



## **RETURNING ISIS FIGHTERS**

**Date:** March 30th, 2019

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### **Purpose Statement**

This briefing note explores the potential threat posed by returning radicalized Canadian citizens who went abroad to Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIS.

### **The Security Problem**

Canadians fought for Daesh overseas in Iraq and Syria. Those who fought are returning and there is little indication that many of them will face criminal charges. The purpose of allowing Canadians to return free is reintegration. It is feasible that “radicalized” individuals could commit terrorist activities in Canada. This is an issue for several reasons. Radicalized Canadians could be inspired to commit “Lone Wolf” attacks because of personal frustrations that are only loosely tied to wider religious aims or political ideals (Spaaij, 2010: 854). Returnees who lone wolf attacks inspired by Islamist Jihad is a security problem for civilians and Canada’s security agencies. Civilians are usually the targets in terrorist attacks; and for law enforcement agencies, monitoring and preventing possible attacks would take manpower and increased capabilities.

### **Key Facts**

Canadians were “inspired” by Daesh’s ideology to travel to Syria and fight as soldiers for the organization in 2013. The last update by the Canadian government estimated that ~190 Canadians travelled to Iraq

and Syria to join Daesh, not including those who have already returned, which number at 60 (Ministry of Public Safety, 2017: 2; Fejes, 2019: 91). Canadians who relocated to Syria and Iraq for Daesh have allegedly engaged in terrorist activities. However, due to the nature of war and the lack of accessibility in Syria and Iraq over the past 6 years, it is nearly impossible to verify any crimes committed (Swain, 2019; Neustaeter, 2019). Some returnees have already been designated as threats and others have been put into mandatory deradicalization programs (Pazzano, 2019).

### **Background**

The Islamic Caliphate of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was declared in 2013. The establishment of the so-called “Islamic State in Syria” (ISIS) followed shortly after. Since late 2016 and culminating in the liberation of Baghouz, Daesh has lost most of its territory, but it remains an active group with support from foreign fighters all over the world (Muneer, 2017; Speckhard et al., 2017).

There is limited evidence which suggests that Canadians fighting for Daesh have committed crimes in Syria and Iraq. There have been accounts of rape, sexual enslavement, summary executions, and mass atrocity crimes as listed under Article 5 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Chertoff, 2017: 1058). However, it is not clear which crimes were committed by Canadians fighting for Daesh or whether Canadians who are returning from Syria and Iraq committed those crimes.

### **Key Considerations and Implications**

It is possible that Canadians returning home can be reintegrated. According to evidence-based deradicalization programs, returning combatants who are not reintegrated properly have higher chances of returning to conflict or engaging in violent attacks Cragin (2017: 306).

The implications of Canadians returning from Syria and Iraq fall into two possible categories. First, evidence suggests that foreign fighters returning home from conflict do not pose a significant threat to the homeland if they are properly reintegrated (Bryman & Shapiro, 2014). However, there is competing anecdotal evidence that foreign fighters are more likely to commit crimes upon return from Syria, as in France (Cragin, 2017: 292).

### **Alternative Perspectives to be Considered**

- Evidently, the returning Canadians are Muslim. When they return, the expectation is that they will attend mosques on a regular basis. It is feasible that the returning Canadians will want to radicalize or perhaps recruit other Canadians to commit terrorism while at these Mosques.
- White supremacist groups that have knowledge of returning ISIS members' whereabouts could feasibly attack them. This is especially true in Alberta and Quebec, where far-right groups such as the III% and La Meurte are growing and expressing their discontent for Islam (Lamoureux, 2017).

### **What is Not Known**

- The breadth of Canadians' crimes abroad is not known. If Canadians participated in terrorist activities, the Canadian government will only know from accounts within Syria and Iraq.
- It is unclear how many Canadians are being kept prisoner by Kurdish forces.
- The evidence of Canadians' whereabouts in Syria and Iraq is not verifiable.
- The extent to which Canadians were radicalized in Syria and Iraq is not known.

- The Canadian government must be apprised of returning Canadians' whereabouts when they resettle in Canada.
- In the Canadian context, there is little precedence for possibly radicalized and hostile fighters returning from conflict zones.
- The amount of manpower necessary to ensure the safety of communities where returning Canadian fighters will live is not clear.

### **Next Steps**

- Interviews must be conducted with returning fighters to brief law enforcement officials of the situation where they came from.
- Canadians' movements must be corroborated with Kurdish and Iraqi security forces.
- All returning Canadians should be investigated by law enforcement officials on their whereabouts, the degree to which they were involved with Daesh, and their intended places of residence in Canada upon return.
- A comprehensive strategy must be implemented **before** Canadians return home.

### **Available Options**

- Deradicalization programs can help dissuade returning foreign fighters from re-engaging in politico-military conflict (Bryman, 2016: 70).
- The Canadian government seek out remaining Canadian members of Daesh in Syria and Iraq and eliminate them. This strategy is undertaken by the United Kingdom, USA, and France (CBC, 2017).
- Daesh-affiliated Canadians that have committed crimes should be tried and sentenced (if guilty) in a court.

- Intelligence and security agencies can monitor returning Canadians from Syria and Iraq.

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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict and Warfare and Simon Fraser University, Volume 2, Issue 1.

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>