

What is the Threat of “Returnees” from the “Islamic State”?

Many “Islamic State” combatants and their families are “returning.” Does such repatriation pose internal security threat to various destination countries? It seems a very simple issue. Without “departure,” however, there could be no return. Due to ignorance and misunderstanding of this issue, debates on its root cause and necessary countermeasures usually become misdirected.

With continuing losses of operative bases and its occupied region diminishing in size, the Islamic State’s defeat in Iraq and Syria is becoming simply a matter of time. Yet there are concerns that foreign combatants active under the Islamic State banner are returning, along with their families, to their countries of origin and are then “transferring” to other regions. Many fears that if people who return or transfer continue activities as Islamic extremists, then the Islamic State will survive and proliferate to continue its menace into the future. An American research institute published an interesting report (<http://www.soufangroup.com/beyond-the-caliphate/>) about this issue. This institute also published internationally referenced reports about migration of foreign combatants to the Islamic State in 2014 (<http://thesoufancenter.org/research/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>) and 2015 (<http://thesoufancenter.org/research/foreign-fighters/>).

What is the Problem with Returnees?

The reports mentioned above indicated that, of the more than 40,000 people from 110 countries who have entered Iraq and Syria, at least 5,600 from 33 countries have returned, and there have been returnees to a yet unknown number of other countries as well (https://www.meij.or.jp/kawara/2017_111.html). Intuitively, many fears that these returnees who have taken orders from the Islamic State, could form new Islamic extremist groups and perform destructive acts in Europe and Southeast Asia. Attacks all over the world in the past few years for which the Islamic State has claimed responsibility and the resurgence of Islamic extremism in places like the Philippines provide a basis for fear. Yet a cursory reading of these reports seems to indicate that we are “unaware” of what type of returnees or “Islamic State sympathizers” will constitute what type of threat within what time frame. Based on this, reports warn that even those disillusioned with the Islamic State itself have not necessarily become disillusioned with the “realization of Islamic rule” or “heroic martyrdom,” and thus, these people could continue to be susceptible to Islamic extremist recruitment and agitation. The report expresses the view that as long as conditions promote growth of the Islamic State, similar organizations will certainly survive.

Actual figures for sending combatants to the Islamic State, the number of returnees, the

country names, and their numbers have varied slightly in ranking from the late 2015 report's estimations. However, top export countries and regions remained mostly unchanged. Deserving of serious attention is the return rate for each major export country, for instance, the top five: Russia (3417 people sent, approximately 400 returned, return rate of approximately 11.7%); Saudi Arabia (3244 people sent, approximately 760 returned, approximately 23.4%); Jordan (3000 people sent, approximately 250 returnees, return rate of approximately 8%); Tunisia (2926 people sent, approximately 800 returned, return rate of approximately 27.3%); and France (1910 people sent, 271 returnees, return rate of approximately 14.2%). For countries like Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, where the return rate is over 20%, both "exporting" and "returning" seem relatively easy. In other words, in these countries, measures against the supply of members to Islamic extremist groups have been lax. In addition, the primary route for the flow of combatants going into Iraq and Syria and then returning to their home countries is Turkey. These countries' efforts and our aid to them will be critical in restricting the flow of Islamic extremists.

What Drives Islamic State Growth?

If Islamic State foreign combatants possibly threaten security where they have returned or relocated, or if Islamic extremist groups continue to survive and proliferate, what conditions and drivers fuel the growth of Islamic extremist groups? In Iraq and Syria, religious, sectarian, and ethnic disputes and coercion and dictatorship could generally be considered causes. However, if those were the only causes, they would not explain people coming together under the banner of the Islamic State from all over the world and committing destructive acts in locations other than Iraq and Syria. If they were trying to overthrow the local political administration in Iraq and Syria and occupy and keep territory, it would be rational to use other countries as bases for the supply of resources, so they would not need to bother attacking countries of the West, the Arabian Peninsula, and Asia in the name of the Islamic State. Also, it seems ludicrous to point out, but no return can happen without having left from somewhere. Thus, the returnee issue's essence should be considered as existing in the area of origin.

If that is the case, the cause of people being sent to the Islamic State from all over the world can be considered a driving factor behind its growth. Could the cause lie in poverty, lack of education, disparity, discrimination, maladjustment, and lack of self-actualization among immigrants and their descendants? Yet dissatisfied people in these circumstances do not "automatically and to the last person" become active in Islamic extremist groups. Currently in the European Union, the percentage of low-income Muslim and Arab immigrants who have actually acted for the Islamic State is extremely low. Important, however, is organization of means to influence those dissatisfied with the current state of politics or society.

The recruiting system for Islamic extremist groups, including the Islamic State, deserves special focus. The nature of terrorist groups means that they must prevent entry of those who

are not needed, who lack loyalty, and who are enemy spies. Therefore, to evaluate the recruitment subject's abilities and trustworthiness, the principle recruitment route is through family and friends and direct interaction. As a result, in the Islamic State as well, the main force is chosen, recruited and trained in their "export country," and then travel arrangements are made before they depart. For those who are influenced through the Internet and wish to join voluntarily, the likelihood of being stopped or arrested while traveling is much higher. Furthermore, the recipient of recruits cannot judge ability or trustworthiness so even if recruits arrive, they do not quickly become Islamic State soldiers but must undergo selection, education, and training at a unit or in a combat facility.

In short, countries that send many members to the Islamic State have some organization that makes it possible. The problem with such countries is that the Islamic State and other similar groups are conducting recruitment, selection, training, and then export of members, without any meaningful restrictions. In other words, the most critical measure is to track, identify, and crack down on people who act for the Islamic State in export countries, discover what communications they have with the Islamic State, and then cut off those communications. Ideally, poverty, disparity, discrimination, and inequality of opportunity could be eliminated, but focusing too much on those issues at the expense of other direct measures in the field would mean putting our priorities in the wrong order.

Finally, in the context of return and cross-border movement of foreign combatants, this report states that driving factors of Islamic State growth are flaws in measures of export countries, travel-route areas, and the authorities' inaction. If non-drastic measures or measures involving only areas of Islamic State activities are established, they will not lead to effective countermeasures. This is an issue for which export countries and travel-route areas are responsible, and until this is understood, the threat to repatriates' countries cannot be avoided.