

Europe struggles to deter Islamist prison radicalisation

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The return of foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria to Europe poses particular challenges in terms of prison radicalisation. *Brooks Tigner* examines the measures that European authorities are taking to deal with the threat

Key Points

- Approximately 1,500 Islamist foreign fighters have already returned to Europe from Iraq and Syria, with future returnees likely to be 'die-hard' extremists.
- The incarceration of fighters threatens to perpetuate the cycle of radicalisation, while grant disbursements to counter-radicalisation groups are also vulnerable to misuse.
- A workable prison counter-radicalisation formula is still lacking, with no consistency across Europe about whether to cluster or isolate hardened Islamist extremists.

With the Islamic State-controlled territories in the Middle East largely reoccupied by state and other forces by early 2018, many of the group's fighters have begun to return home, often to Europe. According to estimates by the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) released in July 2017, approximately 5,000 European citizens had travelled by the end of 2015 to become foreign fighters in the sectarian conflicts of Iraq and Syria. They hailed from throughout the EU and the Balkans, with Kosovo having the highest per capita export of foreign fighters.

On average, according to RAN, 30% of the 5,000 have returned to their home countries to date, but the figure varies notably by country, with Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom having received back approximately 50%. Many foreign fighters will have died on the battlefield, and European authorities on the whole do not expect a 'mass exodus' of foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria to take place, but rather a more gradual flow.

Some of these returnees may not look to engage in violence; a February 2013 study by Thomas Hegghammer, senior research fellow at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, found that only one in nine known foreign fighters in the period 1990–2010 returned to the West intending to conduct attacks. However, this number is likely to be higher in the case of returnees from the Islamic State, and *Jane's* understands from conversations with security sources that the future flow of foreign fighters is more likely to include hard-core militants.

The return and likely incarceration of many of these seasoned combatants means that Europe faces a growing set of policy questions demanding a coherent set of responses. These include how to deal legally and socially with foreign fighters; how to assess any risk that they may pose to security; where to further clamp down on terrorist financing in Europe; whether to enable stronger and more focused profiling; and, above all, how to address the continent's incarcerated foreign fighters and the risk of proliferating radicalisation in its prisons.

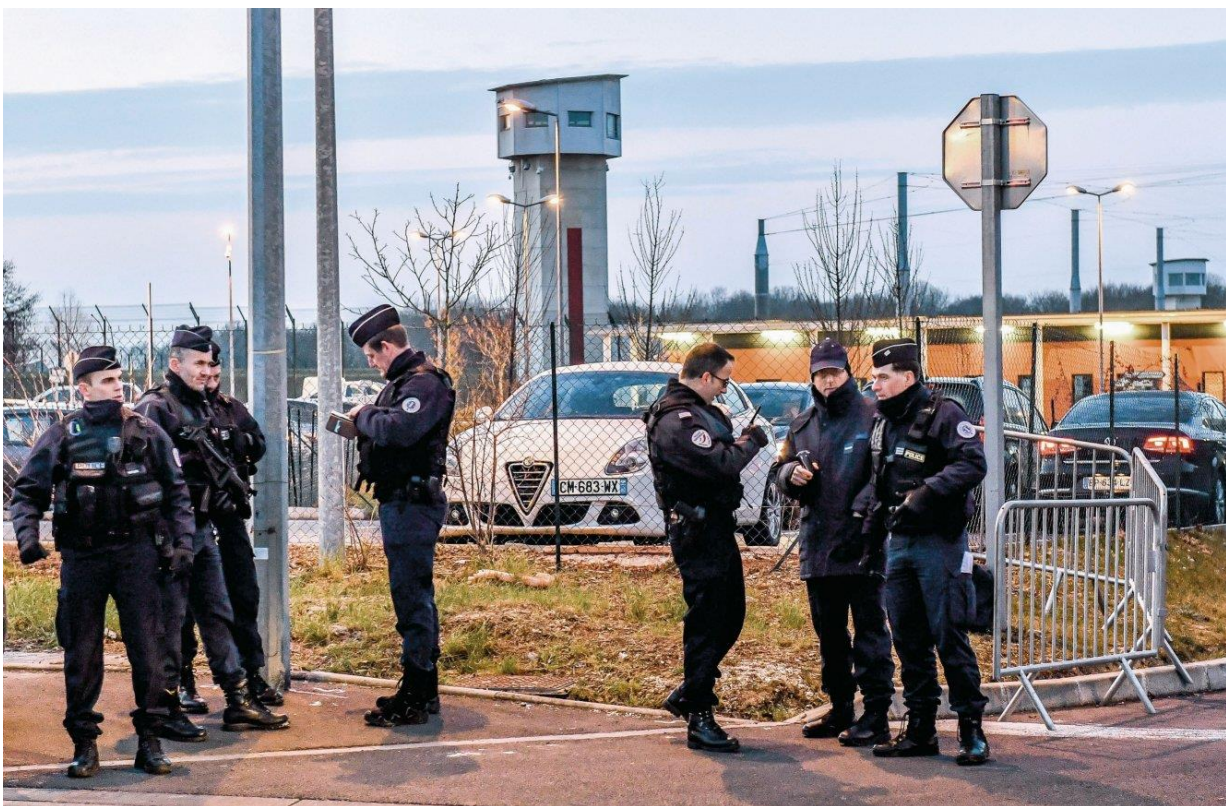
Criminalising activity

One of the most significant concerns for national security authorities is the impact of unreformed foreign fighters or covert Islamist extremist prisoners on other members of Europe's jailed Muslim population. "There is potentially a third wave [of foreign fighters] coming, but we don't think it will be

as large as feared a couple of years ago due to deaths, prosecution, executions by ISIS [the Islamic State] itself, and the overseas military targeting [of the Islamic State and foreign fighters] by Western governments,” Thomas Renard, a researcher at the Egmont Institute, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ think tank, told *Jane’s* on 1 February.

Egmont published a new 71-page assessment on 5 February of how Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands have dealt with returning foreign fighters. “If there is a wave it will be small, but those returning foreign fighters in future will be the die-hards and they will be difficult to deal with,” said Renard.

David Ibsen, executive director of the Counter Extremism Project, an NGO with offices in Brussels, London, and New York, told *Jane’s* on 23 February that the threat “doesn’t seem to be perceived as serious in all [EU] member states, [but] it will grow exponentially in the coming years. If all the returning foreign fighters face a prison sentence, we are likely to see an increase in radicalisation in prisons and the cycle will continue”.



Police stand guard on 5 February 2018 outside Vendin-le-Vieil prison in northern France, in which the only surviving suspect from the November 2015 Paris attacks, Salah Abdeslam, is imprisoned. Policy experts, government officials, and practitioners concur that prison radicalisation is a threat to European security. (Philippe Huguen/AFP/Getty Images)

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Not all previously returned foreign fighters have been incarcerated, but those in future face a higher chance of imprisonment as new measures in Europe take effect. A potentially substantial raft of judicial prosecutions may take place, as national capitals prepare to implement EU directive 2017/541 that will criminalise travel within or beyond the EU for the purposes of terrorist training, fighting, or financing, even in the absence of links to a specific terrorist act. EU member states have until 8 September 2018 to transpose the directive into national law.

Other initiatives by the European Commission (EC) will tighten controls along the EU's common external border to track the movement of all travellers into and out of the EU, whether from third countries or the member states themselves. Cognisant that more work is needed to stymie terrorist financing, the EC has also proposed to strengthen the EU's Fourth Anti-Money Laundering Directive, whose formal approval is expected by mid-2018, although some members of the European Parliament have demanded further measures.

Measures in hand

A report authored by Spanish MEP Javier Nart demanded strong measures to cut cash flows to terrorists. The report was approved by near-unanimity on 21 February by the parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee and is highly likely to gain final approval in March. It calls for a new European counter-terrorism financial intelligence platform and a database of suspicious transactions to be run by Europol; lists of individuals and entities operating under opaque regimes and with high rates of suspicious transactions; and increasing monitoring of suspicious organisations engaged in illicit trade, smuggling, counterfeiting, and fraudulent practices. The report also calls for the imposition of obligations on banks to monitor pre-paid debit cards to ensure they are only reloaded via bank transfers and personally identifiable accounts, and for stronger oversight of non-conventional methods of money transfer such as the Muslim world's hawala transactions or the Chinese fei ch'ien system.

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