a lost opportunity to capitalize on the experience of disillusioned foreign fighters and to more effectively counter the Islamic State's alluring narrative.

Several motivations, including a thirst for adventure and a desire to redress local and regional grievances in the Muslim world – particularly the brutality of the Assad regime – have regularly been cited as individual motivations for those who originally sought to join the conflict in Syria. However, in addition to these motivating factors, the Islamic State has managed to cultivate a particularly powerful narrative of righteousness, which is undoubtedly an extraordinarily powerful recruitment tool. The appeal of this narrative has dramatically increased amongst the small, but important, community of young Western radicals it seeks to court, following the Islamic State's impressive battlefield victories and its announcement of the establishment of its caliphate (Byman and Shapiro, 2014).

As highlighted by Lewis (2014), military victory for IS represents only one part of the equation in the establishment of its caliphate. The key battle for IS is not solely military and achieved by violence, but also includes the formation of the “practical basis of a society” (pp. 11-12). By utilizing a wide range of exceptionally professional and sophisticated communication and social media initiatives that are easy to access and highly attractive to their audiences, the Islamic State is attempting to normalize and legitimize its existence. These messages can be, in part, understood in terms of soft-power projections. While IS propaganda is, at times, clearly aimed at intimidating Western audiences with depictions of atrocities and threats of future violence, other imagery of genuine state-building exercises and depictions of IS' engagement in administrative functions are, in contrast, clearly designed to socialize Muslim audiences to the ideals and value of the Islamic State. These depictions have included images and videos of IS' fighters engaging in community supporting initiatives.

These images include, but are not limited to, the enforcement of sharia law through the establishment of a religious police; the establishment of religious schools; the distribution of food; and reconstruction projects (Lefler, 2014). This positive narrative created by IS propaganda depicting a unified community where pious men police the streets eliminating drugs and making sure everyone prays together, offers a sharply idealized contrast to most states in the Middle East, where aging autocrats are seen to preside over irredeemably corrupt and stagnant government. The existence and persuasiveness of IS' narrative is therefore arguably one of IS' greatest success, and a crucial component in its continued recruitment of Western fighters.

Cognisant of the impact and allure of IS' narrative, Western governments have launched campaigns to counter it. The most publicised effort is the U.S. State Department's *Think Again Turn Away* campaign, which included the mock recruitment video *Welcome to the 'Islamic State' Land*. Produced by the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication, a small unit devoted solely to the task of analyzing and countering terrorist messaging, the video informs

potential recruits that they can learn “useful new skills” such as “blowing up mosques” and “crucifying and executing Muslims,” in attempt to satirise IS’ seductive message and illustrate the reality joining IS (Logiurato, 2014). The video ends with the line, “Travel is inexpensive, because you don’t need a return ticket!” Unfortunately, the efforts by Western states to deter potential recruits from joining their ranks face significant obstacles, as they lack credibility in the minds of most their audience (Sorenson, 2014). The counter-narrative campaign launched by the U.S. State Department almost exclusively focuses on heavy-handed and obvious government messaging, rather than identifying and utilizing authentic voices, such as former fighters calling for others to stay at home based on their own personal experiences.

In order to be effective, these campaigns must promote dialogue within the targeted community, as opposed to presenting one sided, government-issued monologues on the subject. Rather than refusing to repatriate those foreign fighters who, having grown disillusioned, are now seeking to return home, a potentially poignant way to engage in such a dialogue is to capitalize on the experiences which led them to defect. One of the most notable sources of this disillusionment is the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict, and the bitter infighting between the Islamic State and other jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra.

According to intelligence and media reports, Western fighters who were motivated by a desire to fight Assad's forces have become disillusioned by the Muslim-on-Muslim violence perpetrated by ISIS (Byman and Shapiro, 2014). However, those defecting from the Islamic State risk serious consequences, and have limited chance of success, especially if not aided by Western governments. In fact, recent reports indicate that approximately 200 foreign fighters who wished to return to their homeland were executed by the Islamic State in December 2014 (Tufft, 2014). In addition, the threat of prosecution in their home country, triggered by Western countries’ fears that returning foreign fighters pose a serious security threat to their homeland, further reduces avenues for rehabilitation and disengagement from IS.

Since motivations for travelling to Syria and Iraq are so diverse, as such it might be counter-productive to think of foreign fighters as a homogenous group. While it is evident that some amongst the thousands of individuals may pose significant security threats upon their return and, as such, should indeed be subject to arrest and prosecution, others may not, and therefore tougher laws and blanket punishments represent a missed opportunity to use these individuals as part of the efforts to counter IS’ narrative, thus reducing the numbers of those travelling to the conflict zone in the first place. Moreover, a more balanced approach, might also offer these individuals a path towards rehabilitation and reintegration.

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