Impacts of the War in Ukraine: Extremism and Weapons Dispersal Policy Brief

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian War began in 2014 following the 2013 Maidan Uprising, during which widespread protests resulted in the Ukrainian parliament removing the then-president. Russia responded to the protests by annexing Crimea and occupying the Donbas region of Ukraine. The conflict eventually stabilized in 2015. However, hostilities quietly persisted until February 24th, 2022 when Russian troops once again invaded Ukraine.

Now in its third year, the second phase of the war poses an increasingly large risk to the international community. In addition to the indiscriminate violence and impacts of the ongoing fighting, considerable safety and security concerns continue to emerge and evolve. Of critical concern are the potential multidimensional threats posed by foreign fighters returning home and the proliferation of weapons beyond the conflict zone.

The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon

The term "foreign fighter" originally referenced individuals traveling into Afghanistan to fight for al-Qa'ida against the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.[1] The terminology expanded in 2003, referring to the terrorist-led insurgency in Iraq, and since the early 2000s has been used to describe an individual motivated by either an ideology or set of beliefs to voluntarily join an armed conflict, military action, or insurgency outside of their countries of residence.[1,2]

Concerns surrounding foreign fighters are primarily in regard to their potential for radicalization. Radicalized foreign fighters can become tools for external influence upon returning home – in addition to being well-trained, they are desensitized by combat and sufficiently skilled to carry out complex and coordinated attacks. Their extensive knowledge using weapons, explosives, and combat tactics, as well as their experience under fire, makes them high-value targets for recruitment by foreign and domestic terrorist organizations to train others or to carry out attacks. Returning foreign fighters are also presumably internationally connected and could have links with foreign terrorist organizations.

It is important to recognize that traveling abroad to join a conflict as a foreign fighter does not guarantee an individual will return home radicalized or committed to carrying out acts of violence. Although the second phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War led to an increase in the number of foreign fighters compared to the start, new fighters have been described as generally "apolitical".[3] Since 2022, most foreign fighters arriving in Ukraine have no affiliation with extremist groups, and there is no evidence to corroborate claims that Ukraine has become a center for right-wing extremism.[4] However, given the significant role that foreign fighters have played in previous attacks (such as the Franco-Belgian cell responsible for terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels 2015-2016), the growing threat of political violence, and the military background and combat experience most foreign fighters joining the Russo-Ukrainian War have, potential safety threats and security risks must be considered.[2,3,5]

Foreign fighters have a wide range of motives to join conflicts and, while individual motivations may vary, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Broadly, these encompass political, religious, and ideological beliefs, but they may also include an ethnic connection to a specific region. Specific motives can also be outrage and despair, a "good versus evil" mentality, boredom, adventure, difficulties adapting to civilian life after service, missing combat, and longing for military camaraderie.[4,6]

Individuals who travel abroad as foreign fighters often return with changed perspectives based on their experiences during combat. Some are traumatized by what they witnessed and experienced; others become disillusioned, disgruntled, or aggrieved, sometimes with malicious intentions to carry out an attack in response to these experiences.[7,9] Research has found that the amount of training received corresponds to the duration of a foreign fighter's stay in combat environments. Additional studies suggest that the longer the duration, the greater the likelihood of indoctrination and radicalization.[9]

The diagram below contrasts the motivations of foreign fighters joining the Russo-Ukrainian War with those who decided to return home following a similar conflict.[8,9] While these do not necessarily predict the outcome of Ukraine's foreign fighters, they can provide a reference point from which to build upon. Four profiles were identified for each, along with the motivations that accompany the profile group. Importantly, the final two categories – sleeper agents placed in target countries and captured or repatriated returnees – pose the most concern for radicalization.[9]
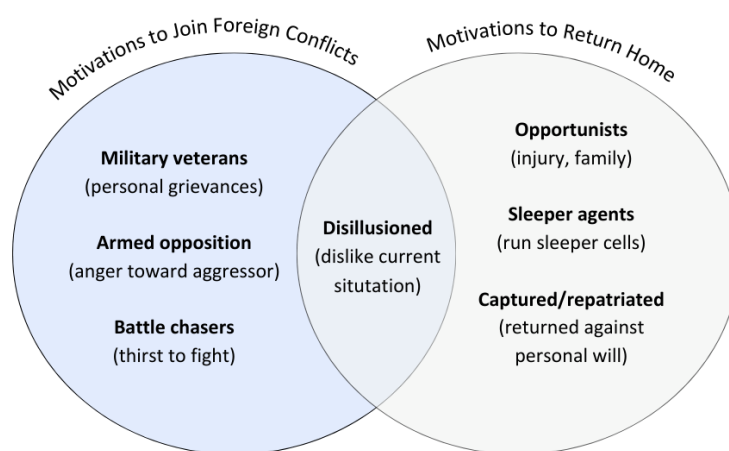
In addition to potential radicalization, long-term multidimensional security concerns include returnees engaging in violence, spreading terrorist propaganda, and using their "foreign fighter credibility" to indoctrinate others.[3,10] Because carrying out acts of domestic terrorism may not be the principal goal of most returning foreign fighters, it is necessary to look beyond the immediate concerns of such physical threats.[10] Consider long-term security risks consistent with providing financial, logistical, or recruiting support to extremist networks, such as being involved in wider political violence, exerting ideological influence and guidance, creating extremist networks, facilitating other foreign fighters' travel, and participating in criminal activities.[3,10]

Risk Multipliers and the Virtual World

The online environment is an increasingly popular tool among terrorist organizations and extremist groups of all ideologies and is used to indoctrinate, radicalize, mobilize, and recruit new members. The speed and ease of communication provided by the Internet, including unrestricted and encrypted communication channels, enables networking and skillset development. Additional advances in technology include artificial intelligence and augmented reality. These broaden the range of threats beyond cybercrimes to include the exploitation of autonomous vehicles to conduct attacks from remote locations and the use of augmented reality to facilitate remote training activities.

The 2022 European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) found that disinformation campaigns associated with the Russo-Ukrainian War could mobilize consumers of extremist propaganda.[11] Similarly, social media – and other aspects of the online domain – can be used to stimulate violent extremist reactions.[11] This is particularly important for lone actors who may be self-

radicalized or inspired to carry out attacks on behalf of terrorist organizations. Given the difficulties in tracking online activities and the highly unpredictable behavior of lone actors, this threat poses a significant public safety risk.

Weapons Dispersal

As of October 21st, 2024, the international community had supplied more than $104 billion USD worth of military aid to Ukraine including air defense systems, artillery rounds, guided rockets, firearms and ammunition, manned aircrafts, unmanned aerial systems, and maritime equipment, amongst others.[12,13] Conflicts such as this have historically created ideal circumstances for gathering and stockpiling weapons, many of which end up in the hands of non-state actors, insurgent groups, terrorist organizations, and organized crime networks.[14]

Recent reports show no considerable outflow of weapons from the Russo-Ukrainian War. However, the potential destinations of these weapons – both combatant and foreign fighter stockpiles – once the war is over must be considered.[14] Some may remain under military control, but large amounts of weapons will likely enter the black market.[14] Economic hardships in Ukraine may contribute to black market sales of weapons by individuals in need of resources for their survival. Organized criminal gangs are also expected to resume or expand their operations in the illegal market as hostilities end. Information regarding the number of weapons trafficked or smuggled out of Ukraine is limited, but it is reasonable to anticipate activity along illegal trafficking routes returning to pre-war levels.[14]

Regardless of the outcome of the war, failure to track and secure weapons – especially those left behind on the battlefield – poses considerable public safety and security concerns both within Ukraine and beyond its borders. Planning for their potential destinations must be prioritized.

Recommendations, Additional Considerations, and Opportunities for Exploration

The evolution of foreign fighters in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War may involve factors that are not yet fully understood. Developing informed solutions and strategies requires a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional threats posed by returning fighters. It is necessary to understand how opportunities for attacks (vulnerabilities), target selection, and access to weapons can shape outcomes. As governments examine and evaluate policies to manage the return of their citizens, policymakers and legislators should consider the fluid, decentralized, and loosely organized structures foreign fighters may be aligned with.

Historically, the number of returning foreign fighters engaging in acts of domestic terrorism is very small; however, the potential for these fighters to be radicalized represents a significant security risk.[10] The development and implementation of proactive strategies to counter potential threats, consistent with applicable national and international laws and considering the varied histories, cultures, and legal systems among states receiving foreign fighters, is essential.[12] Policy considerations should encompass long-term results, rather than solely focusing on adopting short-term solutions and temporary provisions. Policies also should consider counterterrorism mitigation strategies, radicalization prevention, situational awareness, threat assessment and threat management, and risk mitigation. Prevention and de-radicalization tools and methods should not consist of a 'one size fits all' approach; instead, approaches must be tailored and adapted to the context of a country's structure and capabilities. Where possible, implementing mechanisms to identify returnees and continuously monitor transnational fighter connections can help determine the degree of security challenges when designing specific policies.[7] Previous studies regarding returning foreign fighters noted that it is more important to focus on how to best implement policies as part of a comprehensive approach, rather than to engage in debates over criminalization versus reintegration.[7]

The following recommendations are aimed at providing overall guidance to public safety professionals regarding the potential threats and security risks posed by returning foreign fighters. Assessing all available resources within a country's capability will aid the development of a tailored mitigation plan that considers potential risk-enhancing and risk-mitigating factors. Overall recommendations often require adjustments to enhance success.

- Invest in long-term relationships with communities that are susceptible to recruitment, and target broad-level support toward vulnerable and at-risk individuals based on the issues their community experiences.[15]
- Promote a wide range of positive counter-narratives and non-violent, productive alternatives to address grievances, creating a means to channel frustration, anger, and concerns without turning to violence.
- Create compelling counter-narrative content by bringing together social media professionals, analytic experts, and technology innovators.
- Develop assessment tools that mitigate risk by identifying adequate treatment, support, and services; improving an individual's circumstances; and building resilience against radicalization to violence.
- Prepare for the eventual return of those who have already traveled to the region to engage in foreign fighting by investing in risk mitigation and threat assessment strategies that include conflict resolution, empathy training, and alternative solutions.

Although many local, regional, and national agencies around the world work together to counter public safety and security threats, it is essential to expand and enhance coordination and collaboration, through which it is possible to evaluate and mitigate threats posed by foreign fighters.

References

[1] 'Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Manual for Judicial Training Institutes Middle East and North Africa'. (2021). *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, [online]

[2] Tinsley, H., Jensen, M., & James, P. (2015). 'Understanding the Threat: What Data Tell Us about U.S. Foreign Fighters', *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism*, [online].

[3] Kaunert, C., MacKenzie, A., & Leonard, S. (2023). 'Far-right foreign fighters and Ukraine: A blind spot for the European Union?', *New Journal of European Criminal Law*, [online].

[4] Rekawek, K. (2023). 'A Year of Foreign Fighting for Ukraine: Catching fish with bare hands?', *Counter Extremism Project*, [online].

[5] Reed, A., Pohl, J., & Jegerings, M. (2017). 'The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, [online].

[6] Patin, N. (2015). 'The Other Foreign Fighters: An Open-Source Investigation into American Volunteers Fighting in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria', *A Bellingcat Investigation*, [online].

[7] Malet, D. & Hayes, R. (2018). 'Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat?', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, [online].

[8] Murauskaite, E. (2020). 'Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Assessing Potential Risks', *Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis*, [online].

[9] Boncio, A. (2017). 'The Islamic State's Crisis and Returning Foreign Fighters: The Case of Italy', Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [online].

[10] Hoffman, A. & Furlan, M. (2020). 'Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters', *The George Washington University*, [online].

[11] 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report'. (2022). *EUROPOL*, p. 76-77, [online].

[12] Trebesch, C., Cherepinskiy, D., Irto, G., and Nishikara, T. (2024). 'Ukraine Support Tracker', *Kiel Institute for the World Economy*, [online].

[13] 'U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine'. (2023). Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. *United States Department of Defense,* [online].

[14] Galeotti, M. & Arutunyan, A. (2023). 'Peace and Proliferation: The Russo-Ukrainian war and the illegal arms trade', *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, [online].

[15] 'The Hague-Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon'. (n.d.) *Global Counterterrorism Forum*, [online].