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Responding to the Islamic State's Foreign Fighters: Retribution or Rehabilitation?

By Farish A. Noor and James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Heated debate about the fate of foreign fighters joining the Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Iraq and Syria, spotlights a host of societal problems in Europe. It also highlights the degree of alienation that prompts young men and women to join a brutal force and calls into question the efficacy of criminalisation.

Commentary

PRIME MINISTER David Cameron's plans to criminalise British fighters in Iraq and Syria and bar them from returning to Britain has come in for sharp criticism from the former head of counter-terrorism in its intelligence services MI5 and MI6. Richard Barrett hit the nail on the head when he argued that repentant fighters, who regret taking the fateful step of joining an armed struggle in a war-torn region that has nothing to do with religion, have an important role to play in dissuading others from following in their footsteps.

In fact Barrett was suggesting that the young men and women, many of whom have been marginalised in British society as a result of their ethnic or religious heritage, could not only be reintegrated into society but help break down barriers of alienation in immigrant communities.

Questioning notions of retribution

Barrett's comments came amid reports that as many as one fifth of the estimated British fighters in Iraq and Syria were disillusioned and looking for a way to return home. A man with a 25-year history in British intelligence and diplomacy, Barrett was not motivated by compassion but by hard-nosed realism rooted in the experience of de-radicalisation programmes in a host of countries over a long period of time, including Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.

Barrett recognised that beyond having been there and being able to argue to their peers that groups like Islamic State are not a solution, repentant foreign fighters are also a potential fount of intelligence about the group's mode of organisation, funding, tactics and long-term ambitions. Barrett further understood that in the struggle against radical militants insider knowledge is of crucial importance, and vital for understanding the dynamics of radicalisation.

In doing so, Barrett was implicitly calling into question traditional notions of retribution and rehabilitation by arguing that Britain had more to benefit from turning repentant foreign fighters into assets than from penalising them.

With ISIS having an estimated 12,000 foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, Barrett's argument builds on the more recent experience of Saudi Arabia, a major supplier of the Islamic State's foreign contingent, as well as of Malaysia in the 1950s. Saudi officials estimate that of the approximately 3,000 jihadists that have gone through the kingdom's extensive rehabilitation programme, at most 10 percent have found their way back to violent militancy. In rehabilitating the former jihadists, Saudi Arabia included militant clerics who in the past had supported Osama Bin Laden in the team of professionals working with the young men to re-integrate them into society.

Two models of successful counter-terrorism

While it may be too early to declare the Saudi programme a success with jihadist violence sweeping the Middle East, enough time has gone by to tout Malaysia's experience as one. Former militant guerrillas of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) were persuaded to abandon their struggle and accept rehabilitation in order to be reintegrated into society. Many did, and some provided vital information about the MCP's tactics, operational capabilities, and long-term strategy.

The Malaysian government helped turn the anti-militant campaign into a success by looking into the anxieties and frustrations of those who had become militants in the first place. Like the Saudis after them, they factored in variables such as job opportunities and citizenship rights that pushed young men and women to join the militants in the first place.

The Saudi and Malaysian experiences are but two models of successful counter-terrorism that take as their starting point the addressing of core problems rather than retribution. They offer lessons for Europe in coming to grips with its nationals who join the Islamic State often more as a desperate cry for help because of deep-seated feelings of marginalisation and exclusion that are magnified by their home country's unwillingness to act while a brutal regime in Syria massacred its population.

In many ways, frustration among Europe's Muslim youth over Syria resembles the anger that prompted European leftists and liberals to join the Republicans against General Francisco Franco's Nationalists in Spain in the 1940s – which was another instance of 'internationalism' and which proves that what we are seeing now is neither new nor unique.

With unemployment at its highest in Europe since World War Two, thousands of young Europeans, many of them descendants of earlier waves of immigration, face the harsh realities of economic stagnation and, homelessness. They have lost faith in future prospects and the capability of governments to create opportunities. They share the same problems and despair with non-migrant segments of European society who seek their solace in neo-Nazi organisations and right-wing militias. Like today's foreign fighters, these men and women travelled in the 1990s to Bosnia to fight alongside right-wing ethno-nationalist militias.

The lesson in all of this is that Muslims may be at the centre of the foreign fighter issue in Iraq and Syria but that does not mean that Europe has a Muslim problem. Europe's problem is one of transition from traditional relatively homogeneous societies into a plurality of ethnic and religious communities. That transition has yet to address problems of lack of political representation, social and economic inequality, and the fact that the brunt of these unresolved issues is borne by the young and the poor.

An egalitarian, equal-opportunity employer

Writing in *The Guardian*, anthropologist Scott Atran noted that the Islamic State's western volunteers "are mostly youth in transitional stages in their lives – immigrants, students, between jobs or girlfriends, having left their homes and looking for new families. For the most part they have no traditional religious education and are "born again" to religion."

What inspires the most lethal terrorists in the world today is not so much the Quran or religious teachings as a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends.

Jihad is an egalitarian, equal-opportunity employer: fraternal, fast-breaking, glorious and cool. It was what they sought in European society but were unable to access.

As a result, Europe's foreign fighters largely represent a generation that needs help not castigation. Barrett's argument opens the door to approaching them and their peers with the necessary intelligence and sensitivity, recognising that punitive retribution is not the answer and will not solve the problem. It was precisely the perception of discrimination, exclusion and society's lack of comprehension and compassion that drove them out of Europe in the first place.

Farish A Noor is Associate Professor at RSIS and Head of the RSIS Doctoral Programme. James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg