Probus Sydney - 4 December 2018

Understanding the Returned Foreign Fighter Threat

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Returned foreign fighters focusing on:

- Who they are
- Public perceptions of the threat
- Life “Beyond the Caliphate”
- What they have experienced and learned.
- The potential threat they pose.
The returned foreign fighter
The term “returned foreign fighter” is generally taken to mean persons who have participated in violent extremist groups abroad.

- It does not include those who have fought for nation states, or as mercenaries.

- My focus today will be on persons who have fought for the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq.
Who they are
German security authorities have collected and analyzed data on most of the 910 individuals who travelled from Germany to Syria or Iraq based on Islamist motivations - the largest such study conducted by any Western government.
The analysis confirms earlier findings that there is no typical socio-demographic profile of jihadi terrorists and foreign fighters.
A United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism report of July 2017 also observes: “There is no one profile for FTFs [Foreign Terrorist Fighters] and this report warns against sweeping generalisations.”
“...most FTFs interviewed in this study [43] are young, male and without an advanced education. Perhaps contrary to general perceptions, the report finds that many FTFs serving as foot soldiers lack opportunity, are disadvantaged economically, lack education and have poor labour prospects, even when they come from Western societies.”
Motivators to go and fight

- My impression of those travelling to Syria is that radicalisation was not necessarily the key factor in their decision to go.
- They seem most often to be motivated by a:
  - Sense of adventure/hope for empowerment.
  - Desire for comradeship/to accompany friends.
  - Commitment to an ideal.
  - Desire to be doing something worthwhile.
  - Desire to help “victimised” co-religionists.
Some of the main reasons for leaving Syria/Iraq

- Desire for survival as the situation on the ground became increasingly dangerous, and IS support systems for members and families collapsed.

- Disenchantment with IS and/or home sickness.

- Fighting between competing Islamist groups rather than against the Crusader enemy and its allies.

- Desire to continue the fight on home soil. (Less common because the really committed fighters stayed to fight to the death in Syria.)
At IS’s peak recruitment, in 2015, between 1,500 to 2,000 foreign fighters crossed into Syria and Iraq a month, building IS up to an estimated 40,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq. This was facilitated by neither Turkey nor Syria attempting to interdict the flow.
At its territorial peak in late 2014, IS controlled 41,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria and ruled over eight million people.

It attracted more than 40,000 foreign fighters from 120 countries; it also mobilized over 25,000 from inside Syria and Iraq.
Foreign Fighters By Region

- 8,717 Former Soviet Republics
- 7,054 Middle East
- 5,718 Western Europe
- 5,319 The Maghreb
- 1,568 S and SE Asia
- 845 Balkans
- 439 North America
By October 2017, the foreign fighter inflow had dropped to almost zero.
Thousands have now returned to their home countries.

By the time the caliphate collapsed in 2017, at least 5,600 men, women and children from 33 countries had already returned home - according to The Soufan Center and The Global Strategy Network.

Few have been prosecuted - in the West due to lack of evidence that would stand up in a court of law, or in many Muslim countries - because it would be politically unpopular.
Prosecution problems include obtaining evidence in a war zone and using foreign intelligence in court.
Australian Foreign Minister Bishop stated on 14 February 2018: “I’m aware that we are tracking about 110 Australian foreign terrorist fighters and we think about 220 went to Iraq and Syria but there’s still about 110 who could make their way back to Australia.”

It has since been estimated that about 40 have returned to Australia.
Public perceptions of the threat
A Pew survey, published on 1 August 2017, found that fear of an attack by IS ranked first in global concerns, just above climate change.
Major concerns by region show divergences in top threat assessment

Regional medians saying ___ is a major threat to our country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Europe</th>
<th>Asia-Pacific</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>Africa</th>
<th>Latin America</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>40</td>
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</table>
### In Asia-Pacific, varied international concerns

___ is a major threat to our country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top choice</th>
<th>ISIS</th>
<th>Global climate change</th>
<th>Cyberattacks from other countries</th>
<th>China’s power and influence</th>
<th>The condition of the global economy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MEDIAN</strong></td>
<td><strong>62%</strong></td>
<td><strong>61%</strong></td>
<td><strong>52%</strong></td>
<td><strong>47%</strong></td>
<td><strong>46%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q17a, d-f, h.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
Between the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014 and February 2017, IS conducted or inspired around 143 terrorist attacks in 29 countries, causing the death of over 2,000 people and injuring many more. It is not clear how many involved returned fighters.

Paris 13/14 November 2015, 130 victims
Nature of the international threat

- The first reported case of a returned fighter engaging in a terrorist attack occurred on 24 May 2014 with the Jewish Museum of Belgium (in Brussels) shooting, which led to the death of four people.
In 2017, IS was linked to 24 attacks outside Iraq/Syria killing 1,402 people.

In 2018, (to 30 Nov) IS was linked to 21 attacks outside Iraq/Syria killing 565 people.

It is not clear how many were linked to returnees.

Date: 22 May 2017
Location: Manchester Arena, Manchester
Total number of deaths: 23 (including the bomber)
Attack type: Suicide attack
Non-fatal injuries: 512
Nature of the international threat..

- On 9 November 2018 in Melbourne, a Somali man set his car on fire and then started stabbing people, killing one and injuring two. The attacker was later killed.
- IS claimed responsibility for the attack, and the perpetrator supported IS.
What they have experienced and learned
Training
Training for new arrivals lasted for two months, with the first 45 days comprising sharia and military training.

- The typical daily program was:
  - 0400-0700 Prayers
  - 0700-0800 Breakfast and sports
  - 0800-1600 Weapons training, including guns and mortars
  - 1600-1800 Dinner and sports
  - 1800-2100 Sharia study, prayers and lights out
Training..

- After 45 days there was a graduation ceremony presided over by an emir.
- For the next 15 days the recruits were divided into groups for specialised military training in one of:
  - Joining the battlefield as fighters
  - Guarding military installations
  - Serving as bodyguards for prominent IS officials and commanders
  - Becoming suicide bombers
The source, a 14 year-old who trained at Deir ez-Zor and is now in Turkey commented “The stupid ones were always chosen to be suicide bombers”

Most of the suicide bombers were foreigners. Few Iraqis or Syrians volunteered to be suicide bombers.
'Jihadi' Jake Bilardi - from Australian suburban schoolboy to IS suicide bomber (from zero to hero)
After 2016, it is likely that the organised training declined to be replaced by more on-the-job training as IS became more desperate for frontline fighters, and there was a larger component of urban fighting.
“Khatiba Nusantara is reportedly an ISIS unit established in Syria composed of militants from Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore. The unit’s purpose was to recruit would-be fighters and facilitate their travel to ISIS battlefields in Iraq and Syria.”
Katibah Nusantara

- Katibah Nusantara meaning "Katibah Archipelago", is a Southeast Asian combat unit within IS composed of Malay-speaking individuals, mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia, but also from the Philippines and Singapore.
- Its training ground is allegedly located in Poso, Indonesia.
- The latest KN unit commander (probably the third) until April 2018 was Bahrumsyah, an Indonesian national, now believed dead.
Indonesia investigates reports that most senior Southeast Asian Islamic State commander has been killed in Syria

More than 600 Indonesians, including at least 166 women and children, travelled to Syria to join IS, according to data from Indonesia’s counterterrorism agency.
The report: *Beyond the Caliphate*
As IS loses territorial control of its caliphate, there is little doubt that the group or something similar will survive the US-led coalition campaign against it so long as the conditions that promoted its growth remain.
Its appeal will outlast its demise, and while it will be hard to assess the specific threat posed by foreign fighters and returnees, they will present a challenge to many countries for years to come.
Despite the overall increase in Foreign Fighters since The Soufan Group’s last report in December 2015, the flow of fighters came to a virtual standstill as IS began to lose its territory in both Syria and Iraq and nation states implemented better measures to prevent travel.
However, from 2015, there was a marked rise in the number of foreign women and children traveling to or, in the case of children, being born in the IS “caliphate”.

Key findings
While returning foreign fighters have not as yet added significantly to the threat of terrorism around the world, the number of attacks inspired or directed by IS continues to rise.

All returnees, whatever their reason for going home, will continue to pose some degree of risk.
There are now at least 5,600 citizens or residents from 33 countries who have returned home.

Added to the unknown numbers from other countries, this represents a huge challenge for security and law enforcement entities.
Key findings

- States have not found a way to address the problem of returnees. Most are imprisoned, or disappear from view.

- There will be a need for more research and information-sharing to develop effective strategies to assess and address the threat.
Returnee women and children represent a particular problem for States, as they struggle to understand how best to reintegrate these populations.

Proper mental health and social support mechanisms will be especially relevant in the case of children.
The IS video titled “He Made Me Alive With His Blood” features children as young as three executing prisoners.
Categories of leavers

- Those who returned early or after a short stay.
- Those who returned later, but disillusioned.
- Those who returned having had their fill of violence.
- Those who were forced out or captured and sent home.
- Those who were sent home or elsewhere by IS.
Islamic State: Families of Australian fighters pose security conundrum for authorities

By Danuta Kozaki

Updated 12 Sep 2017, 1:02pm

PHOTO: More than 165 Australian foreign fighters are estimated to have gone to Iraq and Syria, many with young families. (Reuters: Art Jalal, file)
### Table: Foreign Women and Children in the Islamic State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total $^{173}$</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>~25</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>&lt;300</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>~528</td>
<td>~85</td>
<td>~118 $^{177}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>~185</td>
<td>~35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>~4,000</td>
<td>~680</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1,910</td>
<td>~320</td>
<td>460 $^{181}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A UN study warned: “Though disillusionment with the gap between the rhetoric of extremist groups and their actions on the ground is a reason for leaving, this may not mean that the ex-FTF has altogether abandoned the ideology and political objectives of the group he or she joined.”
By 2018, after the loss of 95% of its caliphate, IS still claimed more than three dozen wilayats, or provinces, on three continents.

Many fighters fleeing the caliphate have opted to travel to established branches or wilayats in third-countries rather than returning to their countries of origin.
IS presence outside Syria/Iraq

Main locations:
- Afghanistan/Pakistan
- Algeria
- Caucasus
- Congo
- Egypt
- Gaza
IS presence outside Syria/Iraq

- Libya
- Nigeria
- Philippines
- Saudi Arabia
- Somalia
- Yemen

And more generally the Sahel region of Africa
The potential threat they pose
Skills gained with IS

- Familiarisation with small unit infantry tactics, both in rural and urban environments.
- Weapons familiarisation.
- Construction and use of IEDs.
- Construction and use of drones.
- Preparation of tunnel systems/bunkers etc.
- Use of civilians as human shields/intelligence collectors.
- Use of propaganda and brutality to encourage and enforce public support and recruitment.
Most returned fighters will be unlikely to experience anything in their lives at home that matches the intensity of their experience as a member of IS, particularly so for combat veterans.
Returnees will be vulnerable to contact from people who were part of the network that recruited them, or to appeals for help from ex-comrades in arms.

The influence and involvement of returnees in terrorist attacks will probably grow if they have not found a purpose in life.
Police or military - depending on which is employed in the CT role.

Christian churches and Shiite Muslim shrines.

Government offices and public servants.

Any target associated with Israel or Jews.

Embassies, expats and civil aircraft identified with the US-led coalition against IS.
The US-led coalition against IS.
Returnee attack modus operandi

The scale will depend on whether it is a lone actor or group attack:

- Lone actor
  - Vehicle ramming
  - Knife
  - Firearm
  - IED

- Group/family
  - All of the above and often in multiple locations
Keeping the brand alive

- With the loss of the physical caliphate and denial of a central overt presence, the IS leadership is looking to supporters overseas, including returnees, to keep the brand alive through continual attacks.
The preferred form of contact between IS supporters will probably continue to be the message app Telegram, and Whatsapp.
So far in Southeast Asia we have some evidence of more skilled attacks based on returnee combat knowledge gained in Iraq and Syria or information disseminated from conflict zones.
The largest urban battle in Southeast Asia since the Vietnam War - Marawi, Philippines May-October 2017
What we saw at Marawi was copying of the tactics used by IS in Iraq and Syria based on videos disseminated by IS - including on the use of drones.
“While there is no doubt that foreigners from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have been fighting Philippine government forces in Marawi, [CSIS] cannot independently verify the presence of foreign fighters from the Middle East or North Africa (MENA) region in Marawi...
• ...sources deemphasized the role of battle-hardened ISIS foreign fighters”
Conclusions..

- Nevertheless, it seems inevitable that future attacks in our region will be influenced by returnees - unless we can come up with effective strategies to manage returnees and counter the threat.
For example, the 2018 Surabaya church bombings were a series of terrorist attacks that occurred on 13 May 2018 in three churches in Surabaya, the second largest city in Indonesia, resulting in 28 deaths.

The perpetrators were a family who had returned from Syria.
A German study concluded: “With a growing threat emanating from returning foreign fighters, the counterterrorism response needs to be both multifaceted and specific, tailoring approaches to certain sub-groups such as minors, women, converts, and immigrants.”
Conclusions

- To be effective, our response will need to be well coordinated - and will need to take into account returnee and country-specific factors.