

Executive Summary:

# The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union

Profiles, Threats & Policies

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## Executive Summary

In the summer of 2012, first reports emerged of so-called “foreign fighters” (FF) leaving their home and residence countries to join the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime. Since then, the number of these “travellers” to the Syrian, and more recently, Iraqi battlefields has grown significantly: From September 2014 to September 2015 alone, the number of FF reportedly doubled and reached 30,000 combatants coming from 104 countries. Experts and government officials have increasingly warned of the potential security threat this phenomenon might also pose to Europe and beyond.

On the occasion of the Netherlands’ presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) in the first half of 2016, the Netherlands National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) commissioned the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) to report on the FF phenomenon in the EU. Specifically, this report aims to map the phenomenon and facts surrounding FF in the context of the conflicts in Syria and/or Iraq, as well as the threat assessments and policy responses both at the EU level and within individual EU Member States (MS). As such, this document is not an evaluation of policies, but rather is a charting of the FF situation and responses within the Union.

Utilising data received directly by MS in response to a questionnaire, as well as other public material, ICCT gathered information on the number of FF, their characteristics, MS’ threat assessments, and the policies adopted in response to the phenomenon. Supplemented by open-source data and information from expert consultations, this report provides a close look at the FF phenomenon and responses in a total of 26 MS. Nine countries were selected to be analysed in-depth, representing a mixture of transit and sending countries from across the EU, including MS with the highest absolute and per capita numbers of FF. These nine focus countries are: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Additionally, the report also examines developments at the EU level in response to the FF phenomenon.

Several challenges were encountered during the data collection period, especially with regards to the number of FF. First, lacking a common and agreed definition of FF, and a central repository for data collected at the MS level, some countries conflate numbers on FF and foreign *terrorist* fighters, at times adding those involved in terrorism more generally. Second, authorities themselves often lack accurate data or may not disclose their information. Open-source data seldom matches the official government numbers, and many reports use estimates instead of exact numbers, frequently leading to inflated FF numbers. The third challenge is that of the double counting of travellers, returnees, those who died abroad, residents, and citizens.

### Foreign Fighter Numbers

Based on the responses to the ICCT questionnaire and available open-source information, numbers and key characteristics of EU FF were identified. The total number of FF in the 23 MS<sup>1</sup> that responded to the ICCT questionnaire is 3,710. When completing this data with open-source information, the EU-wide<sup>2</sup> estimate lies between 3,922 and 4,294 FF. A majority of around 2,838 FF come from just four countries: Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, with Belgium having the highest per-capita FF contingent.

Many consider *returning* FF as a potential security threat; this research indicates that an average of 30% of FF have returned to their countries of departure.

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<sup>1</sup> Data collection for the questionnaires was closed at the end of October 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Note that two countries are not included in this research: Greece and Hungary for which no information could be found.

## FOREIGN FIGHTERS FROM THE EU



**Total Foreign Fighters:** 3922 - 4294  
**Returned:** 30%  
**Confirmed Dead:** 14%



**Gender:**  
 17% of foreign fighters are female.



**Residence:**  
 90 - 100% of foreign fighters come from urban or built-up areas.



**Converts:**  
 6 - 23% of foreign fighters are converts.

The percentage of returnees is based on data from nine MS accounting for 94% of FF.  
 The percentage of confirmed dead is based on data from sixteen MS accounting for 99% of FF.  
 The percentage of female FF is based on data from eleven MS accounting for 80% of FF.  
 The percentage of converts is based on data from three MS accounting for 51% of FF.  
 The percentage of urban residents is based on data from five MS accounting for 9% of FF. Four more countries responded to the question in the questionnaire, stating a majority originated from an urban environment. The nine countries together account for 30% of the total FF, and have at least a majority of FF originating from an urban environment.

### Foreign Fighter Profiles

This report shows that there is no clear-cut profile of a European FF. Based on the responses from eleven MS, an average of 17% are female. With regard to the place of residence before travelling, the responses of several MS show that between 90% and 100% originate from large metropolitan areas or peripheral suburbs. Many FF originate from the same neighbourhood, which seems to indicate that there are pre-existing (extremist) networks operating in these areas, that a circle of friends radicalise as a group and decide to leave jointly for Syria/Iraq, or recruit each other from abroad. There is no clear pattern with regard to the nationality of FF; In some countries the majority hold a nationality other than the one of the country where they departed from, whereas in other countries the opposite trend can be observed.

The data also shows a sizeable number of converts to Islam among FF: For MS with more than five FF, between 6% and 23% of the FF are converts. Also, preliminary research indicates that the mental-health status of (potential) FF might also play a role. Regarding the radicalisation process, many MS highlighted what they saw as very short and “under the radar” radicalisation processes. Additional data on, for instance, prior criminal history and family status was inconclusive across the EU.

### Threat Perceptions in the EU and the Member States

According to various official EU documents, four general aspects of the FF phenomenon were identified to pose a threat: 1) Persons travelling from the EU to Syria/Iraq seeking to become a FF; 2) the threat posed to EU countries by returned FF who had acquired basic military training and battle field experience; 3) the impact of the FF phenomenon and related terrorist activity on social cohesion within the EU; and 4) the threat posed by would-be FF, who, having been prevented from travelling to Syria/Iraq, may carry out attacks within the EU instead.

The majority of MS consider the FF phenomenon as a serious security risk to their national society. Fourteen MS make use of threat-level assessment mechanisms. Only five regard the threat level in their country to be low or below average. Eleven MS have changed their threat levels since 2011, when the Syrian conflict commenced and the issue of FF started to increasingly gain attention.

## Policy Developments in the EU

The EU's CT Strategy based on the four pillars of prevent, protect, pursue, and respond, remains the primary prism through which the FF phenomenon is perceived and policy options are formulated. While the CT Strategy was set out in 2005, it was only in 2013 that the EU began to respond to the FF threat in the context of Syria/Iraq, with the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator outlining 22 proposals. In 2014, the Council of Justice & Home Affairs (JHA) Ministers set out four priority areas: "[1] to prevent radicalisation and extremism, [2] share information more effectively – including with relevant third countries, [3] dissuade, detect, and disrupt suspicious travel and [4] investigate and prosecute foreign fighters", which has remained the core of the EU's policy response to FF.

With reference to the first priority, the Commission released the communication, "Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU's response" in 2014. Already in 2011, the Commission had launched the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), in order to assist front-line practitioners through the exchange of experiences and good practices. In November 2015, the RAN Centre of Excellence was established. Given the prominence that IS places on its social media communications, the Commission financed the Syria Strategic Communications Advisory Team, whose role is to help MS develop effective counter-narratives. Additionally, efforts have been made to improve the detection and removal of extremist social media content from the Internet. In July 2015, Europol set up the Internet Referral Unit at the behest of the JHA Council.

With regard to the second priority, international cooperation has been strengthened through intensified cooperation especially with countries geographically close to Syria/Iraq. Following the decision taken by the JHA Ministers in November 2015, Europol has launched the European Counter Terrorism Centre in The Hague in January 2016, as a platform for sharing information and coordinating cross-border investigation, focusing on FF, the trafficking of illegal firearms and terrorist financing.

With regard to the third priority, in April 2013, the much-delayed, second-generation Schengen Information System went live, allowing "for an easy exchange of information between national border control authorities, customs and police authorities on persons who may have been involved in a serious crime", a crucial tool for combatting the FF phenomenon. Another important step was the creation of the Focal Point Travellers by Europol in 2013, which contributes to information sharing among MS and third countries with regards to suspected individuals.

Regarding priority number four, the EU prioritised the investigation and prosecution of FF. A key part of this has been the drive to update the EU Council Framework Decision (FD) of 2002, as was already done once before in late November 2008 through FD 2008/919/JHA, to be able to address the new legal challenges presented by the FF phenomenon. In December 2015, the European Commission agreed on a new directive replacing FDs 2002/475/JHA and 2008/919/JHA on combating terrorism. This new directive proposes to strengthen the FD by criminalising the provision of training for terrorism, the receiving of training for terrorism, and the funding of terrorism.

All in all, much progress has been made within the EU. Many of these initiatives are part of a more general evolution of EU CT policy rather than targeting FF specifically.

## Policies in the Member States

Responses to the ICCT questionnaires show that every MS has developed its own national approach to terrorism, FF, and radicalisation. Some countries, including ones that have little prior history with terrorism and only a few FF, have developed elaborate, comprehensive strategies, or are currently in the process of doing so.

The general impression is that countries have a broad set of security and legislative measures at their disposal to prevent and counter the problem of FF, from informative hotlines to

deprivation of citizenship. Even though MS often refer to the issues of prevention, law enforcement and security measures are still dominant issues.

In the wake of the January 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, MS have strengthened or announced the strengthening of their security and intelligence services, including in connection to transnational crimes. Border controls have also been stepped up and national passenger name record systems are being introduced. Moreover, the use of special investigation methods has been expanded. This Report also shows that countries recently and increasingly adopt administrative measures, even if these measures do not specifically target FF.

With regard to criminalising various terrorist acts in addition to the act of terrorism itself, in line with EU FDs 2002/475/JHA and 2008/919/JHA, all 26 MS included in this research have criminalised the financing of terrorism. Twenty-two MS have criminalised the participation in or leadership of a terrorist group. Recruitment for a terrorist cause has been made an offence in twenty MS. Twenty-three MS have criminalised incitement to and/or glorification of terrorism. Another 23 MS have criminalised the *providing* of terrorist training, whereas fourteen MS have criminalised the *receiving* of terrorist training, with two additional MS being in the process of developing legislation in this regard. Finally, only nine MS have made the travel of FF a criminal offence, and legislation is being developed in two additional MS.

Prevention and addressing the root causes of radicalisation were mentioned by some countries as the primary goal when it comes to addressing the FF phenomenon. The examples of measures mentioned varied from inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, engagement with the Islamic communities, and the use of counter-narratives, to the setting up of emergency phone lines. Community policing, another preventive measure whose importance was stressed after the Paris November attacks, was not often mentioned as a response. Asked about whether MS have a rehabilitation and/or reintegration programme in place for convicted and/or returning FF, a few MS responded affirmatively.

The authors note that certain particularities or emerging trends of the current FF cohort are not (yet) reflected in more targeted policies. These include the number of women, the percentage of converts, the increasing number of (very) young people, the urban-suburban origin, the potential role of mental health issues with FF, the effectiveness of social media propaganda, as well as the sometimes very short radicalisation processes. Better understanding of these trends could help inform more effective, targeted, gender-sensitive policies and actions.

### **Policy Options**

Based on the research for this Report, a number of policy options are proposed for the EU and MS.

#### ***Recommendations to both the EU and Member States:***

1. There is a clear need for an effective (and centralised) monitoring and evaluation framework to analyse impact and effectiveness of existing and future policies and practices.

#### ***Recommendations to the EU:***

2. One common definition of FF is necessary to ensure coherence in policies, accuracy in data collection and greater validity when it comes to data analysis.
3. To ensure follow-up by MS of non-binding objectives and policy guidelines formulated by the EU, the Union could consider establishing an internal reporting system, which allows for a dialogue between MS and the EU on how MS are implementing various policies.

***Recommendations to Member States:***

4. MS that have not yet done so, are advised to draft comprehensive strategies, including prevention programmes, to address the problem of radicalisation towards violent extremism and FF in particular. Such multistakeholder and multidisciplinary strategies should encompass a suitable, proportional, context-specific and effective mix of policy responses, taken from a toolbox of security, legislative, and preventive measures.
5. Prevention can best be achieved at the local level, therefore first-line practitioners are to be supported through, for example, telephone help lines or other supporting facilities.
6. MS are also advised to learn from past experiences and good practices to develop rehabilitation and reintegration programmes to deal with convicted FF as well as other returnees, and to adapt and tailor these to national exigencies. For an effective implementation of these programmes, MS should also invest in training of, for instance, prison personnel, as well as preparing municipalities to deal with increasing numbers of returnees.
7. In order to better address the emerging trends in FF characteristics, MS are advised to constantly review and, where necessary, amend the current policies and recalibrate their early-warning mechanisms.
8. In order to address the risk to social cohesion within European societies, a shift in the framing of public debates is recommended. Communication is not merely a means to informing the general public about certain measures and policies, but can be an important instrument on its own. As such, careful consideration and crafting of messages intended for different audiences is recommended.



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## About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think-and-do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal-justice sector responses, as well as human-rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement, and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors, and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

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