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# FOREIGN FIGHTERS - SHOULD WE BE AFRAID FROM THEIR RESOCIALIZATION AND REINTEGRATION?

**DECEMBER 2015**

Comments

**THE** radicalization and foreign fighters' phenomena have overwhelmed the world for the terror they propagate and being a global threat has caused concerns for the region of the Balkans and Macedonia as well.

From Macedonia currently there are around 110 fighters fighting for ISIS or Al Nusra fronts in Syria or Iraq. Of these, 25 have been killed and approximately 69 are believed to have returned back to Macedonia.<sup>1</sup> The security institutions still have to develop good strategy for fighting violent religious extremism in Macedonia. Even though our state participates in the global coalition for fighting DAESH<sup>2</sup>, internally it lacks strategy for prevention of radicalization of its citizens, and there is no other program for reintegration of the returning foreign fighters in the society or attempts of deradicalizing them.

The threat returning foreign fighters pose to the society can vary, considering that majority of them might still hold on to the radical ideologies. It is possible that untreated, traumatized former fighters may be more prone to acts of violence<sup>3</sup>, and continue in spreading extremist ideologies and assist in further recruitment of foreign fighters.

1 A statement from President of R. of Macedonia, "Ivanov - from Syria have returned 69 fighters" [Иванов - Од Сирија се вратиле 69 борци во Македонија] <http://bit.ly/1V2kdjV>, 22.11.2015

2 Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL Coalition Ministerial Meeting and a list of states participating the coalition: <http://1.usa.gov/1HZPBdG>

3 Foreign Policy: What to Do When Foreign Fighters Come Home, <http://atfp.co/1G13MPD> 01.06.2015

However, on the other hand one should not exclude that some of the foreign fighters had joined these fronts due to solidarity with the Syrian people in order to fight the oppressive regime of President Assad. Some of them have joined paramilitary formations before ISIS was officially created and they might be returning back to Macedonia particularly having some disappointments in the brutality and in the way ISIS fights. Those foreign fighters who have returned to Macedonia because they regretted joining ISIS, if identified, could be very resourceful both for the state and the religious communities if a program for de-radicalization and reintegration were to exist.

In September 2014 the Macedonian Parliament passed amendments to the Criminal Code that participation in foreign military, police or paramilitary formations shall be punished with at least 4 years of prison time, while the punishment for organizing and funding these activities would be at least 5 years.<sup>4</sup>

After the legal changes were made so far there have been several police actions conducted as part of one bigger police operation called "Kjelija (Cell)" where the total number of arrested under the suspicion on participating in foreign wars in Syria and Iraq or recruiting foreign fighters reached 12, while 23 still remain unreachable with the suspicion they might be currently in Syria or Iraq.

4 Prison for participants of foreign wars [Затвор За Учество Во Странски Војски]: <http://www.akademik.mk/balkanot-4/>; 05.09.2014

The security forces have been vigilant in keeping an eye to this threat. After the Paris attacks Macedonia increased its security level in the vital objects in city of Skopje. However, so far Macedonia is still in an early phase of developing strategy for countering religious violent extremism<sup>5</sup>, and preventing radicalization of its citizens.

In Europe, countries like Germany, France, Belgium and UK offer programs for de-radicalisation and re-integration of former foreign fighters. These programs have been focused in three areas; ideological: in de-legitimizing and invalidating jihadi narratives; pragmatic: assisting former foreign fighters in finding employment, education or training and housing; affective: addressing foreign fighters' emotional needs with support by their families and establishing an alternative reference group of psychological help.<sup>6</sup>

In Macedonia ideas similar to these programs surfaced as a project idea in the beginning of 2015. The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) had a project proposal called STOP Rad-Terr where the main idea is prevention of radicalization, and for the first time the problems that might arise upon returning of Macedonian nationals that participated in the wars of Syria or Iraq were stressed. The goal of this

5 Interview with Toni Jakimovski, national coordinator for fight against terrorism: <http://www.mia.mk/Mobile/mk/Home/RenderSingleNews/279?newsID=132888115>, 13.11.2015

6 Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration?: <http://brook.gs/1L8rSvw>, pg . 10, 2015

program is to create an early system that will be ready when the flux of returnees will begin, a system that will have the capacity to offer psychological support to foreign fighters and members of their families, in the area of how to cope with social stigma they would be facing back home. Another aspect of the program is focusing through Islamic teachings from competent imams no to allow radical beliefs to take place among believers.<sup>7</sup>

This project however is still seeking institutional support and approval. Even after a year since it was introduced, nothing has moved in this direction. When the idea of re-integration and re-socialization initially got promoted by Islamic Religious Community (IRC) in early 2015 it was confronted with harsh media accusations towards the IRC as giving soft hand to terrorists and which might have opposite effect as to promote further radicalization.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The head of IRC meets US ambassador: <http://koha.mk/aktuale/35162-kreu-i-bfi-takohet-me-ambasadorin-bejli.html>, 05.03.2015

<sup>8</sup> Jihadists cannot be allowed on our state's expenses: <http://bit.ly/1Onsxvp>, 28.01.2015

But the rhetoric since then has changed a bit, the idea of having a program on prevention and de-radicalization along with the suppressive measures that were adopted has started to gain approval among the public opinion and state institutions which can be seen with the President's ending speech for 2015, on calling institutions to provide help and support to the Islamic Religious Community in fighting radicalization<sup>9</sup>. The importance of religious community leaders in playing direct role in this process should be emphasized. They can play undoubtedly very constructive role by explaining the faults of ISIS ideology through religious teachings and arguments.

How much these kinds of programs have had success in de-radicalization of foreign fighters still is debatable, as there has not been any data that proves or disapproves since it is a very new and ongoing process. However there are some good examples that have been successful such as the "Hayat" project in Germany which has dealt

<sup>9</sup> National Security in the focus of the speech of President Ivanov <http://bit.ly/1ZxaGUG>, 22.12.2015

with roughly 130 cases, mostly men who often get reported by family members when they have doubts they are to be radicalized, this program also offers to imprisoned foreign fighters the possibility to reduce their prison sentences by cooperating with security institutions and by actively engaging in its programs for de-radicalization.<sup>10</sup>

The need for having a way to minimize the threats foreign fighters pose to Macedonia is imminent, prevention programs from further radicalization of others and programs that simultaneously would prepare these people for re-integration after they have served their time in prison should be considered. The cost of leaving this issue un-tackled is much higher for the state. Very often re-socialized individuals have played crucial role in the campaigning against radical ideologies, since they always can speak from their personal experience and can better explain the traps they had felt.□

<sup>10</sup>Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration?: <http://brook.gs/1L8rSvw>, pg . 10, 2015



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