

Switzerland and Jihadist Foreign Fighters

Since the start of the Syrian war, the international community has been confronted with so-called jihadist foreign fighters. 5,000–7,000 of these foreign fighters come from Western countries. Even though Switzerland is less affected by this phenomenon than other European countries, the resulting risks should not be underestimated.

By Fabien Merz

With the rise of jihadist militias in the Syrian civil war, there has been a massive increase in Western jihadist foreign fighters from 2012 onward. These are individuals who travel to a conflict region in order to participate in the fighting as members of jihadist groups.

The phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters is not new. They already fought in the Afghanistan War (1979–89). Similarly, they also fought in the wars in the Balkans, Chechnya, Somalia and Iraq. What is new, however, is the extent of the phenomenon as observed since 2012. It is estimated that around 30,000 jihadist fighters have traveled to Syria and Iraq, of which up to 80 per cent joined the “Islamic State” (IS).

The majority of these fighters come from Arab countries with particularly large numbers hailing from Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. However, since 2011, also 5,000–7,000 jihadist fighters from Western countries have gone to Syria and Iraq, including more than 900 from France, approximately 760 from the United Kingdom, 760 from Germany and 470 from Belgium. These figures are mostly estimates. In addition, different data collection methods make a cross-comparison between countries difficult. Hence, the numbers should be treated with caution. They can, however, be used to assess the extent of the phenomenon. The picture that emerges



The terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels between 2014 and 2016 illustrated the dangers emanating from returning foreign fighters for Switzerland. *Benoit Tessie / Reuters*

is worrying. Experts believe that in the last three years more Europeans have joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq than was the case in all the previously mentioned conflicts since 1979 as a whole.

Besides prolonging the respective wars, foreign fighters also pose a significant security risk for their countries of origin or of former residence. Most recently, Belgium and France became painfully aware of this.

Returning jihadist foreign fighters were directly involved in the terrorist attacks on the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014 and in the attacks in Paris (January and November 2015).

So far, Switzerland has remained unscathed from terrorist attacks by returning jihadists. It is, however, also affected by the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters, albeit to a lesser extent than most Europe-

an countries. The Swiss Federal Intelligence Service (FIS) has registered 77 jihadist inspired journeys since 2001, 63 of which led to Syria and Iraq. 14 Swiss jihadist travelers have returned to Switzerland in the meantime (11 of these cases have been confirmed). Until May 2013, only 20 jihadist travelers from Switzerland had moved to a conflict zone, according to the FIS. By May 2014, the number had doubled to 40 people. As a result, from 2012 onward, the FIS warned of the dangers these jihadist travelers posed for Switzerland's security. In 2013 and 2014, the FIS focused even more on this issue, and in 2015, returning jihadist travelers were first mentioned as a "focal point" of security policy. In its 2016 situation report, the FIS emphasized that the threat of jihadist terrorism had increased further.

How Big a Risk?

The foreign fighter phenomenon poses significant challenges for Western security forces. During their stay in a conflict zone, jihadist foreign fighters are already in a position to indirectly compromise the security of their countries of origin. With the help of electronic communications, they can radicalize sympathizers in their home countries or help with the planning and coordination of terrorist attacks in the West. The biggest potential danger arises, however, when jihadist foreign fighters return to the West with combat experience and indoctrinated by groups such as IS. Studies have shown that returning jihadist fighters have a higher success rate in committing terrorist attacks in the West and that their terrorist acts are more lethal than attacks without their participation. It is indeed possible that returning jihadists have grown accustomed to extreme violence, that they

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have a lower threshold for brutality and that they have been trained in handling weapons and explosives. After their return home, they can also further radicalize sympathizers and build their own terrorist cells or recruitment and support networks.

Since the end of 2014, the risk of IS terrorism has risen in the West. IS responded to the start of the international military intervention directed against it by launching a terror campaign in the West. In many of

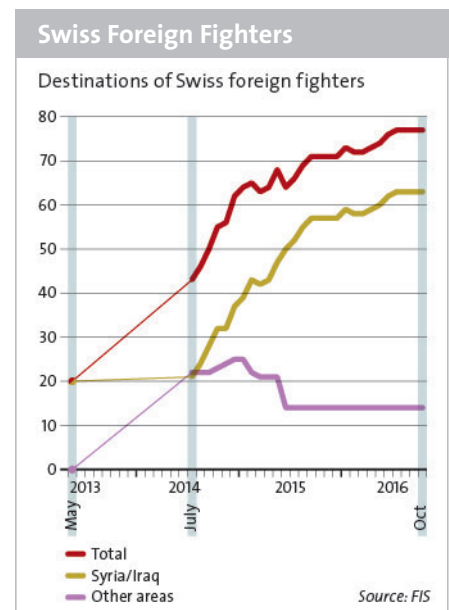
these attacks in 2015/16 jihadist foreign fighters were either the perpetrators or they were involved in the organization and preparation.

This development also affects the terrorist threat in Switzerland. Despite its neutrality, Switzerland, as part of the Western world, fits into IS's broader concept of the enemy. Although not considered a primary target, there have been instances in which the group's propaganda displayed the Swiss flag along those of countries participating in the "crusade" against IS. There are also conceivable scenarios in which Switzerland is used as a point of transit or preparation for attacks in other countries or in which the interests of third countries on Swiss territory become the target of attacks. The international cities of Geneva, Bern and Zurich are particularly at risk in this regard.

In assessing the risk posed by returning jihadists, the fact that not all foreign fighters return to their country of origin needs to be taken into account. A certain number will be killed during the fighting on the ground. The FIS assumes that so far, 21 of the 77 known jihadist travelers from Switzerland have been killed. Other jihadist fighters have no intention of returning to their Western homeland. They prefer to die as martyrs, want to settle in the caliphate for the long term or move to new areas of conflict.

Furthermore, not all foreign fighters who actually return to the West intend to participate in terrorist activities. Many of those who return are traumatized by what they have experienced on the battlefield and have become disillusioned given the discrepancy between what was promised in the propaganda materials and the reality on the ground. Others were arrested upon their return or have subsequently been under surveillance. A study on returning jihadists from Syria (Hegghammer/Nesser) calculated that the so-called "blow-back rate", i.e. the number of foreign fighters who directly participated in terrorist activities in the West between January 2011 and June 2015, was one in 360.

This is not meant to deny or play down the potential danger posed by returning jihadist foreign fighters. It does seem helpful, however, to inject some objectivity into the discussion by putting into perspective the sometimes dominant image in Western media which implies that every returning



jihadist automatically is a terrorist waiting to take imminent action in the West.

Challenges for Switzerland

Even though statistically speaking only a small fraction of returning jihadists represents a real danger, this does not change the fact that the relevant security services must monitor the movements of every individual jihadist foreign fighter in order to, amongst other things, anticipate as best as possible their return and their intentions. As this task is resource intensive for the FIS, a further increase in the number of Swiss jihadist foreign fighters could lead to capacity problems. At present, the trend seems to be moving toward a lower number of departures and a rising number of return journeys. This trend can also be observed for Switzerland. Given that dealing with returning jihadists is also extremely resource intensive for the relevant services, potential capacity issues will likely remain a source of concern. In the case of certain returnees, depending on the situation and the individual need for action, the authorities at cantonal or municipal level also have to take action. Amongst those structures, not all have the means to cope with multiple caseloads, for example, such as when several returnees who are classified as potentially dangerous have to be kept under round-the-clock surveillance simultaneously.

The recent increase in military pressure on IS could lead to a rise in the number of jihadist foreign fighters returning to their

countries of origin. A collapse of the caliphate would probably further accelerate this development. Western jihadists, who often only speak poor Arabic and are conspicuous due to their appearance and their behavior, would find it difficult to blend in with the local population. A collapse of the caliphate would most likely leave them little choice but to get killed, be captured or escape.

Switzerland faces yet another challenge regarding the coordination and rapid exchange of information with foreign security services. On the one hand, this involves preventing jihadist foreign fighters from reaching their destination, while on the other hand detecting their return to the West as early as possible so that appropriate arrangements can be made. A great deal of progress has already been made in this area, but cooperation still suffers because fragmented databases are often used when searching for wanted persons at international level.

As a Schengen member, effective European coordination in dealing with jihadist foreign fighters is of key importance for Switzerland. Systematic border controls have been eliminated, and citizens of other Schengen countries can enter freely. Returning jihadists could be among them. Either they have crossed the Schengen area's external border undetected or they have been recognized but due to ineffective coordination and an inefficient exchange of information, the Swiss authorities have either not been notified at all or they have been notified too late or insufficiently. Therefore, Switzerland is dependent on the external Schengen border being properly secured and on information being passed on quickly by other security services in the Schengen area.

Measures taken by Switzerland

Since the attacks in Paris, the EU has focused on counterterrorism measures that aim to improve international cooperation and the security of the external Schengen border. Switzerland was involved at a political and technical level in drawing up these measures. At EU level, Switzerland participates in multilateral expert panels in the field of police and intelligence aimed at promoting the exchange of information and analysis on jihadist foreign fighters. Furthermore, Switzerland also supports efforts to promote the integration of the often fragmented national and international databases on wanted persons.

Switzerland recognized early on the need for a multilateral approach in dealing with jihadist foreign fighters. Thus in 2013, the issue of foreign fighters was set as a priority for the 2014 Swiss Chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In this context, Switzerland organized a conference in April 2014 in Interlaken to discuss the best ways of dealing with this phenomenon. This led to a statement by the OSCE Ministerial Council in December 2014 with recommendations to the 57 OSCE participating states. In the same vein, Switzerland supported the 2014 UN Security Council resolution 2178 on the issue of "foreign terrorist fighters." This resolution calls on all UN member states to take legal measures to prevent travel to conflict zones and prevent financial and logistical support for foreign fighters. In addition, countries are urged to take precautions to prevent the transit of jihadist foreign fighters.

Switzerland has adapted its national legislation due to the increased threat of terrorism and in keeping with the relevant UN resolutions. In October 2014, IS was banned by federal decree. In January 2015, this ban was extended until 2018 under ur-

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gent federal law. The new law not only prohibits all IS activities at home and abroad, but also all activities that provide assistance in the form of materials or manpower, for example, propaganda or fundraising activities or the recruitment of new members. A further tightening of the law is currently being prepared. In addition, a new Intelligence Service Act was approved by the people and the cantons in a referendum on September 25, 2016. This gives the FIS greater powers in matters of surveillance.

Currently, the Swiss authorities already have several measures at their disposal with which to stop persons from entering the country or with which to expel them. Thus, an entry ban can be imposed on foreign nationals if they are deemed to pose a threat to Switzerland. In 2015, the Federal Office of Police imposed 17 entry bans on jihadist foreign fighters and ten on hate preachers. Moreover, Swiss citizens with dual nationality can have their Swiss citizenship re-

voked if they have participated in terrorist acts in a conflict zone. Such a proceeding is currently ongoing. If individuals who threaten the security of Switzerland are already residing in Switzerland but do not hold Swiss citizenship, their residence permit may be revoked in accordance with the Foreign Nationals Act or they may be expelled.

At present, specific preventive police measures are also being considered, which would make it easier for the authorities to prevent individuals who want to join a terrorist organization abroad from leaving the country. For example, changes in the law that would allow for the preventive withdrawal of travel documents are being prepared. This kind of withdrawal is being drawn up as an administrative rather than a judicial measure, significantly simplifying the procedure. Furthermore, the possibility to compel suspicious individuals to periodically reporting to the police is also under consideration.

In order to alleviate the increased workload resulting from the new threat levels for the relevant authorities, almost 100 new positions have also been created at federal level in the area of counterterrorism since 2015. The federal government has also provided the necessary funds for the creation of a further 20 positions in the cantons.

A Comprehensive Approach

When an increase in jihadist travel from Switzerland was registered in 2013, a task force named TETRA (TERRORIST TRAVELERS), made up of representatives from all the authorities involved in counterterrorism, was convened. The task force is meant to assess, coordinate and review existing measures and make suggestions on how to improve ways of dealing with jihadist foreign fighters and terrorism in general. In 2015, TETRA published two reports that have played a crucial role in advancing the above measures and adjustments. Besides repression, the reports also called for more preventive work to be done that targets the causes of the phenomenon. This is to prevent individuals from joining groups such as IS in the first place.

Due to the federal structure of Switzerland, the primary responsibility for combating radicalization lies with the cantons and municipalities. Thus, the cantons and municipalities most affected by the phenomenon have been particularly active on that front. The Canton of Geneva has drawn up a strategy for combating radical-

Key Documents

UN Security Council, [Resolution 2178 \(2014\) on Foreign Terrorist Fighters](#), 09.24.2014.

Task Force TETRA, [Combating jihadist motivated terrorism in Switzerland](#), 02.26.2015 (in German).

Federal Council, [Switzerland's counterterrorism strategy](#), 09.18.2015.

Task Force TETRA, [Measures taken by Switzerland to combat jihadist motivated terrorism](#), 11.02.2015 (in German).

Swiss Security Network (SSN), [Measures to prevent radicalisation](#), 07.04.2016.

T. Hegghammer and P. Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West", in: *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015).

ization. Counseling centers in Zurich, Bern, Winterthur and soon also in the Canton of Basel-Stadt are also worth mentioning, as is the "Brückenbauer" ("bridge-builder") project of the Cantonal Police of Zurich.

In a federally organized state with decentralized responsibilities for combating radicalization, the exchange of information and the coordination between the different actors are particularly important. Therefore, the Swiss Security Network (SSN), a coordinating body for the actors involved in security policy at federal, cantonal and municipal level, published a report in July

2016, summarizing the existing measures for combating jihadist radicalization in Switzerland, in order to promote the exchange of ideas. Building on this, the SSN is currently also preparing a National Action Plan to combat radicalization.

In future, it will be important for those directly confronted with jihadist radicalization to have the necessary tools at their disposal to counter radicalization effectively. Beyond the security services this also applies to institutions in the areas of education, social services, religion, integration and the penal system. In Switzerland, this can best be achieved through the exchange of experiences and improved cooperation between the various actors.

If the number of returning jihadist foreign fighters increases in the near future as a result of the military setbacks suffered by IS in Syria and Iraq, the Swiss security services will not be the only ones to be challenged. This will be demanding for all actors at federal, cantonal and municipal level who may have to deal with returning jihadists. It is therefore paramount, that these actors have the necessary resources at their disposal and that they are prepared accordingly to deal with greater numbers of returning jihadists appropriately. TETRA's recommendation to draw up programs or measures for the de-radicalization of returning jihadists has also further gained in

importance in light of this possible development.

A comprehensive approach is the best way of combating the jihadist foreign fighter phenomenon. Apart from measures that prevent and detect journeys to and from conflict zones, measures that combat radicalization and de-radicalize are also need-

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ed. "Switzerland's counterterrorism strategy", which was adopted by the Federal Council in September 2015, focuses not only on repression, protection and crisis preparedness but also on prevention. Therefore, Switzerland seems to be on the right path with its approach to combating the jihadist foreign fighter phenomenon.

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