Report Cities Conference on Foreign Fighters to Syria

The Hague, 30 January 2014

Some 1,500-2,000 European citizens have left for Syria to fight, they are also known as 'foreign fighters'. The level of foreign fighters travelling to Syria to date has been unprecedented in comparison to previous conflicts in the last decades. Member States have implemented repressive measures, such as making it illegal to travel to training camps and withdrawing passports from potential fighters. However, repression alone will not solve the problem. Prevention, signalling and providing programmes to help (potential) foreign fighter to leave the path of violent extremism are necessary as well. These actions are often organised on a local level. Therefore the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) hosted a cities conference for 200 local practitioners and policy makers of European Member States. The aim of the Cities Conference was the exchange of knowledge and practices between practitioners of the various European cities[1] on how to deal with the foreign fighter phenomenon before, during and after travel and provide recommendations on a local, national and EU-level. The programme of the day and the conference paper that was written prior to the meeting are attached to this report.

General

The current situation on the ground in Syria is more and more confused, and the Syrian people desperately need humanitarian aid and solidarity. This reality is exploited by terrorist propaganda to encourage young people in Europe to take action by joining Foreign Fighters in Syria.   European foreign fighters travel to Syria for very different motivational reasons such as humanitarian reasons, ideological reasons (being attracted to the jihadi, nationalist or pan-Islamic narratives), disillusion towards national government responses or adventure quest. Around 80% of them have now joined terrorist groups like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or Jabat al Nusrah. In other words, most of those who have travelled are there with the intention to fight. That poses a big concern to European Member States.

The panel discussion showed that foreign fighters pose a potential threat to EU Member States in numerous ways. The biggest security threat lies in the fact that foreign fighters acquire terrorist and fighting skills and that some of them may plan attacks against their home countries on return. This is why Member States have certain repressive and legal measures in place. However, governments are not in a position to investigate and prosecute all the foreign fighters upon their return. Many participants highlighted that it was even not desirable and that Member States should also deal with foreign fighers in a different way. For instance, some of them have probably experienced psychological trauma associated with war and may require health care assistance, rehabilitation and reintegration type interventions. An interesting fact also highlighted by the panel was that each

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[1] Vilvoorde, Antwerp, Brussels, Mechelen, Birmingham, London, Cardiff, Portsmouth, Aarhus, Copenhagen (Vestegn), Odense, Ceuta, Melilla, Frankfurt, Berlin, Bonn, Göteborg, Örebro, The Hague, Zoetermeer, Delft, Arnhem, Huizen

media coverage of the foreign fighter phenomenon mechanically resulted in an increase of departures of foreign fighters.

The conference also showed that it is important not just to invest in aftercare, but also in preventing people from travelling by safeguarding vulnerable individuals. However, if travel cannot be prevented, it is important to invest in communities and families during travel. In short, dealing with the foreign fighter phenomenon requires actions by Member States and local practitioners before, during and after travel.

The importance of first line practitioners

Local practitioners can make a difference, as they know their citizens and communities best and thus have the opportunity to detect worrying signs and act upon them. They can also develop tailor-made de-radicalisation or re-socialisation programmes for those who have gone out to Syria or are considering to do so. We identified relevant practitioners from the following different sectors: legal and law enforcement (community/local police officers), local governments, youth work, the educational sector, (mental) health care and NGO's.

Practitioners from (local) statutory bodies and NGO's who work with vulnerable individuals need to be aware of the risk of people leaving to join a crisis zone. It is only when professionals recognise warning signals and are in close contact with other practitioners and the community these individuals come from, that it is possible to safeguard them. In short, a multi-agency approach, in which practitioners work in close cooperation with each other, is key. Some cities and Member States had already set-up multi-agency fora to discuss vulnerable individuals prior to the Syria conflict and to the increase of the phenomenon of foreign fighters. They already had institutional infrastructure in place. However, the conference showed that it is never too late to set up a multi-agency approach to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive approach. Quite a few cities are currently in the developmental stages. Practitioners on a local level deal with several challenges. Among the challenges that were echoed throughout the day was the absence of a national or European framework for dealing with the foreign fighter phenomenon. The difficulty to create an entry point for community and family engagement, due to legal frameworks not favouring a trust-based relationship with families and key community figures, was also highlighted. The foreign fighters are designated and criminalised also doesn't ease cooperation between communities and statutory bodies. The criminalising language also strengthens a feeling of exclusion and of self-victimisation, thus maintaining a vicious circle which motivates young people into going to Syria.

The most important recommendations of the different practitioners were:

- Local government: continuous EU practitioner and knowledge exchange through the RAN and a set up or consolidation of EU & national frameworks for dealing with the foreign fighter issue;
- Legal and law enforcement: ownership and recognition to enable the police to engage;
- Education: encourage critical thinking and deal with prejudice;
- Youth work: acceptance-based youth work; don't condemn, but engage on an equal level;
- Mental health: awareness raising for mental-health workers to deal with the issue, not in isolation but a multi-agency approach;
- NGO: peer-to-peer approach and prompt reactive response.

Specific actions that first line practitioners can undertake were identified and lessons learnt by the practitioners on those types of actions were shared. They concern:

- Community engagement;
- Supporting families;
- Offering exit-programmes, tailor-made de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes.

Community engagement

There is a strong call for humanitarian aid for the people of Syria. In Syrian cities, there is currently a lack of skills in useful areas (such as hospital staff etc.). The focus should therefore move away from travelling to Syria to fight and focussing on the positive aid one can give to the Syrian people. This should be done by creating a bridge between European communities here and Syrian civil society and aid organisations.

Another power of communities is that they can provide an alternative narrative. Active engagement will work when local government and professionals and the communities have a mutual trust in each other. Finding and empowering credible voices is essential for successful community engagement. This engagement is easier to build when no urgent problems are at stake. However, where no active community engagement was in place prior to the Syrian events, it is preferable to aim for long-term engagement, and not just for engagement on an ad-hoc or a crisis basis (sustainability is key).

Other vital elements of community engagement are a reciprocal and, moreover, transparent relationship between communities and statuary bodies. Reciprocal means that grievances and practical needs of the communities should also be addressed. For example, foreign fighters sometimes cause tension within certain local communities, specifically in those communities where peer-recruitment seems to play an important role in the travelling to Syria. These tensions are often magnified by the press. Helping communities to deal with the press, by offering media training by local government communication officials is a form of very practical help. Being transparent in the motives for and throughout the process of engagement, will also increase the chance of establishing a trust-based relationship.

Family support

Supporting families is valuable for several reasons. Quite often, foreign fighters are still in contact with their families back home. If practitioners are able to create and sustain a relationship with those families, than it will be easier to create an entry point for contact with the foreign fighter upon his/her return. This is of particular importance, as families are also crucial for de-radicalisation and disengagement work. Support should therefore not end with the return of the foreign fighter. Moreover, family members (brothers, sisters, cousins) can sometimes also be an at-risk group of travelling to Syria. Supporting families should enable practitioners to act upon early warning signals and prevent travel of other family members. Finally, foreign fighters cause a lot of grief, anxiety, despair and upset for family members. They can benefit psychological support. In short, supporting families should be a continuous process, before, during and after travel.

The type of family support should be tailor-made to the needs of families and their (local) context. Different approaches in several cities and/or countries were presented, varying from individual family support to parent groups. Group discussion among practitioners and policy makers showed that whilst a group approach might be suitable in big anonymous cities, this approach might be less

effective in small and sometimes very diverse communities in which peer-recruitment played an important role in the travel to Syria. All forms of family support that were discussed were on a voluntarily basis, but ranging from very pro-active (making house visits) to leaving the initiative for support completely to the families (families phoning a special centre for support). The extent of the support can vary from purely therapeutic to encouragement and empowerment of families to play an active role in the de-radicalisation process. In particular in (migrant) families where there is imbalance in power relations and children know their way better in Western society than their parents, it is important to work on the empowerment of families. Family support can be carried by practitioners from either statutory bodies or NGO's, locally or nation-wide. That is very much dependent of the way in which Member States are organised (centralised, federal or strong role for local governments). Either way, establishing a trust-based relationship is crucial. That is sometimes best done by NGO's, but is not a given.

Exit-strategies: de-radicalisation & disengagement

As the returnees come back for different reasons and in different states of mind, it is important to assess if people are in need of a de-radicalisation or disengagement programme, are better off with some small help for re-socialisation, or should be prosecuted. When an exit-strategy is applicable, only tailor-made de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes work, based on a careful assessment of motivational factors, practical needs etc. To offer this tailor-made programme a multi-agency structure of organisations that can provide the needed bits and pieces is a precondition. For some returnees religious leaders can play an important role, for others it might be a youth worker or a psychologist. Most important is the ability of the practitioner in question to establish a trust-based relationship.

In de-radicalisation work, some of the most important lessons all come together. Not all returnees will want to cooperate in a de-rad or disengagement programme. However, voluntary programmes are likely to have more effect than compulsory ones. Creating an entry point and establishing a trust-based relationship is vital. The focus should be on the sense of belonging to a 'normal society'. Stimulating critical thinking in which one abstains from just absorbing dogmatic messages is crucial. Labelling and solely approaching a foreign fighter from a security perspective will have counter-productive effects. Looking at other areas is just as important, such as involving families and offering psychological after-care.