

The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters in the European context

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The evolution of the phenomenon of "foreign fighter"

Wars, long-term conflicts, the fight against foreign occupations, the feeling of solidarity with the people of the oppressed community are just a few of the factors that have determined, in history, the evolution of the "foreign fighter" phenomenon. Heroes ready to sacrifice themselves for "noble" causes have been on the battlefield since the emergence of nineteenth-century nations in countries like Greece, the United States, Spain, Palestine, Afghanistan, the former Yugoslavia and Somalia (Colgan & Hegghammer, 2011; Hennessy, 2012). But this was only the first stage of the phenomenon.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 were a crucial moment for the evolution of the "foreign fighter" phenomenon, giving a negative note to the connotation acquired by this term: the heroes of the first stage of the phenomenon were now the fighters - terrorists or mercenaries who went to war pushed by another range of motivations (Malet, 2015). Despite the importance of the phenomenon for national and international security, the international community, at this stage, had not yet established a judicial regulation against individuals who became pioneers of far-reaching causes. This weakness in legislative, logistical and strategic terms was initially motivated by the relatively small number of cases and the inefficiency in predicting the possible damage that they can bring to the countries of origin, the countries of destination and other countries they transit or to which they can go at the end of the mission.

The emergence of Daesh in Syria and Iraq triggered a different and more dangerous phase of the "foreign fighter" phenomenon, which has expanded on a much larger scale. As a result, the United Nations Security Council, at Turkey's proposal, added the title of "terrorists" to the name "foreign fighters" and declared them illegitimate (UN, Resolution 2178 / 25.09.2014). Thus, the term "foreign fighter" became "foreign terrorist fighter" and the legal framework is represented by Resolution 2178 of 24 September 2014, which defines them accordingly:

"[...] persons moving to another state than their state of residence or nationality for the purpose of committing, planning, preparing or participating in acts of

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terrorism or in providing or receiving terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict ... "(UN Security Council, Resolution 2178 / 25.09.2012)

The first of its kind to regulate the dangerous phenomenon, the UN Resolution 2178 represented a foundation for the future fight against those individuals and, at the same time, warned Member States of the threat and urged them to take the necessary measures to prevent the actions of these foreign terrorist fighters (FTF), as follows:

- "to prevent the movement of terrorists or terrorist groups by means of strict border control and control of the issuing of identity documents and travel documents, as well as by measures to prevent counterfeiting, falsification or fraudulent use of identity documents and security documents. travel",

- "to intensify and accelerate, through bilateral or multilateral mechanisms, the exchange of operational information on the actions or transit of terrorists or terrorist groups, including foreign terrorist fighters, in particular in relation to their states of residence or states whose citizenship I own, "

- "to cooperate in the efforts to combat the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters, including by preventing the radicalization of people and recruiting foreign terrorist fighters, including children, by preventing foreign terrorist fighters from crossing the border, by withdrawing and stopping financial support. aliens, as well as through the beginning and conduct of criminal prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. in order to repatriate foreign terrorist fighters " (UN Security Council, Resolution 2178 / 25.09.2012).

The way in which the subject and the definition of the foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) is approached in relation to the displacement in the conflict zones or to the manifestation of the intention to commit a terrorist act is a result and a clear reflection of the level of threat that this phenomenon implies to the national and international security. Given the complexity, the high degree of difficulty and the uncertainty of the success of the process of de-radicalization of these fighters and understanding the "contagious" effect that they can manifest in the spread of violence at international level, regardless of the territorial borders, the third generation of fighters - the foreign terrorist fighters - presents a high level of threat, which justifies the content of UN Resolution 2178.

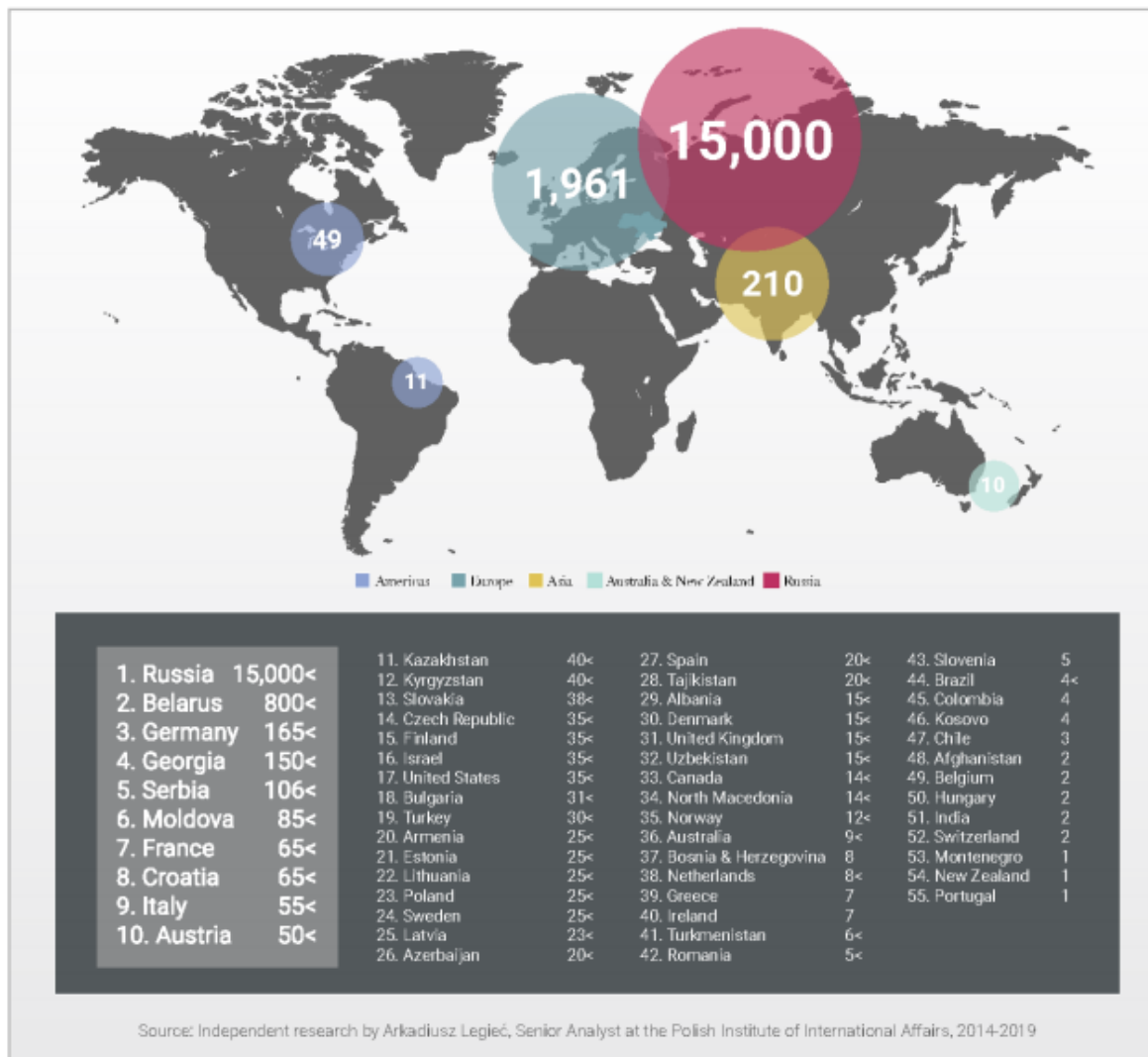
The threat posed by the "foreign terrorist fighters" is felt even more strongly nowadays, even if the Daesh terrorist organization was defeated in the territory. The victory of the international community is overshadowed by the uncertainty about how the situation of foreign terrorist fighters, their women and children will be resolved. Currently, a large number of foreign terrorist fighters are kept in improvised prisons under the control of Kurdish forces in northern Syria. Beside

them, there are hundreds of women with their children, whose states of origin do not rush to repatriate them.

The table structured based on Fainberg's study (2017) presents estimative figures, based on information from open sources, for destinations within the evolution of the phenomenon of foreign fighters / foreign terrorist fighters (we used both names because they are valid in depending on the period addressed), relevant for mapping the evolution of the phenomenon and for understanding the current threat: the first and second war in Afghanistan, the conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq and Syria. The table is a clear evidence of the presence of foreign fighters in virtually all conflicts in the Islamic world starting with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, where foreign fighters played a prominent role (Fainberg, 2017).

Country	Time	Number of foreign fighters / foreign terrorist fighters
Afghanistan	1978-1992	8.000 - 20.000 (3 - 8%)
Bosnia	1992-1995	300 – 6.000 (5.5%)
Chechnya	1994-2009	500 – 700 (4%)
Afghanistan	2001-2014	1.500 (2%)
Iraq	2003-2014	4.000 – 5.000 (5 – 6%)
Syria	2011-present	27.000– 40.000 (15 – 20%)

In view of these contexts, the term "foreign fighter" began to refer to radical Islam and jihadism, even though it did not have the name of a foreign terrorist fighter from the beginning and even if it is not only encountered in the context of religious extremism, by a salafist- jihadist type. In fact, the far right is currently another important source of "foreign terrorist fighters", both through the exodus to Kurdish organizations in Syria and to the conflict in Ukraine. According to the map made by Arkadiusz Legiec, an analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs, between 2014-2019, about 17,000 foreign terrorist fighters crossed the borders of Ukraine. Comparing the number with the approximately 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters in Syria, but also with the previous waves of foreign terrorist fighters, we can observe the magnitude of the phenomenon in the Ukrainian context as well. The EU states face about 5,000 terrorist fighters in Syria and 2,000 in Ukraine. Both values are worrying, and the long-term effect of this exodus is far from expected or predicted.



It is interesting to note that the number of foreign fighters (and subsequently their impact) was relatively low compared to the total number of fighters up to the example of Syria. In most conflicts, foreign fighters account for between 2 and 8% of the total number of fighters, but in Syria their number represents about 20% of the total number of fighters. Even if the profile (or profiles) of foreign fighters from the pre-war period in Syria is not known, their low percentage is also due to their limited geographical origin: almost all these foreign fighters come from Muslim countries, including (predominantly, but is not limited to) Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey. Finally, foreign fighters who participated in the aforementioned conflicts were not considered to be a danger to their countries of return. At the end of the mission, they tended to join another battlefield and, in some cases, made up the leadership of the new jihadist groups (Homeland Security Committee Report, 2015).

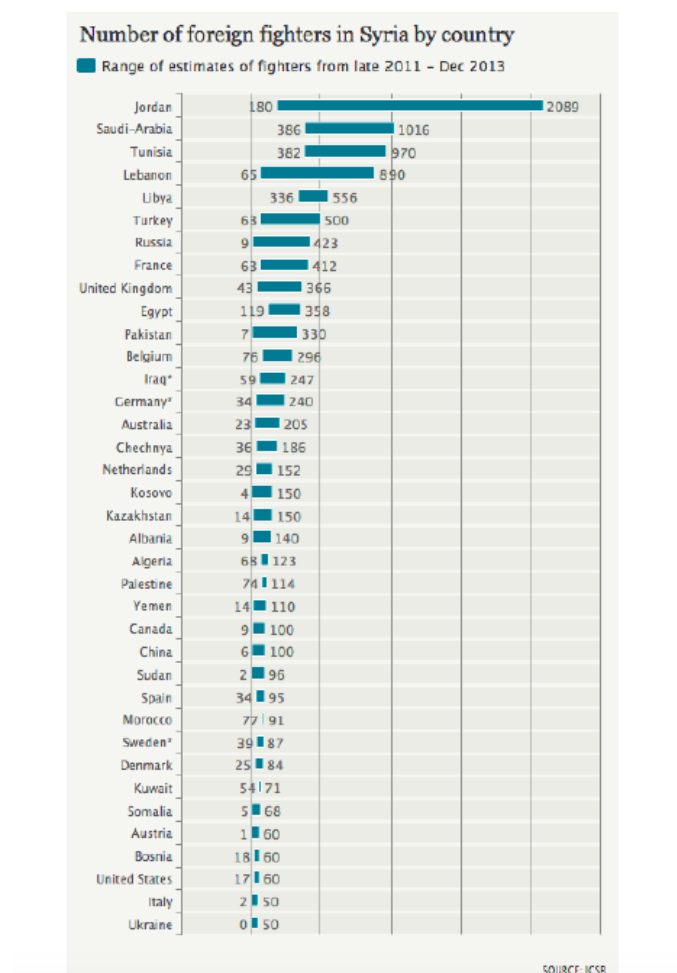
Moreover, in the case of Turkey, many of the veterans of these conflicts were treated as heroes upon their return to the country (Stein, 2016) and played a key role in the Daesh radicalization on Turkish territory. Previous waves of foreign fighters who preceded the Syrian war are relevant because veterans returning from these wars are themselves a stimulating and encouraging factor for the recruitment process led by Syria's terrorist organizations, especially Daesh and the Al-Nusra Front. Both the war in Afghanistan and the rest of the armed conflicts with foreign jihadist fighters have led to the accumulation of jihadist experience used by terrorist propaganda to produce and spread certain messages. Withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan left an ambivalent narrative, which was amplified by the Bosnian, Chechen, Iraq and Syrian wars. On one hand, all these conflicts were presented by the jihadist propaganda as a series of victories over the "infidels", on the other hand, they represented evidence for the uninterrupted attacks of the Western world against Muslims around the world. Such ambivalence allowed jihadist groups and organizations to juggle the narrative and use it, in whole or in part, in their propaganda messages. Until recently, the dissemination of the narrative was limited due to the lack of the necessary technological tools. However, the jihadist discourse has been mainly spread physically, through mosques and independent religious communities, modeled and improved over the years, becoming an organic part of the worldview of many potential foreign fighters. The current Syrian conflict has completely changed the situation, and the use of social media by jihadists brought the story to light and prompted future terrorist fighters to reconsider, discussing online with others - an undeniable advantage of virtual social networks over other broadcasting tools of information.

The evolution of the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq

The flow of foreign terrorist fighters to Syria and Iraq began a few years before the Islamic Caliphate was declared. With the outbreak and amplification of the Syrian crisis caused by the protests of the Arab Spring, the first data on foreign nationals traveling to this conflict zone also appear to join certain groups present in the region, including al-Nusra and ISI (later known as Daesh). Following the research of data from various sources (ICSR, 2015; Soufan Group, 2017; ICCT, 2017; Turkish Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2017) regarding the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to Syria, we identified three stages in the development of the phenomenon: 2011-2013, 2014-2015, 2016-2017. Since mid-2017, the travel of foreign terrorist fighters to Daesh has been significantly reduced due to international security measures, territorial losses of the organization and, at the same time, as a

result of the messages transmitted by the organization as those wishing to travel to stay in the country of origin and fight for Daesh through terrorist attacks.

In the initial period from 2011 to 2013, the number of foreign terrorist fighters who traveled to Syria is smaller, but extremely important for two reasons: most of the terrorist attacks in Europe are committed, largely, by members of the organization that traveled during this period, while some of them were trapped and imprisoned in their attempt to reach Syria, releasing them in the next period representing a possible danger to international security, especially in the states of the European Union.



In the following stages, 2014-2015 and 2016-2017, the number of foreign terrorist fighters in the Daesh-controlled territory increases significantly, with the peak of travel to Syria being reached in the first half of 2016. The evolution of the phenomenon between 2013 and 2016 may be observed, according to information provided by the Soufan Group (Barrett, 2017) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs

of Turkey (2017). One can notice the increase in the number of foreign terrorist fighters during the peak period of the organization, at the time and, in particular, after the declaration of the "Islamic Caliphate". This fact confirms the motivation of foreign terrorist fighters given the utopia of an "Islamic Caliphate" in the region.

After the second half of 2016, the number of foreign terrorist fighters in the territory begins to gradually decrease. Part of them are killed in the fighting between the terrorist group and its rivals. A significant number are caught on the reverse side of the phenomenon - the return of citizens to the countries of origin. At the same time, the number of Daesh members or supporters who traveled to Syria decreases, especially in the second half of the third stage (2016-2017) as a consequence of the successful military actions of the Counter-Daesh Coalition, of the security measures taken at the international level against this phenomenon and the messages of the organization within its propaganda that encourages its followers to continue jihad in its territory through attacks.

The number of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria far exceeds the number of fighters from previous periods, accounting for the largest percentage of the total number of militants of the Daesh terrorist group, compared to the percentages reached by foreign fighters from previous periods. This fact confirms the concern of the international community regarding the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, a fact determined by a variety of factors. The current flow of foreign terrorist fighters involved in the Syrian and Iraqi sectarian conflicts is causing security experts to develop new theories and relevant approaches. First, unlike previous episodes, the number of foreign terrorist fighters participating in Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, as shown in the table, comprises 15-20% of the total number of fighters. Secondly, the current flow is characterized by two main features: the dynamics of development and the diversity of geographical and religious origins. While the previous conflicts were exclusively Sunni, the current ones involve both Sunni and Shiite participants, plus the affiliated military, eventually converted to Islam. Today, fighters come from over 120 countries and join military groups and their affiliates from all sides of the conflict, often moving from one group to another (BBC News, 13 December 2013). In general, there are three main types of militant groups in Syria: those associated with Sunni jihadism, Shiite fighters affiliated with the Assad regime, and pro-Kurdish militants. Each of these types of groups has particularities in recruitment, and the number of foreign terrorist fighters for each type of militant group is difficult to establish.

The geographical diversity of the countries of origin, caused by the technological development is one of the reasons why even the phenomenon of foreign terrorist

fighters has surpassed the conflict in the Middle East and has transformed into an international phenomenon, considering the range of recruits worldwide. Another difference from previous conflicts is the visible participation of Western recruits, many of whom are teenagers, not always of Muslim origin, without previous military experience. Figure 4 shows the international character of the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters who traveled to fight with Daesh in Syria and Iraq, based on data from two stages (2011-2013 and 2014-2015) from several sources including the International Center for Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence) and Soufan Group.

Period of time	First half of 2013	Second half of 2013	First half of 2014	Second half of 2014	First half of 2015	Second half of 2015	First half of 2016
Number of FTF	2.500-7.000	6.000-11.000	12.000	20.000	25.000	30.000	30.000-40.000
Number of countries	60	74	81	90	100	104	Over >100

The International Center for Countering Terrorism in The Hague provides a useful framework for understanding the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, developing a forecast model for its evolution. According to this model (van Zuijdewijn & Bakker, 2014), a foreign terrorist fighter can: be killed in the conflict zone, remain permanently in the conflict zone, or leave the conflict zone. The potential danger of foreign terrorist fighters to the international community begins, ironically, when they decide to leave the conflict zone. In essence, they can return to their country of origin or travel to a third country.

Foreign terrorist fighters can be integrated into the society peacefully, or they may decide to join other conflicts. In another scenario, they could engage in terrorist activities in their country of origin or in a third country, which makes them a real danger. Thus, the main concern regarding foreign terrorist fighters is the "blowback effect". It defines the potential of foreign terrorist fighters to spread violence in different geographical areas, when they return from conflict zones (Sageman, 2004).

The theoretical approach argues, arguing at the statistical level, that one out of nine foreign fighters engages in terrorist activities after their return (Hegghammer, 2013: 10-13). In the case of Daesh, it is very difficult to apply an analysis model to calculate the variables that would help us to understand the level of threat that foreign terrorist fighters pose, due to the fact that the number of those who did not know is exactly known. joined the group and, even less, those returning from the territory (Barrett, 2017).

The current threat to the European Union

After 2017, one can observe an upward trend of returns, caused either by the breaking of the utopia of the "Caliphate" or by the withdrawal of the organization's strategy to locate members in key points at international level. Given the role played by foreign terrorist Daesh fighters in the first wave of terrorist attacks in Western Europe, this upward trend in returns should be a cause for concern for European states and at the same time an incentive for developing a long-term strategy for preventing terrorist activity led by these individuals.

So far, in the context of the European Union, the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria has proved to be a time bomb, for the following reasons: they were behind the terrorist attacks in the European states after 2014, the countries with an increased number of fighters foreign terrorists were targeted for a larger number of attacks which, in their turn, were much better organized, using a complex *modus operandi*. As such, the security of our states today depends, to a large extent, on how we will handle the crisis represented by this phenomenon, on three main sides: the terrorist fighters themselves, the Daesh women - often more radicalized than their husbands, and , more important than anything, Daesh children. The few states in the European Union that had the courage to repatriate a small number of the last two categories, were hit by the legal problem and chose to separate children from their mothers, the latter being tried and imprisoned. France is one of the countries promoting this solution, unfortunately creating even more serious long-term problems. The Daesh children come from Syria and Iraq with the trauma of war and radical ideology, many of them experiencing direct involvement in acts of violence. Separating them from the only person who inspires trusts will only cause a new trauma and transform them into future enemies, pushing indirectly into the arms of the same ideology.

Essentially, there are three international institutional forums fighting to combat the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters within Daesh and, implicitly, against Daesh: the Anti-Daesh Coalition, the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF), and the UN Committee on Combating Terrorism (UNCTC). The Anti-Daesh coalition is taking direct action against the terrorist organization in the territory, such as bombing key points for the organization and conducting attacks on Daesh militants. The Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF) creates a platform to decide the strategies underlying current threats and pave the way for international cooperation. The UN Committee to Combat Terrorism (UNCTC) aims to establish internationally harmonized national regulations.

The conceptualization of the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) is an ongoing process, and the international community is trying to understand the phenomenon and to act accordingly. Therefore, the international organizations' efforts also include legislative projects, such as defining and regulating international travel standards. At the same time, the states of the European Union must collaborate in order to develop a warning system regarding terrorist activity, especially in the case of foreign terrorist fighters. This system can be part of a long-term strategy, developed by counter-terrorism commissions that is highlighted by multiculturalism, multidisciplinary and the ability to understand the contexts in which such phenomena evolve. It is absolutely necessary for researchers in fields such as national security, counter-terrorism, statistics, psychology, sociology, international communication to be part of these teams because the experience of the counterterrorism practitioner is no longer sufficient in the fight against extremism.

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