

The challenge of foreign fighters and the EU's response

Foreign fighters traveling in great numbers to Syria / Iraq are a major security threat to the EU and its member states, as well as to the region.

While the primary responsibility of dealing with this threat lies with the member states, the EU can and should play a supportive and active role.

In [August 2014](#), the European Council recognised that the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a major threat to European security and that determined action to stem the flow of foreign fighters from Europe who join ISIL in Iraq and Syria is needed. The European Council, therefore, called for an accelerated implementation of a package of measures, agreed by the Justice and Home Affairs Council in June 2013 upon the suggestion of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (EU CTC). These measures fall under 4 priority areas: prevention of radicalisation, detection of suspicious travel, investigation and prosecution and cooperation with third countries.

Prevention of radicalisation

Several initiatives have been taken both at member states and EU level with a specific focus on the early detection of radicalisation and ways to prevent potential foreign fighters from engaging in terrorist activities. In this regard, the European Commission's [Radicalisation Awareness Network](#) (RAN) issued a declaration on good practices for engagement with foreign fighters or their environments¹.

Encouraged by the Justice and Home Affairs Council, the Commission decided recently to grant a significant amount of money to assist member states, upon their request, to develop tailored strategic communication messages to counter ISIL's constant calls via Internet and social media to European citizens and residents to join their ranks.

¹ [Declaration of Good Practices with Foreign Fighters for Prevention, Outreach, Rehabilitation and Reintegration](#)

To that same end, the European Commission has set up a forum with key players in the industry to discuss and explore mutually acceptable ways to cooperate to address the challenge posed by the use of the Internet by terrorist organisations, as proposed in its Communication "[Preventing Radicalisation To Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU's response](#)".

Some of the member states affected by the foreign fighters phenomenon have set up specific mechanisms to deal with returnees and to decide on a case-by-case basis which kind of intervention and support is most appropriate.

Detection of suspicious travel

One of the tools used to detect suspicious travel movements of known individuals is the use of the Schengen Information System (SIS II) and Interpol's system of international notices and diffusions. A significant increase in the use of SIS II was noted since the issue was first discussed in EU context in 2013.

For the detection of unknown individuals, a better exploitation of passenger data (EU Passenger Name Record (PNR) and Advance Passenger Information (API)) is needed. The establishment of an EU PNR is considered a priority.

In the meantime, several member states are setting up dedicated national systems to monitor travel information in order to identify individuals presenting a risk before their departure, and upon their return. 15 member states received Commission funding to set up their own Passenger Information Units.

In 2013, Europol created a new Focal Point TRAVELLERS², which is a pan-European analytical tool that will support the competent authorities of participating member states and third countries by collecting, analysing and sharing information on the recruitment and travel facilitation of suspected individuals.

Detection of travel, however, does not depend on effective information exchange mechanisms alone. It also entails the strengthening of border security. Ensuring that checks on persons at external borders become more systematic or harmonised was considered a priority by the Ministers of Interior.

Investigation and prosecution

Having adequate legislation in place is an essential element to address the issue of foreign fighters effectively. To that end, a number of member states have already updated or are in the process of updating their legal frameworks to be in a better position to investigate and prosecute foreign fighters either before departure (if a crime is already in place) or upon return of foreign fighters. Experiences of judicial and prosecution authorities in the member states are being exchanged with Eurojust.

At EU level, the Commission is monitoring the effectiveness of the responses provided under the [Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA](#) on combating terrorism, especially in light of the recent adoption of the [United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178\(2014\)](#).

In addition to the judicial response, a number of member states have also decided to use administrative measures, in particular to prevent or disrupt travel to Syria.

² [Council Decision 2005/671/JHA](#)

Cooperation with third countries

A number of avenues for cooperation have already been identified in the countries neighbouring Iraq and Syria. These are currently being discussed so that they can be prioritised and delivered through projects under the different financial instruments.

Meanwhile, the issue of foreign fighters has been and is being raised in all appropriate political contacts, as well as in counter-terrorism political dialogues with third countries. Regular exchanges take place between a number of US government departments and agencies and their counterparts in the member states and the EU. Two specific meetings with Euromed countries were dedicated to the issue of foreign fighters.

Cooperation on foreign fighters also takes place within existing international fora such as the [Global Counter Terrorism Forum](#) (GCTF), in particular the Dutch-Moroccan-led Working Group on Foreign Fighters.

Cooperation with key countries within the framework of EU agencies such as Frontex, Eurojust and Europol was also intensified.
