Chapter 8. Inside Pandora’s Box: Foreign Fighters and the Lone Wolf Terrorism Nexus

Colonel Bernd Horn

The attacks on the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris, France, on 8 January 2015 and on a cartoon exhibit in Garland, Texas, on 4 May 2015, underline a pair of threats that are, and will continue to be, a significant challenge for national security organizations. Incredibly, they represent in many ways a hidden cancer that can fester and grow within societies without necessarily manifesting any visible symptoms until too late. These threats are foreign fighters and lone wolf terrorism, which especially when combined, can prove devastating to homeland security. Importantly, they are a menace that can easily transcend borders and, as such, necessitate national, regional, and global responses.

Foreign fighters, while not a new phenomenon, have become a much greater concern to governments worldwide. As a result of globalization, terrorist organizations have been increasingly able to use the Internet and social media to attract, seduce, and subsequently radicalize individuals to join ‘the cause’ and wage jihad, or support other extremist action. Many groups, such as the Islamic State, have been exceptionally successful at attracting large numbers of foreigners to join and fight for their cause. These volunteers who are recruited to terrorist organizations and then become foreign fighters expand the international reach of transnational insurgencies, as well as religious and ideological conflicts. In fact, research studies have shown

Colonel Bernd Horn, OMM, MSM, CD, Ph.D., is a retired Regular Force infantry officer who has held key command and staff appointments in the Canadian Armed Forces. He is currently the Director of the CANSOFCOM Professional Development Centre, an appointment he fills as a reservist. Dr. Horn is also an adjunct professor of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, University of Calgary, as well as an adjunct professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada. He is also a Fellow at the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute.
that foreign fighters tend to perpetuate the conflict they have joined, are responsible for higher levels of violence, and act as a recruiting vehicle for other nationals.¹

History has already shown this threat to be real. Terrorist organizations have trained and sent foreign fighters back to their home or other Western countries to conduct attacks, recruit, and/or train others. Moreover, through social media, the Internet, and agents throughout the world, these same extremist organizations have also preached action in the name of jihad for those individuals unable to leave their countries due to an extensive worldwide governmental clamp-down on allowing individuals suspected of leaving the country to become foreign fighters or to engage in terrorist activities. Once blocked from leaving the country to engage in jihad overseas, these individuals may pose an added threat of lone wolf terrorism to the homeland.

Together, foreign fighters and lone wolf terrorism represent a growing threat that has implications for domestic security, as well as regional stability. The solutions are far from simple and require a comprehensive domestic and regional (if not global) approach. As the barbarity and savageness of the ISIS terrorist organization has shown, to name but one threat organization, turning a blind eye to the cancer of foreign fighters and the organizations they support is an approach fraught with peril. Undeniably, foreign fighters and lone wolf terrorism represent a national, as well as a regional skulking threat and as such, they cannot be ignored.

Initially, it is important to delineate what is meant by the term foreign fighter. Dr. David Malet, an internationally recognized expert on the subject from the University of Melbourne, Australia, characterizes foreign fighters as simply, “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict.”² Similarly, Barak Mendelsohn, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, describes them as, “Volunteers [who] leave their homes and intervene in a clash taking place in a foreign location.”³

Professor Thomas Hegghammer from the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment takes a more complex approach. He classifies the foreign fighter as, “an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid.”⁴ His more detailed definition is structured to exclude mercenaries, returning diaspora members, or exiled rebels, who, as he describes, “have a pre-existing stake in the conflict.” In addition, he
distinguishes foreign fighters from international terrorists, who specialize in out-of-area violence against noncombatants. In sum, all share the same basic tenant—foreign fighters are individuals who leave their home country to participate in conflict in another state.

The desire to travel to foreign lands to fight for a ‘righteous cause,’ or simply adventure and thrills is not a new phenomenon. Almost every major conflict has attracted foreign fighters (e.g., Spanish Civil War, Israeli War of Independence, Vietnam War, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan). Importantly, the current wave of foreign fighters has triggered concern, new legislation, and increased law enforcement initiatives worldwide, because the new wave of extremist, radicalized volunteers pose a significant threat to global security. Specifically:

1. They perpetuate the conflict in which they are participating;
2. They act as inspiration to other vulnerable individuals;
3. They create a ‘blowback effect’—i.e., they return home, or travel to a third country and commit violent acts, often in the name of jihad; and
4. They are more lethal, dangerous, and sophisticated than their domestic counterparts.

These issues highlight valid concerns. Conflicts worldwide have shown that foreign fighters are responsible for higher levels of indiscriminate violence. Analysts and scholars assert this rise is due to their belief that they must fight more aggressively because they perceive that they are in a losing struggle for the very survival of their cause. In addition, they can be increasingly brutal, savage, and indiscriminate because they have no equity or families to protect in the same manner that local insurgents do. Furthermore, their ‘apparent’ religious zealousness often promotes sectarian violence. Indeed, Dr. Malet observed: “Transnational recruits are responsible for higher levels of violence than are local insurgents and insurgencies that manage to recruit foreign fighters are disproportionately successful as compared to other rebel groups.”

Recent events in Iraq and Syria underline these points. The series of beheadings conducted by ISIS were executed by a British foreign fighter. Videos depicting the mass murder of Syrian soldiers taken prisoner by ISIS, the reports of ultimatums to convert to Islam or face death by those who fell
under ISIS control, as well as the litany of stories of captured Kurdish and Yazidis villages and the subsequent killings, rape, and kidnapping of men, women, and children, as well as the accounts of brutal imprisonment by hostages who were later ransomed, all speak to the savagery of ISIS. Undeniably, ISIS has been profoundly successful in its military campaigns to defeat rival forces and capture territory. It has also proven to be immensely capable of attracting a large proportion of foreign fighter recruits. In fact, 40 percent of those in ISIS are foreign fighters.\textsuperscript{10} Equally disturbing, many analysts believe that up to 80 percent of the foreign fighters traveling to fight in Syria and Iraq aspire to join ISIS.\textsuperscript{11}

Incredibly, despite global reaction by most states to stop individuals from leaving their respective countries to become foreign fighters and/or take part in terrorist activities, as well as the U.S.-led coalition targeting ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and the estimated 10,000 deaths ISIS has sustained to date, the flow of foreign fighters has not diminished. Jurgen Stock, the head of Interpol, revealed, “In September 2014 less than 900 foreign terrorist fighters had been identified by Interpol.” He continued, “Today, in less than a year, more than 4,000 profiles are available in our database.”\textsuperscript{12}

The concern with foreign fighters also revolves around their experience and ideological commitment. Many volunteer to fight for what they see as a ‘righteous cause.’ Although radicalized through the Internet, social media, or local mentors, they are often indoctrinated to a deeper jihadist ideology as a result of their training and combat experience. As Professor Hegghammer explained, “more importantly they empower transnational terrorist groups such as al-Qaida, because volunteering for war is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy.”\textsuperscript{13} For example, the London 7/7 bombers (7 July 2005) originally traveled to Afghanistan to fight. However, after having attended a training camp in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) for a week, their al-Qaeda instructors directed them to take the fight to England, which had catastrophic results for British citizens.\textsuperscript{14}

The danger posed by these fighters is beyond theoretical. A research report noted that between 1990 and 2010, one-in-nine returned foreign fighters were involved in domestic plots. The study revealed that “these plots tended to be more effective and lethal, thanks both to the skills learned and the indoctrinated zeal provided at radical training camps.”\textsuperscript{15} Currently, in the United Kingdom, “more than half of MI5’s [national Security Service] anti-terror
investigations involve Britons who have traveled to Syria.” Clearly, foreign fighters represent a clear and present danger.

So, who exactly are those willing recruits to fight and die for the apparent cause(s) of others? A well researched 2007 New York Police Department (NYPD) report on radicalization concluded:

The transformation of a Western-based individual to a terrorist is not triggered by oppression, suffering, revenge or desperation. Rather, it is a phenomenon that occurs because the individual is looking for an identity and a cause and unfortunately, often finds them in extremist Islam. There is no useful profile to assist law enforcement or intelligence to predict who will follow this trajectory of radicalization. The radicalization process is accelerating in terms of how long it takes and the individuals are continuing to get younger.

Similarly, political scientist Robert Pape conducted a specific study of suicide terrorism and he concluded:

Few suicide attackers are social misfits, criminally insane, or professional losers. Most fit a nearly opposite profile: typically they are psychologically normal, have better than average economic prospects for their communities, and are deeply integrated into social networks and emotionally attached to their national communities.

Despite these findings, the NYPD, as well as MI5, both observed that most individuals “had some vulnerability in their background and [that] made them receptive to extremist ideology and that it was always influenced by others.” Numerous other studies have shown foreign fighters tended to be impressionable young males who were students or unemployed, lacking purpose and looking for an identity. French authorities categorize volunteers from France as disaffected, aimless, and lacking a sense of identity or belonging. Scholars tend to agree that these characteristics appear to be common across most nationalities and fit with the high number of converts, presumably people who are seeking a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. Alienation from mainstream society also played a central role. The typical age for recruits averaged from 18 to 29 years old, with some as young as 15 to 17 years old. As noted by the NYPD research, the trend since the mid-2000s is of recruits to extremism becoming younger.
The Homegrown Lone Wolf Nexus

Predictably, for Western governments, including the American and Canadian governments, foreign fighters represent a hidden threat, due to a concept that has often been labeled the ‘blow-back effect.’ Simply put, once foreign fighters return home, or are ordered home by their respective organizations to continue the fight, they represent a cohort that is more experienced, more lethal, and more dangerous, as well as more sophisticated than their domestic counterparts. They now represent a substantive menace, either as a group or as individuals acting in a lone wolf capacity. The danger they pose is not merely theoretical. As mentioned earlier, a research study revealed that between 1990 and 2010, one-in-nine returned foreign fighters were involved in domestic terrorist plots.22

Adding to this already explosive situation is the trend toward lone wolf terrorism, where individuals, or at most a pair of individuals, conduct attacks on their own. Richard Fadden, a former director of the CSIS, testified to a Senate Committee that the shift to the more difficult to detect “sole-actor” or “lone wolf” style attacks is a pressing problem for Western counterterrorist agencies. He conceded, “this makes things very complicated for us [CSIS].” He elaborated that, “the lone-wolf approach tends to attract individuals driven by ideology as well as serious personal problems, a combination that makes them more unpredictable.”23 He explained that the larger group activities or plots allowed security agencies more margin for success. After all, for the plotters to achieve their objective of launching an attack, they had a requirement to plan and communicate. In the modern age of instant communication, this requirement provided scope and some possibility of intercepting transmissions. The fact that there were more players and more moving parts also meant that there was greater likelihood of someone making an error. However, when it is only a single conspirator, when there is only one person not talking to anyone, then as Fadden conceded, “you have to be really lucky.”24

United States Attorney General Eric Holder agreed. He acknowledged, “It’s something that frankly keeps me up at night, worrying about the lone wolf or a group of people, a very small group of people, who decide to get arms on their own and do what we saw in France.”25 The problem was also succinctly described by Dennis Blair, a former director of national intelligence. He acknowledged:
We have a good capability to detect and disrupt these sorts of multipurpose [terrorist] teams that take months to plan, rehearse, fund, provide the logistics support for an attack. But we are not as capable as we should be of carrying out the much more difficult task of detecting these self-radicalized citizens of the United States, Europe, other countries like Nigeria, who are given a very simple mission – with an advanced bomb to carry it out – or who plan their own attacks, inspired by Al Qaeda’s message but not directed by Al Qaeda.  

Similarly, former National Security Agency (NSA) Director Lieutenant General Michael Hayden also underlined the concern about the ‘new’ recruits extremist organizations were training and unleashing back on the Western countries. He described:

These Western recruits were reputed to speak multiple languages. They were technologically savvy. They understood Western culture and knew how to blend in. Some of the recruits were of Pakistani descent and were part of the huge diaspora that now lived in Britain. But others were Caucasian. Al Qaeda was bringing more and more people into the tribal region, people who wouldn’t draw undue attention if they were next to you at the passport line at Dulles Airport.

In essence, the recruitment of Western foreign fighters, especially due to their mobility, has created a serious threat for homeland security, particularly when combined with ‘lone wolf’ terrorism, which is the term coined to describe individuals who commit, or are prepared to commit, violent terrorist acts on their own, external to, although perhaps loosely affiliated with a recognized terrorist group, in support of a particular ideology or movement. Not surprisingly, the difficulty of identifying these individuals, as discussed earlier, has made lone wolf terrorism an increasingly evolving trend in terror tactics.

The lethal effects of lone wolf terrorism were clearly shown in 1995, when Timothy McVeigh killed over 150 people and injured in excess of 500 more in his attack on a federal building in Oklahoma City, as well as in August 2011, when Anders Breivik murdered 77 individuals in a bombing and shooting spree in Norway. It is not surprising then that a 2009 United States DHS assessment concluded that lone wolf terrorists “are the most dangerous
domestic terrorism threat in the United States … because of their low profile and autonomy.”

According to University of California Los Angeles lone wolf terrorism expert Jeffery D. Simon:

> What makes lone wolves so dangerous is their ability to think outside the box. Since they operate by themselves, there is no group pressure or decision-making process that might stifle creativity. Lone wolves are free to act upon any scenario they can dream up. This freedom has resulted in some of the most imaginative terrorist attacks in history. For example, lone wolves were responsible for the first vehicle bombing (1920), major midair plane bombing (1955), hijacking (1961), and product tampering (1982), as well as the anthrax letter attacks in the United States (2001).

The prospect of foreign fighters returning home or to other Western countries undetected using their Western passports and then carrying out lone wolf attacks has panicked many, including senior politicians. “This [foreign fighter/IS threat] is a turning point in the war on terror,” South Carolina Senator Lindsay Graham remarked on Fox News. He demanded the U.S. president to deploy thousands of ground troops to Iraq, “before we all get killed back here at home.” He was not alone. “They intend to kill us,” warned House Speaker John Boehner, “And if we don’t destroy them first, we’re going to pay the price.”

Their concerns, although on the surface may appear a tad overdramatic, are not merely theoretical or philosophical. They are in fact very real as they have been borne out. Some recent examples make the point. For example, the 7 July 2005 (7/7) suicide bombings in London, England were homegrown attacks. Two of the four 7/7 bombers, all of whom were British Muslims, had trained in the FATA region of Pakistan and rather than fight in Afghanistan as they had originally intended, their al-Qaeda handlers sent them back to London to conduct a series of coordinated suicide attacks in central London that targeted the public transportation system during the morning rush hour. They used organic peroxide-based explosive devices that were packed in rucksacks. Three of the bombs were detonated in London Underground subway trains. The fourth bomb was detonated on a double-decker bus in Tavistock Square. The four bombers killed themselves and 52 civilians, and in excess of 700 others were injured.
British authorities also thwarted a plot that was described as a “Mumbai-style” armed assault in late February 2014. In June of the same year, French authorities arrested a French national who returned from Syria and conducted an attack in Belgium in May, which killed three people at a Jewish museum. French police also thwarted a nail bomb attack near Cannes. And in Kosovo, arrests in November 2013 apparently disrupted a terrorist cell planning the purchase of weapons for future operations.32

Australia has also felt the specter of foreign fighters and homegrown activities. David Irvine, the director general of Australia’s spy agency, revealed that 15 Australians fighting with militant groups were believed to have been killed in Iraq and Syria. He indicated that dozens of Australian foreign fighters have already returned home and he conceded, “a good number of these” remained a concern to the authorities. He also revealed that 100 or more people in Australia were “actively supporting” militant groups by recruiting new fighters, grooming suicide-bombing candidates, and providing funds and equipment.33

The United States has also been impacted by the peril of homegrown attacks. Since 9/11 there have been in excess of 40 terrorist plots in the U.S. involving American citizens or permanent residents.34 Within a 15 month period, there were 53 indictments for individuals planning or attempting to conduct terrorist activities in the United States.35 Some examples prove the severity of the threat. Najibullah Zazi, a 24-year-old coffee cart vendor in Manhattan, who later became a shuttle bus driver at Denver international airport, flew to Peshawar in 2008 with two high school friends eager to join the fight in Afghanistan. While in Pakistan, three senior al-Qaeda leaders persuaded them that they could optimize their assistance to the jihadist cause by returning to New York and conducting a terrorist attack. As such, Zazi plotted to explode a suicide bomb in the New York subway system in a coordinated “Martyrdom” attack with two others in September 2009.36

In addition, on 5 November 2009, Major Nidal Hasan, a serving member in the U.S. Army, went on a shooting spree on Fort Hood, Texas, killing 13 people. Also, Faisal Shahzad, a financial analyst at Elizabeth Arden, traveled to a Taliban training camp in the FATA where he learned to make bombs. As was the case with others, Taliban leaders requested Shahzad to return to the U.S. to conduct a terrorist attack. As a result, he planted a car bomb in Times Square, New York, on 1 May 2010. Fortuitously, the bomb failed to go off and two alert street vendors noticed smoke coming from a car
Examples of other American homegrown attacks, however, do not stem from foreign fighters but rather are the product of radicalized individuals who lashed out. Such was the case of the 19-year-old Somali-born U.S. citizen who tried to detonate what he thought was a car bomb at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon, on 26 November 2010. Approximately 10,000 people had gathered for the ceremony and had the FBI not thwarted the plot, many would have been killed or injured.

Other examples include: a Baltimore construction worker who plotted to blow up a military recruiting station in Maryland; a 34-year-old naturalized American born in Pakistan who was charged with plotting to bomb the Washington Metro; and finally the case of Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, two brothers who lived in the Boston area for several years and placed two homemade pressure cooker bombs at the finish line of the Boston marathon on 15 April 2013, killing three people and injuring more than 200. The subsequent manhunt paralyzed Boston and ended in a gunfight that killed Tamerlan and led to the capture of Dzhokhar. Most recently, as mentioned, on 4 May 2015, two gunmen, who were indirectly linked to the Islamic State through their twitter accounts, were killed when they attempted to storm a cartoon exhibit and contest related to depicting the prophet Muhammad.

Significantly, a recent study conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center revealed that between the period of 1 April 2009 to 1 February 2015, a domestic terrorist attack, emanating from the radical right and homegrown jihadists, occurred every 34 days on average. It further demonstrated that 74 percent of the more than 60 incidents examined were carried out or planned by a lone wolf working entirely alone, and a total of 90 percent of the events were the work of just one or two people.

Canada has not been immune to the homegrown threat. In 2006, Canadian homegrown terrorists, who were labeled the “Toronto 18” by police, wanted to prod the Canadian government into rethinking its involvement in Afghanistan. They plotted to target the Toronto area by destabilizing the economy through attacks on the Toronto Stock Exchange by way of three truck bombs set off over three consecutive days, which they hoped would paralyze Canadians with fear and keep them at home. They believed that the attacks would be bigger than the London 7/7 subway bombings. In addition, they also planned to attack the CSIS headquarters in Toronto and an
unspecified military base off of Highway 401 between Ottawa and Toronto. CSIS and law enforcement discovered the plot through an informant who assisted them in making the case. As such, police found plans and materials at the homes of the plotters. A test of the terrorists’ plans demonstrated “the blast effect from the bomb was equivalent to 768 kilograms of TNT, and would have caused catastrophic damage to a multi-story glass and steel frame building 35 meters from the bomb site, as well as killing or causing serious injuries to people in the path of the blast waves and force.”

All members of the group were arrested prior to enacting the plan; however, only four were actually charged with the bomb plot itself as the others were not fully implicated in what the four were planning. Notably, the other 14 were charged with a variety of terrorist-related charges. Although the plot was not activated, all was in place with the exception of the last component, the delivery of three tons of highly combustible ammonium nitrate fertilizer, which, unknowingly to the conspirators, was being handled by a Muslim businessman turned informant who was working with CSIS and the RCMP. Upon delivery of the explosive fertilizer the police swooped in and arrested the extremists. Fortunately the plan never came to fruition. The judge hearing the case concluded the plot, “would have resulted in the most horrific crime Canada has ever seen.”

More recently, in April 2013, ‘Project Smooth Arrests,’ resulted in the apprehension of two Canadians who conspired to attack a VIA Rail passenger train traveling between New York and Toronto. Chiheb Esseghaier and Raed Jaser were arrested and charged. Months later, in July 2013, John Nuttall and Amanda Korody were charged with conspiring to use improvised explosives built using pressure cookers to bomb the British Columbia legislature building during Canada Day festivities.

The homegrown threat is exacerbated by the insidious reach of social media and the Internet. Organizations such as ISIS, which employ thousands of foreign fighters that can be unleashed on the West, also employ savvy cyber skills that allow them to penetrate countries from afar. Michel Juneau-Katsuya, a former Canadian intelligence officer who now heads up an Ottawa cybersecurity company observed ISIS, “have been capable (of recruiting) young people without speaking directly to them face to face.” He noted, “If they’ve been capable through the media—through the Internet—to reach them, I wouldn’t be surprised that they convince some of these people
that instead of traveling to the Middle East, to stay here and simply attack us here.”

In fact, the prime minister’s warning was only too real. In July 2014, Martin Rouleau, a 25 year-old radicalized Muslim convert, was identified by the RCMP as a “high-risk” traveler. He was arrested at the airport as he was leaving for Turkey and his passport was seized. Later, on 20 October, Rouleau ran over two military personnel with his car as they walked across a parking lot, killing Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent and seriously injuring another service member.

Then, on 22 October 2014, another radicalized Muslim convert, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, struck in the nation’s capital. He first shot to death Corporal Nathan Cirillo, who was standing guard at the National War Memorial. Subsequently, Zehaf-Bibeau left the scene and quickly moved to Parliament Hill where he entered the House of Commons, penetrating deep inside until he reached the party Caucus rooms, which were in session. However, before he could do anymore damage, he was gunned down by Kevin Vickers, the sergeant-at-arms, and unidentified RCMP personnel. The attack put Ottawa on lockdown and prompted the CAF to institute higher security measures since its members had become the target of radicalized individuals.

This threat prompted Prime Minister Stephen Harper to assert with regard to “knife and gun” attacks in the U.S. and Canada, “These threats are very, very real.” In fact, RCMP Commissioner Bob Paulson affirmed, “We have 63 active national security investigations on 90 individuals who are related to the travelling group, people who intend to go [to countries such as Iraq and Syria] or people who have returned.” Alarmingly, CSIS Director Michael Coloumbe affirmed, “in the last three to four months numbers of Canadians travelling for extremism in Iraq and Syria has increased by 50 percent.”

Solving the Foreign Fighter and Lone Wolf Issues

With the clear and present danger that foreign fighters, the organizations they support, and the homegrown plots that they may inspire, support, initiate, or represent, the overriding question then becomes, how does one stop them? Predictably, many Western governments have taken action. For example, the Canadian Government has taken numerous steps toward tackling the problem and its associated issues. The RCMP leads a High Risk Travel
Case Management Group, which involves a number of other government departments and law enforcement agencies. The group examines cases of extremist travelers and works to find the best tailored response to the most pressing cases through a continuum of actions.

The government also works with international organizations, such as the UN, NATO, G-7, the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum, and Interpol, as well as the FATF to counter terrorism. The government has also taken action through the FINTRAC, releasing more than 200 financial intelligence disclosures to authorities relating to terrorist financing.

Moreover, in 2012, then-Public Safety Minister Vic Towes unveiled Canada’s first comprehensive CT strategy, which includes response plans in the event of a major attack and strategies for de-radicalizing homegrown terrorists. Known as “Building Resistance Against Terrorism,” the strategy encompasses a four-step methodology that includes preventing, detecting, denying, and responding to possible threats. As part of the government’s strategy they also implemented Bill S-7, the Combating Terrorism Act, which came into force in July 2013. This legislation created four new offenses intended to prevent and deter persons from leaving Canada for certain terrorism-related purposes. Specifically, an individual commits an offense by leaving or attempting to leave Canada for the purpose of:

1. Knowingly participating in or contributing to any activity of a terrorist group for the purpose of enhancing the ability of any terrorist group to commit a terrorist activity, including providing training, receiving training, or recruiting a person to receive training;

2. Knowingly facilitating a terrorist activity;

3. Committing an indictable offense on behalf of, at the direction of, or in association with a terrorist group; and

4. Committing an indictable offense that constitutes a terrorist activity.

The offenses described in the first bullet carry a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment. The remaining offenses carry a maximum penalty of 14 years. In addition, the Canadian Government tabled Bill C-51, Anti-Terrorism Act, 2015, in January 2015. Its main provisions facilitate information sharing among a large number of federal departments and institutions, provide
enhanced police powers that would allow them to detain or restrict terror suspects in a preventative manner, ban the ‘promotion of terrorism,’ allow the Minister of Public Safety to add individuals to Canada’s ‘no-fly list,’ and enhance the powers of CSIS.

Other governments (e.g., Australia, the United Kingdom, U.S.) have similarly made it a criminal offense to leave the country to engage in terrorist activities or fight in foreign conflicts. In addition, the UN Security Council, at a meeting chaired by President Obama, unanimously passed a resolution on 23 September 2014, specifically designed to plug the flow of foreign fighters to militant organizations. In fact, the Security Council voted 15 to 0 to compel countries to make it a crime for their citizens to travel abroad to fight with militants or recruit other people to do it.\textsuperscript{51}

Although the efforts are laudable, there is one major problem; experts point out that repression, criminalization, and prosecution can be counter-productive as these measures increase the “victimization” narrative. The European Union commission established the Radicalisation Awareness Network, which clearly cautioned:

\textit{Only repression … will not solve the problem. Prevention, signaling and providing programs to help (potential) foreign fighters to leave the path of violent extremism are necessary as well. These actions are often organized on a local level. For instance, first line practitioners such as teachers and youth workers, can be trained to recognize and refer those who are being influenced to go on jihad. Also, families can be partners in both detecting potential fighters and convincing them to deploy their engagement in a non-violent way. Finally, exit-programs that have proven to be effective, can be tailored to the target group, for instance by employing formers or practitioners as acceptable intermediaries or coaches.}\textsuperscript{52}

The reality is that many of those who become foreign fighters and join extremist groups do so because they feel alienated or disassociated with their society and/or are looking for a meaning/cause to guide their existence.\textsuperscript{53} For many, Islam and the call to defend the \textit{umma} (Muslim community) filled that void. As the Radicalisation Awareness Network notes, further sanctions and threats simply reinforce the narrative of Western victimization of Muslims.
Unfortunately, to date the West offers no clear anti-jihadist message to the many who are drawn to the call to defend Islam. One study identified a wide range of motivations, including, “the horrific images of the conflict, stories about atrocities committed by Governmental forces, and the perceived lack of support from Western and Arab countries.” As one analyst noted, “Such motivations not only speak to fellow Muslims, but also to secular-minded people who wish to defend the widow and the orphan.” He concluded, “There is no effective message to deter them from joining the ranks of or falling prey to the most brutal and radicalized groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL) or Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).”54

As such, cooperation between various intelligence and security agencies, as well as local law enforcement and community groups, will have to become closer. This relationship building entails also working with organizations and agencies which may have little to no experience dealing with security issues.55 In essence, the foreign fighter phenomenon underscores the blurring of boundaries in contemporary national security issues. Moreover, in a borderless world, it has become evident that all forms of international issues have resonance and implications domestically. In the end, it would seem there are very few challenges ‘over there’ that do not have a nexus with ‘over here.’ Therefore, authorities and agencies at every level, i.e., municipal, provincial, and federal, both governmental and nongovernmental, must be involved and work cooperatively. As Senior Research Analyst at the NATO Council of Canada, Alexander Corbeil, concluded:

The solutions to these issues are varied, but all include the input and collaboration between Canada’s Muslim community and their leaders, private industry and government institutions beyond the narrow law enforcement focuses of CSIS and the RCMP. Those at risk of joining these groups or being influenced to carry out plots at home must be convinced of their place in Canadian society and the error of those who have already gone to fight overseas. In short, a new narrative must be created using a comprehensive approach, one which competes with the flashy propaganda machine of the [Islamic State] and other terrorist groups.56

As such, Professor Hegghammer argues part of any long-term policy to combat foreign fighter recruitment “must include strategies to undermine pan-Islamism, by spreading awareness of factual errors in the pan-Islamist
victim narrative and by promoting state nationalisms and other local forms of identification.” In addition, rather than attempt to suppress the appeal of other groups or causes, a concerted effort must be made to emphasize the importance and inclusion of national civil and military institutions. The concept is to generate greater identification with the state and the individual’s own society.

In this larger fight, SOF also have a potential role to play. Although most nations have strict rules with regard to the use of military forces on domestic soil, SOF are adept at working with other governmental departments and navigating the national defense and national security domains. Their precision capabilities and interagency networks and relationships make them a viable partner for dislocating, disrupting, or eliminating threats at home and abroad. For example, SOF’s ability to operate in harsh and austere environments allow for SOF assistance to law enforcement agencies in rural or extreme environments. Similarly, SOF’s experience in fighting networks in urban environments can also be leveraged to assist law enforcement agencies and intelligence organizations domestically.

Importantly, SOF’s skills and experience can be utilized to disrupt foreign fighters, as well as any affiliated TOC organizations abroad. Either independently, or in cooperation with regional partners, SOF can use their precision kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities to counter threats at their source. By disrupting and/or eliminating training establishments, facilitating mechanisms, networks, and/or individuals at their source, SOF can substantively assist the fight against foreign fighters and potentially lone wolf terrorism (i.e., by removing the source of inspiration and radicalization of those who may be influenced by fellow nationals who have become foreign fighters or the active social media campaigns that they support).

Conclusion

Foreign fighters, the organizations and causes they support, and the lone wolf terrorism that they often inspire, represent a very real domestic and international threat. The ability of foreign fighters to travel, often relatively undetected due to their Western passports and cultural acuity, makes them a potentially hidden menace. Trained, experienced, and possibly more radicalized and/or traumatized by their experiences, they possess the potential to carry out terrorist attacks, either in groups or as a ‘lone wolf’ attack at
home or in other Western nations. Moreover, foreign fighters and the causes they support also often act as inspiration to radicalized individuals who either through the inability to travel abroad to engage in terrorist activity, or through calculated choice, decide to conduct lone wolf attacks in their homeland.

In the end, concerted action must be taken to deter, detect, track, disrupt, and stop those who would do us harm. Notably, intelligence and law enforcement agencies operations, along with military/SOF assistance where gaps may exist, as well as increased legislation, are but some of the methodologies that can be used. Equal effort must be placed into preventing radicalization at home. In addition, effort must also be placed into disrupting and destroying extremist organizations and their leadership, which contribute to instability in the world. As President Obama explained, “Resolutions alone will not be enough. Promises on paper can’t keep us safe … Lofty rhetoric and good intentions will not stop a single terrorist attack.” He concluded, “The words spoken here today must be matched and translated into action. Into deeds.”

Endnotes


3. Barak Mendelsohn, “Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends,” Orbis, Spring 2011, 193. Mendelsohn clarifies that a distinction must be drawn between a foreign fighter in a local conflict that is not his own country’s war and “a foreign trained fighter, a local who goes to another area, receives training only, and comes back to carry out attacks elsewhere, normally in his own country.”


5. Ibid.


7. David Malet, “Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions,” Orbis, Winter 2010, 114. Dr. Malet noted, “It’s no accident that most suicide missions in Afghanistan and Iraq were carried out by foreign fighters rather
than local militants. Fighting for what is often an abstract ideal, without having to worry about direct retaliation against their families, the Foreign Fighters need not show mercy. Some insurgent groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, have taken advantage of this dynamic by using foreigners to target civilians when the local combatants will not. David Malet, “In Depth: Foreign Fighters Playbook,” Foreign Affairs, 8 April 2014, accessed 28 July 2014 at: http://www.grouph3.com/News-Analysis/in-depth-foreign-fighters-playbook.html.


10. Skidmore, “Foreign Fighter Involvement in Syria,” 33. The Islamic State is a Sunni Jihadist organization that was originally called the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, depending on which version of translation is used. The confusion revolves around the interpretation of the word “Levant,” which in Arabic is al-sham, which can mean the Levant, Syria or even Damascus in some circumstances. The name was changed to Islamic State in 2013.


24. Ibid.


26. Quoted in Ibid., 214. A well researched 2007 New York Police Department report on radicalization described a four-phase process that transforms “unremarkable” individuals into homegrown terrorists. In the first phase, called “Preradicalization,” the study notes that most homegrown terrorists have normal jobs and lead ordinary lives. The second phase, “self-identification,” occurs when individuals are influenced by external or internal events and begin to explore the jihadist stream of Islam on their own, often using the Internet. The third phase, “indoctrination,” transpires when an individual completely subscribes to the extremist ideology and is willing to commit violence to support the cause. The study noted that this stage is often facilitated by someone with religious influence, such as an imam or other respected figure with religious credibility, who sanction violence as religious duty. Finally, “jihadization” is attained when individuals accept it as their duty to commit violence in the name of Islam and plot to execute a terrorist act. Ibid., 213.

27. Schmitt and Shanker, Counter Strike, 108.

28. The term ‘lone wolf’ was popularized by American white supremacists Tom Metzger and Alex Curtis of the Anti-Defamation League, who believed that individual underground activity was the most effective means of advancing a cause because the ‘lone wolf’ leaves the least amount of collectible evidence for law enforcement, thereby limiting the likelihood of discovery or capture.

29. U.S. Government, “Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment,” Office of Intelligence and Analysis, IA-0257-09 (Washington: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, April 2009), 7. The autonomy of lone wolves is a key threat point. Individuals such as Theodore Kaczynski, more widely known as the “Unabomber,” remained undetected for 17 years because he was able to work in isolation and take the necessary time he felt he needed.


SOF Role in Combating Transnational Organized Crime


34. Schmitt and Shanker, *Counter Strike*, 112.


36. Ibid., 217. On his way to the target he became spooked by surveillance by U.S. agents and he was warned by an Imam that Federal authorities had been asking questions about him. As a result, Zazi dumped his explosives and flew back home to Colorado. He was arrested several days later with the other plotters.

37. Ibid., 221. In all of these cases, terrorist groups attempted to use the foreign fighters to return home and conduct attacks because of their U.S. passports and their understanding of American culture and residency, which would allow them “to fly unimpeded below the radar.”

38. The Tsarnaev brothers built their homemade pressure cooker bombs by using instructions they downloaded from an online jihadist magazine.


43. Ibid.


while innocent children, women, men and religious minorities live in fear of these terrorists.”


47. Daniel Leblanc and Colin Freeze, “RCMP CSIS track foreign fighters,” The Globe and Mail, 10 October 2014, A1. The Director of CSIS revealed, “We have no information of an imminent attack, but we have to remain vigilant, the threat is real.”

48. CTV Nightly News, 20 April 2015. CSIS has noted that the phenomenon of Canadians participating in extremist activities abroad is serious. Within the last few years alone, Canadian terrorists have been implicated in attacks in Algeria, Bulgaria and Somalia, as well as Syria and Iraq. Specifically, Hassan El Hajj Hassan is wanted by Bulgarian authorities in connection with a bomb attack, on behalf of Hizballah, on a bus that killed six people and injured 35 in July 2012. In addition, two Canadian extremists participated in the January 2013 terrorist attack on the Algerian gas plant near In Amenas, Algeria; a Canadian was involved in the April 2013 attack on the Supreme Court of Somalia, which killed more than 35 people and injured dozens more; and a Calgarian, Salman Ashrafi, conducted a suicide bomb attack in an Islamic State operation in Iraq in November 2013 that killed 46 people. See Nadim Roberts, “Gregory and Collin Gordon, Calgary brothers, join ranks of Canadians fighting for ISIS,” CBC News, 28 August 2014, accessed 2 September 2014 at: http://www.cbc.ca/news/gregory-and-collin-gordon-calgary-brothers-join-ranks-of-canadians-fighting-for-isis-1.2749673; and Stewart Bell, “As Many As 100 Canadians Could Be Fighting In Syria Against Assad Regime, Think Tank Says,” 17 December 2013, accessed 28 July 2014 at: http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/12/17/as-many-as-100-canadians-could-be-fighting-in-syria-against-assad-regime-think-tank-says/.


55. As one example of law enforcement working with community groups, the RCMP and two Islamic groups are hoping to combat the glossy recruitment videos of extremists such as the Islamic State with a 37 page booklet aimed at youth who are in particular danger of being radicalized. The booklet, titled “United Against Terrorism,” is meant to combat the idea spread by extremists that being a true Muslim means waging war on western society. It is also aimed at alerting parents to warning signs that their kids may be radicalized (i.e. sudden anti-social behavior, an interest in extremist websites and an adoption of views that are anti-women). There is also a section aimed at non-Muslims designed to educate the public at large about the difference between the Muslim religion and the violence of extremists. Steve Lambert, “Booklet helps parents recognize radical extremists,” accessed 30 September 2014 at: http://preview.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/booklet-helps-parents-recognize-radical-extremists/ar-BB6qur6.

56. Corbeil, “Why Canada must address its foreign-fighter problem.”
