

# **Extreme Right Foreign Fighters: Analysis and Policy Responses for a Multi- faceted Security Issue**

CARR POLICY INSIGHT



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JUNE 2021

To cite this document:

Miotto, N. (2021). "Extreme Right Foreign Fighters: Analysis and Policy Responses for a Multi-faceted Security Issue". CARR Policy Insight 2021.2. London, UK: Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right.

## About the Author

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## Introduction

The term “foreign fighters” (FFs) is often associated with jihadi terrorism, especially the Islamic State (IS).<sup>1</sup> Over 40,000 foreign fighters from around 80 countries travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State in its struggle for the constitution of the Caliphate.<sup>2</sup> However, in the last decade, non-jihadi FFs have also volunteered in militias and paramilitary organisations in war contexts such as Ukraine and Syria. Although precise statistics are unavailable, experts estimate that around 17,000 foreign fighters have participated in the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> Of these, 15,000 came from Russia, while the rest from post-Soviet states (e.g., Belarus, Georgia, and the Baltic Republics) and Western countries.<sup>4</sup> The exact numbers of anti-ISIS foreign fighters in Syria are even more uncertain, with estimates ranging between 1000 and 2000 FFs combating against the Islamic State since 2013.<sup>5</sup> However, experts doubt the reliability of such figures as they might be underestimations.<sup>6</sup>

Evaluating the presence of extreme right members among the foreign fighters operating in Ukraine and Syria is a challenging task as this is still an under-explored security issue. Nonetheless, analysts have conducted interviews with far-right FFs and mainstream media have recently addressed this phenomenon, thus allowing for further focused research. As the foreign *mujaheddin* in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion or the FFs joining the Islamic State gained military and ideological training, far-right foreign fighters are acquiring expertise and combat experience in the war contexts of Ukraine and Syria. These countries are viewed as training camps for future struggles of other states at war or in the home countries of the FFs.

This Policy Insight aims to fill the research gap by providing an analysis of the phenomenon of extreme right foreign fighters and recommending policies to tackle this concerning security issue. Multiple actions are to be taken as the problem is multidimensional and requires policymakers to operate on different levels, developing comprehensive policy responses. Although extreme right foreign fighters are not the only non-jihadi foreign fighters operating in countries at war,<sup>7</sup> this policy brief will concentrate only on far-right FFs.

### The issue of foreign fighters: a complex policy debate

Public authorities and academia state that the issue of jihadi and non-jihadi foreign fighters, especially their return to home countries, is highly likely to constitute a pivotal security issue in the coming years.<sup>8</sup> However, there is much disagreement concerning the

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Tuck, Tanya Silverman, and Candace Smalley, “Shooting in the Right Direction’: Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Francesco Marone and Lorenzo Vidino, “Destination Jihad: Italy’s Foreign Fighters,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Kacper Rekawek, “Career Break or a New Career? Extremist Foreign Fighters in Ukraine,” Counter Extremism Project, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ariel Koch, “The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 4, June 10, 2019.: 1–28.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, also far-left individuals have joined militias and paramilitary organisations such as the People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. For an accurate account, see: Kyle Orton, “The Forgotten Foreign Fighters: The PKK in Syria,” Henry Jackson Society, London, 2017.

most effective measures to address this problem among scholars and professionals. The policy debate concentrates on jihadi FFs, especially Western individuals that have joined the Islamic State and are returning to their places of origin. Despite this, countermeasures could also be applied to non-jihadi foreign fighters. The policy debate is centred on five key interrelated legal issues: 1) the definition of foreign fighter; 2) the policies on the loss of citizenship; 3) the effectiveness of criminal prosecutions; 4) the terrorist use of the Internet; 5) the application of counter terrorist financing (CTF) laws.

There is disagreement around the legal definition of “foreign fighter(s).” Currently, the 2014 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 defines foreign fighters as

*individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflicts.*<sup>9</sup>

Such a definition is contested. The International Committee of the Red Cross has argued that linking armed conflicts to terrorism might be erroneous and could result in designating all non-State actors as terrorist entities.<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch has noted that without clearly defining what “terrorism” is and leaving it to governments to define what actors can be considered terrorist groups, the definition might be misused to target humanitarian aid personnel.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the Resolution does not address the problem of individuals joining governmental organisations.<sup>12</sup> Despite these concerns, being legally binding for UN members states, the Resolution informs countries’ approaches towards the issue.

Secondly, policies on the loss of citizenship are applied in order to target FFs that fall within the UN definition. However, the revoking of citizenship for terrorist activity is questioned by researchers given that such a measure only outsources the problem to other countries.<sup>13</sup> As foreign fighters have been imprisoned by authorities in Iraq and Syria for the crimes they have committed, governments in their states of nationality have deprived them of citizenship to prevent them from returning.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, FFs imprisoned in war contexts might escape from penal facilities as new crises break out, therefore re-engaging with violent actors.<sup>15</sup> Policies on citizenship loss may also create a backlash in the form of radicalisation among minorities as they may perceive these measures as discriminatory targeting.<sup>16</sup> This leads to the issue of stigmatisation and marginalisation of returnees,

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<sup>8</sup> Security Council, “Repatriating Detained Foreign Fighters, Their Families Key to Combating Threat Posed by Islamic State, Counter-Terrorism Officials Warn Security Council | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases,” United Nations, August 24, 2020; Francesco Marone and Lorenzo Vidino, “Destination Jihad: Italy’s Foreign Fighters,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2178 (2014),” 2014.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Foreign Terrorist Fighters. Manual for Judicial Training Institutes South-Eastern Europe,” 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch, “‘Foreign Terrorist Fighter’. Laws Human Rights Rollbacks under UN Security Council Resolution 2178,” 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Alisa Fainberg, “Here We Come: The Evolution of Foreign Fighters’ Flow to Syria and Iraq in 2013-2016,” International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Christophe Paulussen, “Countering Terrorism through the Stripping of Citizenship: Ineffective and Counterproductive,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Maarten P. Bolhuis and Joris van Wijk, “Citizenship Deprivation as a Counterterrorism Measure in Europe; Possible Follow-up Scenarios, Human Rights Infringements and the Effect on Counterterrorism,” *European Journal of Migration and Law* 22, no. 3, October 7, 2020: 338–65.

<sup>15</sup> Matteo Pugliese, “France and Foreign Fighters: The Controversial Outsourcing of Prosecution,” ISPI, December 19, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Christophe Paulussen, “Countering Terrorism through the Stripping of Citizenship: Ineffective and Counterproductive,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, 2019.

which is considered highly problematic as discrimination undermines countermeasures' long-term efficacy.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, academics and practitioners have warned that states may overlook human rights when applying these policies.<sup>18</sup> By revoking citizenship of foreign fighters and preventing them from being prosecuted in their state of nationality, countries may fail their obligations under international, and potentially domestic, laws.<sup>19</sup> For instance, experts have demonstrated how British deprivation of citizenship policies may contravene both international agreements such as the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and the country's extradition obligations.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the case of Shamima Begum, a UK national that lost her citizenship for travelling to Syria in order to join the Islamic State, is a notorious example.<sup>21</sup> She is not allowed to return to the UK due to security reasons and, despite being also a Bangladeshi citizen, Dhaka is denying her entry in the country, therefore she is still living in a refugee camp in Syria.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, repatriation might appear more effective. However, courts often find it difficult to collect the necessary evidence from battlefields in order to prosecute returnees.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, governments have expressed their concerns for the imprisonment of returnees as they might be more capable of radicalising and recruiting inmates.<sup>24</sup> As a result, scholars argue that criminal prosecution may not be the most effective approach to address the issue of returnees. Indeed, some have suggested softer counter-extremism approaches such as counter-narratives and disengagement programmes to tackle the problem.<sup>25</sup> Experts and professionals advocate for the success of community-based measures which directly provides support to families and peers concerned for the travels of individuals.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, family support programmes, as well as individual-tailored disengagement and de-radicalisation programmes, can serve as key tools.<sup>27</sup> In regard to this, European countries have adopted different, but complementary, approaches, with the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium leading disengagement programmes and Denmark pioneering innovative de-radicalisation programmes.<sup>28</sup>

Evidence from prosecutions and de-radicalisation programmes shows that FFs have been engaging with extremist ideologies via social media. Although analysts have highlighted the importance of the Internet in the radicalisation and recruitment process of foreign fighters,<sup>29</sup> different legal approaches towards terrorist online activity exists. For instance,

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<sup>17</sup> OSCE, "Guidelines for Addressing the Threats and Challenges of 'Foreign Terrorist Fighters' within a Human Rights Framework," 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Walle Bos, Bibi van Ginkel, and Tanya Mehra, "Capacity-Building Challenges: Identifying Progress and Remaining Gaps in Dealing with Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters," *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies*, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Shiva Jayaraman, "International Terrorism and Statelessness: Revoking the Citizenship of ISIL Foreign Fighters," *Chicago Journal of International Law* 17, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>20</sup> Paul Arnell, "The Legality of the Citizenship Deprivation of UK Foreign Terrorist Fighters," *ERA Forum* 21, no. 395, June 25, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> "Who Is Shamima Begum and How Do You Lose Your UK Citizenship?," *BBC*, March 2, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Fatima Rajina, "Shamima Begum and the Conditionality of British Citizenship," *Al Jazeera*, March 21, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Oldrich Bures, "EU's Response to Foreign Fighters: New Threat, Old Challenges?," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 4, January 8, 2018 :1-18.

<sup>24</sup> Europol, "EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020," 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Mike G. Fejes, "Returning Foreign Fighters: The Law and Implications for Canadian National Security Policy," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 25, no. 1 October 31, 2018: 90-109.

<sup>26</sup> Racehel Briggs and Tanya Silverman, "Western Foreign Fighters. Innovations in Responding to the Threat," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Renard, "The Homecoming of Foreign Fighters in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium: Policies and Challenges," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, 2019; Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11, no. 3, 2019: 13-16.

European Union members states' national laws differ in terms of retention of data, lawful interceptions of VoIP<sup>30</sup> and freezing of social media accounts.<sup>31</sup> In addition, stronger and more flexible regulations such as new EU regulation on online terrorist content may bring about rights violation due to the lack of clarity concerning categories like "terrorist content."<sup>32</sup>

Finally, following the arrest of FFs, law enforcement agencies have been investigating the financial aid received by them while abroad. FFs use multiple types of legal funds (e.g., salary, and social security benefits) to buy clothing, plane tickets, food and camping equipment for travelling to the country of destination.<sup>33</sup> Financial support may also come from families and friends when the individual arrives at his/her destination. This has resulted in disputed trials of family members for terrorist financing as counter terrorist financing (CTF) laws are applied even if relatives do not have full knowledge of potential terrorist use of the funds.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, academics have highlighted how this approach is disproportionate and may result in the radicalisation of family members that may have sent money to their sons/daughters to cover basic needs, not having the intention to support terrorist acts.<sup>35</sup>

## Extreme right foreign fighters in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries

The term "foreign fighters" entered everyday vocabulary only recently. Despite this, proto-FFs can be found in history, going back to the Greek war of independence (1821-1829).<sup>36</sup> Like jihadi and Far-Left foreign fighters, extreme right FFs have been present in multiple modern war contexts.

The far-right participated in numerous armed conflicts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) Italian fascist volunteers, grouped into the *Corpo Truppe Volontarie* (Corps of Volunteer Troops), supported pro-Franco militias fighting against the Republican Front.<sup>37</sup> American far-right members joined military organisations in war contexts in the 1960-80s. For instance, members from the National Socialist White People's Party and the Crippled Eagles enlisted as volunteers in the Rhodesian armed forces during the Rhodesian Bush War (1964-1979).<sup>38</sup> In the following years, during the Nicaraguan Revolution (1978-1990), extreme right individuals were recruited by American

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<sup>29</sup> Henry Tuck, Tanya Silverman, and Candace Smalley, "'Shooting in the Right Direction': Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2016.; Ariel Koch, "The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 4, June 10, 2019: 1-28.

<sup>30</sup> Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is a category of technologies for delivering voice communications over Internet Protocol (IP) networks.

<sup>31</sup> Oldrich Bures, "EU's Response to Foreign Fighters: New Threat, Old Challenges?," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 4, January 8, 2018: 1-18.

<sup>32</sup> Inés Bolaños Somoano, "Preventing the Far-Right Extremism 'Wave' in Europe: Contemporary Policies and Future Trajectories," 2021.

<sup>33</sup> FATF, "Emerging Terrorist Financing Risks," 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Berenice Boutin, "Has Countering the Financing of Terrorism Gone Wrong? Prosecuting the Parents of Foreign Terrorist Fighters," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, October 2, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Steven O'Connor and Guillaume Piketty, "Introduction - Foreign Fighters and Multinational Armies: From Civil Conflicts to Coalition Wars, 1848-2015," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne D'histoire* 27, no. 1-2, March 3, 2020: 1-11.

<sup>37</sup> Javier Rodrigo, "A Fascist Warfare? Italian Fascism and War Experience in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39)," *War in History* 26, no. 1, September 12, 2017: 86-104.

<sup>38</sup> Simon Purde, "Foreign Fighters and the Global War for White Supremacy," *Center for Analysis for the Radical Right Insight Blog*, February 22, 2020.

paramilitary organisations such as Civil Military Assistance (CMA) operating in Latin America.<sup>39</sup>

In the same years that Italian neofascist organisations such as *Ordine Nuovo* (New Order) and *Avanguardia Nazionale* (National Vanguard) maintained close relationships with right-wing dictatorships in Europe, such as the Greek colonels, members travelled to Greece, Spain and Portugal to train and gain tactical skills used to carry out deadly terrorist attacks in Italy.<sup>40</sup> Extreme right individuals joined the *Army of the Republika Srpska* (VRS) during the War in Yugoslavia and operated in Bosnia. Among others, Greek foreign fighters participated in the 1995 Srebrenica genocide.<sup>41</sup> Some of them were linked to the Greek far-right movement Golden Dawn.<sup>42</sup> Less numerous but still important was the presence of extreme right foreign fighters in Croatian military and paramilitary organisations during the same period.<sup>43</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, extreme right individuals participated in two critical conflicts: the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Syria, discussed below. It is also important to note that new patterns are emerging in the current years. Extreme right foreign fighters that have previously fought in war contexts such as Syria and Ukraine may be migrating to countries where a conflict is outbreaking. For instance, waves of FFs are now joining groups in Nagorno-Karabakh, taking the side of Azerbaijan or Armenia.<sup>44</sup> Members of the Imperial Legion, the military wing of the far-right terrorist organisation Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), are reported to have been deployed by the Kremlin in Libya.<sup>45</sup>

### Far-right foreign fighters in Ukraine: organisations, motives, profiles

As the conflict in Ukraine erupted in 2014, extreme right individuals from various countries joined one side or the other due to ideological beliefs.<sup>46</sup> Pro-Ukraine supporters established numerous extreme right organisations such as the Azov Regiment, the Volunteer Ukrainian Corps, the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, and the UNSO battalion.<sup>47</sup> These groups have been operating in different forms, some of them directly linked to governmental bodies, while others as autonomous paramilitary organisations.<sup>48</sup> These entities with far-right ideology applied a policy of overture towards non-Ukrainian individuals, accepting foreign volunteers, especially from post-Soviet countries (e.g., Poland, Georgia, Belarus).<sup>49</sup> On the other side, the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) is the most concerning far-right organisation operating in the Donbas. RIM has links with

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<sup>39</sup> Philip Taubman, "Private Aid to Latin Rebels at Issue," *The New York Times*, December 13, 1984.

<sup>40</sup> Daniele Ganser, *NATO's Secret Armies Operation GLADIO and Terrorism in Western Europe* (Routledge, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Kar´ci´cHikmet, "'Fear Not, for You Have Brothers in Greece': A Research Note," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 3, no. 1, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Azeem Ibrahim and Hikmet Karcic, "The Balkan Wars Created a Generation of Christian Terrorists," *Foreign Policy*, May 24, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Nir Arielli, "In Search of Meaning: Foreign Volunteers in the Croatian Armed Forces, 1991–95," *Contemporary European History* 21, no. 1, December 15, 2011: 1–17.

<sup>44</sup> Matteo Pugliese, "The Role of Foreign Fighters in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," ISPI, October 7, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Counter Extremism Project, "Libya: Extremism and Terrorism," 2020.

<sup>46</sup> FFs joined Ukrainian extreme right groups due to anti-Russian sentiments as well as ethnonationalist and neo-fascist beliefs. On the other side, individuals joined separatist filo-Russian non-state actors due to anti-Western, especially anti-NATO, views and anti-globalisation stands. For a comprehensive analysis of the ideological beliefs, see: Egle E. Murauskaite, "Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Assessing Potential Risks," Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Vyacheslav Likhachev, "The Far Right in the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine," vol. Institut Franais Des Relations Internationales, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Ukrainian Volunteer Fighters in the Eastern Front: Ideas, Political-Social Norms and Emotions as Mobilization Mechanisms," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 1, January 2, 2016: 139–53.

other European extreme right organisations such as the Nordic Resistance Movement, responsible for the 2017 attack on a refugee center in Gothenburg, Sweden.<sup>50</sup> RIM was designated as a terrorist organisation by the U.S. in 2020 and Canada in 2021.<sup>51</sup>

Although precise statistics are not available, it is estimated that since 2014 around 2000 non-Russian extreme right foreign fighters have been involved in the conflict.<sup>52</sup> The majority of FFs come from Belarus, but individuals from Germany, Serbia, France, Italy, the United States and Australia are present as well.<sup>53</sup> This testifies the complexity of this phenomenon as well as its transnational character. Far-right organisations and individuals have mobilised for the war in Ukraine due to anti-Russian ultra-nationalist ideas as well as emotions such as solidarity towards the populations involved in the conflict or anger and hate for the war crimes committed by one side or the other.<sup>54</sup>

Academics have identified four profiles of extreme right foreign fighters in Ukraine: 1) 'veterans with historical grievances'; 2) 'disillusioned ideologues'; 3) 'armed opposition'; 4) 'battle chasers.'<sup>55</sup> Expert on the issue of foreign fighting, David Malet states that, generally, individuals recruited as FFs are 'loosely affiliated supporters than core members' of terrorist organisations who do not have ties with the local population(s) but have a more polarised view of the conflict (also due to physical distance from it).<sup>56</sup> This observation applies well to far-right FFs who have been interviewed in both Ukraine and the Donbas. Indeed, these individuals had been engaging in diverse online extreme right networks before becoming foreign fighters, gaining a limited historical knowledge of the territories they travelled to.<sup>57</sup>

### Far-right foreign fighters in Syria: organisations, motives, profiles

Extreme right FFs have also been participating in the conflict in Syria. Far-right individuals joined a diverse array of organisations, ranging from the Kurish People Protection Units (YPG) to Christian militias such as Dwekh Nawsha.<sup>58</sup> Aside from these non-state organisations, far-right volunteers have taken the side of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, fighting in pro-governmental Syrian and Russian groups.<sup>59</sup> For instance, Norwegian and Swedish right-wing nationalists had been receiving training and military technology from Russian Armed Forces in 2017, being then included in pro-government forces.<sup>60</sup> Similarly,

<sup>50</sup> Alex MacKenzie and Christian Kaunert, "Radicalisation, Foreign Fighters and the Ukraine Conflict: A Playground for the Far-Right?," *Social Sciences* 10, no. 4, April 1, 2021: 116.

<sup>51</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Samuel Hodgson, and Colin P. Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and Its Links to the Transnational White Supremacist Extremist Movement," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, April 24, 2020; Public Safety Canada, "Government of Canada Lists 13 New Groups as Terrorist Entities and Completes Review of Seven Others," *gcnews*, February 3, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> "WHITE SUPREMACY EXTREMISM: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement," The Soufan Center, New York, 2019; Alex MacKenzie and Christian Kaunert, "Radicalisation, Foreign Fighters and the Ukraine Conflict: A Playground for the Far-Right?," *Social Sciences* 10, no. 4, April 1, 2021: 116.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Ukrainian Volunteer Fighters in the Eastern Front: Ideas, Political-Social Norms and Emotions as Mobilization Mechanisms," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 1, January 2, 2016: 139–53.

<sup>55</sup> Egle E. Murauskaite, "Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Assessing Potential Risks," Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> David Malet, "Foreign Fighters and Terrorism," in *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 210.

<sup>57</sup> Kacper Rekawek, "Career Break or a New Career? Extremist Foreign Fighters in Ukraine," Counter Extremism Project, 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Jason Fritz and Joseph K. Young, "Transnational Volunteers: American Foreign Fighters Combating the Islamic State," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 3, October 27, 2017: 1–20.

<sup>59</sup> Murat TINAS, "Suriye İç Savaşı'ndaki Yabancı (Terörist) Savaşçılara Genişletilmiş Bakış," *Liberal Düşünce Dergisi* 25, no. 97, March 20, 2020: 131–46.

British and Spanish citizens have joined anti-ISIS governmental and non-governmental organisations by building online transnational networks through the Facebook pages of *Apoyo Voluntarios Españoles Contra DAESH* (Spanish Volunteers Support Against ISIS) and the extreme right group Britain First.<sup>61</sup>

Although it is difficult to estimate the number of extreme right FFs in these organisations, different reports confirm some key observations concerning their profiles and motives. In Syria, the average age of an anti-ISIS FFs was 32 years-old with women representing only 3% of the total FFs.<sup>62</sup> According to an investigation conducted by Bellingcat, out of 108 American FF interviewees, 73 have served in the armed forces, only one is female, and their average age is 31 years old.<sup>63</sup> The interviewees declared diverse motives for joining such as moral outrage, protecting Christian minorities, the need for adventure, economic grievances, and dissatisfaction with U.S. foreign policy.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, other reports based on interviews with FFs revealed that anti-ISIS FFs decided to join military and paramilitary organisations in the Middle East for diverse reasons such as an identity crisis, religious motivations, and desire for adventure.<sup>65</sup> The extreme right FFs operating in Syria have been driven also by strong anti-Muslim sentiments as well as the duty to defend Christian minorities targeted by the Islamic State.<sup>66</sup>

The Syrian conflict highlights an interesting pattern that helps us understand the complexity of this phenomenon. Support for Assad transverses radical right politics, which, therefore, may fuel the flow of potential foreign fighters to Syria. For instance, the Italian neo-fascist political party *CasaPound* has announced its support for the Syrian president multiple times.<sup>67</sup> Other far-right parties in Europe such as the British National Party (BNP) and National Rebirth in Poland have likewise expressed their support for Bashar al-Asad in recent years.<sup>68</sup>

### The aftermath of the war: a more transnational far-right?

The foreign fighter poses four main security concerns.<sup>69</sup> Firstly, the foreign fighter travels to war zones and increases the level of violence in the territory and against civilian populations by engaging with violent actors. He/she learns how to use weapons and military tactics and creates transnational ties between violent organisations. Secondly, returnees from war may radicalise other individuals in their home countries, building cells and networks that offer financial and logistical support for future attackers. Thirdly, returnees have potential to carry out lone-wolf style terrorist attacks, especially if experiencing PTSD from conflict-ridden areas, thus constituting a major security issue.

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<sup>60</sup> "Scandinavian Alt-Right Volunteers Fought ISIS on the Syrian-Russian Side in Syria," *Russia Insider*, May 31, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Ariel Koch, "The New Crusaders: Contemporary Extreme Right Symbolism and Rhetoric," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 5, 2017: 13–24.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Tuck, Tanya Silverman, and Candace Smalley, "'Shooting in the Right Direction': Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Nathan Patin, "The Other Foreign Fighters. An Open-Source Investigation into American Volunteers Fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria," *Bellingcat*, 2015.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Henry Tuck, Tanya Silverman, and Candace Smalley, "'Shooting in the Right Direction': Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Ariel Koch, "The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 4, June 10, 2019: 1–28.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Patrick Strickland, "Unravelling Western Fascists' Affair with Assad," *Al Jazeera*, February 14, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Alastair Reed, Johanna Pohl, and Marjolein Jegerings, "The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon," *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies*, 2017.

Finally, the cycle of radicalisation and violence that FFs may bring back home could increase social polarisation.

The influence of FFs can be more indirect. For example, the Norwegian right-wing terrorist Anders Breivik mentioned the war in Yugoslavia multiple times in his manifesto, defining the atrocities committed by pro-Serbia militias as ‘just cause to fight and oppose Islamic demographic warfare.’<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch terrorist, explicitly referred to the War in Yugoslavia by imprinting the phrase “Remove Kebab” on his rifle. The words are a reference to an ultra-nationalist Serbian song celebrating General Radovan Karadžić, who was prosecuted for genocide against the Muslim minority in Bosnia.<sup>71</sup> Tarrant had even travelled to the Balkans to visit the war zones of his supposedly far-right heroes.<sup>72</sup> These two examples demonstrate that modern wars have contributed to the creation of a fictitious common cult of far-right war heroes.

Therefore, current armed conflicts are likely to strongly influence far-right ideology, strengthening the formation of a transnational cult of heroes that may homogenise far-right ideologies and mitigate tensions existing between extreme right groups. Moreover, these conflicts may further radicalise current extreme right ideologies by shifting the focus of non-violent extreme right groups from electoral participation to the use of violence for political purposes. However, because the far-right is currently fighting on different frontlines both in Ukraine and Syria, such common memory may instead result in disagreements between extreme right organisations.

## Policy recommendations

The presence of far-right foreign fighters can be traced back to the modern armed conflicts as well as more recently in Ukraine and Syria. They are not unilaterally motivated, often supporting state and non-state actors. However, these conflicts are furthering their radicalisation and providing them with military experience, which renders their return to home countries a security concern.

Although individuals become foreign fighters for diverse reasons and present heterogenous profiles, some key common aspects characterise the issue of far-right FFs:

- The phenomenon is transnational. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate potential worldwide links between extreme right individuals and organisations.
- The online environment plays a key role in creating relationships between FFs and foreign organisations, functioning as a driver of recruitment and radicalisation.
- Foreign fighters are driven by multidimensional factors (e.g., economic, political, and psychological) and pose multi-faced threats (e.g., lone-wolf terrorism, radicalisation of prison inmates, and terrorist financing). Consequently, a holistic approach must inform policy responses.

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<sup>70</sup> Anders Breivik, 2083: *A European Declaration of Independence*, 2011, 779.

<sup>71</sup> Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order : The Global Dynamics of Disinformation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

- The issue is characterised by scarcity of data. There is a need for more effective and continuous information-sharing among countries, intelligence services and law enforcement agencies as the phenomenon is under-investigated.

Hence, governments should consider a series of policy recommendations to address this complex security issue. Three criteria inform the following policy responses: urgency, complementarity, and availability (of means). The recommended actions are therefore categorised as 1) **short-term**, 2) **medium-term**, and 3) **long-term measures** on the basis of being complementary and not mutually exclusive, and utilising already available means.

In the **short-term**, governments should:

- **Cooperate with governmental and private bodies to monitor activities of social media accounts and groups** that spread polarising narratives on current conflicts.
- **Collaborate with other governments and international organisations to enhance the sharing of passenger name record (PNR) data** by further implementing international agreements.
- **Develop public-private networks to provide counselling and support** to families, relatives and friends of FFs.

In order to achieve these short-term objectives, the following means should be considered:

- The tech industry-backed Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) which engages with governments and civil society to tackle terrorist exploitation of technology. GIFCT members can activate the Content Incident Protocol (CIP) that results in sharing hashes of terrorist content(s) among all the members of the forum to conduct a risk assessment and, eventually, act to counter the sharing of such content.<sup>73</sup> Information concerning FFs should be included as a dedicated category in the hash sharing database.
- The 2016 EU Passenger Name Record (PNR) directive which allows for data-sharing between countries to conduct risk assessment of passengers on pre-arrival and pre-departure flights, while guaranteeing the right to privacy.<sup>74</sup> The European Union reached an agreement on passenger name record data sharing with the United States in 2011.<sup>75</sup>
- In France, since 2014, a National Support Hotline has been operating and has received around 400 calls from family members and friends concerned for individuals at risk of becoming foreign fighters.<sup>76</sup> In Germany, the NGO *The Violence*

<sup>73</sup> Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), "Crisis Response".

<sup>74</sup> The European Council, "Regulating the Use of Passenger Name Record (PNR) Data," *Consilium*, December 14, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Department of Homeland Security, "Passenger Name Records Reviews," June 29, 2015.

<sup>76</sup> Racehel Briggs Obe and Tanya Silverman, "Western Foreign Fighters. Innovations in Responding to the Threat," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2014.

*Prevention Network* leads governmental funded anti-violence-training and pedagogical education programmes for national extreme right offenders and their families as well as foreign fighters.<sup>77</sup> Other national governments should enact similar models for FF-centric intervention programmes.

In the **medium-term**, governments should:

- **Use counter terrorist financing (CTF) laws with caution**, especially when assessing the financial support offered by family members and friends to FFs.
- **Allow for repatriation of FFs in accordance with third countries**, while initiating evidence collection and preparing domestic prosecutions.
- **Design holistic individual-tailored disengagement and de-radicalisation programmes** for returnees and their families.

In order to accomplish these medium-term objectives, the following means should be considered:

- The current Counter terrorist financing (CTF) laws are broad and originate from the implementation of 2011 United Nation Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1373.<sup>78</sup> Governments should update the resolution and, consequently, national CTF laws. In particular, legislation should be narrowed by adding the legal ground of intentional support of terrorist activities to prevent disproportionate application of criminal measures.
- The case of Germany represents a model for repatriation. The German Federal Foreign Intelligence Service has been interrogating FFs, in accordance with Kurdish authorities, in detention facilities in Syria in order to collect information for domestic prosecutions.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, arrest warrants were issued, allowing for the immediate arrest of foreign fighters as they return back to Germany.<sup>80</sup>
- The Australian Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM) is an innovative disengagement and de-radicalisation programme which develops individually designed plans for prison inmates.<sup>81</sup> PRISM addresses psychological, theological, and ideological matters by involving psychologists, religious support officers, Services and Programs Officers, health professionals, as well as family members.

In the **long-term**, governments should:

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<sup>77</sup> Amy-Jane Gielen, "Supporting Families of Foreign Fighters. A Realistic Approach for Measuring the Effectiveness," *Journal of Deradicalization*, no. 2, 2015: 21–48.

<sup>78</sup> Berenice Boutin, "Has Countering the Financing of Terrorism Gone Wrong? Prosecuting the Parents of Foreign Terrorist Fighters," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, October 2, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Kilian Roithmaier, "Germany and Its Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: New Loss of Citizenship Law and the Broader German Repatriation Landscape," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, April 18, 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Adrian Cherney, "Evaluating Interventions to Disengage Extremist Offenders: A Study of the Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM)," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 12, no. 1, July 19, 2018: 1–20.

- **Build community resilience** by encouraging a bottom-up approach by civil society.
- **Cooperate to build international consensus** and establish a new common legal definition of “foreign fighter.”
- **Strengthen law enforcement cooperation** to improve information-sharing.
- **Allocate resources for the creation of specialised crime units** investigating foreign fighters’ activities in combat zones.

In order to achieve these long-term objectives, the following means should be considered:

- A research team at Victoria University, Australia, developed a four-dimension *Prevention and Intervention Cycle* to build community resilience.<sup>82</sup> The plan involves multiple local stakeholders (e.g., local police, policymakers and civil society) and consists in four interconnected stages: 1) assessment; 2) prevention; 3) early intervention; and 4) preparedness and response. The team suggests authorities engage with local groups to assess issues related to extreme right mobilisation in neighbourhoods. Subsequently, community-based actors are encouraged and supported by public bodies to promote events and build spaces for strengthening social harmony and cohesion. Should conflict arises, local authorities initiate community consultations to manage dissent and find shared solutions to problems. Finally, community resilience is enhanced by improving social connection and community identity among individuals through the creation of online and offline spaces for healthy debate.
- Domestic and international neutrality laws. The 2014 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 associates “foreign fighters” with the phenomenon of terrorism. Individuals may become foreign fighters for motives different from terrorist intent, as the case of extreme right FFs demonstrate. Scholars recently proposed to legally redefine the matter by addressing it through neutrality/foreign enlistment laws.<sup>83</sup> If internationally applied, these already existing domestic laws would criminalise acts of travelling and participating in armed conflicts abroad, irrespective of the group joined and the intention to commit terrorist acts. Hence, the definition would be broader and inclusive of other forms of foreign fighting, different from foreign terrorist fighting.
- Europol and Interpol are pivotal organisations for information-sharing. For instance, in 2016 Europol established the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) which offers coordination, operational support and information to Member States.<sup>84</sup> These centres could be enhanced by creating specialised units in charge of providing countries with information on non-jihadi, especially extreme right, foreign

<sup>82</sup> Mario Peucker et al., “A Multilevel Analysis of Far-Right Manifestations, Risk and Protective Factors in Three Local Municipalities in Victoria Dissenting Citizenship? Understanding Vulnerabilities to Right-Wing Extremism on the Local Level,” Melbourne: Victoria University, 2020.

<sup>83</sup> John Ip, “Reconceptualising the Legal Response to Foreign Fighters,” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 69, no. 1, December 4, 2019: 103–34.

<sup>84</sup> Europol, “European Counter Terrorism Centre – ECTC,” March 12, 2019.

fighters. As for this, governments should increase operational cooperation also via Interpol, which is currently the world's largest repository of information, including biometric data, on foreign fighters.<sup>85</sup>

- There are examples of both public and private bodies collecting information on the crimes committed by foreign fighters in war zones. The United Nations Investigative Team for Accountability of Daesh/ISIL (UNITAD), as well as Human Rights Watch (HRW), have been investigating war crimes committed by ISIS foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>86</sup> Similar entities could be created for investigating potential crimes committed by non-jihadi, especially extreme right, foreign fighters in Ukraine and Syria in order to provide evidence-based prosecution according to international rule of law.

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<sup>85</sup> Interpol, "G7 Ministers Recognize INTERPOL as Global Platform for Law Enforcement Cooperation," April 5, 2019.

<sup>86</sup> European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, "Cumulative Prosecution of Foreign Terrorist Fighters for Core International Crimes and Terrorism Related Offences," 2020.