# Islamic State returnees pose threat to Europe

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The Islamic State is under intense territorial pressure in its former strongholds. *James Blake* and *Brooks Tigner* assess the outlook for foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria returning to their home countries, and analyse the likely impact on terrorism threat levels in European cities.

On 25 February 2017, Max Hill, the newly appointed independent reviewer of terrorism legislation in the United Kingdom, told the *Daily Telegraph* that the Islamic State was planning "indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians". He compared the level of threat to that posed by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the 1970s, when it was conducting a campaign of bombings against civilian and security forces targets in the mainland UK. He said, "In terms of the threat that's represented, I think the intensity and the potential frequency of serious plot planning - with a view to indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians of whatever race or colour in metropolitan areas - represents an enormous ongoing risk."
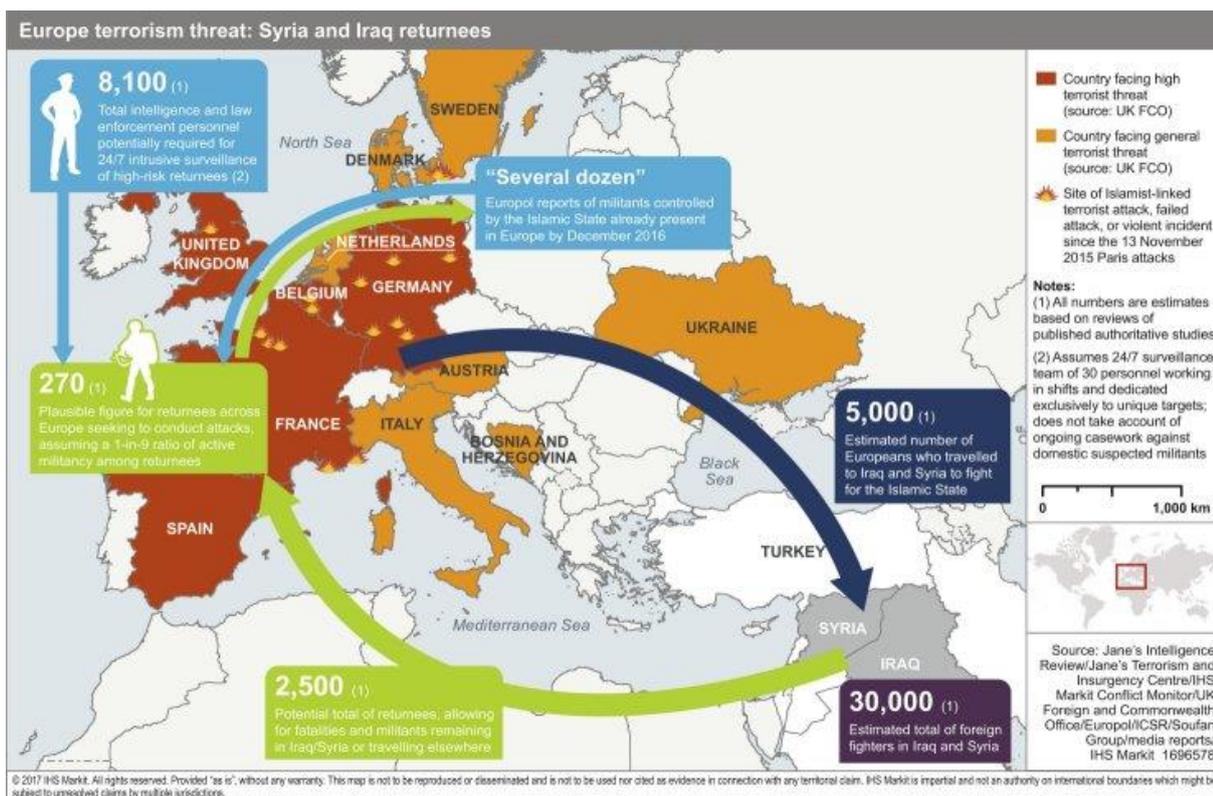
Europe terrorism threat: Syria and Iraq returnees. (IHS Markit)

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Losing territory

For foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, the outlook is rapidly changing. In January 2015, the Islamic State controlled a large swath of territory which, according to IHS Markit Conflict Monitor figures,

was approximately 90,800 km², and included territory stretching from western Iraq through to northwest Syria. It had approximately nine million people under its control.

International efforts to combat the Islamic State have started to shrink the group's presence, curtailing its territorial base, prestige, and power. Former US president Barack Obama's administration (2009-17) adopted a multifaceted policy of 'degrading and suffocating' the Islamic State: it included directing airstrikes against the Islamic State's personnel, territory, and resources, with several thousand US troops training local forces and providing military support.

The ongoing counter-terrorism offensive had substantially reduced the territory held by the Islamic State to 60,400 km² by January 2017, with far fewer cities and people under its control. In Iraq, government-led forces pursued a campaign to retake control of cities, mounting an offensive in late 2016 to retake Mosul. While the battle has been closely fought and the Islamic State has mounted strong resistance, Iraqi-led forces, by mid-March 2017, had cut off the city and were flushing out remaining fighters.

Iraqi security forces strike Islamic State militants in Mosul, Iraq, on 5 March 2017. The ongoing counter-terrorism offensive has substantially reduced the territory held by the Islamic State. (PA)
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Retaking Mosul from the Islamic State will be particularly symbolic, as it is where Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of the so-called 'caliphate' on 29 June 2014; it is also the last remaining city in Iraq under the Islamic State's control. Its fall will represent a significant pointer towards the groups's demise in Iraq.

In Syria, there were concerted efforts in 2016 and early 2017 to reduce the Islamic State's control of key cities and towns. Turkish-led militants began by targeting Al-Bab to the west of Raqqa, and by mid-March 2017 there was an offensive under way to recapture Raqqa, Islamic State's main hub in Syria, although the battle will be more intense than Mosul because the group has more

fighters in the city. Anti-Islamic State forces were also seeking to retake Deir al-Zour in the east of Syria, another territorial hub for the Islamic State.

As the Islamic State increasingly loses territory, more fighters will seek to return to their home countries. This will likely be motivated by one of two factors that are germane to the security threat that they pose: some will be demoralised and will leave because their fortunes have changed, while others will be dispatched back to Europe as part of the Islamic State's strategy of moving from holding territory to insurgency.

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Regrouping and evolving

Thomas Sanderson, director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), told *Jane's* on 5 February that one of the main factors drawing young people was the 'bandwagon' effect of the excitement about joining a "successful" resistance movement. However, loss of territory means that the group will start to lose recruitment power, particularly among those attracted by its "success" rather than for religious reasons. In Syria, foreign fighters may already be leaving the group to join other groups.

Brussels Airport on 22 March 2017, a year after the terrorist attacks. Before Brussels' airport and metro system bombings, Belgium had suffered no such mass attack in its recent history. (PA)
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Operationally, territorial losses will cause significant damage to the Islamic State, particularly to its financial model. A report released on 17 February 2017 by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London stated that the Islamic State was in financial trouble, with overall revenue shrinking by more than 50% since 2014. As its territory has shrunk, it

has lost tax receipts, and it will also lose money because of damage to and loss of control of oil fields.

The Islamic State will have to adapt to survive, altering its financial model, its recruitment methods, and its tactics. According to Sanderson, a likely reaction will be "a spasm of violence" as it seeks to demonstrate its continued relevance and enduring strength. In his estimate, one of the group's likely recourses will be to conduct high-profile attacks in Damascus, Syria; Baghdad, Iraq; and internationally, including in Europe, although the circumstances in each of these three cases are materially distinct.

It remains notable that the Islamic State has not been able to conduct a major attack in Europe since the March 2016 Brussels bombings; attacks since that point have been 'lone actor' attacks, even if retrospectively claimed by the Islamic State. Supposed clandestine - or 'sleeper' - cells have been absent, raising the question of their existence and status, and whether they are waiting for a trigger to act.

The combination of counter-terrorism operations, targeted efforts to disrupt its financing, and the eventual loss of its 'caliphate' all suggest a possible regrouping of the Islamic State, potentially evolving towards being a more 'traditional' terrorist group with a network of connections to other groups in different countries such as Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Yemen, but with less territory under its control.

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Returnee fighters

The number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria is significantly larger than during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, prompting concern within the intelligence community that many European foreign fighters will return home with the intent to conduct attacks and will overwhelm domestic security services' ability to monitor them. This would in turn result in more attacks.

However, the number of returnee foreign fighters will be far smaller than the approximately 5,000 Europeans who left to fight, since not all foreign fighters become domestic terrorists. A Brookings Institution November 2014 report on foreign fighters concluded that the Iraq conflict, in particular, had shown that most foreign fighters posed less of a threat than security services originally anticipated; many who joined the Islamic State were motivated by a host of specific reasons and were unlikely to pose a domestic threat; and many were initially humanitarians opposing Assad.

In addition, others will have been killed during fighting, and many others will likely choose to travel to another conflict zone. Yet others who joined the Islamic State for religious reasons are likely to stay in Iraq and Syria, beginning a new life.

Even among foreign fighters who return home, the terrorism threat is qualified. Based on a February 2013 study by extremism expert Thomas Hegghammer, who analysed data between 1990 and 2010, only one in nine Western foreign fighters returned to conduct attacks in the West. This would nevertheless represent a substantial threat: if half of the assumed 5,000 fighters returned, it would imply a combat pool of around 270 militants with the propensity to plan and conduct attacks.

Equally, previous studies suggest that many returnees will have become so disillusioned by their experiences that they will likely attempt to build a new life at home, potentially even participating in

a deradicalisation programme. In this case, the efficiency of the deradicalisation programme will be in the spotlight: some programmes, such as in Saudi Arabia, have been exploited by Al-Qaeda detainees from Guantánamo Bay who have subsequently rejoined groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Others will fear the consequences for their families and friends if they become involved in domestic terrorism and will avoid it. Yet others who do attempt to join terrorist groups are likely to be monitored by intelligence services, and - if they were involved in terrorist activity in Iraq and Syria - could well be pre-emptively arrested.

It is therefore from the remainder of foreign fighters that the threat of terrorist attacks will be most acute, and this will be from militants who will likely have been trained at terrorist camps in a range of skills, such as bomb-making, weapons handling, and encryption techniques, and who have a network of contacts. Dr Rodger Shanahan, a research fellow at the Sydney-based Lowy Institute for International Policy told *Jane's* on 8 January 2017, "Experienced foreign fighters returning from extended combat will have a good level of security awareness, planning and operational expertise. They will also seek to conduct higher-profile attacks as this is a key part of their attraction."

Foreign fighters were involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks and March 2016 Brussels attacks, and in May 2014 a Frenchman who had previously travelled to Syria attacked the Jewish museum in Belgium. Belgian police disrupted a likely significant plot in Verviers in January 2015 and found a significant number of weapons and explosive devices, suggesting that the plot was nearly operational. Foreign fighters also passed through Greece before joining the Paris attacks in November 2015.

These incidents represent the beginning of a likely trend in the coming months and years, with it being possible that the Islamic State has taken advantage of the European refugee crisis to embed sleepers in European cities. More than a million refugees and migrants entered Europe during 2015, and a senior humanitarian worker told *Jane's* on 12 January 2017 that the Greek authorities had been overwhelmed by the number of refugees and migrants crossing the Aegean Sea and were unable to carry out all necessary checks. Nevertheless, despite these volumes, it remains the case that mass-casualty attacks explicitly directed by the Islamic State have not taken place since Brussels.

In April 2016, then US director of national intelligence James Clapper said that the Islamic State had clandestine cells operating in several European countries. In December 2016, Europol reported estimates from several intelligence agencies that several dozen people controlled by the Islamic State were likely already in Europe.

Since then, scrutiny of arrivals has dramatically improved and the EU-Turkey refugee deal has restricted refugee flows. Moreover, migrant routes from Greece into Europe are closed, and the EU - in conjunction with European border agency Frontex and Europol - has enhanced its due diligence process, making it more difficult for individuals to enter Europe via Greece under false pretences.

Arguably the most significant foreign fighter threat to European cities comes from new networks formed during the Iraq and Syria conflicts. There are 25,000 non-European foreign fighters, many of whom will have formed new connections and new worldviews. This group includes foreign fighters of third states, who will likely travel to new countries following territorial losses in Iraq and Syria and who may therefore be off the authorities' radar. The historical parallel would be with the anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan in the 1970s who forged the connections that produced Al-

Qaeda. Out of the Syria conflict, there is the potential for new terrorist groups to form, or for foreign fighters to set up new outposts of established terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in countries where they settle, such as Morocco, Russia, or Saudi Arabia. Such new groups could conduct transnational terrorist attacks, including against Europe.

Three roadside bombs laid by Islamic State militants explode in a western Mosul neighbourhood, Iraq, on 8 March 2017. International efforts to combat the Islamic State have started to shrink the group's presence, curtailing its territorial base, prestige, and power. (PA)

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Scenarios of concern

It is plausible that current trends of anti-refugee, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim sentiment in many European countries will drive returnees to terrorism. The Islamic State has repeatedly called on sympathisers to conduct lone-actor attacks, including in European countries, and some have already occurred, such as the July 2016 truck attack in Nice and the December 2016 Berlin market attack.

Militants in Europe could also seek to conduct attacks similar to the June 2016 Orlando, Florida, nightclub attack, which are difficult for intelligence services to prevent. With the ease of obtaining firearms in most of continental Europe, and knives and vehicles continent-wide, as well as the growing pool of potential terrorists, individual attacks are likely to occur across Europe in 2017.

A second scenario stems from those who have loose affiliations with a terrorist group, and are sent back to home countries to conduct attacks. In this scenario, foreign fighters may have formed cells in their home country, with a degree of contact with the network in Iraq and Syria. This type of attack is likely to be more sophisticated and well-planned than a simpler lone-actor incident, a

comparable example being the attack on the offices of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015.

There is also the potential for multi-target attacks, which would involve different groups of terrorists armed with firearms and explosives. In these types of incidents, there is likely a degree of guidance and encouragement from terrorist leaders abroad and potentially financial support. These attacks are most likely to occur in countries where a cell of terrorists is already operational - a *New York Times* article from April 2016 citing counter-terrorism sources highlighted Germany, Italy, and the UK as likely targets for the Islamic State, while a *Jane's Intelligence Review* study of 46 cities, based on quantitative modelling, concluded in February 2016 that threats remained higher-than-average for French and German cities.

A third - and worst-case - scenario is an instructed terrorist attack, characterised by incidents that are more complex and sophisticated than others to date. Examples include the use of a radiological dispersal device (RDD) or 'dirty bomb', or an attack using aircraft or sophisticated weaponry that would result in a significant and widespread impact. Nevertheless, *Jane's* assesses that the use of an RDD is unlikely because of the sophisticated planning required.

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Evolving countermeasures

National capitals across Europe have consistently rejected the idea of creating an EU intelligence agency. However, their future aims for exchanging information, not least to combat the terrorist threat, come close to the appearance of one. Significant EU legislative changes, both recent and forthcoming, point to new data sources and unprecedented access for stakeholders to information exchanges, from coast guards and airport control points to financial authorities tracking terrorist financing activities. All of these will be linked to one another via national interfaces and centralised EU platforms.

"The intelligence possibilities will be far greater in the future," a European Commission official told *Jane's* on 2 March 2017. "We're looking at the cross-connecting convergence of [security-related] travel, border, police, and financial data, though no one has any illusions this will consistently turn into useable intelligence any time soon or without a great effort at collaboration."

Fear of organised criminal acts inside Europe, especially those of terrorism linked to returning foreign fighters and home-grown radicalised jihadists, is behind the changes, three of which are under way, with more in the pipeline. For example, the European passenger name record (PNR) system, approved in April 2016, will be implemented across the EU by May 2018, and on 16 February 2017 the European parliament approved a new EU directive to clamp down on lone-actor terrorists and foreign fighters, expanding the EU's list of criminalised preparatory acts to include travel abroad to join a terrorist group or returning to the EU to carry out a terrorist act, plus any recruiting, training, abetting, incitement, or financing of terrorist groups.

On 7 March, the EU Council also adopted a regulation on a new entry-exit system for Europe. This will apply to all third-country nationals, registering their entry, exit, and refusal of entry, and storing their identity, travel documents, and biometric data in the form of four fingerprints and a facial image.

Importantly, the draft entry-exit regulation will create interoperability between its system and the EU's Visa Information System (VIS), with access not only for national border and visa authorities,

but also for law enforcement authorities and Europol. Moreover, the pressure for inter-sectoral collaboration across member states is rapidly increasing, with Germany and France leading the charge.

French soldiers stand guard during a visit by French president François Hollande to a military outpost on the outskirts of the Islamic State-held city of Mosul, Iraq, on 2 January 2017. (PA)
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In a joint 20 February 2017 letter addressed by the German and French ministers of the interior - Thomas de Maizière and Bruno Le Roux - to the European Commission, the ministers called for even greater steps. While praising the entry-exit initiative, they said that the commission should venture further by studying the possibility of "registering European nationals and long-stay third-country nationals" as one way to help identify the routes of foreign combatants.

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Outlook

European intelligence and security services will be severely challenged in coming months and years. There has been definite progress in damaging the Islamic State's capabilities in Iraq and Syria, but - as the group loses more territory and its prestige is further tarnished - it is increasingly likely that foreign fighters will return home or seek new territories. With this shift in the terrorism landscape, there will be a gradual threat evolution.

Because of the number of foreign fighters returning to their home countries, it is likely that there will be an increase in the number of lone-actor-type attacks taking place in European cities, alongside periodic larger-scale assaults such as the attacks in Paris and Brussels. There is also

the potential for more complex attacks perpetrated by terrorists operating from safe havens in states where the government's writ is limited.

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