The RAN perspective

With possibly up to 2000 foreign fighters in Syria, the involvement of European citizens is unprecedented in comparison to other recent conflicts. These so-called foreign fighters are no foreigners to us. They are EU citizens, and may even be the classmates of our children, or the sons and sometimes daughters of our neighbours. Countering their radicalisation, and stopping them from fighting, is not so much a task to be done in Syria. It needs to be done here, at home in the cities of Europe in which first line practitioners play a crucial part.

Member States have implemented repressive measures, such as making it illegal to travel to training camps and withdrawing ID’s from potential fighters. Only repression however will not solve the problem. Prevention, signalling and providing programmes to help (potential) foreign fighter to leave the path of violent extremism are necessary as well. These actions are often organised on a local level.

For instance, first line practitioners, such as teachers and youth workers, can be trained to recognise and refer those who are being influenced to go on jihad. Also, families can be partners in both detecting potential fighters and convincing them to deploy their engagement in a non-violent way.

Finally, exit-programmes that have proven to be effective, can be tailored to the target group, for instance by employing formers or practitioners as acceptable intermediaries or coaches.

Geopolitical developments that look for solutions for the Syrian conflict might decrease the radical thoughts and acts of our foreign fighters. We know however that this is not enough. First line practitioners are essential to prevent recruitment and to de-radicalise returnees. First liners such as teachers and youth workers, such as community police officers and health practitioners, each working locally in specific cities are best placed to do this job. And that is why RAN organises this Cities Conference: to learn from the useful experiences many cities and their practitioners already have with their inhabitants fighting in Syria or who are considering to, and to share those lessons learned.

Introduction

European Member States and cities see themselves confronted with the phenomenon of foreign fighters travelling to Syria. At it’s broadest level, “foreign fighters” refer to people who voluntarily leave their homes and join foreign conflicts. The level of foreign fighters travelling to Syria to date has been unprecedented in comparison to previous conflicts in the last couple of decades. Foreign fighters can pose a potential threat to states in numerous ways: At the minimum level, it is likely that, on their return, they will have experienced psychological trauma associated with war and will require health care assistance, rehabilitation and reintegration type interventions. While abroad, foreign fighters also pose a threat by attempting to recruit others to join the fight. They can also acquire more advanced terrorist and fighting skillsets and significantly expand their transnational
extremist networks. Finally, and at the most extreme level, it is probable that some will have joined Islamic extremist factions whilst fighting abroad and may seek to attack their home countries on return to export the Al Qaeda (inspired) ideology of global jihad against the West.

European citizens who make a journey to the Syrian battle fields leave their local communities. They might maintain contact with their local community during their stay but sometimes also disappear for months, leaving families and communities in despair about their fate. Finally, if they return to their home town, their mental, physical and ideological state is uncertain. This foreign fighter phenomenon also creates tension within local communities: other parents who are worried that their children will go to Syria as well, tensions within parts of communities (e.g. ethnical or religious groups), tensions between groups for example on the question if returnees should be helped or punished.

Early intervention and a multi-actor approach are key elements to prevent radicalisation towards violent extremism, and local actors are among the ones best placed to take action. This point was extensively discussed at the High Level Conference (“Empowering local actors to prevent violent extremism”) on 29 January 2013 in Brussels. The RAN Cities Conference on Foreign Fighters builds upon this notion. Local practitioners can make a difference as they know their citizens and communities best and thus have the opportunity to see worrying signs and act upon them. But they can also develop tailor-made de-radicalisation or re-socialisation programmes for those who have gone out to Syria or are considering to do so. Several European cities already have experience in coping with foreign fighters and their social environment. What are the lessons learned and which practices are useful for cities elsewhere in Europe that are facing the same challenge? And what is needed on the grassroots level to work effective on the matter? What could Member States and/or the EU do to facilitate this? The aim of the Cities Conference is the exchange of knowledge and practices between practitioners of the various European cities on how to deal with the foreign fighter phenomenon before, during and after travel and provide recommendations on a local, national and EU-level.

Fortunately, we do not have to start from scratch. Based on knowledge and lessons learned from previous meetings of the Radicalisation Awareness Network, this conference paper provides a starting point for discussion at the Cities Conference. The paper starts with a short baseline assessment on the issue of foreign fighters. Facts & figures, motivational factors and narratives are briefly discussed. This is however only done very briefly, as the goal of the Cities Conference is not to discuss the extent of the problem (such as the situation at hand in Syria) but is aimed at discussing solutions in the form of good practices. Therefore, the main part of the paper is dedicated to good practices for engagement with foreign fighters before, during and after travel. The following approaches are discussed in more depth: awareness raising of first line practitioners, providing family support, community engagement & empowerment, exit-strategies: de-radicalisation & disengagement, creating an institutional infrastructure, providing multi-agency support

Baseline assessment

Facts and figures

The exact number of European foreign fighters that have travelled to Syria is unknown. However, several estimations have been made. Based on the information which European Member States have

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provided themselves, the estimate of 1500-2000\textsuperscript{2} foreign fighters seems reasonable. The International Centre for Study of Radicalisation (ISCR) has estimated that the number of fighters from Western Europe ranges from 396 to 1937. That is a threefold increase compared to their previous research last April, when they estimated the range from 135 to 590. Western Europeans now represent up to 18\% of the foreign fighter population in Syria, with most recruits coming from France (63-412), Britain (43-366), Germany (34-240), Belgium (76-296), and the Netherlands (29-152). Adjusting for population size of each country, the most heavily affected countries are Belgium (up to 27 foreign fighters per million), Denmark (15), the Netherlands (9), Sweden (9), Norway (8), and Austria (7) (Zelin, 2013). However, we should not only consider the most heavily affected countries, but also the most heavily affected cities. In the above mentioned countries the vast majority of foreign fighters consists of inhabitants from a limited selection of cities. And this selection of cities is not always self-evident, as it does not always concern the largest cities with the largest Islamic communities.

**Target groups & motivational factors**

The target groups and motivational factors differ widely per country but the relatively high number of fighters is most likely explained by the fact that Syria is easily accessible for Europeans, in contrast to past conflicts in Afghanistan or Iraq. Those travelling are, generally, young males in their twenties, but several exceptions have also been reported (females, teenagers, whole families). In certain countries a wide variety of profiles were described including:

- Criminal groups and gang members, in Denmark for instance;
- Unemployed people;
- Students;
- Converts;
- Middleclass people;
- Young women e.g. The Netherlands
- Whole families, including some with very young infants e.g. from Belgium

A wide range of motivational factors have also been reported, and included but are not limited to: humanitarian reasons, ideological reasons (being attracted to the jihadi, nationalist or pan-Islamic narratives) and those disillusioned with national government responses or those in search of adventure. In terms of motivating narratives, the following can be identified:

- Identity: The idea of being a true ‘Muslim’, and undertaking one's duty,
- Religion/theology: (linked closely to that above) it is one's religious duty,
- Community: a need that’s being felt to act upon the cruel deeds against the Ummah; joining, helping and defending fellow brothers and sisters,
- Play ones part in the apocalyptic battle that was announced as revenge and the 'liberation' of the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem,
- Resonance of history: undertaking jihad in the geographical and historic centre of Islam,
- A winnable war: a victory against Assad is possible, although this argument is losing strength as times goes by and the conflicts among the opposition increase,
- The failure of the international community to bring a sustainable peaceful situation utilized by extremist groups to recruit,
- The notion of Bilad al-Sham\textsuperscript{3} as reference to the Syrian conflict has deep resonance for those that are considering to join the conflict.

\textsuperscript{2} EU Ministerial Meeting on Foreign Fighters, 5 December 2013

\textsuperscript{3} Also known as ‘Greater Syria’ or ‘Natural Syria’, The term denotes the restoration of the medieval Arab Caliphate province of Bilad al-Sham, encompassing the Eastern Mediterranean or the Levant and Western Mesopotamia at the peak glory of the Arab Muslim civilization.
Good practices for engagement with foreign fighters before, during and after travel

Practitioners have a wide array of engagement options. Several EU Member States have implemented repressive legal measures to make it more difficult for people to become potential foreign fighters in Syria and/or to deal with them if they return. For example, making it illegal to travel to training camps or conflicts abroad (implemented in France, Germany and Austria); forbid joining terrorist organizations at home and abroad or to travel with this purpose and withdrawing passport or ID’s. The focus of the RAN and the aim of this Cities Conference however is to discuss good practices for preventive measures on how to deal with foreign fighters before, during (outreach) and after travel (rehabilitation, re-integration and in some cases de-radicalisation). There are various moments that offer opportunities to engage. For instance, prior to travel (and targeting those at risk individually, with the intention of prevention), reaching out to family members while relatives have travelled abroad, or undertaking rehabilitation and re-integration activities for those on their return.

The following approaches can be distinguished and will be further discussed in this paper:
- Awareness raising of first line practitioners;
- Providing family support;
- Community Engagement;
- Exit-strategies: de-radicalisation & disengagement;
- Creating an institutional infrastructure, providing multi-agency support.

These approaches are in line with the more general approaches to prevent and counter radicalisation as presented in the RAN Collection on 15 January 2014 (http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices/index_en.htm). Each approach is briefly described, followed by some specific lessons we have extracted from our RAN meetings related to dealing with the Syrian foreign fighter phenomenon.

Awareness raising of first line practitioners

This approach consists in raising awareness of first line practitioners working with vulnerable individuals or groups at risk of radicalising, in order to ensure that they are well equipped to detect and to respond to radicalisation. Throughout Europe training courses have been developed to raise awareness and understanding among first liners who have responsibility for individuals who may be vulnerable to radicalisation. First line workers have been identified as a key group that can make an important contribution to this issue and include teachers, youth workers, community police officers, child protection workers, (mental) health care workers. These groups are often in direct contact with potential vulnerable individuals who may be at risk of radicalising. In contrast to policy makers for example, first line workers - potentially - have the ability to recognise and refer individuals who may be vulnerable to radicalisation. However, public sector workers do not always have a sufficient understanding of radicalisation, do not understand the warning signs, or do not know what to do in response. Therefore, raising their awareness on this issue is required.

Specific lessons learned and recommendations that are relevant for the foreign fighters issue are:
- Analyse and assess level of engagement of foreign fighters from their social media footprints. Often it is possible to discern the chosen symbolism and iconographic images selected by foreign fighters, and to determine their different levels of involvement. These can serve as an early-warning signal for schools, social services and law enforcement that individuals are involved. Also it can serve as a mechanism of dialogue with prospective foreign fighters. Knowledge about and interpretation of early warning signs from social media can serve as a mechanism of dialogue.
• **Anticipate the need to utilise mental health services in some cases.** Being aware and recognising possible mental health issues of the (potential) foreign fighter is key. In some cases, actors could undergo specific trainings by psychologists in order to recognise signals and receive the tools to address the issue. It is important for actors to have access to the requisite mental health services and those providers should, preferably, be trained to deal with similar cases to those of foreign fighters. Cultural sensitivities, not recognising the existence of mental health problems, may require innovative ways to persuade those in need of mental health intervention.

• **Programmes are long term and require sustained commitment.** As such, strategies must be put in place to ensure the longevity of programmes. A key component is training: both with colleagues (a ‘train the trainers’ exercise) and with other actors in the community, including (where possible) family members as well as education and religious institutions. Trainings can be undertaken using hand-outs (of signs for potential foreign fighters), using internal checklists of previously successful activities, simulations and role play exercises and training conferences, at individual or group level.

Providing family support

Family members can provide key forms of support to, or have a positive influence on, the (potential) foreign fighter and, in many cases, can help with prevention or rehabilitation, re-integration and, to a lesser extent, de-radicalisation. However, it should be noted that families can equally pose risk factors, such as neglecting their relative or influencing (or even promoting) violent extremist ideologies. As such, it is essential to provide family support.

Specific lessons learned and recommendations in relation to Syria foreign fighters are:

• **When supporting families it is important to not just focus on the parents, but on the family system as a whole.** Brothers, sisters, cousins and peers can be just as affected if their family member is becoming radical or has turned to violent extremism. One should realise that they are also a group at risk which should be safeguarded.

• **Recognizing the gender issue is an important aspect in supporting families.** Each parent and family member has different roles and responsibilities and should be accordingly addressed. Many cases have shown that the (potential) foreign fighter will come from a family with highly patriarchal traditions, but in reality, when placed in a new (often western) environment, these traditional norms are challenged and in fact disenfranchise and emasculate the dominant father in favour of the mother. As such, gender issues must be addressed, explored and discussed with the recipient and commonly also with his/her family.

• **Families may be fearful of sharing information or worry about stigmatisation because of involvement in an intervention.** This can create barriers for seeking or accepting help. Creative and pro-active ways are necessary to break down those barriers.

• **Create infrastructures so that families are able to seek help.** One can create an infrastructure where parents at least have the opportunity to seek help. For example, creating a special ‘hotline’ (telephone number) which families can call if they are concerned about their family member (Germany), or actively visit homes of parents whose children are considered at risk of becoming or have become radical (Belgium).

• **Where possible, it is important to proactively encourage the recipient’s family and other networks not to reject or stigmatisate their relative.**
Community engagement and empowerment

This approach consists of engaging and empowering communities at risk in order to establish a trust based relation with authorities and to create resilience within communities. ‘Communities’ are groups of people that may or may not be spatially connected, but who share common interests, concerns, identities or neighbourhood. These communities could be local, national or international, with specific or broad interests. Preventing radicalisation is a common effort between communities, authorities and practitioners. Communities can play an important role in helping prevent violent extremism at both ends of the intervention spectrum: prevention and exit of radicalisation. Given that communities can play such an essential role in preventing radicalisation, it is important to invest in community engagement and community empowerment. This approach can take different forms. ‘Community engagement’ can be defined as the proactive harnessing of the energies, knowledge and skills of communities and partners not merely to identify problems but also to negotiate priorities for action and shape and deliver solutions. ‘Community empowerment’ refers to the process of enabling communities to increase control over their lives. Community empowerment, therefore, is more than the involvement, participation or engagement of communities. It implies community ownership and action that explicitly aims at social and political change (Baum, 2008).

Specific lessons learned and recommendations in relation to Syria foreign fighters are:

- **Look for opportune moments to initiate engagement.** Several instances have arisen where outreach has started successfully:
  - Cases, where others from the community have travelled can provide an opportunity to engage community members or local religious/educational authorities.
  - In advance of (or after) a feast day or event that might cause demonstrations or ill-feeling, local police or authorities can approach the community/schools/religious institutions.
  - Practitioners can use mainstream activities, such as day trips and movie nights, to make initial contact and to provoke discussions conducive to trust-building and intervention.
  - Police can initiate contact when parents fear for minors or there have been domestic disturbances and they can then recommend the necessary actors.

- **Practitioners must be aware of opportune times and signals to start engagement.** There is no tried and tested method for initiating contact. Persistence will be crucial at this stage. Long-term engagement will also greatly help if an important incident does occur, as this will mean that there is a need to identify mechanisms that are already in place to reach out to relevant actors enabling pro-active rather than re-active engagement.

- **Look for interested and committed parties.** Family members, local community groups, teachers, or religious figures (amongst others) that are trusted by the (potential) foreign fighter can provide an opening for engagement. In this case, other actors can provide trust ‘by proxy’, and may be able to vouch for the practitioner engaging. This can also provide an opportune moment to begin contact. Actors can include family members (both of the [potential] foreign fighter’s immediate and extended family), local community or youth groups already in the area, teachers, or trusted religious figures.

Exit-strategies: de-radicalisation and disengagement

This approach consists of setting up programmes of de-radicalisation or disengagement aiming at re-integrating (violent) radicals (de-radicalisation) or at least dissuading them from violence (disengagement). Even after the best of prevention efforts, some individuals radicalise. While reaching that stage, they fall under the responsibility of security services/police, and, in some cases,
of justice and prison services. However, there will (most likely) come a day when the individual has finished his/her sentence and will have to be re-integrated into society. For a successful re-integration into society it is important to offer radicals de-radicalisation or disengagement programmes. Exit programmes are not only suitable for individuals who have faced imprisonment. Ideally, imprisonment should be prevented by offering this kind of programmes before the individual undertakes illegal activities.

The process of de-radicalisation or disengagement includes behaviour and cognitive aspects such as beliefs. With regard to behaviour, this primarily involves the cessation of violent actions. This is usually referred to as ‘disengagement’. With regards to attitudes, this involves an increase in confidence in the system, a desire to once more be a part of society, and the rejection of non-democratic means. This is referred to as ‘de-radicalisation’. In short, to use the words of John Horgan (2009), de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes “are generally directed against individuals who have become radical with the aim of re-integrating them into society or at least dissuading them from violence.”

Specific lessons learned and recommendations in relation to Syria foreign fighters are:

- Only tailor-made engagement programmes that are informed by the context and environment work. Practitioners must remember that all cases will be different, based on the individual involved. For instance, not all of those returning from Syria will be violent, or have suffered mental health traumas. Most commonly practitioners report that each individual case is different and that there is no 'one-size fits all' approach. This will result in more targeted efforts that make success more likely. The downside is that it is more time consuming and often more expensive to personalise individual treatment.

- Both preventive and repressive measures are key to deal with these long-term risks. In the preventive area, it is important to build a relationship of trust and confidence with returnees and to help them with both psychological/identity questions, as well as practical ones (finding a house, job etc.). Having prevention programs (channels, network of trained government officials) and exit/derad interventions already in place, offers the possibility of tailor-made programs that meet the reasons why people went and came back and the needs they have now. With regard to repressive measures, prosecution could be a possibility if enough evidence can be gathered. This also depends on the legal system in place.

- Engagement must be coordinated throughout the system by a capable, trusted intermediary. Any engagement programme will be undertaken by a range of actors. For the (potential) foreign fighter to be open to engagement, a direct point(s) of contact should be established and that person(s) should assess what types of agencies and targeted intervention should be employed. It is crucial for success that this intermediary be trusted by all parties, but primarily by the (potential) foreign fighter. At times, the intervention may be directly with the foreign fighter or indirectly through their family or social network.

- Actors engaging with a (potential) foreign fighter win his/her trust through transparency, honesty and openness. Many practitioners agree that when they are transparent about their intentions, those they are engaging with are more receptive. Transparency can also help to prevent any unwelcome surprises throughout the engagement which will lose the receiver’s trust. Where possible, information sharing should be reciprocal between the actor engaging and the (potential) foreign fighter. It should be noted, however, that in many cases some police or intelligence information will be classified. In these cases, clear rules and guidelines about the sharing of this information should be established and, depending on the situation, shared with the recipient.
• ** Actors speak the same language as those they engage, both in the literal sense and wider empathetic and cultural sense.** In dealing with (potential) foreign fighters, practitioners will often experience persons who speak various languages and come from various cultures. Therefore, it is important to communicate in the mother tongue that the (potential) foreign fighter and his social environment is comfortable with, or employ a trusted translator. Furthermore, actors who engage should be very aware of the cultural norms of the recipient and steer an intervention with these in mind. It is highly important that the person engaging is empathetic, treats the recipient with respect and refrains from using stereotypical or negative labels. In this sense, anyone can intervene once they have the right characteristics, and this can be true for women, or persons who do not share the same cultural background as the foreign fighter – once language is not an issue, the culture is understood and respect is shown.

• **Trust-building is a necessary, long-term, time-consuming commitment that should remain a top priority throughout engagement.** Being present and available in a visible and sustained way is essential for building trust. The benefit of this is increased trust with the (potential) foreign fighter. However, those engaging may also experience conflict with their parameters of work and workload. Often, practitioners may need to juggle workload with this commitment. Therefore, a balance of necessary time spent with the individual must be found within the parameters of the practitioner’s job.

• **Make an informed decision about who to include and who should potentially be excluded.** Within the complex system of actors who can potentially be involved in prevention, outreach or rehabilitation and re-integration, some controversial figures may exist. For instance, groups with hard-line opinions (but not necessarily violent extremists) may seek to be part of a public dialogue on prevention. Or, programmes may use former extremists (‘formers’) to try to dissuade a potential foreign fighter. Actors may also choose to utilise or exclude recruiters (of foreign fighters). There is no agreement on who should be included and excluded, however the actor implementing the programme should make an informed decision based on the tailor-made needs of the individual case.

• **Be prepared to understand practical problems experienced by (potential) foreign fighters and have strategies in place to deal with such problems and requests.** Often, and particularly if undertaking a prevention type intervention, (potential) foreign fighters will have more practical problems than only related to the conflict abroad: these can include family issue such as the lack of a father figure, issues at school, issues related to children or (un)employment. Often, a practitioner may not be able to help with these problems directly but should be prepared to help find someone who can, or to explain to the recipient that it is not within the scope of their work.

• **The foreign conflict will often only be the beginning of the discussion.** Be prepared to deal with a wide range of topics, from the local micro level to the international macro level. Most commonly, (potential) foreign fighters will initially speak of their assumptions or experiences of the conflict abroad. However, it is important to note that a wide range of issues will arise, for instance, in the home or in the community (such as discrimination or polarisation), at a national policy level (for instance discussing foreign policy) or about other international grievances. The practitioner should have all available actors and strategies on hand to anticipate, as much as possible, the recipient’s needs.

• **Encourage critical thinking and challenge the (potential) foreign fighters to think about their actions and the potential for alternatives.** Often, those thinking of travelling abroad in a foreign conflict will not be aware of alternative courses of action. Those intervening should highlight these areas. This can be done by inviting humanitarian workers or soldiers of national armies to visit the recipient to share their experiences (depending on the specific case). Engaging to think critically on actions and challenging assumptions
only can be achieved in a respectful manner. It will be likely that the (potential) foreign fighter has not been engaged in this way before.

- **Using counter narratives can be helpful in the process of deradicalisation and disengagement.** Counter-narratives delivered by trustworthy, credible and influential messengers (e.g. formers, victims, family, religious/community leaders) may:
  - Dispel travelling myths;
  - Reframe the appeal of fighting and reducing the glamour;
  - Present alternatives to support Syria, such as giving humanitarian aid;
  - Provide ideological/religious arguments explaining that being a good Muslim does not require fighting in Syria.

Creating an institutional infrastructure, providing multi-agency support

This approach consists in creating institutional infrastructures ensuring that people at risk are given multi-agency support at an early stage. Governments cannot undertake counter radicalisation by themselves. In many cases, violent extremists could have been prevented if practitioners would have had worked together and shared information. A multi-partner approach in which partners have the ability, the knowledge and the capacity to identify and support individuals at risk, is essential. Practitioners working in organisations where individuals at risk could be identified should know each other, be able to share concerns and information and develop a combined approach to support the individuals at risk. In short, a multi-agency approach and a system where information can be shared - an institutional infrastructure - is crucial for identifying and dealing with vulnerable individuals who may be at risk. The aim of this approach is recognising vulnerable individuals who may be at risk; assessing the nature and the extent of the potential vulnerability or risk; developing an appropriate support package to protect those at risk of being drawn in to violent extremism based on an assessment of their vulnerability and ensuring that relevant information is shared, faster and earlier and is fully coordinated.

For this approach, the general recommendations and lessons learned of a multi-agency approach apply:

- Rather like a jigsaw puzzle, engaging with a (potential) foreign fighter and their environs will require dialogue and engagement with a wide range of actors from the micro to macro level, such as families (both immediate and wider), community members and leaders, religious scholars, teachers, local authorities, police and intelligence services.
- A multi-agency approach means shared responsibility, but it must be clear who the lead party is for good coordination purposes. Within this lead party there will then, preferably, be a key intermediary.
- It may also be advantageous to build on already existing partnerships and networks.

Feedback

The RAN Secretariat welcomes feedback on this paper, or additional information that is relevant to the subject. To offer feedback and/or further information, please contact Amy-Jane Gielen (a.gielen@radaradvies.nl) or Maarten van de Donk (m.vandedonk@radaradvies.nl).