



SMA Reach-back

Question (LR 3): What actions and policies can regional and coalition nations employ to reduce recruitment of ISIL inspired fighters?

Reducing ISIL Recruitment

Dr. R. Kim Cragin
National Defense University

This paper addresses the issue of ISIL recruitment from Literature Review Question #3. To do this, it utilizes a “quick look” format and focuses on two non-standard ideas approaches to challenge of terrorist recruitment. For readers interested in source materials on this subject, this paper also incorporates a bibliography at the end of the document.

Minimize the impact of existing foreign fighters and returnees¹

The single most significant policy that nations could employ to reduce recruitment of ISIL fighters in the future is to minimize the influence of returnees. Historically, most foreign fighters have returned home from conflicts overseas to recruit and build local networks. Take, for example, the case of Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. Approximately 80 per cent of the 20,000 foreign fighters returned home and recidivism rates ranged from 40 per cent (Indonesia) to 90 per cent (Algeria). Moreover, even in the case of Indonesia, which had the lowest rate of recidivism, returnees recruited and expanded local terrorist networks. In fact, recent interviews in Indonesia with Afghan veterans revealed that foreign fighters were instructed to recruit 10 new operatives each, once they got home.

A similar pattern exists with foreign fighters today. Between June 2014 and May 2016 there were 54 directed and “inspired” plots or attacks associated with ISIL in Europe. Foreign fighter returnees were involved in 65 per cent of the directed and 40 per cent of the entirety of the plots. In many of the plots, returnees recruited others to assist in the operation. The November 2015 Paris attacks illustrate this phenomenon. The core group of operatives was comprised of nine individuals under the leadership of Abdelhamid Abaaoud. Seven of the operatives were foreign fighters and returned home specifically to conduct an attack in Europe. Two of the operatives were Iraqi nationals who were sent to Europe by ISIL leaders to participate in the attacks. But an additional 21 individuals have been arrested by security officials for providing logistical or other support to these attackers. Of these additional 21 recruits, only seven had previously fought in Syria or Iraq. The rest were recruited locally.

This means that regional and coalition nations should put policies and programs into place now to mitigate the impact of returnees on future recruits. These programs should include the following elements. First, nations should make it illegal – through penal codes or otherwise – to travel overseas to fight as part of an insurgency. The United Nations has already begun to work with

¹ Findings in this section draw on a forthcoming article in a special edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* on the topic of countering violent extremism, entitled, “The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees.”

countries on their legal frameworks, but this framework is essential for countries to be able to act, and assist each other, in mitigating the impact of returnees. Second, countries should provide “off-ramps” or de-radicalization programs to individuals who travelled to Syria in support of ISIL, but did not engage in violence. Third, returnees who engaged in violent acts should be imprisoned – per a countries’ relevant penal code – but, in the prison, they should likewise be placed into a de-radicalization program. If they refuse to participate, they should be isolated from other prisoners to minimize the potential recruitment of other prisoners.

Emphasize programs that reinforce non-radicalization²

Another policy that nations could employ to reduce recruitment of ISIL fighters in the future is to implement programs that reinforce non-radicalization. Generally speaking, radicalization can be understood as a process whereby individuals are persuaded that violent activity is justified in pursuit of some political aim, and then they decide to become involved in that violence. However, many of the factors that push or pull individuals toward radicalization are in dispute within the expert community. Much of the problem is that the factors identified by experts as contributing to radicalization apply to many more people than those who eventually become involved in political violence. Such limitations are more than academic, because they make it difficult for policymakers to design interventions. These limitations lead to programs aimed at manipulating broad structural actors—for example, education—so that they affect small subsets of populations of people who might or might not decide to become terrorists. One alternative is to instead focus policies on encouraging individuals to reject violent extremism.

To explore this possibility, we conducted a series of subject matter interviews, focus groups, and surveys in the Palestinian West Bank (2012) and Yemen (2016) on why individuals eschew violent extremism. Findings revealed the following:

- Rejecting violent extremism is a process with multiple stages and choices within each stage
- Choosing not to engage in violence is distinct from opposing political violence in theory
- Nonviolent political activism does not contribute to non-radicalization
- Family plays a greater role than friends in shaping attitudes towards nonviolence in the Palestinian West Bank, and
- Urban centers in Yemen represent key populations for strengthening non-radicalization.

These findings suggest that policies to reduce the recruitment of ISIL inspired fighters must go beyond de-radicalization and counter messaging programs. In fact, from a policy perspective it is equally or more important to strengthen the factors that inhibit radicalization. And, importantly, these factors are *not* merely the absence of radicalization factors. Thus regional and coalition nations should attempt to understand why most do not engage in violence in their countries and they attempt to design programs to reinforce these factors.

Bibliography

² Findings in this section draw on three publications on the topic of non-radicalization, including the results from a forthcoming study on Yemen. References can be found in the Bibliography.

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Biography



R. Kim Cragin is a senior research fellow at the National Defense University. She recently left a position as senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation. Cragin focuses on terrorism-related issues. Cragin has conducted fieldwork in Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Egypt, northwest China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, among others. Her RAND publications include *Severing the Ties that Bind* (2015), *Disrupting Global Transit Hubs* (2013) and *Social Science for Counter-Terrorism* (2010). Cragin also has published academic articles, including "Resisting Violent Extremism" in the reviewed journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2013), "al-Qa'ida Confronts Hamas" in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2009), and "The Early History of al-Qa'ida" in the *Historical Journal* (2008). Her book entitled *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs* was released by Praeger in 2009. Cragin has a master's degree from the Sanford Institute of Public Policy at Duke University. She completed her Ph.D. at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom.