
CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

The Terrorist Diaspora: After the Fall of the Caliphate Testimony before the Task Force on Denying Terrorists Entry into the United States

Homeland Security Committee,
U.S. House of Representatives

July 13, 2017

Robin Simcox
Margaret Thatcher Fellow,
Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, The Heritage Foundation

Chairman Gallagher and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

My name is Robin Simcox; I am the Margaret Thatcher Fellow at The Heritage Foundation. My responsibilities consist of research on terrorist groups, particularly those targeting Europe, as well as research on intelligence and security policy. These are issues I have helped governments across Europe shape their response to for almost 10 years. I also regularly speak to relevant US government agencies on such matters.

The views I express in this testimony are my own and do not represent the official position of The Heritage Foundation.

My goal this afternoon is to highlight the ways in which fighters returning from Syria and Iraq pose a clear risk to the West. I will focus particularly on the European component of this phenomenon.

There are three aspects to the threat which I will discuss today: the short term, medium term, and long term.

The Short Term

At least 5,000 to 6,000 Europeans have fought alongside ISIS and other Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq.¹ Some have already been killed in the fighting, and as ISIS's "Caliphate" in Iraq and Syria comes under increasing pressure, yet more will be.

However, there is also an expectation that many

foreign fighters will disperse, and inevitably, some of these individuals will return to their home countries. There could be approximately 1,000 returnees just from the U.K., France, and Germany.

The risk posed by these returning fighters is clear. They will have fought in the Iraq/Syria conflicts and been trained by ISIS, al-Qaeda, or associated groups.

Indeed, the danger these fighters pose has already been demonstrated on the streets of Europe. Members of the cell that committed ISIS's attacks in Paris in November 2015—killing 130 and wounding 368—had traveled to Syria from Europe, fought and trained with ISIS, and then returned to Europe to carry out an attack. This cell also contained ISIS members who had entered Europe from Syria after making false asylum claims.

Those plugged into the same network then committed the attacks in Brussels in March 2016, which killed 32 and wounded approximately 300.

It is worth noting that American citizens were killed in both the Paris and Brussels attacks. Clearly, the threat to life of American lives is not consigned solely to the homeland.

The Medium Term

Even if these returning fighters do not immediately plan to carry out terrorist attacks in the West, that does not mean they are not still detrimental to national security. These fighters will not be

returning into a vacuum; they will be reconnecting with pre-existing Islamist networks. The U.K., for example, has approximately 23,000 terror suspects on the intelligence radar.²

How these pre-existing radical networks will treat returning fighters from Syria will likely differ on a case-by-case basis. Yet we must remember that those who fought in previous foreign conflicts—such as Afghanistan in the 1980s and Bosnia in the 1990s—earned gravitas and credibility as heroic, returning members of the *mujahideen*. This helped propel a younger generation towards radicalism.

Take the example of a British citizen, Babar Ahmad. Ahmad, who pleaded guilty to terrorism offenses in the U.S. in 2013, fought in Bosnia in the 1990s and then returned to London. True, he did not commit a terrorist attack there. However, he was able to leverage his experience fighting in Bosnia to become one of the key radicalizers in the entire country upon return. He was successful in inspiring a younger generation of potential radicals to take up the fight.

This included men such as Saajid Badat, who was drawn into Ahmad's circle in South London and then dispatched to Afghanistan to train with al-Qaeda.³ Badat was assigned by al-Qaeda to be part of the same suicide bombing mission as the “shoe bomber” Richard Reid. He pleaded guilty in a U.K. court concerning his role in this plot in 2005.

The Long Term

The conflict in Syria has helped ensure that the war with Islamism will be a multi-generational one. Entire families from the West, including children, moved to Syria to live in the “Caliphate.” Furthermore, there have been children born in Syria to Western parents who may now be attempting to

return to Europe. Many will have inevitably been indoctrinated with ISIS's ideology.

To use France as an example: there are almost 500 children currently in Syria with connections to France. Approximately 150 such children have been born there. There are approximately 80 Dutch children born in the “Caliphate”;⁴ and as many as 50 from the U.K.⁵

How many of these children will end up returning to the West is at present unknowable. Yet knowing how to deal with the potential security threat from children of hardened ISIS fighters is clearly a major, long-term problem for Western governments.

Europol has warned that ISIS has demonstrated “that they train these minors to become the next generation of foreign terrorist fighters” and that this “may pose a future security threat to member states.”⁶ According to a report from the British counter-extremism think tank, Quilliam, “Boys learn a rigid Islamic State curriculum.... Children churn out memorised verses of the Qur'an and attend ‘Jihadist Training’, which includes shooting, weaponry and martial arts.”⁷

Furthermore, my previous research demonstrates that there is already a pre-existing threat to the West from teens and pre-teens. By the end of 2016, there had been 34 such plots carried out by this demographic in seven different countries.⁸

Chairman Gallagher, distinguished Members of the committee, the risk that returning foreign fighters pose to the West is stark and will continue to be felt for many years to come. Countries impacted by this threat must continue to work together to mitigate this. Even then, however, we can only reduce the risk, not eliminate it.

Thank you for inviting me today and I look forward to your questions.

1. “More than 6,000 European Jihadists in Syria, EU Official Says,” *The Telegraph*, April 13, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11531884/More-than-6000-European-jihadists-in-Syria-EU-official-says.html> (accessed June 21, 2017).
2. Sean O'Neill, Fiona Hamilton, Fariha Karim, and Gabriella Swerling, “Huge Scale of Terror Threat Revealed: UK Home to 23,000 Jihadists,” *The Times*, May 27, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/huge-scale-of-terror-threat-revealed-uk-home-to-23-000-jihadists-3zvn58mhq> (accessed June 21, 2017).
3. *United States v. Adis Medunjanin*, March 29, 2012, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1048734-deposition-in-u-s-v-adis-medunjanin.html> (accessed July 6, 2017).
4. Emily Feldman, “Can Isis's Indoctrinated Kids Be Saved from a Future of Violent Jihad?” *Newsweek*, July 6, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/2017/07/14/isis-kids-indoctrination-saved-violent-jihad-632080.html> (accessed July 6, 2017).
5. Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State* (London: Quilliam, 2016).
6. Lizzie Dearden, “ISIS Training Children of Foreign Fighters to Become ‘Next Generation’ of Terrorists,” *The Independent*, July 29, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-training-children-of-foreign-fighters-to-become-next-generation-of-terrorists-a7162911.html> (accessed July 6, 2017).
7. Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*.
8. Robin Simcox, “The Islamic State's Western Teenage Plotters,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (February 2017), p. 21, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-states-western-teenage-plotters> (accessed June 21, 2017).

The Heritage Foundation is a public policy, research, and educational organization recognized as exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. It is privately supported and receives no funds from any government at any level, nor does it perform any government or other contract work.

The Heritage Foundation is the most broadly supported think tank in the United States. During 2016, it had hundreds of thousands of individual, foundation, and corporate supporters representing every state in the U.S. Its 2016 income came from the following sources:

Individuals 75.3%

Foundations 20.3%

Corporations 1.8%

Program revenue and other income 2.6%

The top five corporate givers provided The Heritage Foundation with 1.0% of its 2016 income. The Heritage Foundation's books are audited annually by the national accounting firm of RSM US, LLP.

Members of The Heritage Foundation staff testify as individuals discussing their own independent research. The views expressed are their own and do not reflect an institutional position for The Heritage Foundation or its board of trustees.