Balkan Foreign Fighters Are Coming Back: What Should Be Done?

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Recommendations

- Put an emphasis on reintegration instead of criminalization;
- Tailor responses to the returnees based on their motivations to join IS, motivations to return and gender/age dynamics;
- Engage local religious, family and school communities in the process of reintegration;
- Address push factors such as poverty, inequality, and economic insecurity.

Executive summary

The Islamic State (IS) will remain a threat in 2018, experts say. Thousands of foreign fighters are now coming back to their home countries following the collapse of the so-called "caliphate". From the around 900 people from the Western Balkans who have travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2016, 250 have already returned. Despite the different reasons for doing so, returnees raise security concerns, to which local governments should respond.

The key challenge for security actors is how to assess the threat posed by former IS combatants and their families. Although returnees have not contributed to the threat of terrorism locally, they create some degree of risk, not only to the Western Balkans but

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also to Europe as many returnees have dual citizenship or links to their diaspora communities across the continent.

There are at least three criteria to consider in developing policies. First, returnees vary in their motivations to travel to the battlefield. Second, they are coming back home for different reasons. Third, gender/age characteristics matter. Thus, a tailored approach to each returnee is necessary.

This policy paper addresses the issue of returning foreign fighters to the Western Balkans by analysing the threat and the response. It discusses key actions that local authorities should consider. Recommendations here derive from existing strategies and approaches in other states. "Hard" measures such as prosecution and detention have been already applied by the countries in the region. However, individual risk assessment, as well as "soft" policies like rehabilitation and reintegration, are becoming essential to address the problem in the long term.

Central European governments should consider a more active role in the region by supporting local governments in dealing with the issue of returning foreign fighters. The Visegrad Four states should support the dialogue between Western Balkan countries (especially between Serbia and Kosovo), and to encourage more active security information sharing among the Western Balkans states, and with the EU. Central European countries have also the capacity to assist in reintegration policies and addressing push factors for radicalization in the region.

The context

More than 42 000 people from 120 countries have travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the so-called Islamic State (IS) (RAN 2017). Of the 5000-6000 European nationals, most are citizens of Belgium, France, Germany and the UK (Soufan Center 2015). The flow of fighters has significantly decreased as a result of the strict measures that countries have applied to prevent citizens joining IS. As IS has begun to lose its territory, the number of war travellers declined from around 2000 a month in 2014 to around 50 a month in September 2016 (Reed and Pohl 2017b, 2017c). At the end of 2016, around 15 000 were still in the conflict zone (Interpol 2016). However, many have returned. At least 5600 citizens from 33 countries who travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2016 have already come back home (Soufan Center 2017). About one third of European IS combatants have returned to their home countries While many of them are currently

under prosecution or already in jail, some have certainly disappeared from the view of the security services (RAN 2017).

The Journey of the Foreign Fighter Concept: From Civil Wars to Terrorism

The most recent wave of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq is not a new phenomenon. From the Spanish Civil War to the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Bosnia, and Chechnya, foreign insurgents have always been part of the war theatre. Nevertheless, foreign fighter participation has only become a serious political issue worldwide with the rise of the Islamic State (also known as IS, ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh).

Research on foreign fighter participation does not have a specific place in the literature, it is rather scattered among different fields - civil wars, transnational social movements or terrorism. More recent and comprehensive accounts on foreign fighters appeared following the civil war in Syria and the rise of IS (Hegghammer 2015, Roy 2017, Coolsaet 2016, Neumann 2016, Nesser 2015). The declaration of a caliphate enabled IS to call on Muslims on a global basis by employing the narrative of statehood. Like in previous wars, a humanitarian crisis attracted volunteers from abroad and thus, shifted the struggle from a national civil war to a supranational jihadist conflict (Donnelly, Sanderson and Fellman 2017).

As research on foreign fighters is predominantly empirical, it lacks conceptual clarity. Foreign fighters might be insurgents but not necessary terrorists (Mendelsohn 2011); they might be mercenaries or volunteers (Bakke 2010); they might have their own motivation to join a foreign war or be forced by other individuals, or certain circumstances (Coolsaet 2011). Despite all these dimensions, there are similarities on the empirical level, which help draw the boundaries of the phenomenon. We call them foreign fighters because they join a cause with geographical, national, and ideological determinants that they embrace like their own although they do not initially belong to it. Various types of ethno-nationalism or religious ideologies have triggered foreign fighter participation in recent wars. All contemporary examples follow similar patterns: local conflicts turn to supranational struggles and draw worldwide volunteers (Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman 2017). This is the case of Syria but also Iraq, Chechnya, Bosnia or Afghanistan.

The lack of a coherent definition of a foreign fighter allows various applications to appear in the work of academics, security experts, policymakers, and journalists depending on the conflict that they study. The UN definition of those who travelled to

Syria and Iraq to join IS has been 'Foreign Terrorist Fighters' (UN Resolution 2178). Although researchers, security experts, and policy makers have quickly adopted this definition, the label "terrorist" is not helpful from a public policy perspective to distinguish among various categories within the pool of returnees. This policy paper employs the term 'war travellers' to describe more broadly those individuals from the Western Balkans who have travelled to the conflict area between 2011 and 2016. It comprises the variety of possible reasons for these individuals to go to the battlefield as well as to come back home.

Western Balkans and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon – from Demand to Supply

To understand what the Western Balkans countries are currently dealing with, we need to look at the foreign fighter phenomenon historically. The recent wave of war travellers to Syria and Iraq is not unique to the region. While the Balkan states are among the active suppliers of IS warriors, previously they were on the demand side of the phenomenon following the collapse of Yugoslavia. Bosnia became a magnet for foreign fighters after declaring independence in 1992 and trying to separate. Bosnian Serbs refused to accept this step and undertook military actions against Bosnian Muslims backed by the Serbian army (Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman 2017). The ethno-religious dimensions of the conflict as well as the terrifying massacres committed against civilians evoked transnational defensive mobilization and attracted former mujahedeen from the Middle East. For instance, Sheikh Abu Abdel Aziz, a commander and associate of Osama bin Laden, established the El Mudzahid Battalion ("Battalion of the Holy Warriors") in 1992 (ibid). The conflict in Bosnia attracted Afghan war veterans, as well as new recruits seeing Bosnia as "a Muslim country, which must be defended by Muslims" (New York Times 1995). Following the end of the war, most foreign fighters left Bosnia and later some of them returned to Kosovo when the situation there escalated in the late 1990s (Corovic 2017). Both conflicts enjoyed opportunistic support by Muslim extremists around the world who used the chance to promote radical ideologies in the region (ibid).

With the rise of IS, the region has become a supplier of war travellers. Following the civil war in Syria, volunteers from the region felt obliged to join the conflict to help their fellow Muslims in need (ibid). Most of those Balkan fighters, who initially (before 2014) joined various rebel groups in Syria, moved to IS after its emergence, along with Al Nusra (Time 2016). The number of foreign fighters from the region reached its highest level in 2014 when Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared the formation of a caliphate and called

on Muslims from around the world to join it. The mobilization peak was in the second part of 2014, continued in 2015 and has since decreased.

Between 900 and 1000 fighters from Western Balkan countries have travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2016. The most active 'exporters' of war travellers have been Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Macedonia. Citizens of Serbia and Montenegro have also contributed to the foreign fighter mobilization.

Table 1. Western Balkan War Travelers to Syria and Iraq

Country	Total	Women	Children	Returned	Killed	Still in the conflict zone
Albania	136	13	31[2]	40	20	76
Bosnia and Herzegovina	260	56	at least 80	43 men 6 women	44 men 2 women	77 men, 48 women, 46 children
Kosovo	316[3]	38	28	118	59	139 (75 men, 38 women, 27 children)
Macedonia	135	-	-	80	27	35
Serbia	42	-	-	9	11	28
Montenegro	Up to 30	-	-	-	5	-

Sources: Soufan Center 2015, Atlantic Initiative 2016

The demographic dynamics confirm that many men from the region left to the conflict zone followed by their families. This trend is particularly visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina where a significant number of male war travellers went to the battlefield with their wives and children (Azinovic 2016). Many of those who joined IS had criminal records prior their departure, others were veterans from the Yugoslav wars, but the majority did not have any previous combat experience (ibid).

From the Western Balkans to the „Caliphate" and Back

Balkan war travellers have gone to Syria through one of the major transit routes – Turkey. Due to the geographical position of the Balkans and the liberal visa regime with

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[2]Balkan Insight, ISIS Holding Albanian Children 'Hostage' in Syria
http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/isis-holding-albanian-children-hostage-in-syria-01-04-2016
[3]Knudsen, Rita A., "Radicalization and Foreign Fighters in the Kosovo Context, NUPU Working Paper 875" (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2017).

Turkey, it is not easy to say with certainty how many Balkan fighters have made their way to the battlefield (Corovic 2017). At the Turkish-Syrian border, they get help by IS affiliates who facilitate their journey (Soufan Center 2017).

Despite the conflict heritage of the region, IS mobilization has not affected entire societies in the Western Balkans, but it has been concentrated in certain towns and villages. The table below gives information about the geographical dimensions of the phenomenon.

Table 2. Municipalities with high foreign fighter mobilization rate

Country	Municipalities
Albania	Leshnica, Zagoracan and Rremenj, Pogradec
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Sarajevo, Zenica, Tuzla, Travnik, and Bihac
Kosovo	Hani i Elezit, Kacanik, Mitrovice, Gjilan, Viti,
Macedonia	Skopje (Cair and Gazi Baba), Aracinovo, Saraj, Kumanovo, Gostivar
Serbia	Sandzak (Novi Pazar)

Source: The Atlantic Initiative 2017, Report 'Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans'

The war travellers' mobilization, therefore, does not follow a random distribution. These hotspots are geographically close to each other. Some of the radical networks appear in bordering regions, others in the capital cities and major towns. Yet, local networks in different countries connect through identity links. Various empirical sources show that both Bosnian (including fighters from Bosnia and Sandzak, Serbia) and Albanian (including fighters from Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia) contingents have cells across the region linked though charismatic leaders, ideologues (radical imams), and social circles (Azinovic and Neumann 2017, Azinovic 2016, Kursani 2015).

The Threat and the Perception of the Threat

The conflation of the threat itself and the threat perception has implications for the creation of counterterrorism policies. The real terrorist threat relates to a small probability of an individual in a certain society to become a victim whereas the perception of the terrorist threat concerns larger parts of a certain population (Wolfendale 2006). Terrorism induces fears within a society due to its decentralization and unpredictability. Thus, politicians should react not only to a threat but also to the societal perception of terrorism that is much broader in its nature. In addition, the fear of terrorism can

influence not only security policies but also electoral outcomes (Berrebi and Klor 2008). Consequently, it might be a source of political manipulation as well as power.

The perception of the threat: A 2017 survey by Pew Research Center shows that people globally see both IS and climate change as the main threats to national security (Poushter and Manevich 2017). Moreover, IS is clearly the primary concern for most states in the EU. There is no comprehensive data concerning the attitudes in the Western Balkan states, nevertheless, public fears of terrorism have been part of the political agenda in the region over the past years.

The threat: There are at least four interconnected threats that relate to foreign fighters (or war travellers): the travel of foreign fighters, their return to their counties of residence, the threat posed by lone actors and sympathizers who carry out attacks at home, and finally, an increasing polarization of a society (Reed and Pohl 2017c) . Reed and Pohl argue that changes in any of these aspects have an impact on the others (ibid). Consequently, policies designed to tackle one aspect of the threat may have effects on the other aspects.

The major concern of security experts across Europe is the growing number of returning individuals who have lived and fought with IS. Both the ongoing conflict in Syria and the defeat of the so-called "caliphate" have raised worries within national security communities in Europe over massive waves of returnees. However, experts do not expect a massive return of war travellers to Europe. Gilles de Kerchve, the counterterrorism coordinator for the EU, says that "the intelligence community doesn't fear a massive flow of returnees but more a trickle" (NBC News 2017). Nonetheless, the warning is that even a small number of returnees might have the potential to cause mass casualties. More than 40 attacks were carried out in the EU since 2014, three of them were conducted by returning IS jihadists but accounted for more than two-thirds of the total deaths and injuries (ibid). Three of the five attackers in Brussels 2016 were returnees and at least six of the perpetrators of the Paris attacks were fighters returning from Syria (RAN 2017).

In the case of the Western Balkan states, there were no attacks conducted by returning IS combatants. However, in June 2017, the Bosnian version of IS's magazine "Rumiyah" published an article with a title "The Balkans – Blood for Enemies, and Honey for Friends". The text makes explicit threats to Serbs and Croats over their roles in the Balkan wars, as well as to Muslim "traitors": "No, we swear by Allah, we have not forgotten the Balkans" (Balkan Insight 2017). In addition, some returnees have dual citizenship as well as close connections with the diaspora communities across Europe. Since "the West"

remains the main target of IS (Independent 2017a) the Balkan war travellers might represent a certain level of risk to the European security.

While the governments in Europe are worried about the rise in numbers of returning war travellers, a recent study shows that only 1 in 360 returnees conducted an attack after their return (Hegghammer and Nesser 2015). On the other hand, a study by German intelligence services found that around half of German returnees remained engaged in extremist or Salafist environments (Reed and Pohl 2017c, Bewarder and Flade 2016). Hence, while the export of terror may not be the primary goal of most returnees, they may continue to pose a threat mainly by upholding supportive functions within radical networks. Thus, as Reed and Pohl point out, returnees may not necessarily plan attacks themselves, but initiate or engage in logistical, financial, or recruitment cells, or become leaders in extremist societies (Reed and Pohl 2017b, Europol TE-SAT 2016). National security actors, therefore, must identify who among the returnees continues to pose a threat and develop policies to counter it.

To define the threat more precisely governments in the region need to profile war travellers and distinguish among different groups. While some are disillusioned and even remorseful, others will keep violent extremist views and create the basis for new circles of radicalization. Some might return with explicit intentions of planning and executing attacks. Yet, many of those who return to their old neighbourhoods are women and children. Looking at the IS roles based on demographic dynamics helps to profile those who are coming back.

Table 3. Roles in IS based on gender/age dynamics

Men	Women	Children
Higher risk of combat experience and skills	Family role and mother to future soldiers	Intense ideological indoctrination through education and socialization
Often involved in and exposed to war atrocities	Driven by sense of empowerment and their role in building the 'caliphate'	Recruited for combat and other violent activities from age of 9
Variety of roles within the terrorist-held territories	Involved in recruitment, indoctrination of children and others	Severely traumatised

Source: RAN Centre of Excellence, Report 2017

Several other factors, still present, shape the threat coming with returning war travellers.

Push factors (structural preconditions): (1) Previous criminal/war experience; (2) poor socio-economic conditions (or so-called "lack of future" factors): poverty, inequality, lack of access to education, unemployment; and (3) local loose radical networks supporting IS.

Pull factors: (1) IS has promised more attacks in the West; (2) at a strategic level, IS has not admitted defeat despite the eradication of its administrative structures in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, its propaganda has cast the loss of territorial control in Syria and Iraq as unimportant, and just a temporary slowdown in its strategy to victory (RAN 2017). This approach might provide a focus for some returnees to re-establish local loose networks of former comrades or to attract new recruits (Soufan Centre 2017).

To sum up, experts expect that IS will survive the collapse of its central core. The slowing rate of returning war travellers makes the security problem manageable. However, the scope of the threat is blurry since it is unclear to what extent its dispersed supporters will regroup, resurge, recruit and recreate what they have lost (ibid).

Who are the returnees? Motivations to return

There are three broad categories, which can fit under the umbrella of returnees with respect to the threat. The first group consists of people (men, women and children) who travelled to Iraq and Syria and have returned. The second one included those who tried but police forces captured and returned them unwillingly. They were obviously motivated but unsuccessful in their attempt to reach the "caliphate". Consequently, they have experienced a sense of failure that contributes to the likelihood that they seek other ways to achieve their goals (Soufan Center 2017). The third category refers to those who had the desire to go but for some reason were not able or decided to stay. These people have identified themselves as members of the caliphate and might follow the injunction to attack where they can rather join the battlefield in Iraq and Syria (ibid). This policy paper focuses on the first group, as there is no reliable and publicly available data concerning the other two.

War travellers have different reasons to return. Some are disillusioned due to brutality, poverty and oppression that they have experienced (Balkan Insight 2017). Those who were driven by material incentives lost their opportunities to benefit after the defeat of the 'caliphate'. Others still follow the ideology. Some feel that they can do more for the

cause of IS in Europe than in Syria and Iraq, or even come back with a task to conduct an attack (RAN 2017).

Table 4. War Travelers who have gone to Syria and Iraq; returned

Country	War Travelers	Returned	Date
Western Balkans	900	250	August 2017
Albania	90	40	-
Bosnia	248	46, remain 115	December 2016
Kosovo	317	117, remain 138	April 2017
Macedonia	140	80	-
Serbia	50	9	-

Source: Soufan Center (2017)

A recent report by the Soufan Center (2017) identifies five sub-categories within the group of returnees as each of them brings different risks.

1. Early returnees or after a short stay: They travelled to Syria and Iraq and left before the caliphate began to shrink. They returned because they did not find what they were looking for and did not recognize themselves in the cause of IS.

2. Those who returned later, but disillusioned: As the report notes, all foreign recruits to IS must have supported the idea of a caliphate to a certain extent. Although they might have expressed disagreement with leadership, tactics, or strategy of IS, this does not necessarily mean rejection of aims and objectives.

3. Returnees who have had their fill: They were attracted by the heroic image of the IS fighters composed by a sense of adventure. They joined and stayed through the high point of the caliphate in 2015 or joined once it began to lose its power. These recruits may also decide to seek new theatres of jihad once they have rested and recuperated.

4.Forced to return or captured: A significant number of foreign fighters have survived the collapse of the "caliphate": escaped, captured or surrendered. There might be a number of individuals in each of these groups who still support the goals and the leadership of IS. Thus, they will try to contribute to them once they return.

5. Sent home or elsewhere by IS: This category refers to the capacity of returnees to re-establish local networks and conduct attacks.

Women and children

When IS declared the "caliphate", its leadership called on individuals to travel to the territory under its control together with their families, including women and children. The number of women and children who travelled to Syria from the Western Balkans remains unclear. However, at least two of the states in the region have contributed significantly to this category – Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo.

Table: 5 Foreign Women and Children in the Islamic State

Country	Total	Women	Children
Bosnia and Herzegovina	148	60	81
Kosovo	300	44	27

Source: Soufan Center 2017

Women: A comprehensive research by Vlado Azinovic shows that about 30% of the Bosnian contingent consists of women. Moreover, Bosnian women represent one of the highest proportions in the foreign communities in Iraq and Syria under the rule of IS (Azinovic 2016). Some of them have left their homes to join their husbands or children on the way to Syria. Another group of women has departed to the 'caliphate' leaving their families in Bosnia (ibid).

While previously women had only the role to spread propaganda, marry fighters, and take care of and indoctrinate children, they have been recently given the task by IS to conduct attacks (Dearden 2017b). The recent IS call on women to fight frames jihad as an "obligation" and encourages female supporters to take part in violent activities (ibid). Furthermore, there is an increase in women's participation in terrorist plots in Europe, recent report shows. In the first part of 2017, sever terrorist plots in Europe (or 23% of the total) had involved women (Heritage Foundation 2017).

Children: The number of children from the Western Balkans who travelled to Iraq and Syria is at least 110. However, a more precise estimate is not available. Children returning from conflict zones might be both participants in and victims of violent actions. On one hand, IS have has considered anyone over 15 an adult, yet the age of nine appropriate to start combat training (AIVD 2017). Children, therefore, were used to

carrying weapons, guard strategic locations, arrest civilians and serve as suicide bombers (UN Security Council Reports). Children have also been a target of indoctrination turning them into loyal supporters for terrorist activities (RAN 2016). On the other hand, however, the war experience has a strong impact on their moral, emotional, and cognitive development and poses risks to their mental health in the long term (ibid).

Both groups, women and children, create a security challenge for the security actors, as it is difficult to judge the degree of their commitment to IS as well as their motivation to become active or passive supporters (Soufan Center 2017).

The response

There are two streams of policies implemented by states dealing with returning war travellers: *criminalization* and *reintegration* (Lister 2015). Security experts also focus on rehabilitation in each stage of the criminal proceeding including the pre-trial, trial and post-trial stage (Entenmann 2015). Some governments invest in diversion programmes as an alternative to a prison sentence. The individual receives treatment or rehabilitation instead of being directly prosecuted and sentenced (ibid). While some European states have developed new rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives to tackle the issue, most have built on existing programmes, not specifically designed for foreign terrorist fighters (Mehra 2016). This part of the paper explains how the states from the Western Balkans are currently dealing with the issue of war travellers, looks at best practices from other European countries and then elaborates on what should be done.

How are Western Balkan countries dealing with the issue of foreign fighters?

Following the rise of IS worldwide, all governments in the region joined the international efforts in fighting the trend. In accordance with UNSC Resolution 2178 adopted in 2014, the Western Balkan states amended their criminal legislation recognizing participation in foreign conflicts as a criminal act. Kosovo has adopted an entirely new law to address the issue, while the neighbouring states have added new provisions to their criminal codes. The possible sentences are between 6 months and 15 years in prison for participation in a foreign war, recruitment of fighters or support for terrorist groups (Beslin and Ignjatijevic 2017).

However, two key issues obstruct the course of justice. First, many war travellers from the Western Balkans returned home in 2013-14 and, therefore, could not be

prosecuted under the new legislation. Second, the implementation of the adopted amendments has been extremely problematic, as the law has treated returnees as terrorists, but prosecution often cannot find sufficient evidence of war travellers' activities in the battlefield (ibid).

In the last 18 months in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there were ten second-instance verdicts, sentencing 16 people to a total of 30 years and 8 months in prison for going to, trying to go to or returning from Syria and Iraq (Muslimovic and Rovcanin 2017). Nonetheless, most indicted for going to the conflict in Syria received only one year in prison due to guilt admission agreements (ibid). In Kosovo, most returnees have also become objects of prosecution despite the denials of going to Syria to fight along IS (Balkan Insight 2017). One example is the case of Albert Berisha who said that he travelled to Syria to help the moderate Syrian opposition but was trapped by IS (Leposhtica 2016). Once he returned to Kosovo, he set up an NGO to help other ex-fighters reintegrate themselves into society: "The state has never understood that our goal was not to be terrorists" (ibid).

Best practices

Table 6: Definitions of "rehabilitation" and "reintegration"

Rehabilitation	"a purposeful, planned intervention, which aims to change characteristics of the offender (attitudes, cognitive skills and processes, personality or mental health, and social, educational or vocational skills) that are believed to be the cause of the individual's criminal behaviour, with the intention to reduce the chance that the individual will re-offend".
Reintegration	"a safe transition to the community, by which the individual proceeds to live a law-abiding life following his or her release and acquires attitudes and behaviours that generally lead to a productive functioning in society".

Source: Veldhuis 2012

Countries dealing with returning war travellers differ in the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration policies depending on:

1. Target audience (right-wing extremism, religious extremism)
2. Phase or setting of policy implementation (pre-prison, in-prison, post-prison)
3. Voluntary or mandatory participation of targeted individuals

4. Who is responsible for the implementation (government, NGOs, or local communities)
5. Policy components (psychological counselling, education, religious counselling) (Van der Heide and Geenen 2017).

These components might help governments in the Western Balkans to adopt measures which suit their local institutional culture. Experts believe that rehabilitation and reintegration should start pre-trial, either in prison or in a local environment (Veldhuis 2012). There are several "soft" approaches concerning prevention and rehabilitation, which governments in the region can borrow from Europe. Looking at the multi-stakeholder character of the policies, Reed and Pohl distinguish between three options (Reed and Pohl 2017b).

The French top-down approach: The state relies on its representatives to decide on a course of action for dealing with war travellers. This approach affirms that all relevant stakeholders are involved in the process of de-radicalization. The so-called "Centres for Prevention, Integration and Citizenship" opened in 2015 with the focus on de-radicalization, targeting individuals who travelled to conflict zones (ibid). However, these centres seem to be inefficient since they encounter some administrative and practical complications (Washington Post 2017).

The German bottom-up approach: The government financially supports local and regional NGOs, which are responsible for the development and implementation of prevention and rehabilitation initiatives. For example, the program "Hayat" established in 2014 targets people involved in radical Salafist groups or on the path of a violent Jihadist radicalization including war returnees from Syria and Iraq (Hayat Deutschland 2017). It includes an assessment of returnees and addresses both pragmatic and ideological aspects of de-radicalization (Lister 2015). It engages family and members of local communities who have a positive relationship with war travellers and can help them in the process of reintegration. Local and regional NGOs usually stay closer to affected individuals and communities and, therefore, can easily intervene.

Both approaches suffer from drawbacks (Reed and Pohl 2017b). In the French case, local communities and families might be reluctant to report cases of radicalization due to a fear of legal consequences as the Ministry of Interior runs the de-radicalization initiative. In the German case, de-radicalization initiatives remain heterogeneous and lack a comprehensive engagement of federal authorities, which in some cases might have negative effects on coordination and unified best practices.

The Danish mixed approach: The so-called "Aarhus model" aims to build trust between the authorities and the social networks to which radicals return (Guardian 2015). This approach establishes networks involving schools, social services and police as well as healthcare, prison and probation services. This institutionalized collaboration exists in every Danish municipality (Reed and Pohl 2017b).

As the Western Balkan war travellers originate from certain geographical spots and (usually) seek to return to the same places, a municipal approach to their reintegration looks particularly relevant. Since mobilization has been concentrated in a number of municipalities in each country, governments should focus on these hotspots rather investing in de-radicalization campaigns at a national level. Following the Danish example, the Western Balkan countries should consider three groups of measures: individual risk assessment (based on motivation to go, motivation to return and gender/age dynamics), reintegration and rehabilitation through work with communities at a local level and addressing the push factors.

Recommendations

1) Recommendations on individual risk assessment

1.1 To tailor responses to returnees, governments should develop mechanisms to identify precisely the individual motivations to join IS, motivations to return, the gender/age dynamics and the commitment and risks posed by returnees. Measures depend on several considerations. On one hand, some returnees may not only be perpetrators but also victims of violence. On the other hand, some individuals may support the radical ideology even though they were not engaged in violent activities under IS. It might be useful to consider at least two groups of war travellers (RAN 2017): (1) Returnees who were motivated to go to Syria for humanitarian reasons. They are more prone to disillusionment, arguably less violent and relatively free to leave the terrorist-held territory. (2) Returnees who travelled to Syria or Iraq following the establishment of "caliphate". They have been battle-hardened and ideologically committed, had to evade pervasive surveillance by IS to escape and may have come back with violent motives (ibid).

1.2 With respect to male returnees, to consider criminal/war background. Various sources confirm that almost one-third of those who have gone to Syria and Iraq from the Western Balkans had violent experience (ICSR 2016, ICCT 2016,

Europol 2016). Police records on the Bosnian contingent show that at least 44 of the 156 considered IS recruits have previous criminal experience, including offences such as terrorism, illegal possession of arms and explosives, robbery, and illegal trafficking (Azinovic 2015). Approximately 40% of those who left for Syria from Kosovo also had criminal records before becoming war travellers (KCSS 2015). Thus, returnees should be prevented from re-establishing their criminal social networks.

1.3   With respect to female returnees, to consider their roles and duties on the battlefield (being wives, mothers) but also if they may have been engaged in different forms of violence or influenced by indoctrination

1.4   With respect to child returnees, consider age and attitudes (Van der Heide and Geenen 2017). The age of the individual could give an indicator about his/her role under the rule of IS. Children under the age of nine, born in the IS' caliphate or brought by their parents at a very young age, should be perceived as victims. For children from nine to eighteen years old consider factors such as indoctrination, training, and participation in combat activities as likely. The latter group requires an approach, which goes beyond the victim-perspective. Security experts should identify the degree of association of these children with the IS' culture and ideology. In addition, it is crucial to assess their attitudes towards violence and IS, compared to adult returnees. Finally, consider that juveniles are particularly vulnerable to mental, emotional and physical abuse (ibid).

2) Recommendations on work with local communities (religious communities, families or school communities)

Three types of communities should be engaged in the process of turning returnees away from radical ideology and reintegration: (2.1) religious communities, (2.2) family communities, and (2.3) school communities. The first task for local institutions is to prepare each of these communities to be more receptive to the returning war travellers It means to address challenges such as hostility, stigmatization and isolation that can obstruct the process of reintegration (ICCT 2017).

2.1   The Western Balkan countries are post-conflict societies dealing with a variety of identity crises and reconstructions. They experience an erosion of socio-

cultural values and norms, where violence or retrograde ideologies are often perceived as the only way for personal development and protection (Azinovic and Jusic 2015). Post-conflict environments encourage the rise of identity creation processes that have to construct the basis of foreign fighters' mobilization. Hence, it is necessary to understand how ideological commitment to radical networks appears and then is sustained in these societies. There is a sufficient empirical evidence that many of the Western Balkan war travellers who joined IS belonged to radical communities prior their departure. Radical religious organizations and mosques, which promoted and encouraged radical values, inspired many to leave for Syria and Iraq. For example, a significant number of Bosnian war travellers and their families visited Salafist communities or mosques operating outside the official religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Azinovic and Jusic 2015). On the other hand, a report on Kosovo suggests that there is no firm evidence for radical ideologies being a direct cause of foreign fighters' mobilization (Kursani 2015). Although it is impossible to determine to what extent affiliation to such structures affects one's decision to participate in a foreign conflict, the influence of these authorities on mobilization seems significant at the local level. Consequently, official religious institutions play an important role in the process of counter-messaging and reintegration of returnees. Some Western Balkan states already started redirecting resources from fighting terrorism to de-radicalization projects with a focus on both the prison population and local communities where the released war travellers are returning to (Muslimovic and Rovcanin 2017). For example, the Islamic Community in Bosnia educates imams who directly communicate with young people. Thus, religious communities should be actively engaged in the process of reintegration and resocialization.

2.2   Families can be partners in the reintegration of war travellers. However, local authorities should assess to what extent family members themselves support extremist ideologies and would be supportive towards their radicalized relatives (RAN 2017). In addition, events and social networks related to foreign fighter mobilization may have affected families and social circles at the local level. Authorities, therefore, should also consider psychological support for these families. The goal is to prevent family environment conducive to future involvement with radical groups.

2.3   School communities also play a vital role in the process of resocialization. They have the difficult task to reintegrate returning children. Teachers, students, and administration, therefore, should be prepared to contribute to this process. Measures should be taken to educate teachers how to facilitate reintegration but also to be able to recognize the dangerous behaviour. School communities should also provide returning children with psychological support focused on anger management or cognitive behavioural therapy (Mullins 2010). Engagement in activities such as participation in sports, theatre, arts and music may add value to the process of reintegration.

3) Recommendations for addressing push factors

IS war travellers from the Western Balkans often originate from a poor socio-economic environment. Once they return, they are exposed to the same conditions including poverty and lack of employment opportunities. For instance, the empirical data on Bosnia shows that most individuals who left for Syria between 2011 and 2015 come from villages and small towns – they were poorer, unemployed, and less educated (Azinovic and Jusic 2015). The link between poverty and terrorism has been widely discussed in the literature. On one hand, the "absence of future" argument suggests that factors like unemployment and economic inequality create a feeling of injustice and deprivation, which might encourage individuals to get involved in extremist activities (Abadie 2004). Some researchers argue that social welfare policies affect preferences for terrorism by reducing poverty and inequality (Abadie 2004, Burgoon 2006, Krieger and Meierrieks 2009). On the other hand, many scholars consider this claim problematic since the behaviour of a small group of people cannot be directly linked to conditions that affect a much broader segment of the society (Bjorgo 2005, Crenshaw 2011, Sageman 2008).

Although poor socio-economic conditions cannot explain the foreign fighter phenomenon, they certainly affect the environment where radical networks emerge and operate. A broad body of research on the link between poverty and radical views indicates that poverty inspires larger numbers of people to deepen their religious belief and engage in extremist religious-political activities (Barro and McCleary 2003, Berman 2000). Empirical data on Kosovo indicates that previously poorly educated citizens in rural areas attended lectures of Saudi charity organizations introducing them to more conservative forms of Islam (Kursani 2015). Due to the lack of economic and political stability in these regions, such organizations play the role of imperfect substitutes for social policies. Locals, therefore, see them as a source of security and hope (Gill and Lundsgaarde 2004, Burgoon

2006). The absence of working welfare institutions in Bosnia or Kosovo leaves space for religious charity organizations to influence more marginalized segments of the society (KIPRED 2005). As they monopolized the social activism in these regions, citizens were not able to refuse aid (Azinovic and Jusic 2015).

To sum up, "lack of future" factors might encourage returnees to again seek engagement in radical activities. Consequently, poverty and unemployment are among the push factors that local governments should address in dealing with the issue of returning war travellers. Better job opportunities, employment programs, and improved welfare policies play a vital role in reducing economic insecurity and inequality and might affect preferences for re-joining radical networks. Reintegration of returnees should include support in education, employment and housing.

Conclusion

Governments in the Western Balkans are under pressure to enhance security measures to address the threat of returning war travellers. While applying "hard" policies such as prosecution and detention solve the problem in the short term, they do not bring a higher level of security in the long term. Thus, reintegration and rehabilitation measures are increasingly important. To help radicalized individuals in rebuilding their lives back home seems essential in discouraging their possible return to violence. Adequate risk assessment, as well as complex "soft" policies, are necessary to reintegrate returnees into the society. Institutions should also focus on the socio-economic conditions, which may be conducive to radicalization and lead returnees again to seek violent solutions to their problems. Governments should apply a tailored approach to every individual coming back from the ranks of IS instead of acting on suspicion that they can conduct a terrorist attack. Due to the relatively small number of fighters coming from each of the states in the region, it is feasible to employ individual measures. However, the challenge for the authorities is how to prioritize targets and to decide on the approach in each case. A mixture of top-down and bottom-up reintegration measures might be a relevant approach to address the problem in the Western Balkans. It includes a broad circle of stakeholders including police, social services, local religious communities, families and schools. Governments should consider country's institutional culture when they adopt policies from other states. Moreover, implementation of such policies should follow the geographical pattern of foreign fighter mobilization in the region concentrated in hotspots in each of the states.

The issue of returning war travellers to the Western Balkans requires the attention and efforts of the local governments but also the EU, and more specifically the EU states from Central and Eastern Europe. The Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the EU (which gives a priority to the integration of the Western Balkans) provides the Visegrad Four with a good opportunity to engage more actively with the region.

Although the Central European countries have not experienced the issue of foreign fighters, there are several ways to support the Western Balkan governments. First, to support the dialogue among the countries in the region, with an emphasis on the Kosovo-Serbia relations (put on hold after the assassination of the Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanovic). The Visegrad Four states should initiate a more intensive exchange of information between police and intelligence agencies in the Western Balkans as well as with the national security actors in the EU states. Second, Central European states have the capacity to contribute to "soft" policies implementation with respect to the reintegration of war traveller in the Western Balkans. The strong NGO communities in these countries have experience and expertise, which might be applicable to the reintegration efforts of the governments in the Western Balkans. Finally, Central European states should consider direct investments in the region to help local governments addressing the push factors for radicalization. ●

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