



## Returnees in the Maghreb. A European perspective

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More than 10,000 individuals travelled from Europe and North Africa to fight in Syria and Iraq. Now, Europe and North Africa are dealing with the challenge of returning foreign fighters, mostly separately. This policy brief looks at the inter-regional dimension of the returnees' challenge, at why Europe should care more about North Africa's ability (or not) to craft effective policies, and how it could help – with a focus on the European Union (EU). It concludes with concrete recommendations for the EU and North African countries.

### **A CHALLENGE WITHOUT PRECEDENT**

Countries from North Africa have provided one of the largest contingents of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to the Levant. More than 5,000 individuals joined jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq since 2012, while about 2,000 went to Libya. Most of them originated from Tunisia, one of the countries worldwide with the highest ratio of FTFs per inhabitant (about 3000 went to Iraq/Syria, and about 1500 to Libya). Another significant contingent came from Morocco (1664

went to the Levant and 300 to Libya, according to intelligence services), while the Egyptian contingent is estimated at 500-600. This mobilization is not only large in contemporary terms, compared to other regions, but also larger than any previous jihadi mobilization, including that for the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

FTFs have raised concern among North African countries. Returning foreign fighters in particular are considered a serious threat. Over the past few years, Egypt and Tunisia have both been struck by terrorist attacks either perpetrated by or involving returnees from Syria and Libya. Meanwhile, Morocco dismantled several terrorist networks involving returnees. Although not every returning fighter is a direct threat, 'veteran jihadis' can bring the jihad home, transfer their military skills to local recruits, or actively engage in proselytizing activities including from within prison. Some returnees from previous jihadi waves (Afghanistan, Iraq) played a critical role in the mobilization for the Syrian jihad. Overall, returnees are a long-term security liability.

In a recent report published jointly by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the Egmont Institute, we looked specifically into this challenge and how

North African governments responded to it.<sup>1</sup> It appears that all countries are aware of the challenge and have taken measures to deal with it. However, the scope of the challenge varies from one country to another, as well as the capacity to tackle it effectively. Tunisia would be dealing with about 1,000 returnees (representing about a third of its FTF contingent, similar to European ratios), while Morocco would only have just over 200 returnees (about 12% of its FTF contingent). Figures for Egypt are unknown but most likely comprised between one hundred and several hundred.

Morocco has developed a systematic policy to deal with returnees. It has strong and capable security services, as well as new laws facilitating the prosecution of returning fighters. In prison, a new rehabilitation programme has been initiated, which will also be open to returnees. In contrast, Tunisia and Egypt have taken a narrower and less systematic approach to dealing with returnees. Tunisian authorities and civil society seem to agree that the country is ill-equipped to deal with this challenge. Only a fraction of returning fighters was prosecuted and jailed, while most are said to be ‘under house arrest’ or ‘monitored’, if at all. In Egypt, there are simply very few specific instruments or laws for coping with returnees. In both Tunisia and Egypt, prisons lack specific rehabilitation and reinsertion programmes for returnees, while overcrowded detention facilities are at risk of breeding further radicalisation.

Overall, North African countries share a heavily security-driven approach to terrorism and returning fighters. In spite of their rhetoric, they all fail to take a comprehensive approach, encompassing the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees, while in prison and long afterwards. Little prevention (P/CVE) work is being developed, which implies that the underlying conducive environment to radicalisation and

mobilization is still present locally. Returnees exiting prison are therefore likely to fall back in the same environment that led to their radicalisation in the first place, but also to play a role in the radicalisation of others. Furthermore, counter-terrorism policies are often criticized by international observers and organisations for their lack of compliance with international law and human rights standards, which is also counterproductive in the longer term.

### THE EUROPEAN CONNECTION

The success or failure of North African countries to mitigate the threat from returnees over the long term will have clear effects on Europe’s security. First, there is, of course, geographic proximity. The development of jihadi networks or, worse, the strengthening of a jihadi front closer to Europe is a worrying perspective. Jihadi fighters in the Maghreb and Egypt could plot attacks against European interests in the region (diplomatic, business or tourists), but also plot or incite attacks on European soil.

In spite of the fall of the Caliphate, there is the possibility of a jihadi resurgence in Syria, as well as in other regions such as Libya or the Sinai, with a possible influx of European and North African FTFs. The multiplication and internationalisation of jihadi conflicts makes it more complicated for European services to monitor their national fighters and protect their interests worldwide.

Second, there are historical and personal ties between North Africa and diaspora communities in Europe. Such connections have existed between jihadis from North Africa and Europe for more than two decades. Historically, veteran fighters from the Maghreb have been active throughout Europe, to proselytize and recruit notably. Groups such as the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group or the Tunisian Combatant

Group were partly rooted in Europe. However, the unprecedented number of FTFs from Europe and the Maghreb (about 10,000 combined) has created an unprecedented jihadi community across the region.

Many European foreign fighters who joined the caliphate were of Moroccan or Tunisian descent, and they fought alongside North African fighters. Some were likely integrated in the same units. Several Europeans also travelled to and stayed in North Africa before heading to Syria. These ties have inevitably deepened in the Syrian context and will probably outlive the caliphate. The seeds of future terrorist networks spanning across the Mediterranean Sea have undoubtedly been planted already.

Adding to this, a number of European countries have stripped terrorist convicts or suspects of their European citizenship and subsequently expelled them. This approach is one of the cornerstones of Italy's counter-terrorism policy, which has expelled (with or without citizenship stripping) over 400 presumed 'extremists' since 2014. The vast majority of these expulsions concerned Moroccans, Tunisians and Egyptians. Revoking citizenship (in the case of binationals) and /or the expulsion of foreign citizens with links to terrorist organisations are also considered or used with increased frequency throughout Europe. Germany passed a new law in 2019 facilitating such measures, whereas the UK and Denmark have already stripped a number of violent extremists of their nationality, notably foreign fighters stranded in Syria.

Removing highly influential individuals from the national territory is sometimes perceived as an effective way to counter radicalisation in the short term, but the longer terms effects of such policy are highly debatable. To be sure, it is an ethically dubious policy given that most

European foreign fighters radicalised in Europe. Their case is therefore clearly Europe's responsibility. Pretending otherwise only feeds into jihadi groups' narrative on the discrimination and marginalisation of Muslims in Europe.

Furthermore, such 'offshoring' approach increases the risk of creating a new jihadi 'community of the unwanted', which may further coalesce in prisons and socialise with local jihadi milieus. This community will not only hold deeper grievances against European authorities but also rely on extensive networks in Europe, among friends and family, while being mostly out of reach of European security services. Such approach also increases the security burden on North African countries, which are already facing a higher strain than Europe.

We could add to this 'community of unwanted' the group of European fighters in Syria deprived of their nationality and of their right to return home; and who are probably ineligible for repatriation by North African states. These stranded fighters are more likely to become 'roaming fighters', with few other alternatives to a life of jihad, and therefore remaining a long-term threat worldwide.

Overall, Europe and North Africa are both facing a tremendous and unprecedented challenge. While individual countries are responsible for crafting effective policies to deal with returning fighters, there are clear incentives to cooperate in light of the shared threat landscape.

### **EU SUPPORT TO NORTH AFRICA**

The EU Council conclusions of 9 February 2015 constitute one of the guiding documents for the EU's external efforts in counter-terrorism. It states that the EU's security depends on its engagement and outreach with neighbouring regions, particularly the Middle East and North

Africa (MENA), in light of the foreign fighters' threat. In this respect, countries of the Maghreb are considered to be priority partners, and counter-terrorism (CT) has become much more central to the EU's cooperation with North African countries.

The EU doubled its financial contribution on external counter-terrorism, reaching €274 million in 2015-17, more than 20% of which was allocated to the MENA region.<sup>2</sup> CT Action Plans have been agreed with countries in the region (except Morocco, due to political tensions linked to the Western Sahara issue), while the EU has appointed CT experts in its delegations (except in Egypt, due to local reluctance). With Tunisia, there is even a High-Level political dialogue, with the participation of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove.

The EU has supported a number of relevant initiatives at the regional level, notably in terms of training and capacity-building for regional police cooperation, or to encourage the use of Interpol instruments and databases. Europol is negotiating cooperation agreements with all countries of the Maghreb, except Libya. Furthermore, a pilot project supporting regional civil society actors in countering violent extremism (CVE) was also initiated.

Tunisia is probably the country in the region that is the most open to cooperation with the EU. It has received significant support for the reform of its justice system or for its prisons, notably. The EU is also active in the G7+ support group for Tunisia (G7 countries + Belgium, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, EU and UNODC), where the EU co-chairs the working group on radicalisation. In contrast, Morocco and Egypt are less open to cooperation and assistance. They do not necessarily perceive the added value of the EU in these issues of national security. Of course,

EU efforts do not occur in a vacuum. They complement other CT-related initiatives taken by its member states.

Overall, the EU's efforts in the region have increased, but they remain modest. And their effects are hard to measure. On the issue of returning foreign fighters specifically, the EU's efforts are even more limited, in spite of the 2015 Council conclusions identifying it as a priority. There is a recognition that more should be done, but this appears difficult in light of the reluctance from certain North African governments and of the lack of flexibility of EU financial instruments.<sup>3</sup> More fundamentally, the EU has not been able so far to convince its North African partners to develop a more comprehensive approach to terrorism and foreign fighters, with the development of stronger socio-preventive policies.

## 10 RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the returnees' long-term challenge for the Maghreb and Europe, we formulate ten key recommendations.

To the North African countries:

- **Develop a more systematic response to returnees.** States should be able to detect returning fighters, prosecute, rehabilitate and monitor them. The United Nations' Counter-Terrorism Committee (UN CTC) 'Madrid Guiding Principles' serve as a benchmark to meet.
- **Work on the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees, starting in prison.** Incarceration may effectively 'freeze' the problem stemming from returnees for several years, but it will not help in the longer term if terrorist offenders are not supported in their desistance efforts. Some returnees are already exiting prisons in the Maghreb and Egypt, with little support. An effective approach to returnees should therefore

aim at lowering the chances of re-offending upon release by increasing the chances of a successful reinsertion.

- **Tame the conducive environment to violent radicalisation.** As foreign fighters return into society, most often into their former environment, the risk of them re-engaging in jihadi activities is high if the primary causes of their radicalisation are not addressed. So far, however, it is not clear how much effort has been invested in such prevention programmes; but it is clearly not enough.
- **Develop contacts with regional and international partners,** in order to obtain as much information as possible on (detained) North African fighters. Biometric information, as well as evidence collected by the Iraqi authorities could be useful to feed national and international databases (i.e. Interpol, Europol), to gain better knowledge about these fighters' role in the conflict and future intentions, as well as to hinder their movements and ease their prosecution.

To the EU, we recommend the following measures towards the Maghreb and Egypt:

- **Encourage the development of more comprehensive strategies to deal with returning foreign fighters and violent extremism in general.** Morocco and Tunisia are moving in the right direction, but should be further supported to develop stronger socio-preventive programmes (P/CVE) as well as more cooperation among government services (multi-agency approach).
- **Increase the support for the security sector reform (SSR) in the Maghreb,** with a particular focus on the justice and penitentiary administrations,

emphasising the importance of complying with human rights standards.

- **Increase the support for development programmes that are not specifically CT-oriented,** but which can undermine the conducive environment to violent radicalisation by fostering economic development and social inclusion in areas particularly affected by radicalisation.
- **Increase the support for civil society organisations active in P/CVE efforts,** particularly at the local level.
- **Encourage the exchange of good practices between Europe and North Africa** in dealing with returning foreign fighters and violent extremism. The EU-funded Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) has identified a number of good practices, which could serve as inspiration for the region.
- **Support further exchanges and cooperation between relevant CT and P/CVE services in North Africa.** The EU could support a regional RAN (separate from the EU RAN), bringing together practitioners from the region to develop their own good practices inspired from the local context. In short, a sort of '*RAN made in MENA*'.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Renard (ed), 'Returnees in the Maghreb: Comparing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia', Egmont Paper 107, Brussels: Egmont Institute and KAS, April 2019.

<sup>2</sup> <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/eu-ct-evaluation-v7-final.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Interview with an EU official, Brussels, 7 June 2019.