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The terror threat to Denmark from travellers to Syria/Iraq

Summary

The conflict in Syria/Iraq continues to attract individuals from Denmark, but the number of travellers and returnees has been declining since Islamic State (IS) announced a caliphate in June 2014 and international efforts were launched in September 2014.

CTA assesses that at least 125 individuals have left Denmark for Syria/Iraq. This number may be higher. Approximately half of them have returned. More than one in every five traveller has been killed in the conflict zone. The travellers are still primarily young Sunni Muslim men. CTA assesses that up towards 10 per cent of the travellers to Syria/Iraq are women. However, the women are assessed not to take part in combat.

CTA assesses that there are individuals among the returnees from Syria/Iraq who may pose a terror threat. CTA assesses that returnees from the conflict zone who want to commit terrorism may act on their own initiative or on the basis of instructions given by groups or individuals in Syria/Iraq with a global militant Islamist ideology. The terror threat to Denmark may increase if Danish travellers actively call for attacks in Denmark or against Danish interests abroad.

CTA assesses that returnees who are in contact with Islamist circles may contribute to the radicalisation of these. CTA assesses that individuals who become part of criminal circles upon their return will have easier access to weapons and that their capacity to commit terrorism thereby may be increased. CTA assesses that some of the returnees are disappointed or disillusioned and not immediately motivated for committing terrorism.

The propaganda from militant Islamist groups in Syria/Iraq increasingly focuses on attacks against the West. There has been a pronounced increase in the number of attacks and attempted attacks since September 2014. The vast majority have been carried out by non-travellers.

CTA assesses that the travellers are now younger, that they stay in the conflict zone for a longer period of time, and that they are primarily joining militant Islamist groups, predominantly IS. CTA assesses that this may increase the risk of travellers becoming radicalised and gaining capacity to commit terrorism against Denmark. CTA assesses that the threat from returnees may increase if a rising number of individuals start leaving the conflict zone in Syria/Iraq.

1. Introduction

The conflict in Syria/Iraq remains the main factor of the current threat picture due to the massive propaganda influence and the large number of travellers and returnees.

In June 2014, the group calling itself Islamic State (IS) announced the establishment of a caliphate in certain areas of Syria/Iraq. An international campaign was subsequently initiated against IS and other militant Islamist groups. Both IS and the al-Qaida-affiliated group the al-Nusra Front have since issued threats of attacks against the coalition countries and have made ongoing calls to attack the West. Such threats mark a shift in the primary focus of IS from being on the local conflict to including direct calls for attacks against the West.

The analysis is an assessment of the terror threat posed by individuals who have left Denmark and joined militant Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq. It does not include individuals who join other parties of the conflict, including Kurdish or Shiite militias, or individuals who are assessed to have left for other purposes (including emergency relief). Finally, the analysis makes no distinction as to whether a person, who has left Denmark, has stayed in Syria or Iraq or possibly in both countries.

2. The extent of departures for the conflict zone in Syria/Iraq

The conflict in Syria continues to attract a large number of people from all over the world, particularly from other countries in the region. CTA assesses that at least 125 individuals have left Denmark for Syria/Iraq. There is a certain degree of uncertainty surrounding this number and it may be higher.

CTA assesses that approximately half of those who have left are now back in Denmark, while just under a quarter remain in the conflict zone. The remaining individuals are located in various places abroad. CTA assesses that an increasing number of travellers are killed in the conflict zone. At least 27 travellers from Denmark are presumed to have been killed. The number is evidence of the serious risk associated with going to the conflict zone. CTA assesses that, when compared to other Western countries, Denmark is at the high end when it comes to the number of deaths relative to the number of travellers.

CTA assesses that following the announcement of the caliphate, fewer are travelling from Denmark to Syria/Iraq, but that the conflict zone continues to attract individuals who are going for the first time or going again. CTA assesses that the number of returnees has gone down since the announcement of a caliphate, the reason being that the majority of the individuals staying in Syria/Iraq intend to remain in the

caliphate and fight for its consolidation and propagation. Also, it is increasingly difficult to leave IS-controlled areas.

There is a growing trend for the travellers to remain in Syria/Iraq for a longer period. Many of the individuals currently in Syria/Iraq have not been back to Denmark, and they have been located in Syria/Iraq for more than a year.

3. The profile of the travellers

Those who travel from Denmark to the conflict in Syria/Iraq are still primarily young Sunni men. The current trend indicates that the first-time travellers are now younger than in the first year of the conflict.

The motivation for leaving has changed over time. In the early days of the conflict, many left with the purpose of fighting the Assad regime. CTA assesses that the majority of the travellers currently located in Syria have joined IS.

Since the summer of 2014, several women have left Denmark. CTA assesses that women are primarily leaving with or going to join their boyfriends/husbands. A few may have left with the purpose of finding a spouse in Syria/Iraq.

CTA assesses that just under half of those who have left Denmark have been involved in criminal activities, including violent crimes.

The majority of travellers from Denmark are Danish citizens. The group is characterised by highly diverse ethnic backgrounds. There are also ethnically Danish converts among the group of travellers.

CTA assesses that individuals are leaving from most parts of Denmark but that the majority are from Copenhagen, Aarhus, Odense and certain other provincial towns. Many of the travellers have links to Islamist circles. CTA assesses that there are individuals within these circles who actively seek to promote a militant Islamist agenda and who are involved in radicalising others in a militant Islamist direction. CTA assesses that such individuals have also contributed to the facilitation of individuals to the conflict zone in several cases, and that they have participated in the collection of funds subsequently transmitted to the conflict zone.

4. Assessment of the terror threat from Syria/Iraq travellers and returnees

Not all of those who have taken part in the fighting or stayed with militant Islamist groups in Syria/Iraq pose a threat to Denmark upon their return. CTA assesses that

some of the returnees from the conflict zone are disillusioned or disappointed, e.g. about the internal fighting among opposition groups in Syria and the difficult living conditions in the area. Others are affected by the violent and extremely brutal behaviour of IS and the very strict rules of conduct, especially for women.

However, CTA assesses that returnees may pose a particular terror threat. The stay in the conflict zone may lead to an increased level of brutalisation and proneness to violence as well as close ties to individuals or groups with the intention of attacking the West, and increased capacity to commit terrorist attacks. Like non-travellers, returnees can be affected by the propaganda disseminated by militant Islamist groups on social media and elsewhere.

CTA assesses that returnees from the conflict zone who want to commit acts of terrorism may act on their own initiative or on the basis of instructions given by groups or individuals in Syria/Iraq with a global militant Islamist ideology.

The travellers to Syria/Iraq may also pose a threat while they are staying in the conflict zone if they communicate with individuals in Denmark. They may e.g. act as radicalisers, take part in the facilitation of new travellers or make specific calls for attacks. CTA assesses that there are travellers from Europe who have called for terrorist attacks and given specific instructions on such attacks to individuals, staying in Western countries. CTA assesses that such calls may also come from individuals who have left Denmark.

Militant Islamist propaganda calls directly and persistently for individuals to carry out simple attacks with the use of easily accessible means. Simple attacks do not require a high degree of capacity, and CTA assesses that having experience from a conflict zone is not pivotal to the execution of a simple terrorist attack. However, CTA assesses that returnees who have built up capacity through training or fighting in a conflict zone such as Syria/Iraq would be able to carry out a simple attack with greater effect.

CTA assesses that many of the travellers from Denmark acquire military skills because of their training and possible participation in combat. CTA assesses that basic military training can increase the capacity of the travellers, e.g. when it comes to the handling of weapons or the manufacturing of simple bombs, just as participation in military combat can increase tactical understanding. Such experiences can lead to more complex attacks or attack plans. CTA assesses that individuals with lengthy stays in the conflict zone are particularly likely to gain such capacities.

CTA assesses that some of the female travellers receive basic weapons training, but that they typically undertake support functions which provide no added capacity to commit terrorism. In addition, CTA assesses that women who have gone to Syria/Iraq may take part in radicalisation and facilitation activities, both during their stay in the conflict zone and after having returned home.

CTA assesses that some travellers have displayed a level of proneness to violence and/or knowledge of weapons handling even before going to the conflict zone and that some of the returnees continue to display a level of proneness to violence. CTA assesses that individuals, who become part of criminal circles upon their return, will have easier access to weapons and that their capacity to commit terrorism thereby can be increased. Furthermore, they can also take part in radicalisation activities within these circles.

Following calls in the autumn 2014 by IS and the Nusra Front for attacks against coalition countries, there has been a significant increase in the number of terrorist attacks and attack plans in the West. The majority of the attacks following the announcement of a caliphate have been carried out by individuals who to a certain degree have supported IS but who have not travelled to a conflict zone themselves. However, CTA assesses that the share of attacks and attack plans in the West involving individuals who have been to the conflict zone – if only briefly – is on the rise.

CTA assesses that there is better chance of exposing terror plots when more individuals are involved and when the person or persons involved has/have international contacts, e.g. from travelling to a conflict zone. As militant Islamist groups are attentive to this fact, they use their propaganda to encourage attacks by individuals or small groups.

There have been examples abroad of attacks and attack plans carried out by individuals who were or perceived themselves to be subject to travel restrictions. There have also been examples in Denmark of people who try to leave but who are prevented from doing so by their families or the authorities in Denmark or abroad. CTA assesses that individuals in Europe, including Denmark, will often be able to find illegal ways of leaving. However, if their leaving is prevented, it may lead to the emergence of an intention to commit terrorist acts in their home country.

CTA assesses that there are returnees who perform practical tasks in Denmark related to the conflict in Syria/Iraq, e.g. collections of money or equipment. There are also individuals who take on a radicalising or facilitating role within Islamist circles following their return. CTA assesses that individuals who have returned to Denmark and are in contact with domestic Islamist circles may be retained on their militant Islamist path or influence others in the same direction.

In Denmark, there have been no examples of returnees from Syria/Iraq carrying out a terrorist attack. CTA assesses that this, in part, may be the result of measures aimed at the returnees by the authorities, including security authorities. CTA also assesses that many of those who have returned since the announcement of a caliphate have never had or no longer wish to have links to IS or militant Islamism.

However, CTA assesses that returnees from the conflict zone may potentially pose a more long-term threat as their capacity can be used e.g. in connection with international events or events in Denmark that are perceived as provoking or insulting.

CTA assesses that a growing number of the travellers from Denmark are likely to have engaged in or been close to combat action or other brutal acts. CTA assesses that such experiences may lead to a further radicalisation and brutalisation of both male and female travellers and, potentially, to an intention to commit terrorism or other violent criminal activities in Denmark. In addition, some may have been directly or indirectly affected by the efforts of the coalition in Syria/Iraq, which may add to their motivation to strike against the West, including Denmark.

CTA assesses that the individuals who return after longer stays in the conflict zone are more likely to have become affected by the ideology, propaganda and brutality of the militant Islamist groups. Many of those who leave are young under the age of 25. CTA assesses that this makes them particularly susceptible and impressionable.

CTA assesses that the threat posed by returnees may grow if an increasing number of individuals who have joined IS or other militant Islamist groups choose or are forced to leave the conflict zone in Syria/Iraq.