“WELCOME” HOME
Deradicalization of Jihadi foreign fighters

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The growing interest among academics and intelligence security agencies about the phenomenon of Jihadi foreign fighters generated a significant literature which sought to identify the dynamics that lead individuals to abandon their home and travel to countries they have never before visited in order to risk their lives in the name of an ideology that they knew little about before their radicalization (Hegghammer 2010; Holman 2015; Malet, Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context 2015; Mustapha 2013; Nilsson 2015; Stenersen 2011). These efforts indeed helped to decipher some aspects of the radicalization process of foreign fighters, and their socialization into the Jihadi lifestyle. However, they interestingly paid somewhat less attention to the main reason behind the initial interest in foreign fighters, which is the threat they represent upon their decision to leave their organization or areas of conflict, and return to their home country, and how we can facilitate policies that will ensure their rehabilitation and re-integration into society (Gurski 2016).

The current chapter aims to present and analyze important aspects of deradicalization and social re-integration of foreign fighters. After providing a brief conceptualization and historical context of the phenomenon of foreign fighters, the chapter will proceed to discuss current attempts to promote and execute deradicalization programs among foreign fighters and the unique challenges these efforts are facing. The concluding section of the chapter will review policy and theoretical insights which hopefully can help better understand the dynamics and processes which are related to the deradicalization of foreign fighters and how they should be addressed when devising relevant policies.

Who is a foreign fighter?

More than any other event, the Paris attacks in November 2015 heighten the attention of policymakers and security practitioners to the threat of returning foreign fighters. This is not just because of the fact that six out of the ten members of the Brussels cell – which was responsible for the attack as well as the Brussels attack in early 2016 – fought in the ranks of ISIS in Syria/Iraq (Parlapiano et al. 2015), but mainly because it demonstrated how the unique characteristics of foreign fighters could help terrorist organizations to dramatically elevate the level of sophistication and execution of their attacks. Simply put, the combination of
significant military experience which was gained by members of the Brussels cell during their “tour” in Syria/Iraq, with their familiarity of the Western/European social and security setting, helped them in plotting and perpetrating simultaneous attacks in multiple locations, against different types of targets, and by using multiple tactics. Such a combination of elements in a terrorist operation is fairly exceptional and previously was witnessed just during the Mumbai attacks in 2008 and very few other cases previously (especially during the 1970s).

As with the case of the concept of terrorism, the growing interest in foreign fighters didn’t necessarily lead to a consensus regarding the defining features of the phenomenon, or simply put, who should be considered a foreign fighter. One of the reasons for the conceptual inconsistency may be related to the fact that the phenomenon of violent political parties which mobilize recruits and supporters from foreign countries is not new and changed over time.

Two fairly well-known early cases of conflicts that attracted foreign fighters are the Greek struggle for independence during the 1820s and the Spanish civil war between 1936 and 1939. In both cases, the conflict was restricted to a specific national territory, and focused on the desire to change the socio-political order in a specific country via a civil war which reflected a clash between what can be characterized as universal ideologies (in the case of Greece, the idea of national self-determination and anti-colonialism, and in the case of Spain liberal democracy and opposition to fascism) (Perliger and Milton 2016). Recent cases of political struggles that attract foreign fighters, what Cohen and Barak term “Modern Sherwood Forest” (Cohen and Barak 2013), seem to have different characteristics. Jihadi groups that recruit foreign fighters reject nationalist sentiments and the concept of the nation-state and aspire to engage in a global, violent struggle. Thus, Jihadi foreign fighters naturally can be inclined to act against their home state upon returning. Moreover, Jihadi groups espouse an exclusive religious ideology, which allows just members from specific religious communities (selective recruitment) to join them. Lastly, not as in the past, many of the Jihadi foreign fighters participate in violent campaigns against their home countries (or in opposition to their home countries’ declared interests) which complicate the normative and legal/operational aspects of potential counter-policies (Perliger and Milton 2016).

The diversity in the strategies that are being implemented by the groups which recruit foreign fighters also doesn’t help to reach consensus about the nature of the phenomenon. For example, there are different views regarding the question of whether individuals who are being paid should be considered foreign fighters (or be considered mercenaries) (Hegghammer 2010), as well as with regard to those who are fighting in a neighboring country or in “border wars.” Similarly, it is not clear if someone who received training by a specific group, and then returned to his home country to conduct an operation, but didn’t participate in any violent operations in foreign countries, should be considered a foreign fighter. Indeed, in many cases it is extremely challenging to identify the specific role of the foreign fighter in areas of conflict.

Despite the conceptual confusion, several important characteristics seem to be shared by most experts (Bakke 2013; Bryan 2010; Hegghammer 2010; Malet 2013). These include: (1) the lack of affiliation to the country where the fighting is happening; (2) the joining to a non-state entity; and (3) the role of transnational ideology as a motivating factor. Malet further distinguishes between the following classes of fighters (Malet 2013):

(a) Transnational insurgents – members of groups that extend operations across borders into states external to the civil conflict.

(b) Foreign-trained fighters – individuals who have traveled abroad to receive paramilitary training or participate in an insurgency and then return to their home countries to participate in a civil war or commit a terrorist attack.

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(c) Foreign terrorists – individuals who travel to another state in order to perpetrate a terrorist attack.
(d) Foreign fighters – individuals who travel to another country (where they are not citizens) to join an insurgency.

Since the current chapter focuses on deradicalization of foreign fighters in the Jihadi context, and the threat that they represent upon their return, it will focus mainly on the second category of foreign fighters.

**Deradicalization programs for foreign fighters**

Several characteristics of foreign fighters are especially relevant when evaluating the potential security threat that they represent. The first is naturally the military experience and skill set that they acquire during their “tour” in areas of conflicts. Data collected from open sources illustrate that around 90% of the Jihadi foreign fighters attended military training camps and that a similar percentage eventually served as foot soldiers, rather than in support/logistical units, or in any leadership position (Perliger and Milton 2016). The fact that the foreign fighters suffer from a high death rate further reflects their intensive engagement in violent military operations. Hence, it is clear that most foreign fighters do not just receive military training, but have the opportunity to sharpen their military skills in actual military activities.

Additionally, the joining to Jihadi groups and the time spent with other Jihadists, which facilitate the socialization into the Jihadi lifestyle and ideological framework, may further strengthen the foreign fighters’ solidarity with other Jihadists, as well as their commitment to the violent Jihadi struggle at large. Such a dynamic may create difficulties for returning foreign fighters who attempt to re-integrate into their original communities. Lastly, foreign fighters’ attributes (military experience and ideological commitment) combined with their familiarity with various aspects of their home countries (language, culture, etc.) and their ability to move freely because of their citizenship status make them particularly useful for Jihadi groups that are interested in operating in Western countries.

The growth in the number of Western foreign fighters, and the expectation that some of them will eventually return to their home countries, eventually convinced several countries to adapt their existing counter-radicalization and disengagement programs in order to meet with this new challenge. But before discussing these adaptations, it is important to briefly review the main premise of deradicalization programs which were developed following 9/11 and the spread of Jihadi violence all over the globe.

The post-9/11 programs traditionally focused less on efforts of ideological disengagement (i.e., deradicalization) and more on helping individuals to disengage from the social network/framework which facilitates their radicalization or to support them if they decide to disengage voluntarily. More specifically, they tried to identify individuals which as a result of a specific event/process were more open to consider disengaging from radical groups, such as personal experience/trauma, disillusionment with the group’s leaders or goals, exhaustion from living under stress or pressure from others (family, spouse) to leave the group. Once such an individual was identified, he or she received access to a plethora of support mechanisms which were aiming to help him or her rehabilitate and re-integrate back into his or her community (Bjørgo and Horgan 2009; Fink and Hamed 2011; Horgan and Braddock 2010). To illustrate, in Norway and Sweden specific “exit” programs were developed in order to allow members of violent neo-Nazi groups to leave their respective groups and to integrate back into the general, “normative,” society. These programs relied
heavily on non-profit organizations and the families, in order to provide the radicalized individuals with access to various social services that will facilitate their re-integration into society (Ramalingam 2014; Smith 2015). In other countries, similar programs include the transferring of the individuals (and sometimes their families) to new locations, in addition to access to social services and financial incentives (Colombia is a case in point, as FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) members were relocated from their home towns to other areas of the country, and then went through orientation programs that were aiming at exposing them to the fallacies of FARC’s propaganda, as well as helping them integrate back into mainstream society) (Ribetti 2009).

At the same time, many countries also included counter-propaganda efforts in their programs (or what some term as the ideological dimension of deradicalization) which were based mostly on the dissemination of information which fulfills one of the following objectives (Gregg 2010; Kohler 2014; Ryan 2007; Schori Liang 2015): (1) exposing the hypocrisy/corruption of the organization or its leaders, especially when the latter are not behaving in accordance with the group’s ideology; (2) exposing inconsistencies in the group’s ideological platform, or disagreements between ideological leaders – for example, many efforts were made by Western law enforcement to publicize Nazir Abbas’ (top Jemaah Islamiyah leader) statement that Bin-Laden’s 2000 fatwa (religious ruling) about the need to kill Americans and Jews everywhere is a false ruling that should be ignored; (3) exposing when possible the ineffectiveness of the group’s operations and use of violence; (4) illustrating the advantages of non-violent means of protest or political activism; and (5) focusing on the life of the terrorist – dispelling the myth that the terrorist’s life is glamorous or provides access to material or social benefits. These efforts in many cases emphasize how badly members are being treated by the groups’ leaders and their heavy sacrifices. Overall, this information is supposed to foster cognitive dissonance in the radicalized individual and to motivate him to break the emotional attachment to the “collective” and ideological perceptions represented by the militant group.

In many ways, however, foreign fighters represent a more challenging problem in comparison to regular home-grown radicalized individuals, who were the main focus of most deradicalization programs until the last few years. To begin with, it is extremely difficult to track their moves upon their return and to gain valuable information about their experiences and personality characteristics (for example, how much they are still committed to Jihadi ideology). In many cases the states are unaware of the returning foreign fighters. This explains why, according to an Interpol report, by 2015 fewer than 20% of European foreign fighters were identified (Stock 2015). In addition, in contrast to home-grown terrorists, foreign fighters are more likely to suffer from an array of psychological pathologies which are reflected in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), emotional instability, and behavioral unpredictability (Briggs and Silverman 2014). Lastly, again, unlike most home-grown Jihadists, many of the foreign fighters can eventually become important assets for law enforcement and the intelligence agencies as a result of their military experience and close familiarity with their organizations. Thus, rehabilitation and re-integration can also facilitate their usage as intelligence sources and active participants in the deradicalization of other foreign fighters.

It seems that two important classifications need to be exercised in order to gain a better context and analytical clarity regarding deradicalization of foreign fighters. First, it is important to note that experts tend to identify two “types” of deradicalization policies (Lister 2015). The “soft” or “liberal” approach is focusing on the mobilization of the family and in some cases also other actors within the foreign fighter’s community, as a support mechanism, as well as on a more nuanced approach to the risk he represents (Briggs and Silverman 2014; Lister
2015). In other words, it is based on the premise that the primary social network has the best resources to “pull” the radicalized individual back to a normative lifestyle (they are the most familiar with him, and he has some level of emotional commitment to them) as well as the fact that he can represent a “living counter-narrative.” The hard approach, on the other hand, is focusing on detaining and then distancing/deportation of returning foreign fighters (Briggs and Silverman 2014; Lister 2015). The second useful classification differentiates between deradicalization programs in Western democracies and in Muslim countries. The different types of polities are facing different legal and cultural challenges, as well as different characteristics of the foreign fighters they “export” and then absorb. In the next sections, both types of approaches and polities’ deradicalization efforts of foreign fighters will be analyzed.

**Deradicalization of foreign fighters in Western democracies**

Probably the most-known program which adopted a “soft” approach is the German HAYAT (“life” in Arabic) which is run by the Center for Democratic Culture (ZDK) in Berlin. It is an extension of a previous initiative which was active between 2007 and 2010 and provided a consultation service to family members of far-right radicalized youth (Koehler 2013). In order to empower the family members to directly engage in helping with the disengagement or deradicalization of the radicalized family member, HAYAT’s counseling services provide the family information about the groups and ideology which facilitate the radicalization of the family member, as well as training in the appropriate methods to interact with a radicalized individual (Koehler 2013; Lister 2015). For example, family members are trained to identify behaviors or communications which may be an indication that the radical individual has started to develop doubts regarding his decision to adopt a Jihadi lifestyle and views, and then to exploit these doubts to further inform him about the related moral and practical costs of his decision to adopt radical views, and to help him to disengage from radical activities. The counseling also aims to identify cases of ideological radicalization which are not likely to lead to violent activities (and then try to help the family to cope with the new ideological views of the relative, without engaging in direct deradicalization efforts), as well as identifying the underlying motivations of the radicalization which is important in order to make informed decisions about the exact methods that family members should employ to help the radicalized relative (Koehler 2014; Lister 2015).

As stated above, in recent years HAYAT was modified so it can provide effective help to families of (would-be or returning) foreign fighters. At the pre-travel phase, the counseling is focused on trying to convince (or if necessary prevent by legal means) the radical family member not to travel to areas of conflict. In the post-travel phase, the focus is on working with experts and law enforcement in order to maintain communication with the family member and to gather information about his activities, while identifying possible mechanisms that can facilitate his return. In addition, family members are provided therapy treatments in order to reduce their anxiety. If the foreign fighter eventually returns, the program focuses on initial risk assessment, and then on providing help to the family so it can become a supportive environment which will be able to prevent further radicalization of the family member or even convince him to abandon his militant behaviors/views. At this stage, if the individual is continuing to practice behaviors which indicate that he is a security threat, the program will focus on helping the family to cope with the situation, and prevent other members from radicalizing, while law enforcement will deal directly with the threat represented by the returning foreign fighter (Koehler 2013; Lister 2015).
Another fairly well-known program which adopted a “soft” approach is the one exercised in Denmark. Denmark’s initial counter-radicalization program, “A Common and Safe Future,” was launched in 2005, and in its 2009 revision, it recognized for the first time the need to deal with the risk of traveling/returning Danish citizens to/from areas of conflict (Project Denmark: Extremism and Counter Extremism 2015). The emphasis of the Danish program is on promoting policies that will encourage Danish foreign fighters to return to the country, as well as to facilitate effective re-integration. Therefore, it provides several services to the foreign fighters immediately upon their return, including medical and psychological treatments, and counseling regarding future occupational and educational opportunities and housing solutions (Briggs and Silverman 2014; Project Denmark: Extremism and Counter Extremism 2015). Thus, the premise is that providing a solution to the socio-economic needs of the returning foreign fighters, can both facilitate their re-integration as well as motivate those of them who have doubts about their ideological choices, to try and return to Denmark. As in Germany, also in Denmark, the primary social networks of the returning foreign fighters are mobilized to help in their deradicalization. Families of returnees are offered counseling and guidance and are also asked to provide a supportive home to the returning foreign fighter. In addition, initiatives which focus on dialog and cooperation between the relevant communities, social services, educational and religious institutions, and law enforcement are part of these efforts, although more in the preventive stage. To conclude, the Danish program also fosters cooperation and coordination with local initiatives. For example, in the framework of the “Aarhus initiative,” government agencies worked with local organizations to deal with the issue of local returnees (the city of Aarhus is a significant “exporter” of foreign fighters) (Briggs and Silverman 2014; Lasse and Sedgwick 2012).

The tendency of some programs to concentrate on the utilization of family members as a “pull” mechanism presents several potential challenges. To begin with, while the family can provide emotional support and a safe space, it is much less effective in dealing with socio-economic challenges. Some of the studies which looked into Western foreign fighters identified that it is not just that they usually come from minority groups which suffer from structural economic discrimination, but also from the lower socio-economic echelons of these communities (Perliger and Milton 2016). Thus, they seem to be motivated at least partially by the lack of upward mobilization opportunities. Therefore, it seems that deradicalization models which combine both emotional and socio-economic support (i.e., the Danish model) may be a better solution. In addition, data collected in recent years specify that foreign fighters are in many cases second- and third-generation immigrants. This may hint that at least some of the reasons for their decision to travel to the Middle East is related to feelings of alienation and miscommunication with other members of their family. Many stories of foreign fighters depict polarized and contentious inter-generational relationships (which in families of immigrants are highly common), which prevented the parents identifying in advance their son’s/daughter’s intentions, and crippled their ability to deal effectively with their radicalization. Lastly, it is important to remember that the emotional attachment of family members to their radicalized son/daughter/brother/sister can make it difficult for them to acknowledge concerning developments in his or her behavior/attitudes and lead to the failure of the deradicalization effort.

Another challenge which is not necessarily specific to foreign fighters is related to the tendency of more conservative families to avoid the use of counseling services and to embrace more radical and stricter versions of the Islamic faith. Considering that some found that the stronger the level of piety of the family (Davis and Cragin 2009), the greater are
the chances that some members will be radicalized, this seems to suggest that utilizing family as a “pull” mechanism can work just when there is already some inherent resistance within the family to radical Islamic narratives.

Some democracies adopted what can be considered a “harder” approach when devising programs to deal with the threat of returning foreign fighters. The UK, for example, utilizes an umbrella program titled CONTEST to manage various counter-radicalization/terrorism efforts (Rabasa et al. 2010). Within CONTEST two sections are most relevant to our discussion. The first is focused on the funding of national and local counter-radicalization initiatives (mainly via the “channel” program which utilizes partners within the community to provide pre-criminal intervention), as well as on integration efforts (this strand of the program was titled “Prevent”). The second focuses on the conviction, arrest, and quick deportation of radicalized individuals (this strand of the program was titled “Pursue”) (Griffith-Dickson, Dickson and Ivermee 2014). Thus, in many ways, both represent different attitudes within CONTEST. However, the latter seems more prominent, especially in the context of foreign fighters. This is reflected by the high number of returning foreign fighters detained and arrested (around 80%), as well as by the hardening of specific counter-foreign fighters’ policies (Committee, Home Affairs 2009). Moreover, the fact that British foreign fighters are distributed between several correctional facilities to reduce the possibility of in-prison radicalization (that is, foreign fighters radicalizing other inmates) naturally hinders the ability to effectively utilize resources aiming to promote foreign fighters’ rehabilitation. Lastly, unlike in Germany or Denmark, CONTEST seems to focus more on empowering communities rather than utilizing the primary social network of the returning foreign fighter. The “concept” of a family is absent from the language of CONTEST, except for a recommendation to help them enroll in formal parenting programs (Committee, Home Affairs 2009).

The focus on communities’ empowerment in the UK generated significant criticism for at least two reasons (Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010). The first is that it fostered public designation of Muslim communities as hubs of radicalization, which facilitated animosity between them and the general public. The second was that it put the responsibility on community leaders rather than on those who are in closer interactions with the radicalized individual. In addition, the focus on conviction and detention, as well as deportation, possibly undermines the willingness of family members to cooperate with the authorities, and may also deter foreign fighters who were interested in returning and disengaging from their group.

**Deradicalization of foreign fighters in Muslim countries**

While most of the discussion about the security threat from foreign fighters can be described as Western-centric, data show that the number of foreign fighters from Muslim countries is several times higher than that of Western foreign fighters (Dodwell, Milton and Rassler 2016). Consequently, it is not surprising that several countries in the Middle East and North Africa attempted to devise deradicalization programs, which were also utilized to mitigate the threat of returning foreign fighters. Most of these programs included a combination of counter-narrative efforts, counseling, and vocational training.

Saudi Arabia, the number-one “exporter” of Jihadi foreign fighters (Dodwell, Milton and Rassler 2016), established several new rehabilitation centers since 2014 to treat Saudi foreign fighters returning from Syria/Iraq. These centers worked as an extension of the Prevention, Rehabilitation, and After-Care (PRAC) program which has been run in Saudi Arabia since 2004. As with the case of “home-grown” Jihadists, the focus is on ideological training/
“Welcome” home counseling which was supposed to expose the inconsistencies and fallacies of the Jihadi narrative (Horgan and Braddock 2010; Rabasa et al. 2010). The program also fosters family involvement in the rehabilitation process, in order to ensure that after his release, the former radicalized individual will have a stable supporting environment. Interestingly, recently the Saudi government also utilized its official TV networks to support the program, by broadcasting testimonials of former foreign fighters refuting the Jihadi narrative (Zelin and Prohov 2014). Overall, it seems that ideological counter-indoctrination is the backbone of the Saudi program, while more marginal elements provide additional support and a constructive environment to the returning foreign fighter (Bakrania 2014; Rabasa et al. 2010; Zelin and Prohov 2014). It is important to note however that Saudi Arabia may have deterred some of its foreign fighters from returning when it released a royal decree in 2014 announcing that any citizen who fought in a conflict abroad would be imprisoned for 3–20 years. The decree also clarified that Saudis who join, endorse, or give moral or material aid to groups it classifies as terrorist or extremist organizations, whether inside or outside the country, would face prison sentences of 5–30 years.

Other Muslim countries which endeavored to implement similar programs or to promote policies which will facilitate re-integration of foreign fighters faced significant challenges in executing and maintaining their programs. In Tunisia, the government adopted in 2016 a plan, which was utilized successfully in some Latin American countries (i.e., see, for example, the case of the M14 and FARC in Colombia), of initiating an amnesty program. More specifically, returning foreign fighters who were not involved in actual killings during their “tour” in Syria, and who publicly expressed their regret and remorse for traveling to Syria/Iraq were supposed to be given amnesty (Zelin and Prohov 2014). While it is unclear to what extent this program was implemented, as shortly after it was announced the government faced mass protest and political backlash (Gall 2017), it seems that at least several hundred were indeed given amnesty and received help in re-integrating into society. Nonetheless, most foreign fighters who returned in 2016 and 2017 were arrested after the government decided to build special prisons to accommodate the returning foreign fighters, and government officials announced that returning foreign fighters would be arrested in accordance with Tunisian counter-terrorism laws (Watanabe 2015). Latest testimonies seem indeed to confirm that the Tunisian government abandoned any intention to adopt “soft” re-integration policies or deradicalization programs. For example, Ridha Raddaui, a Tunisian lawyer and civil rights activist, stated that “families of suspects and fighters who have returned are persecuted rather than supported” (Gall 2017).

Tunisia’s neighboring countries seem to have made even less progress in developing effective deradicalization or re-integration programs. In both Morocco and Algeria, the governments established strong control over the religious establishment and the curriculum of religious educational institutions, in order to prevent the penetration of Jihadi elements, and ensure that religious education does not facilitate radicalization (Bakrania 2014). In addition, the governments of both countries initiated vocational programs to help people in their early professional career in finding employment. However, no deradicalization programs were formed to deal with returning foreign fighters, and, as in Tunisia, in both Morocco and Algeria they are usually incarcerated immediately upon their return (Bakrania 2014).

In the rest of the countries in the region, there is even less inclination to utilize “soft” measures. Hence, it seems that most Muslim countries prefer to utilize their criminal justice system and “hard” punishment measures, rather than investing in deradicalization efforts. This policy trend can be explained by addressing more broadly the contextual dynamics which are in play in most Muslim countries with regard to the foreign fighters’ problem.
To begin with, in comparison to most Western countries, most Muslim countries face tremendous challenges in tracking and monitoring their citizens who became foreign fighters. This is because they are dealing with much greater numbers, as well as because of the inherent limitations of their intelligence agencies and law enforcement. Most of the literature which covers the counter-terrorism efforts of these countries emphasizes the inability of many Arab countries to gain accurate data about their citizens who travel to areas of conflict (Bakrania 2014).

Another challenge that is usually ignored by experts is the unique linkage between the political and religious establishments in many Middle Eastern countries. The fact that many political leaders provide patronage to specific religious streams/institutions, in return for political support and legitimacy, facilitates a deradicalization program which focuses on ideological transformation, rather than on socio-economic mechanisms as well as the utilization of strong mechanisms of monitoring over religious institutions. However, this dynamic frames the conflict with the Jihadist as a religious-ideological dispute, rather than a battle against illegal and immoral violent practices, and thus, benefits jihadists on several grounds. It allows them to present themselves as a legitimate opposition to oppressive political leaders, as well as more easily to utilize religious rhetoric as a justification for their violent struggle. Lastly, this puts governments under greater pressure to support and nurture alternative religious streams.

Another problem which most Middle-Eastern countries face is related to their non-democratic and non-liberal characteristics. Regimes which for decades based their policies on the premise of aggressive treatment and response to opposition groups, and did not base their rule on the concept of popular legitimacy, will find it naturally difficult to adopt policies which are based on concessions, and re-integration of individuals who represent potential ideological opposition.

Conclusions: theoretical and policy insights

One of the common threads within the deradicalization literature is the consensus regarding the great difficulties in evaluating the effectiveness of deradicalization and re-integration policies (Bakrania 2014). This is no different in the case of deradicalization of foreign fighters. While conventional assessment methods try to identify how many of the participants in these programs were able to re-integrate into society and abandoned their radical views, in the case of foreign fighters the application of such methods is more complicated. It is not always clear if the returning foreign fighters are still devoted to the Jihadi ideological framework, or if they returned because their experience “opened their eyes” and exposed them to the deficiencies of the Jihadi lifestyle and ideological paradigm. Moreover, in many cases it is not also clear if the returnees actually engaged in violent or illegal activities (beyond joining a Jihadi group). As a result, foreign fighters who did not resume their radical activities upon their return cannot necessarily serve as a measure of the effectiveness of deradicalization programs. In addition, as with the case with programs which are focusing on home-grown radicals, it is difficult to identify personal ideological transformations and to distinguish them from behavioral ones. Simply put, it is difficult to ascertain how much the fact that the individual is not involved any more in Jihadi activities really reflects a change of heart.

But the probably more important question is related to the potential of deradicalization of people who in many ways already fulfilled their radical aspiration and became part of the Jihadi struggle (i.e., foreign fighters). Academic literature which is focusing on the psychological and sociological processes related to deviant behaviors usually depict a feedback loop
between cognition and behavior, and that in many instances behavioral tendencies are the ones which are responsible for rooting specific cognitive and emotional perceptions. Therefore, it is understandable why so many of the young individuals who travel to join Jihadi groups have limited familiarity with Jihadi ideology, but it is also fair to hypothesize that their actual involvement in ideological and military engagements upon their joining a Jihadi group will intensify their attachment to the Jihadi ideology. If this is indeed the case, it is fair to ask: how effective can deradicalization programs be when dealing with individuals who already manifested their devotion by risking their lives? In other words, some may argue that foreign fighters cannot be the subject of deradicalization efforts since they are the manifestation of the failure of such efforts.

**Identity vs. upward mobilization**

The inconclusive opinions within the academic community regarding the motivating factors of foreign fighters also position deradicalization efforts in a no-man’s land in terms of their focus and resource allocation. Some studies emphasize that foreign fighters are being attracted to areas of conflict and Jihadist groups because of the lack of upward mobilization opportunities in their home countries and communities, and a strong sense of economic marginalization. Other studies tend to focus on the role of identity, asserting that young Muslims aspire to join Jihadi groups since this allows them to overcome sentiments of alienation and social marginalization in their home countries and to develop feelings of belonging and solidarity with a Jihadi transnational community. Thus, their inability to develop emotional attachment to the national collective in their home countries, because of the marginalization of their cultural heritage and ethnicity, is overcome by joining an alternative community (i.e., Jihadi collective).

Naturally, each of these sets of factors which drive individuals to become foreign fighters demands different sets of counter-policies. However, in both cases there is a clear necessity for long-term solutions which are actually not focusing on the individuals and their families but on their communities. More specifically, policies which aim to deal with socio-economic factors and marginalization need to address the root causes which prevent some immigrant communities from providing their young people opportunities for economic mobilization and the tools to position themselves better within the labor market. Improving educational, vocational, and social efficacy seems to be an effective long-term step. But it is also important, it seems, to identify how intra-communal services can help deal with the more economically vulnerable within immigrant communities. Studies which show that large portions of foreign fighters are from the lower economic echelons of immigrant communities hint that it is not enough to help the community at large, but also identifying mechanisms that in the short term can provide direct assistance to the low economic tiers of the community (Perliger and Milton 2016). While such solutions cannot provide immediate “medicine” to the current “symptoms,” they can generate effective responses to the root causes of the threat.

Addressing foreign fighters who seem to be attracted to the Jihadi struggle as a result of their desire to become part of an alternative collective identity is even more challenging since some of the major policies which were implemented so far to tackle this problem have seemed to fail miserably.

Both the adoption of multiculturalism in places like the UK, as well as policies which emphasized homogenization of national practices in public (i.e., France), seem to have failed
to instill a sense of belonging among second- and third-generation immigrants, many of whom constitute contemporary foreign fighters. The tendency of immigrant communities to cluster in specific areas, which facilitates segregation, may add to the related challenges. Lastly, the intensifying process of globalization and the emergence of transnational communities, which seem to erode some aspects of national identity and cohesiveness, definitely do not make it easier to find effective policies that can facilitate emotional integration and help marginalized communities to feel part of the national collective.

**Mixed messages: the politics of deradicalization of foreign fighters**

In democracies, political leaders are traditionally trying to shape counter-terrorism policies that strike a balance between ensuring the security of the nation/citizens and the preservation of democratic/liberal principles (Schmid 1992). Studies on the factors which shape counter-terrorism policies in democracies identified however that governments tend to adopt more aggressive policies when fighting terrorist groups that represent marginal communities which are not part of the mainstream culture, and have limited political capital (Perliger 2012). This trend is even more enhanced in non-democratic regimes. Hence, it is not surprising that most countries tend to distance themselves from “soft” deradicalization policies when dealing with the threat of foreign fighters. After all, most of the foreign fighters originate from such subcultures or marginalized communities (Perliger and Milton 2016). Moreover, it explains also why in several of the case studies which were discussed above it was clear that one of the challenges of implementing “soft” deradicalization policies was related to political counter-pressure, as well as opposition by the general public (see the cases of the UK and Tunisia).

Another issue which may contribute to public pressure against “soft” deradicalization policies is the strong sense of betrayal which proliferates in some of the societies which “export” foreign fighters. These sentiments, at least in North America and Western Europe, are further stimulated by various far-right parties and movements which promote sentiments such as that the foreign fighters’ phenomenon represents the “ungratefulness” of immigrant communities, and that immigrants are not really interested in integrating and embracing loyalty to their new countries. Thus, any effective deradicalization efforts must also engage in practices which will refute such xenophobic views, and promote further interaction and understanding between immigrants and mainstream society/culture, as well as rejecting perceptions which tend to blame the communities for the acts of individuals. Such policies can in the long term reduce the backlash towards soft deradicalization programs and increase the likelihood of their effectiveness.

**References**


