

Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria – Why So Many?

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Australian Foreign Fighters: The Long Reach of the Syrian Conflict

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We are happy to release Volume 6, Issue 9 (October 2014) of the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis (CTTA) at www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta. The three articles in this issue focus on the heartrending conflicts of Syria and Iraq which have caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands and displaced millions. The articles by Abdul Basit and Chantal Azzam specifically focus on the aspect of the conflicts which make them one of the major challenges to global security and stability, i.e. their ability to attract thousands of foreign fighters from across the world.

Abdul Basit identifies the motivational factors which cause foreign fighters to travel to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, which include among others, the desire to participate in the 'end times battle' and live in and defend an 'Islamic state', as well as ISIS' appeal, coming as a result of the group's sophisticated propaganda tactics and wealth.

Chantal Azzam underscores the 'blowback' effect of returning foreign fighters – committed jihadists with lethal combat skills – to their respective countries, focusing on the threat to Australia.

Mekki Uludag describes how Turkey's ambiguous policies vis-à-vis ISIS on the one hand, and dithering on the issue of deploying its military assets as part of the international coalition, is undermining the fight against the ISIS threat.

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Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria – Why So Many?

Abdul Basit

The rise of ISIS-like terrorist groups in the Syria and Iraq conflicts and their ability to attract foreign fighters has created new challenges for global peace. While the return of these foreign fighters to their home countries is a threat to be monitored, it is imperative to understand the factors luring them to fight in Syria and Iraq to formulate counter-strategies. The desire to live in and defend the so-called 'Islamic state', participate in the 'end times battle', sectarian motivations and the search for an Islamic identity are some of the factors attracting foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria.

The conflicts in Syria and Iraq have created new challenges for global peace and security. In this regard, one of the principal challenges to overcome is the participation of foreign fighters in these conflicts. The region is now hosting the largest congregation of jihadists since the Afghan Jihad (1979-1989). According to a June 2014 report of the Soufan Group (TSG), a US-based security consultancy firm, more than 12,000 foreign fighters from at least 81 nations, including Western countries like the United States, Britain, France and Australia, have travelled to Iraq and Syria. The majority of foreign fighters in Syria/Iraq are from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Algeria. A significant portion of foreign fighters have come from the Caucasus region, Central Asia Republics (CARs), and Australia. Fighters from South Asian countries like India and Pakistan and Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand have also travelled to Syria and Iraq.

The Soufan Group's report notes that approximately 80 percent of the foreign fighters have joined the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) group, recently declared the Islamic State (IS). Meanwhile, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat Al Nusra (JN) (also known as Al Nusra Front) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have attracted considerable numbers of foreigners to their ranks as well.

Ideological Factors

End Times Battle Myth

One major reason why such a large number of foreign fighters have travelled to Syria and Iraq is the Islamic belief that the ‘final battle’ of all time between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ forces will take place in Syria (Armageddon in the Christian context). The eventual defeat of the evil forces will lead to the End of Time (Day of Judgement), when God’s judgement will come to a pass.

This narrative is supported by the use of the ‘black flag’ by most radical and extremist groups. This is based on contested Hadith (reports of teachings, deeds, and sayings of Prophet Muhammad). One of these Hadith was narrated by medieval scholar Ibne Maja (570 - 632 C.E.) and speaks of the carriers of black banners/flags as representing true Islamic believers. According to Iben Maja, the Prophet said: “If you see the black banners coming from Khurasan go to them immediately, even if you must crawl over ice, because indeed amongst them is the Caliph, Al Mahdi [the Messiah]...and no one can stop that army until it reaches Jerusalem.” Islamist militant groups like ISIS have distorted such Hadith in their propaganda campaigns to paint the on-going war in Syria as the start of the end times battle.

Desire to Live In and Defend the so-called Islamic State

To a great extent, individual choices and decisions are a result of individual dispositions. At the same time, the social environment of an individual has a strong influence in shaping an individual’s character or personality. In the context of Muslim foreign fighters joining ISIS from Western countries, their social paradigm and the treatment of Islam in the West warrants analysis and reflection.

Some of the volunteers who have gone to Iraq and Syria were lured by strong ISIS propaganda on the establishment of the so-called Islamic State on 7 July 2014, when Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared himself its caliph. A significant portion of these volunteers were Western Muslims, who have become dejected due to the West’s negative stereotyping of Islam as a religion of violence and radicalism vis-à-vis the liberal-secular system of the countries which they perceive as not permitting them to practice ‘true Islam’.

“ After 9/11, the growing Islamophobia in the West has disenfranchised a large segment of Muslim youth ... ”

The rampant criticism of Islam in the West and the debating of Islam’s compatibility with liberal Western values is a social environment which the first, second and third generation immigrant or diaspora Muslims living in Western countries have had to cope with post 9/11. After 9/11, the growing Islamophobia in the West has disenfranchised a large segment of Muslim youth in the West’s Muslim community, resulting in a sense of alienation among them and a quest for identity (while it can be noted that Islamophobia has increased in Western countries with the advent of ISIS). For example, France’s decision to ban the wearing of veils for Muslim women due to the perception that it was a negation of Western liberal values, has made it difficult for Muslim communities to integrate/ remain integrated there.

The declaration of the so-called Islamic State resonated with these marginalised individuals, and for them travelling to Syria and Iraq was a migration undertaken to find a new home, so that they may be able to live their lives in the ‘Islamic way’. In their estimation, it was a journey of spiritual purification and enlightenment. Later, the desire to defend and expand this ‘Islamic state’ became an imbedded part of their so-called holy sojourn to Syria and Iraq.

Most of the Muslim youth from the West who have joined ISIS and other jihadist militant groups in Iraq and Syria are between the ages of 18 and 29 years. In some instances, individuals in their 30s and boys as young as 15 years old have also joined as fighters. A significant number of these fighters are either new converts to Islam or second or third generation immigrants. Those coming from Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia are Muslims who have a history of jihadist militant activity or

self-radicalised individuals who have become uprooted from their religious tradition and are searching for a 'pure' Islam. The ISIS narrative of establishing a caliphate (Islamic state) strongly appeals to all of these types of individuals. The prospect of living in a caliphate which enables them to live their lives 'purely' in accordance with Islamic values, in a strict Islamic social context, lure them to join ISIS.

Sectarian Factors

The sectarian aspect of the present Iraqi and Syrian conflicts has been greatly exploited by Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran to further their interests of regional domination in the Middle East. The ideological influence of both countries on Sunni and Shia faiths respectively has galvanised individuals from both sects across the world to travel to Syria and Iraq. The ISIS jihadist ideology constitutes an anti-Shia, Pan-Sunni Islamism in the Middle East (and the world). Some of the other anti-Shia Sunni militant groups also overtly demonise Shias as heretics. Thus, many Sunni foreign fighters have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight against the present Shia regimes of Syria and Iraq.

In return, many Shia *ulema* (Islamic scholars) in the Muslim world have issued *fatwas* (religious decrees) directing their followers to go to Syria and Iraq to protect holy shrines and relics. For the Shias, it is a fight for the survival and existence of their creed. It is pertinent to mention that Iraq and Syria are home to the most sacred sites of Shia Islam in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. Following these *fatwas*, Shias from across the Muslim world have gone to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside the Shia government of Bashar Al-Assad against the Sunni-led, presently foreign-dominated, opposition.

Effective Use of Social Media

The use of the internet and particularly social media by terrorist and extremist groups is not a new tactic. However, what is unprecedented in the case of ISIS is its level and scope of engagement online. ISIS is known for its effective and tech-savvy propaganda and recruitment campaigns using social media and networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, as well as internet forums to reach its target foreign audience. The high-definition videos, slick graphics, and advanced editing techniques leave deep impressions upon viewers.

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On Twitter, ISIS has organised 'hashtag' campaigns to distribute its message. The ISIS has made available a mobile phone application (for Android mobile devices) named 'The Dawn of Glad Tidings', allowing its users to keep themselves updated with the latest news about the group, as well as allowing ISIS to send its messages regularly to users. ISIS also publishes an electronic magazine named *Dabiq* in several different languages, including Arabic, English, and several other European languages. The magazine is named after the town *Dabiq* in northern Syria mentioned in a Hadith, which describes it as the site of the greatest battle during the end times between Muslims and 'non-believers'.

In order to illustrate how innovative and effective ISIS is in its online operations, a comparison between the use of the internet by ISIS and Al Qaeda is instructive. AQ operated on the internet using password-protected, secretive online forums. On the other hand, ISIS spreads its message in Arabic and English on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other social media forums very openly. Furthermore, the production quality of ISIS videos posted online far surpasses that of AQ videos. AQ videos also mainly constitute long, boring lectures by Al-Zawahiri and other AQ ideologues, while ISIS videos are shocking, 'thrilling', and 'action-packed' – a known example being the infamous videos of beheadings by the group. Moreover, ISIS' following online and otherwise has increased due to the fact that ISIS has followed through on their promises - speech following the actions - whereas AQ has made speeches but has not delivered on them. Indeed, while AQ has been promising its much sought-after 'Islamic state' to its followers in its videos

for the last two decades, ISIS has already effectively established it in parts of Iraq and Syria.

ISIS: Tactical Factors

Well-Financed and Well-Armed

ISIS' appeal certainly also stems from its wealth and military strength. It is believed that ISIS pays a monthly salary to its members. Currently, ISIS is better financed and equipped, as well as better organised, than its rival AQ affiliates or other groups fighting in Iraq and Syria. Self-financed, and thus self-sustained, the group is the world's richest terrorist group, earning approximately US \$2 million a day through crude oil sales in the black market in neighbouring countries. As many as eleven oil fields in Iraq and Syria are under the control of ISIS. Oil is not the only stolen resource ISIS has benefited from. Large parts of Iraq's most fertile provinces are under ISIS control, which account for 40 percent of Iraq's wheat crop. It is believed that the group also makes about US \$12 million every month through kidnappings for ransom, extortion, bank robberies, collection of local taxes, and smuggling of antiquities out of Iraq to be sold in Turkey.

ISIS is of formidable military strength having captured large quantities of US-manufactured weapons left by the capitulating Iraqi military, such as assault rifles and ammunition, as well as heavy weaponry. This has freed the group from the need to allocate funds for arms procurement. As a matter of fact, the volume of resources and territory occupied by ISIS is unprecedented in the world by a non-state actor, and the interest of jihadist foreign fighters to join its ranks in this regard is unsurprising. It is known that seasoned fighters from Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have gone to Iraq and Syria to fight for ISIS due to financial incentives. ISIS reportedly pays better salaries compared to the Taliban and other jihadist groups in the Afghan-Pakistan theatre.

Welcoming Attitude

Unlike Al Qaeda, the ISIS openly welcomes foreign fighters into its ranks. Since its inception, Al Qaeda has remained a secretive organisation with a very strict vetting process for new recruits; its *shura* (Islamic advisory council) being very careful about whom they allow into the group. Moreover, the AQ leadership has maintained an Arab supremacist attitude which has prevented

“ Unlike Al Qaeda, ISIS openly welcomes foreign fighters into its ranks... the AQ leadership has maintained an Arab supremacist attitude which has prevented non-Arab jihadists from advancing in the organisational hierarchy.”

non-Arab jihadists from advancing in the organisational hierarchy. AQ did not allow a non-Arab jihadist leader to its central committee (AQ core or *Tanzeem Al Qaeda*) until 2014. Asim Umar is the first non-Arab AQ leader, who is the head of AQ's newly formed South Asia branch or Al Qaeda in South Asia (AQIS).

In glaring contrast, ISIS welcomes all Sunni Muslims and treats them as equals within the organisation. Foreigners play a prominent role within ISIS, holding key leadership positions. An example is Australian fighter Abu Yahya Al-Shami who heads a military unit responsible for holding the town of Jalula in Northern Iraq. Another example is Aqsa Mahmood, a young Glaswegian of Pakistani origin, who heads ISIS' all-female Sharia police unit (Al-Khansaa Brigade) in the Syrian city of Raqqa. Reportedly, approximately sixty British women have joined the Al-Khansaa Brigade. Omar A-Shishani, who has emerged as the face of ISIS through its online videos, is a young Chechen military commander operating in Syria.

Conclusion

On their return, foreign jihadists in Iraq and Syria could pose a threat to their respective countries.

Battle-hardened and radicalised, they have the ability to plot terrorist attacks either on their own or by joining existing extremist or militant groups. History shows that the Afghan Jihad (1979-1989) culminated in the creation of Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban movement. The veterans of the Afghan Jihad also spearheaded the militant uprisings in Kashmir and inspired uprisings in Bosnia and Chechnya.

Thus, it is imperative for the international community to take immediate and coordinated steps to manage the ISIS threat. The intensification of terrorist activity in the Iraqi and Syrian battlefronts and attraction of foreign fighters to the conflicts and terrorist groups, underscores the acute failures of the decade-long international campaign against terrorism and religious extremism. Tactically, the US and international community may have prevailed over Al Qaeda and other extremist groups, but strategically they have failed to address the causes which breed radical Islamist tendencies. This calls for a more comprehensive counterterrorism approach with long-term measures, as against the short-term and reactive fixes so far.

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Australian Foreign Fighters: The Long Reach of the Syrian Conflict

Chantal Azzam

The 'blowback' effect of Australian battle-hardened fighters returning from Syria and carrying out attacks in the homeland has become a national security concern for the country. This is further compounded by the increasing number of small jihadist cells and lone wolf terrorists aiming to perpetrate terrorist attacks in Australia.

Introduction

The impact of the Syrian conflict is being felt well beyond its borders, especially as it has become a magnet for jihadists globally. In particular, a growing concern is the alarming number of foreign fighters in Syria (as defined by David Malet in *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during a civil conflict”) who have volunteered to fight against the government of Bashar Al-Assad by joining jihadist or militant opposition groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), or to a lesser extent, to defend the Assad regime.

In fact, the Syrian conflict has seen the largest mobilisation of foreign fighters since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Syria has also become a terrorist training ground as with Afghanistan in the 1980s, where new skills are learned and contacts are made on the battlefield. The fighters in Syria are predominately Sunni Arab Muslims. However, Sunni (and Shia) foreign fighters have also come from numerous other countries, including Western countries such as Australia, the United States, and European countries.

The disposition of returning foreign fighters to carry-out attacks in their respective homelands is neither linear nor certain. It is difficult to distinguish between those who will engage in terrorism upon their return and those who will not. Nevertheless, returning fighters are worrisome to their home countries, as the majority of them perceive the respective countries as being hostile to Muslims, and to Islam in general. For example, since the United States formed a coalition to combat ISIS (which attracts most of the foreign fighters), ISIS has urged followers to attack military personnel, government officials, and civilians, including members of the media, of the states fighting against ISIS. Syrian-born Sheik Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, a senior member of ISIS, urged supporters to kill 'disbelieving' Americans, Europeans, or any other 'non-believers' who are waging war against ISIS by any possible means: "Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him."

Australian Fighters in Syria

The presence of Australian fighters abroad and the threat presented by them are not entirely new to the country. As catalogued by Andrew Zammit (in "Tracking Australian Foreign Fighters in Syria" and "Explaining a Turning Point in Australian Jihadism"), Australians have fought in a number of conflicts in the past. From 1998 to 2000, approximately twenty Australians trained with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in Pakistan. From 2002 to 2012, sixteen Australians were arrested or charged in absentia in Lebanon for alleged jihadist activities with Fatah Al-Islam and Asbat Al-Ansar. Moreover, approximately forty Australians have travelled to Somalia in 2000 to fight for Al Shabaab or to join jihadist groups in Yemen.

Nonetheless, the Syrian conflict has resulted in the mobilisation of Australian fighters on a scale not previously seen. Though it is difficult to quantify accurately, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) report to parliament for 2012-2013 estimates that the number of Australians fighting in Syria range from 70 to over 200. Although there are some who volunteer to go to Syria without pre-existing links to armed groups, active recruitment and facilitation by terrorist groups in Syria has also been occurring while the would-be fighters were still in Australia. For instance, Hamdi Alqudsi,

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arrested in December 2013 following a four-month investigation, is one of several Australians who have been found to run expensive, sophisticated, and illegal schemes to send young Australians to fight in Syria. He was a conduit for six men to travel to Syria.

The Australian Federal Police has described activities of Australians in Syria as "a real game-changer", as it has also nourished the emergence of Australian 'lone wolves' who are inspired by the violent jihadist ideology propagated by the terrorist groups (and Australian foreign fighters) in Syria. A recent example is ISIS sympathiser Numan Haidar, a Melbourne man, who made threats against Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott. On 26 September 2014, Haidar attacked two police officers with a knife as they tried to meet with him, and Haidar got killed in the encounter by police firing. When his body was searched, an ISIS flag was found. Investigators believe that initially Haidar's intention was to behead the officers and record the carnage.

Why Australians?

There are several factors for the high level of involvement of Australian Muslims in Syria. The Syrian conflict has generated widespread outrage among Muslim communities, and has provided an opportunity for jihadist groups such

as Al Qaeda’s Jabhat Al-Nusra (JN) and ISIS to present themselves as defenders of (Sunni) Muslims. Most Australian jihadist sympathisers believe that the West is waging a war against Islam and that terrorist groups such as ISIS and AQ are acting in defence of Islam. In fact, some Australian Muslims who have gone to fight in Syria have no Syrian ancestry, and many are not ethnically Arab. They have no links to the conflict except for the belief that they share a religious identity with the fighting groups. Indeed, Australian Muslims who join terrorist organisations in Syria may be disaffected, ‘aimless’ individuals lacking a sense of belonging or identity. Due to their search for a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives, they have become vulnerable to the jihadist narrative. Finally, there are also persons and small groups who believe that a terrorist attack in Australia is justified due to Australia’s military deployments (i.e. in Afghanistan and Iraq) or because they believe that Australian culture is in direct conflict with their radical interpretation of Islam.

Abu Asma Al-Australi

One of the most controversial events concerning an Australian in Syria occurred in mid-September 2013, when the JN group asserted that a man known as ‘Abu Asma Al-Australi’ executed a suicide bombing in the town of al-Mreiya. Abu Asma, a 27-year-old Lebanese-Australian, is believed to be the first suicide bomber of Australian origin. He drove a truck loaded with 12 tonnes of explosives into a school where 35 Syrian government soldiers were stationed. The attack killed the soldiers and helped JN seize the city’s military airport.

The root causes of Abu Asma’s radicalisation are unclear owing to limited publically available information. However, his extreme jihadist inclination is evident through his video message posted just prior to executing the act of terror, where he stated: “Today jihad is a duty of every Muslim, to carry a weapon and come to the land of jihad... today jihad is a duty imposed on every Muslim, so rise up Muslims.”

Mustapha Al-Majzoub

Mustapha Al-Majzoub, a popular sheikh in Sydney is an Australian of Syrian heritage born in Saudi Arabia. Initially, it was reported that he was killed in a rocket attack in August 2012 while delivering humanitarian aid in Latakia. Nevertheless, there are indications that Al-Majzoub was killed while fighting against the Syrian government. It is now evident that he was

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involved in a military operation linked to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), based on statements made by sources close to the FSA, a speech delivered by his father at the Lakemba Mosque in Sydney, and statements made by Majzoub himself. Majzoub stated in his last Facebook post:

"Subhanallah [Glory-to-God], I met brothers here who from the first instance you might think are too merciful or weak, however on the battlefields they are lions that roar. They are stern and firm, they scare their enemies more than 100 men with big muscles, like the way the companions were described in the Quran (they are merciful towards one another and stern against their enemies)."

Mohammad Ali Baryalei

Mohammad Ali Baryalei is an Australian citizen of Afghan origin who was recruited to ISIS while he was in Australia. Before Baryalei turned radical, he was a former Kings Cross Hotel nightclub bouncer and part-time actor who loved gambling, drugs, and women. Today, he is a senior member (and most senior Australian member) of the ISIS operational command, and a key ISIS recruiter of potential Australian jihadists, providing material support and arranging travel for those interested in fighting with ISIS in the battlefields of Iraq and Syria. He

has recruited persons as young as seventeen as well as notorious senior fighters such as Khaled Sharrouf and Mohamed Elomar from Australia to fight on behalf of ISIS.

Counterterrorism authorities say Baryalei formed a cell of young Afghan-Australians in Sydney in May 2014 not only to recruit them as fighters, but also to carry out terrorist attacks within Australia. The emerging reality of domestic terrorism struck Australia on 18 September 2014, when authorities intercepted a phone conversation between Baryalei and Omarjan Azari, an Afghan-Australian man, as Baryalei ordered Azari to kidnap and kill a random 'kufar' or non-believer and record it on camera. This incident triggered several police units to launch synchronised raids on vehicles and houses across Sydney and Brisbane. It is believed that executions of Australians - in the style of the ISIS beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and David Haines - were just days from being carried out.

Khaled Sharrouf

Khaled Sharrouf is a Lebanese-Australian who came to the limelight in August 2014 when he had his young son pose for a photo with a severed head in Syria. Sharrouf was recruited by Baryalei while he was in Australia, and travelled to Syria using his brother's passport. In August 2014, he threatened a terrorist attack in Australia and stated that he would have carried one out already if he had not left to fight in Iraq and Syria in 2013.

Before going out to fight, Sharrouf was a drug addict and petty criminal, who suffered from a chronic mental illness. Sharrouf claims that he has been on the path of 'jihad' for more than a decade. In 2009, Sharrouf pleaded guilty to possessing six clocks and 140 batteries, which he admitted were to be used for a terrorist act. He was subsequently sentenced for eleven months in prison. It is suspected that while in prison he was further radicalised by receiving weekly 'lessons' via the jail phone from Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, a prominent radical Salafist Jordanian-Palestinian preacher.

Challenges to Australian National Security

In September 2014, Australia raised its public terror alert to 'high' for the first time since the 9/11 attacks (2001). The terrorist threat to Australia may have exacerbated due to its participation in the US-led coalition against ISIS. There is no doubt that the Syrian conflict poses a great security risk and challenge to Australia.

“ The emerging reality of domestic terrorism struck Australia on 18 September 2014, when authorities intercepted a phone conversation between Mohammad Ali Baryalei and Omarjan Azari, as Baryalei ordered Azari to kidnap and kill a random ‘kufar’ or non-believer and record it on camera ... ”

The likelihood of returning fighters - committed jihadists with deadly skills, violent intent, combat experience - carrying out attacks cannot easily be ruled out. A study conducted by Thomas Hegghammer (author of *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting*) on foreign fighters returning from Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Somalia and other jihadist battlefronts, found that one in nine returned to their home countries to commit attacks. Even though the ratio appears less, those one in nine are likely to be more efficient, knowledgeable, and influential than 'home-grown' extremists who have not had the opportunity to obtain military training, bomb-making skills, and fighting experience.

Australia's security concerns are also based on the nature of past jihadist activity in the country. The Al Qaeda plot in Sydney during the 2000 Olympics, the LeT plot in Sydney in 2003, and the two cells in Melbourne and Sydney which were disrupted in 2005, all involved individuals who were trained in Al Qaeda and LeT camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s. A plot to carry out a mass shooting

against Sydney's Holsworthy Army Barracks in 2009 involved Muslim men from Melbourne who had functioned as a support network for Al Shabaab. They had also dispatched others to train and fight in Somalia. Given the greater scale of the Syrian mobilisation, it has the potential to have an even greater impact on the domestic security threat.

Additionally, there is a threat from small domestic cells of radicals and lone wolves who are influenced by the jihadist activity in Syria. As mentioned earlier, ISIS is urging lone wolf attacks in Western countries. This is a significant security concern as such acts are exceedingly difficult to detect and prevent.

The Syrian and Iraqi conflicts have also brought the issues of sectarianism and identity to the forefront among Australian Muslim communities, negatively impacting national peace and security. There have been sporadic incidents of communal violence between Sunnis and Shias of Australia since 2012. For instance, areas in Sydney such as Lakemba and Greenacre have become 'no-go' zones for Shias.

Conclusion

The long reach of the Syrian conflict is well felt in Australia. The threat posed by Australian fighters returning from Syria remains potent, although unclear. Risks to national security also emanate from radicalised citizens within Australia. The Syrian mobilisation is radically reshaping jihadist activity in Australia, a security concern that cannot be underestimated. The Australian government has instituted a series of preventative programs and punitive measures to dissuade would-be foreign fighters, but despite this their numbers have grown.

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Turkish Hostages Freed by ISIS after 102 Days – Why and How?

Mekki Uludag

With Turkish officials not offering an explanation to ISIS' release of the 46 Turkish hostages, the Turkish leadership's open condemnation of the Assad government, and the Turkish public's overt support of ISIS, suspicions are growing about Turkey's ambiguous relationship with ISIS. Indeed, Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria and Iraq is based solely on friendship towards Sunni Arabs, as Turkey has not had good relations historically with Shias, Kurds, Alawis, and non-Muslims in both Syria and Iraq.

"It does not matter whether there was an exchange or not. The most important thing is our citizens are back at home with their families...Nothing can be of more value than my citizens," Turkey's first directly elected president Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters on 21 September 2014, before departing for the United Nations General Assembly Meeting in New York. He added that, "Bargaining with money [with ISIS] was totally out of the question, there were only political and diplomatic negotiations and this is a diplomatic victory." However, Erdogan hinted that Turkey had also engaged in a prisoner exchange with ISIS by saying, "Some can release 1,500 soldiers only in return for one of their hostages... Such things can happen" (it is likely that he was referring to the swap of 1,027 Palestinians for one Israeli soldier which took place in Egypt in 2011).

The 49 hostages were seized from the Turkish Consulate on 11 June 2014 by the ruthless Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) terrorist group, who recently declared themselves as the Islamic State (IS), as they overran Mosul, Iraq. The hostages included Consul Ozturk Yilmaz and other diplomatic staff

and their families including children, as well as (well-trained) security guards of the consulate. The 46 Turkish employees of the consulate were detained and imprisoned by ISIS immediately, while the three Iraqi employees were released the same day they were captured, in all probability as the Iraqi hostages did not meet 'mission purpose'. The 46 Turkish hostages were released after more than three months (102 days) on 20 September 2014.

Official Statements Questioned: Truth is Important

The nature of the hostage release is questioned as it is unclear why the hostages would have been returned to Turkey without the government engaging in a quid pro quo of some kind. However, there are no details provided either by the captives or by the Turkish government in this regard, except the president's subtle hint at a prisoner exchange as mentioned earlier.

The Turkish government's claim that it was primarily political and diplomatic manoeuvres which led to the release of the 46 hostages is also incongruent with Turkey's past dealings with militant groups in Syria. Turkey has previously secured the release of hostages only by succumbing to ransom demands, prisoner swaps, or through the involvement of other militant groups, as illustrated by the following three hostage-taking incidents in the recent past.

Hostages released on 19 October 2013: Two Turkish Airlines pilots, Murat Agca and Murat Akpınar, who were abducted by Hezbollah on 9 August 2013 near Beirut, Lebanon, were freed after 71 days of captivity on 19 October 2013. It is widely believed that the two pilots were released after the Turkish government met a large ransom demand. The government has not made any official statement to the contrary. However, there are no guesses as to the exact ransom amount. Both hostages insisted that they had been treated very well during their captivity, although the conditions they had been kept in were difficult.

“ The nature of the hostage release is questioned as it is unclear why the hostages would have been returned to Turkey without the government engaging in a quid pro quo of some kind ... ”

Hostage released on 5 January 2014: The award-winning Turkish photojournalist Bunyamin Aygun, who was kidnapped on 25 December 2013 by ISIS militants, was rescued on 5 January 2014 and returned to Turkey by [Ahrar al-Sham \('Free of the Levant'\)](#) fighters. Aygun said that ISIS forced him to pray five times a day (one of the Five Pillars of Islam) but treated him well. He also said that the house that he was kept in was full of Turks who were fighting for ISIS. No further details have been provided by Aygun or the Turkish government on the involvement of Ahrar al-Sham fighters in his release.

Hostages released on 3 July 2014: Thirty-two Turkish truck drivers were kidnapped on 10 June 2014 by ISIS while they were transporting oil from Iskenderun Port to Gyarah Thermal Station in Mosul, and were released after 24 days. They also said they had been treated well while in captivity. The Turkish President and the Prime Minister stated that the government “did a lot” to get the hostages back and as such, they were relieved and happy that the drivers were safely back in Turkey. On the other hand, there were serious claims in the Turkish media that these hostages were released on a large amount of ransom given by the owners of the company for which they were working.

Moreover, government officials have given contradictory statements on the recent hostage release. For example, while President Erdogan thanked every member of the Turkish national intelligence agency, from the director to the field operatives, and stated that it was a successful rescue operation only due to their step-by-step planning, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated that there were so many unnamed heroes who were a part of the rescue operation to whom the government would be grateful forever. Meanwhile, Samil Tayyar, Member of Parliament and a member of the ruling Justice and Development Party, insisted that the rescue operation was directed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of United States of America to persuade Turkey to join the military coalition against ISIS. Thus, it is still to be clarified whether the hostages were rescued through an operation by Turkish forces or if they were handed over by ISIS.

The veracity of government statements were in doubt even prior to the hostage release as the Turkish government had implemented a law on 16 June 2014 banning any kind of publication about the hostage crisis. Despite the ban, there are presently harsh debates in the Turkish media about the release of the 46 hostages. Pro-government writers defend the government persistently, stating that a prisoner swap or some other exchange between ISIS and the government is inconsequential, and that the most important thing is that all hostages are back at home now, and that there is nothing more important than saving the lives of these Turkish citizens. On the other hand, segments of the Turkish population believe that the government is not being honest regarding the nature of the recent ISIS hostage-taking and release, and that it aims to deceive its own public.

Some question the real nature of the recent hostage-taking due to the strange manner in which the hostages were captured: the Turkish government was aware of the imminent threat posed by ISIS and had informed the diplomats of it, but the diplomats were still ordered not to leave the premises and not to fight, but surrender to ISIS. This is the view held by columnist Soner Yalcin of the *Sozcu* Turkish newspaper, one of Turkey's major mainstream newspapers, in his article published on 13 June 2014. He claims that it was a spurious capture and release staged to prevent Turkey from joining a military coalition against ISIS. With Turkish officials refusing to explain why ISIS decided to release

“ Turkish officials have stated on many occasions that they support anyone who is against the Assad government in Syria ... ”

the Turkish diplomats, suspicions are growing about Turkey's ambiguous relationship with ISIS.

Turkey's Relations with Jihadist Militant Groups

Some argue that Turkey maintains relations with most of the terrorist groups in Syria, as these groups must have good relations with Turkey for their members to cross Turkey's border and to receive humanitarian aid from Turkey. Indeed, Turkish officials have stated on many occasions that they support anyone who is against the Assad government in Syria, which they call a dictatorship.

Critics question why Turkish citizens have been released by ISIS, while citizens of other countries are killed. They accuse the Turkish state of colluding with ISIS to achieve foreign policy and domestic political objectives of opposing the Assad government and eliminating the Kurdish nationalist movement within Turkey, respectively. Turkey importing nearly all of its oil supplies, some also claim that Turkey seeks to gain some benefits from the oil stations that are under ISIS control.

Earlier, the Turkish leadership stated that it will not side with any military operation or coalition against ISIS, because that could risk the lives of the 46 Turkish hostages. However, a few days after the hostages were released, the Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan for the first time stated on 24 September 2014 that the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is a bloody terrorist organisation”, during a session on “Foreign Fighters” at the United Nations meetings in New York. Upon his return to Turkey, President Erdogan stated that, “Turkey cannot remain outside of a coalition targeting ISIS.” Still, it

seems that Turkey is far from convincing the public as the national and international press are full of statements which either explicitly or implicitly assert Turkey's accommodating attitude towards ISIS.

It should be noted that despite the existence of a dissident segment of the population, the majority of the Turkish public support ISIS due to their Sunni Muslim orientation. Most Turks identify only with Sunni Muslims, and do not like the Shia Muslims, Kurds (even Kurds who are Sunni Muslims), Alawis, or non-Muslims within Turkey or regionally in Iraq and Syria. "ISIS we are with you, destroy the Kurds" was a 'worldwide Twitter trending topic' by Turkish users on 5 October 2014, which is evidence of the Turkish people's support for ISIS. The Turkish state, representing the majority Sunni Muslim ethnic Turkish population, has been in conflict with the minority Kurdish population and Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan/PKK) for decades due to the strict bans the government has implemented on the Kurdish language, education, and expression of Kurdish identity and culture in Turkey for the approximately 18% Kurdish population.

Turkey did nothing to protect its business partner, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq when ISIS attacked in August 2014. Nor is it helping the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani which is presently under brutal attack by ISIS - Kobani being very significant for the Turkish Kurds due to their family ties with the people of Kobani as well as politically for the Kurdish people. Instead, Turkey strictly closed its border-crossing to Kobani, preventing Turkish Kurds from entering Kobani or any movement of humanitarian aid or weapons to the Syrian Kurdish militia, Yekineyen Parastina Gel/ YPG (People's Protection Units), fighting against ISIS in Kobani. This has led to the perception that the Turkish government has allied with ISIS to capture the strategic town of Kobani. Of course the Kurdish people of Turkey have become enraged and desperate, leading to violent protests across Turkey which have led to the death of more than 30 protesters.

What Now?

The central question remains as to whether Turkey will take part in the military coalition against ISIS. It seems improbable that Turkey will join such a coalition due to its foreign policy towards Syria and Iraq. Firstly, as stated many times by the Turkish government, it views the Assad government in Syria as an acute threat and seeks for it to be toppled by any means. Secondly, Turkey sees any kind of Kurdish group as a threat to its 'internal security'. In all of his speeches, the President Erdogan has identified Assad as the biggest danger to Syria, while also blaming the Shias in Iraq for their exclusion of Sunnis from the government of Iraq. As these are the cornerstones of Turkish foreign policy, it is unlikely that they will change in the short-term, especially as the majority of Turks are in favour of ISIS and construes an attack on the group as an attack against Sunni Muslims. On the other hand, the Turkish President recently stated that, "Turkey will not remain outside of the coalition [targeting ISIS]." It is hoped that Turkey joins the international alliance in earnest, so that groups like ISIS can be comprehensively targeted in the future.

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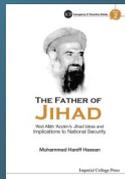
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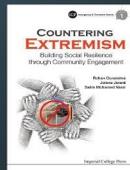
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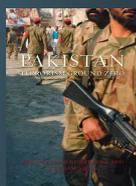
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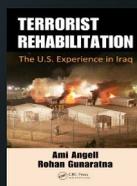
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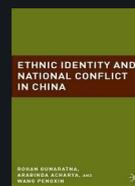
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