Returning ISIS Fighters

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Purpose Statement

Approximately 195 allegedly radicalized Canadians who have travelled abroad to join ISIS, are seeking repatriation. This may pose a threat to Canadian national security as well as to public safety, as well as will require a strategic plan, since the imprisoned Canadians will be released in the next few months.

The Security Problem

Canadians returning from allegedly fighting abroad on behalf of ISIS require further research as they may create a greater risk to public safety and national security for two reasons. First, civilians or public locations are often the targets of terrorist attacks. Second, monitoring and preventing possible attacks would require increased manpower, capabilities and resources than may currently be available to law enforcement and government agencies. the likelihood of a radicalized individual being inspired to commit "Lone Wolf" attacks is increased, particularly because of personal frustrations that are only loosely tied to wider religious aims or political ideals (Spaaij, 2010: 854).

Individuals who are allegedly radicalized, and may have been involved in conflicts abroad may pose a threat to Canada as there is a possibility of 'lone wolf' attacks being perpetrated on Canadian soil by these individuals.

Returnees who lone wolf attacks inspired by Islamist Jihad is a security problem for civilians and Canada's security agencies for two reasons: Civilians are usually the targets in terrorist attacks; and for law enforcement agencies, monitoring and preventing possible attacks would take manpower and increased capabilities. It is feasible that "radicalized" individuals could commit terrorist activities in Canada. This is an issue for several Radicalized Canadians could be inspired to commit "Lone Wolf" attacks because of personal frustrations that are only loosely tied to wider religious aims or political ideals (Spaaij, 2010: 854).

Key Facts

The last update by the Canadian government estimated that ~190 Canadians travelled to Iraq and Syria to join Daesh, not including those who have already returned, for which the number is at 60 (Ministry of Public Safety, 2017: 2; Fejes, 2019: 91). Canadians who have relocated to Syria and Iraq for Daesh have allegedly engaged in terrorist activities (Bell & Russell, 2019; Bell, 2019; Matthews, 2018) . However, due to the nature of war and the lack of accessibility to records in Syria and Iraq over the past 6 years, challenges arise in verifying if and what crimes were committed (Swain, 2019; Neustaeter, 2019). Some returnees have already been designated as threats and others have been put into mandatory deradicalization programs (Pazzano, 2019).

Background

The Islamic Caliphate of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was declared in 2013. The establishment of the so-called "Islamic State in Syria" (ISIS) followed shortly after. Since late 2016 and culminating in the liberation of Baghouz, Daesh has lost nearly all of its territory. However, the ideology remains dangerous, especially for those who would use it as a justification for 'lone wolf' attacks. Furthermore, ISIS may still have some support from foreign fighters in Africa and the Middle East (Muneer, 2017; Speckhard et al., 2017; Wedemann & Said-Moorehouse).

There have been accounts of rape, sexual enslavement, summary executions, and mass atrocity crimes as listed under Article 5 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Chertoff, 2017: 1058). However, it is not clear which crimes were committed by Canadians fighting for Daesh or whether Canadians who are returning from Syria and Iraq committed those crimes.

Key Considerations and Implications

There is anecdotal evidence that foreign fighters are more likely to commit crimes upon return from Syria, as in France (Cragin, 2017: 292).

However, according to evidence-based deradicalization programs, returning combatants who are not reintegrated properly have higher chances of returning to conflict or engaging in violent attacks (Bryman & Shapiro, 2014; Cragin, 2017: 306).

Alternative Perspectives to be Considered

- It is feasible that the returning Canadians will want to radicalize or perhaps recruit other Canadians, via participating in local communities and attending mosques, to commit violent terrorist acts.
- Increased resources invested into Studies on Deradicalization, Dearmification, and Reintegration (DDR) can help to prevent future violent offences by returning foreign fighters (Cockayne & O'Neil, 2015: 20; Henley, 2014).
- ISIS returnees, much like deradicalized Islamist Jihadists, could become informants for Canada's national intelligence agencies and police forces. Therefore, allowing returnees who fought for ISIS to gather intelligence on their former group. One example of this occurring is with Mubin Shaikh, who once reintegrated, helped take down the Toronto 18, and is now an expert in deradicalization, counter-terrorism, as well as countering violent extremism.
- White supremacist groups that have knowledge of returning ISIS members' whereabouts could feasibly attack them. This is especially true in Alberta and Quebec, where far-right groups such as the III% and La Meute are growing and expressing their discontent for Islam (Lamoureux, 2017).

What is Not Known

- The breadth of Canadians' crimes abroad is not known. If Canadians participated in terrorist activities, the Canadian government will only know from accounts within Syria and Iraq.
- The accounts of crimes committed by Canadians will likely be uncorroborated and perhaps untruthful due to the nature of warfare.

- It is unknown whether Canadians who fought for ISIS will return to Canada, or to another country closer to Syria.
- Evidence from deradicalization programs are anecdotal and are based on historical accounts of programs for Al-Qaeda returnees.
- It is unclear how many Canadians are being kept prisoner by Kurdish forces.
- The evidence of Canadians' whereabouts in Syria and Iraq is not verifiable.
- The extent to which Canadians were radicalized in Syria and Iraq is not known.
- The amount of manpower necessary to ensure the safety of communities where returning Canadian fighters will live is not clear.

Next Steps

- Interviews must be conducted with returning fighters to brief law enforcement officials of the situation where they came from.
- Canadians' movements must be corroborated with Kurdish and Iraqi security forces.
- All returning Canadians should be investigated by law enforcement officials on their whereabouts, the degree to which they were involved with Daesh, and their intended places of residence in Canada upon return.
- A comprehensive strategy must be implemented **before** Canadians return home.

Available Options

- Deradicalization programs can help dissuade returning foreign fighters from re-engaging in politico-military conflict (Bryman, 2016: 70).
- Daesh-affiliated Canadians that have committed crimes should be tried and sentenced (if guilty) in a court.
- Intelligence and security agencies can monitor returning Canadians from Syria and Iraq.

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