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INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AGAINST FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS: THE EXPERIENCE OF TURKEY

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The threat posed by extremist groups has become a concern for international security and stability. Turkey, due to the geographical proximity to this troubled area and its long land border with Syria and Iraq, has been facing an increased risk and threat to its security at many levels. One of the security threats against Turkey is Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) and their travels through the country. This policy brief aims to shed light on the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon from Turkey's angle. The brief highlights the importance of international cooperation in the prevention of FTF travels. It also studies the two instruments Turkey has developed to prevent FTF travels: a no-entry list and Risk Analysis Groups. The brief also discusses the recently released data on no-entry and deportations, based on geographic distribution. It concludes by underlining that FTF recruitment and travel is a cycle and intervention at any stage requires an effective international cooperation.

Terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and its ideology have expanded their presence and influence in Syria and Iraq as well as in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region due to the fertile environment created by the violent crisis in Syria, that has been unfolding since 2011 and the developments in Iraq. The threat posed by these groups, particularly Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/DAESH) and al-Nusra Front (ANF), has become a concern for security and stability not only for the countries of the region but also different parts of the world where the violent ideology spread by these groups triggered radicalization and violent extremism.

Turkey, due to the geographical proximity to this troubled area and its long land border with Syria and Iraq, has been facing an increased risk and threat to its security at many levels. One factor that contributes to this risk stems from flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) to the areas that are infected by the presence of terrorist groups. This paper aims to shed light on the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon from Turkey's angle.

Foreign terrorist fighters have a high potential to create serious problems for the rest of the world, in addition to deepening the existing problems within Syria and Iraq. An examination of this problem is bedevilled by many aspects, though. Currently, the conflict zone is not accessible to conduct research on various aspects of ISIS and other extremist groups, compared to the previous conflict zones. Presumably, Sierra Leone Civil War in the 1990s contained some similarities with the current conflict and massacres carried out by the extremist groups. Similarly, the international community could not reach the conflict zone for a while in Sierra Leone. Today, however, owing

to the social media networks and return of many former FTFs, there are leaks from the conflict zone that let us understand more about the dynamics of the violence and the FTF activity.

This policy brief focuses on the two aspects of this multi-faceted issue: the threat posed by the FTFs to Turkey and Turkey's struggle against the transit of the FTFs. Turkey itself is vulnerable not only to the direct threat from extremist organizations, but also to the many challenges presented by the movement of FTFs. Essentially, there are three factors that shape the boundaries of the FTF threat to Turkey by its nature:

1. High percentage of the population of Turkey is Muslim and this raises Turkey's potential vulnerability compared to Turkey's western allies.

2. Turkey has a long border with Syria and Iraq.

3. There are almost 2 million Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Therefore, the current FTF phenomenon encompasses high threat potential to Turkey compared to many other countries.

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Figure 1. *Foreign Terrorist Pathways[1]*

Turkey and the FTF Threat

FTF threat against Turkey has three dimensions whereas the western societies have primarily one dimension according to the emerging models for FTFs in the recent literature. Since the FTF phenomenon is still being conceptualized, there are different attempts to create models for the western foreign terrorist fighters' pathways. In this context, a model developed by the International Center for Counter Terrorism in The Hague provides a useful framework to understand this issue. According to this model, a foreign terrorist fighter will either be killed in conflict zone, stay in the conflict zone permanently, or leave the conflict zone (Figure 1). The potential threat of FTFs to the rest of the world begins, ironically, as they want to leave the conflict zone. Essentially, they might either return to their home or travel to a third country. In the first option, they can be either integrated into the society

Figure 2. Foreign Terrorist Pathways and Potential Threats against Turkey

peacefully, or may decide to join other conflicts. Or else, in a very detrimental scenario to the world, these ex-FTFs might engage in a terrorist activity in their home country. The last option for the ex-FTFs tops the threat list for the rest of the world.

As for application of the model to Turkey, the concerns have been tripled compared to the rest of the world. Turkey perceives exactly the same threat with the western allies in the sense that a Turkish FTF who decides to come back to her/his home might engage in a terrorist activity in Turkey (Figure 2). In addition to that, Turkey's threat perceptions encompass two additional dimensions. Because, concerns of Turkey begin as any FTF decides to leave the conflict zone and creates a threat on the way back to her/his home. For instance, in March 2014, three Turkish citizens including one police officer and one military personnel were killed during the return of some FTFs. As this event underscores, the return decision creates an additional threat for Turkey. In other words, we should consider FTFs travelling through Turkey as a double edged sword regarding travels to and from the conflict zone. As for the third dimension, a FTF who decides to leave the conflict zone might prefer to reside in Turkey as a third country, due to the fact that Turkey is a Muslim-majority country where she/he can relatively easily blend in local society. In this regard, this particular model tells us threats against Turkey have additional two dimensions compared to the western allies.

Turkey is a western state which is located at the very edge of the current conflict in the Middle East. Undoubtedly, this reality creates not only threats against Turkey, which have already been mentioned above, but also raises its vulnerability

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as a transit country for the FTFs mobility. Many media releases suggested that the FTF travel through Turkey to Syria has been triggered by the liberal visa regime and porous Turkish land border with Syria.

Turkey receives more than 35 million tourists from all around the world in a year through its borders, ports and especially airport gates. Its attempts to have a more liberal visa regime not only aimed at supporting its tourism industry but also facilitating economic and trade interests, which are very legitimate points in a globalized economy. Essentially, Turkish policies devising the visa liberalization in the past decade can be excused for not having foreseen the unwitnessed flow of FTFs, since this development caught all governments unprepared.

Moreover, essentially, Turkey's long border, more than 900 km, with Syria has been historically a problematic issue for Turkey. The border, crossing from rural and urban areas, dividing towns, families, tribes has been long a matter of concern in terms of terrorist infiltrations from Syria, particularly by the PKK terrorist groups. Furthermore, the border area has been known to be an arena of smuggling networks that are connected on both sides of the border. Last but not the least, as it is a well established fact, securing borders requires constant struggle and can never be guaranteed. While many countries around the world have moved in the direction of erecting walls during the last two decades to secure their borders, infiltrations still take place.

Turkey's Measures against FTFs

In this paper, it is not the intention to dwell on the details of border protection, but it is important to take note of the developments

in this field. Since the unfolding of the crisis in Syria, the Turkish authorities have been declaring that the vulnerabilities are known and measures are being enhanced to address them without infringing the policy of providing protection to Syrians that are escaping to Turkey.[2] As a matter of fact, Turkey has been providing protection to around 2 million Syrians and Iraqis since the beginning of the crisis in Syria and the ISIS advance in Iraq. The fact that most of the refugees reside in the areas close to border and international humanitarian aid work is being facilitated through this border complicates the picture. Last but not the least, increased presence and clashes by ISIS and other terrorist groups on the other side of the border further add to the problem. Nevertheless, it can be stated that these challenges in the border are one of the main reasons that increase the security risk and burden

that FTF flow poses to Turkey.

In that respect, Turkish authorities have stated that their priority has been to stop FTFs reaching to Turkey at the first point of entry. The main instrument for Turkey to prevent travels through Turkey is a no-entry list of potential FTFs established through international cooperation. Essentially, the no-entry list has been developed through the information shared by the third countries either through bilateral channels or through the INTERPOL. The second instrument, namely Risk Analysis Groups, have been established by Turkish security units to identify potential FTFs at borders, ports and airport.[3] Any individual who fits the profile might be prevented from travelling through the country and surely deported back to her/his country. Understandingly, prevention and restriction of freedom of travel is a sensitive issue regarding human

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rights. In other words, the Risk Analysis Groups are effective but a delicate attempt regarding Turkey's commitment to European and universal values about the protection of individual liberties and privacy.

The no-entry list details are not published. So a detailed analysis of the FTF flow on the basis of that list is not possible. According the information that has been made public, the number of people on the no-entry list has reached 9915 persons. This number was around 5000 during the summer and around 7000 during the autumn in 2014. The increase in figures indicates that the list has grown most notably in 2014 (Graph 1). It can be suggested from this preliminary information that the information from source countries provided for the no entry list increased significantly. While the data is not available to deduct a periodical analysis of the growth in this list, it is assumed that the increased international awareness on the FTF risk as revealed by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 on 24 September 2014

Graph 1. *No-Entry List by Years (2011-2014)[4]*
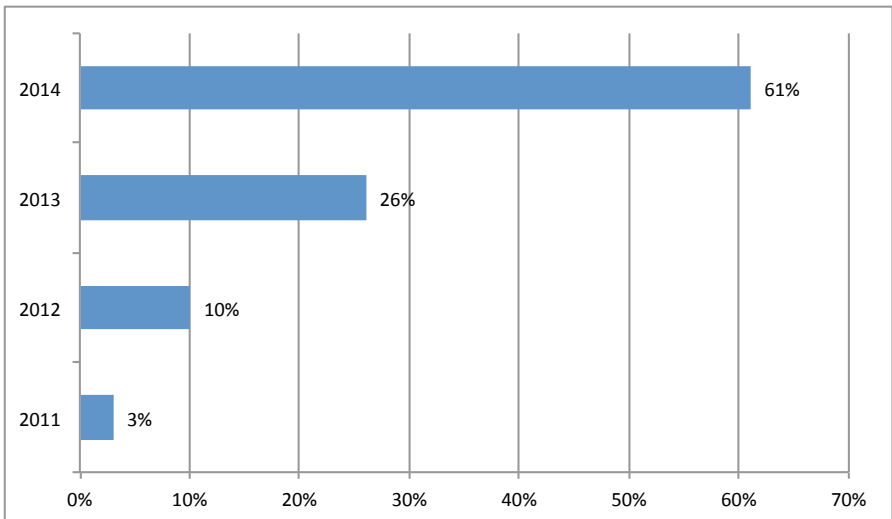
might have contributed to enhanced information exchange.

The contributions for the no-entry list based on regions are detailed in Graph 2, which gives us some clue regarding the geographic distribution of FTFs as well as the state of international cooperation. Yet, as of January 2015, the last estimations state that the amount of the FTFs in Iraq and Syria reached 20.730, although the-no entry list surely does not reflect the exact number.[5]

Graph 2. *No-Entry List (Distribution by Regions 2011-2015)[6]*
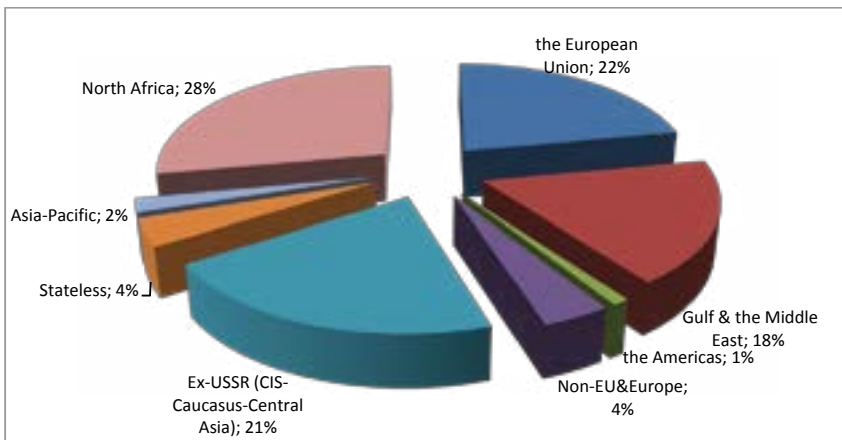
It is possible to compare the no-entry list data with the estimated number of FTFs based on the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation's (ICSR)'s recent study released in January 2015. ICSR's estimated data has been adapted on regional bases and percentages on Table 1 since Turkish authorities released data on regions and percentages.

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Table 1. *Percentages of FTFs based on ICSR's recent study in January 2015 (by regions)*

Region	Estimated Amount of FTFs	Percentage
European Union	3910	19
North Africa	5830	29
Asia-Pacific	1106	5
Ex-USSR (CIS-Caucasus-Central Asia)	2950	15
Gulf & The Middle East	5242	26
Non-EU - Europe	692	3
The Americas	200	1
Stateless/Statistically Omitted Countries*	200	1
TOTAL	20130**	100

* ICSR has neglected some countries with 5 or less confirmed cases.

** The number of FTFs from Turkey is shown 600 on ICSR study and it is omitted in order to make comparison to the No-Entry List.

Graph 3 shows us the comparison of both data, the ICSR study and the no-entry list, via using percentages by regions. It is possible to assume that the North Africa, the Gulf and the Middle East, and Europe are leading regions for FTF recruitment. However, the Gulf and the Middle East countries may be somewhat behind desired level of cooperation with Turkey in terms of information sharing. Similarly, the proportionality of the two figures in the case of the European Union suggests that the level of cooperation might reflect the actual gravity of the problem. The higher proportion of those from ex-Soviet region on the no entry list suggests an effective cooperation.

Graph 3. *Comparison of the percentages of FTFs based on ICSR's recent study and No-Entry List (Distribution by Regions 2011-2015)[7]*
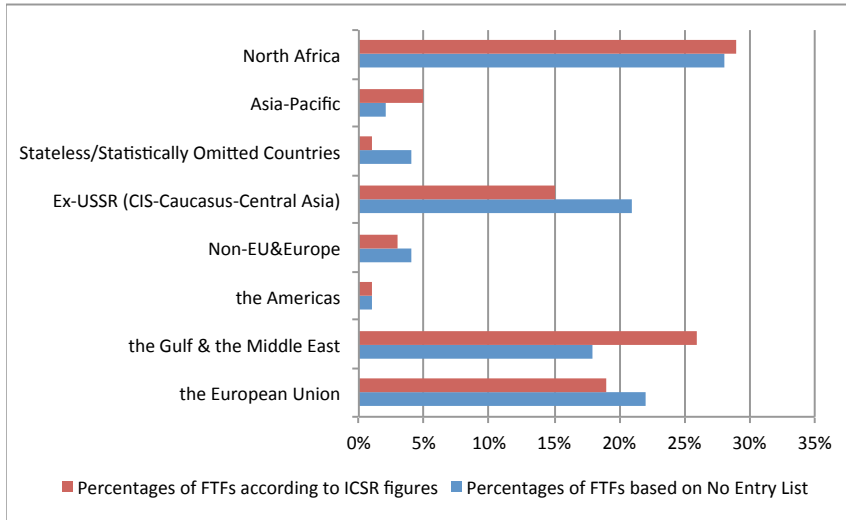
The information, regarding deportation of suspected FTFs, also gives an indication of the FTF threat posed to Turkey and its partners. The information available suggests that deportation of suspected FTFs from Turkey has reached 1084 individuals in the course of 3 years (Graph 4). It needs to be stated that the higher numbers on the no-entry list does not necessarily mean more deportation, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the graph gives us an insight about the importance of international cooperation and information sharing because each deportation reflects a humble step to prevent any potential FTF recruitment.

Graph 4. *Deported Individuals by Years compared to the No-entry List[8]*
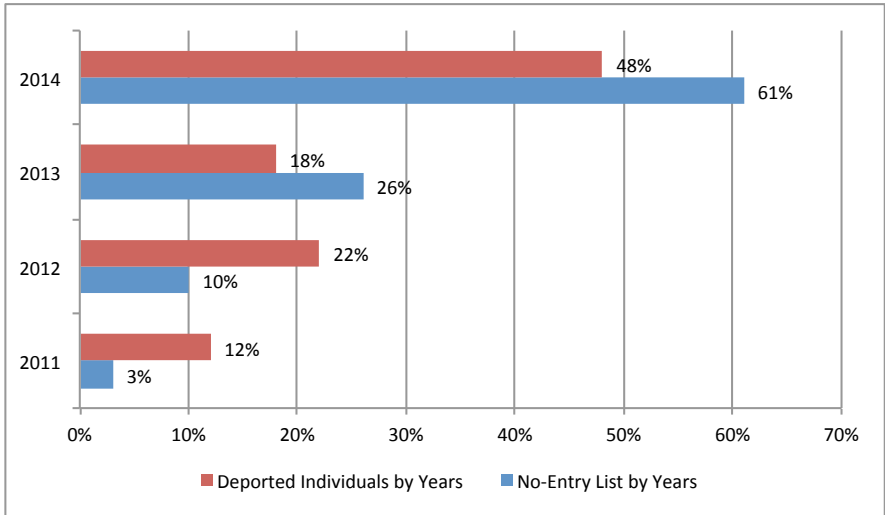
Figures and percentages of deported individuals from Turkey are an indicator for FTF recruitments on regional basis (Graph 5). The parallel growth of deportations with the no-entry list also indicates that in terms of detecting and preventing FTF travel, information exchange is vital. Moreover, the more information sharing leads to more deportation, or, in other words, more prevention of FTF recruitment.

Graph 5. *Deported Individuals by Regions (2011-2015)*
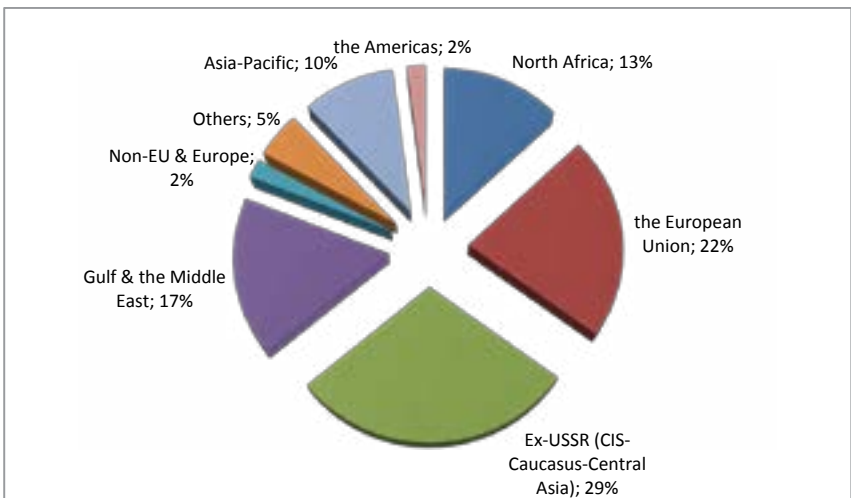
Conclusion

The available information regarding Turkey cannot present a full profile of FTF distribution or the scope of the threat per se. First, as suggested before, the international community does have nothing but only estimations for the number of FTFs as well as has an emerging no-entry list. Second, there can be undetected returns; and third, the potential patterns in new arrivals are unknown. As of January 2015, the last estimations state that the amount of the FTFs rose to 20.730 although the figure surely is not the exact number.[9] The no-entry list states 9915 individuals which means the international cooperation is far behind the ISIS's recruitment efforts. It should be accepted that each FTF recruitment is a failure of international efforts. Nevertheless, the steady increase of the no-entry list and the deported list gives Turkey a hope for the prevention of the FTF travels through Turkey. In essence, the international community needs to increase its performance and begin effective information sharing because the current estimations state that every month ISIS recruits more than 1000 FTFs whereas the no-entry list could not reach that number.

It is obvious that the international community is far behind to figure out the threat level of foreign terrorist fighters, due partly to the lack of data. Instead there are assumptions, estimations and weak generalizations on the subject. In essence, the researchers do not have enough data and info in order to conceptualize this phenomenon as of now. As of January 2015, Turkey's no-entry list encompasses almost 10.000 potential FTFs, and total number of deportations reached 1084 persons. The continuous flow of FTFs to the conflict zones indicates the failures

of international effort for preventing FTF recruitment. The information available on exact number of FTFs, returnees, deaths and so on is far from satisfying. We still need more data to properly conceptualize the FTF phenomenon. What we know is limited, but reveals that FTF recruitment and travel is a cycle and intervention at any stage requires an effective international cooperation.

ENDNOTES

1 Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker, *Returning Western Foreign Fighters: The Case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Background Note, The Hague, June 2014, p.10.

2 "Measures against Foreign Terrorist Fighters," Presentation of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, *the State of Affairs in Foreign Terrorist Fighters Research Workshop* held by ORSAM on January 23rd, 2015 in Ankara.

3 *The State of Affairs in Foreign Terrorist Fighters Research Workshop* held by ORSAM on January 23rd, 2015 in Ankara.

4 "Measures against Foreign Terrorist Fighters," Presentation of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, *the State of Affairs in Foreign Terrorist Fighters Research Workshop* held by ORSAM on January 23rd, 2015 in Ankara.

5 Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/IraqNowExceeds 20,000; SurpassesAfghanistanConflict in the 1980s," *ICSR Insight*, King'sCollegeLondon. accessdateJanuary 2015 http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/

6 "Measures against Foreign Terrorist Fighters," Presentation of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, *the State of Affairs in Foreign Terrorist Fighters Research Workshop* held by ORSAM on January 23rd, 2015 in Ankara.

7 "Measures against Foreign Terrorist Fighters," Presentation of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, *the State of Affairs in Foreign Terrorist Fighters Research Workshop* held by ORSAM on January 23rd, 2015 in Ankara.

8 "Measures against Foreign Terrorist Fighters," Presentation of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, *the State of Affairs in Foreign Terrorist Fighters Research Workshop* held by ORSAM on January 23rd, 2015 in Ankara.

9 Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/IraqNowExceeds 20,000; SurpassesAfghanistanConflict in the 1980s," *ICSR Insight*, King'sCollegeLondon. accessdateJanuary 2015 http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/