



4 December 2013

## The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria

### Summary

Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) assesses that at least 80 people have departed Denmark since the summer of 2012 to engage in the conflict in Syria. Not all of those who leave to engage in the conflict in Syria pose a threat to Denmark.

CTA assesses that a significant number of foreign fighters from Denmark have gained specific military skills as a result of their training and participation in the fighting in Syria. These skills can be used in relation to a terrorist attack in Denmark or against Danish interests abroad.

CTA further assesses that the group of foreign fighters comprises a number of individuals affiliated with militant Islamist groups in Syria which share al-Qaida's global militant Islamist ideology. CTA assesses that the combination of these skills and the sympathy with the global militant Islamist ideology may result in an increased terrorist threat to Denmark and Danish interests abroad.

CTA assesses that foreign fighters in Syria who return to Islamist circles in Denmark pose a particular threat as they can add to a continued radicalisation and retention within these circles. CTA assesses that individuals from Danish Islamist circles who are currently in Syria disseminate militant Islamist propaganda which can be perceived as a call for violence.

CTA assesses that foreign fighters in Syria who join militant Islamist groups may pose a terrorist threat to Danish interests abroad; for instance if their groups consider attacking Danish targets in Syria or in its neighbouring countries.

CTA assesses that the threat to Denmark may also come from the increasing number of Europeans who take part in the fighting in Syria.

## **1. Introduction**

The conflict in Syria has a special historic and religious appeal to Islamists from Denmark and the rest of the world. Syria is also a much more accessible combat zone for militant Islamists looking for armed struggle than other combat zones such as Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia.

The conflict in Syria has attracted several thousand foreign fighters from around the world. CTA assesses that at least 1000 of them are from Europe. CTA assesses that at least 80 people have departed Denmark since the summer of 2012 to engage in the conflict in Syria. This number is subject to some uncertainty and may be higher. Almost half of those who have departed are still in Syria. CTA assesses that at least seven people have been killed. The majority of the rest have returned to Denmark. CTA assesses that the conflict in Syria will maintain its significant appeal to individuals from Denmark.

CTA assesses that individuals who leave for a conflict zone, engage in the fighting and come into contact with militant Islamist groups may pose a terrorist threat to Denmark. The analysis will examine this threat in the light of the existing knowledge on individuals who depart Denmark to engage in the conflict in Syria.

## **2. Foreign fighters from Denmark**

The range of motives for going to Syria is wide. CTA assesses that there are individuals in Denmark who feel obligated to help their fellow Muslims in Syria and go there to assist in the humanitarian work. Others go to Syria to overthrow what they believe to be a repressive and illegitimate dictatorship. Some are motivated by the idea of fighting for the introduction of Sharia law in Syria under an Islamic caliphate and even by martyrdom. Finally, there are those who mainly go to Syria in a search for excitement and adventure.

CTA assesses that the foreign fighters from Denmark are mainly Sunni Muslim males aged 16-25 years. The group comprises a wide range of individuals with various ethnic backgrounds, including Danish converts. The group of people who have left for Syria is thus younger and more varied than those who have previously left for conflict zones in countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq.

CTA assesses that the vast majority of those who have departed for Syria are affiliated with known Islamist circles in Denmark, primarily in Copenhagen and other major cities. A small number are affiliated with criminal circles in Denmark.

CTA assesses that people within Islamist circles in Denmark are actively being recruited to engage in the conflict in Syria. The recruitment activities are aimed at young and often socially vulnerable individuals and take place via social media and in the form of outreach activities at places frequented by young people. Individuals from an Islamist group have, for instance, made a number of videos entitled 'The forgotten obligation'. The videos, filmed by individuals in Syria, call for people to travel to Syria with the purpose of going on jihad.

These circles comprise individuals whom PET knows from the investigation of previous Danish terrorism-related cases.

In addition, collections of money, clothes and other items have been made within Islamist circles in Denmark in support of the Syrian people. CTA assesses that in certain cases the funds may have been used to finance the journey of foreign fighters to Syria.

CTA assesses that individuals affiliated with criminal circles, including gang-related circles, also leave Denmark for Syria. CTA assesses that there is a growing tendency for criminals and individuals affiliated with criminal groups to associate with or even join Islamist circles.

### **3. Danish fighters in Syria**

The armed opposition in Syria is not united under a joint leadership but consists of a number of groups, whose shared objective is to overthrow the Assad regime. The majority of the groups are Islamist Sunni Muslim groups, including a number of militant Islamist groups which are either affiliated with or to a varying degree support the ideology of al-Qaida. A small number of the groups are not religiously inspired in their fight. Some of the groups fight for democratic reforms. The groups continuously split and merge, and there is often an opportunist, operational co-operation across ideological boundaries. The groups also fight each other.

CTA assesses that the majority of the foreign fighters from Denmark have been in contact with groups with a militant Islamist agenda. The most important militant Islamist groups are Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). ISIL is also known by the name al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). Both are affiliated with al-Qaida (AQ) and appear on the UN Al-Qaida/Taliban Sanctions List. ISIL and the Nusra Front both have a declared intention to create an Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria. They control several towns in northern Syria and border crossings to

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Turkey, from where they gradually try to extend their control to larger territories in Syria and introduce Sharia law in these areas.

The Nusra Front is responsible for several complex attacks in Syria, in which suicide attacks have been combined with other types of attack, such as simultaneous detonation of suicide bombs and car bombs. Through its activities in Iraq, ISIL has built up a considerable capacity, particularly for IED construction, which is also used in Syria.

ISIL assisted the Nusra Front in establishing a presence in Syria during the initial fighting against the Assad regime. Since spring 2013, there has been disagreements between the two groups concerning, among other things, the hierarchy between the groups and the balance between the local struggle and the more global agenda in the current phase of the conflict. CTA assesses that AQ-affiliated groups can use foreign fighters from the West to pursue their global militant Islamist agenda outside Syria.

Another large militant Islamist group, Ahrar al-Sham, collaborates with the Nusra Front and ISIL. According to the group itself, it has for instance used remote-controlled car bombs in attacks against regime targets. Ahrar al-Sham has, however, denied having used suicide attacks and claims to solely aim for military regime targets. A number of small groups are affiliated with Ahrar al-Sham, including groups which are assessed to comprise foreign fighters from Denmark. CTA assesses that Ahrar al-Sham is now part of a larger grouping.

Open sources report many examples of atrocities committed by militant Islamist groups against captured opposition soldiers or civilians. According to Human Rights Watch, the Nusra Front, ISIL and Ahrar al-Sham, among others, were involved in the killing of a large number of civilians near Latakia in early August 2013.<sup>1</sup>

CTA assesses that the majority of those who have left Denmark for Syria have taken part in the fighting. CTA assesses that at least seven people from Denmark have been killed in combat in Syria.

CTA assesses that foreign fighters from Denmark who join groups in Syria go through basic training during the first weeks of their stay, which consists of weapons handling, and firing practice. Moreover, the foreign fighters in Syria will have the opportunity to receive more specialised training and acquire specific skills, such as the ability to handle firearms or construct IEDs.

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<sup>1</sup> The report "You Can Still See Their Blood" Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside. Published on [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org) on 11 October 2013.

#### **4. Returnees from Syria**

CTA assesses that nearly half of the foreign fighters from Denmark have returned. Some of these individuals have been in Syria a number of times.

Some have returned to the Islamist circles which they were affiliated with before they departed for Syria. CTA assesses that returnees have gained a certain status within these circles and therefore often play an important part in terms of recruiting new foreign fighters to Syria. In addition, returnees from Syria can potentially contribute to a further radicalisation within these groups.

#### **5. Assessment of the threat to Denmark from foreign fighters in Syria**

Not all of those who leave to engage in the conflict in Syria pose a threat to Denmark. Having engaged in the fighting or stayed with a militant Islamist group does not in itself mean that a person is ready to commit acts of terrorism in Denmark.

CTA assesses that a significant number of those who have left Denmark for Syria have gained specific military skills as a result of their training and fighting experience. These skills can be used for committing acts of terrorism in Denmark or against Danish interests abroad.

CTA further assesses that the group of foreign fighters from Denmark comprises a number of individuals affiliated with militant Islamist groups in Syria which share AQ's global militant Islamist ideology. CTA assesses that militant Islamist groups continuously use the cartoon case and Denmark's international security political involvement as an argument for attacking Danish targets.

CTA assesses that the combination of the skills acquired from training and fighting experience and the sympathy with the global militant Islamist ideology may result in an increased terrorist threat to Denmark and Danish interests abroad.

CTA assesses that the video 'The forgotten obligation', in which foreign fighters from Denmark shoot at photos of six named Danes, expresses an intention to hit targets in Denmark and that it not only calls on people to engage in the conflict in Syria, but also calls for violent jihad in Denmark. CTA assesses that the video, which is subtitled in English, with its reference to the cartoon case may contribute to maintaining focus on Denmark among militant Islamists abroad. CTA assesses that the individuals featured in the video are in contact with militant Islamist networks in Syria, where they have taken part in the fighting.

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CTA assesses that individuals who depart Denmark for Syria and return to Islamist circles pose a threat as they can add to a continued radicalisation and retention within these circles. Moreover, CTA assesses that returnees within the said Danish circles can contribute to further recruitment of foreign fighters to Syria.

CTA assesses that individuals who have stayed with militant Islamist groups in Syria will be able to commit acts of terrorism in Denmark without any contact to Denmark-based groups or networks.

CTA assesses that returnees who have been in contact with militant Islamist circles and who are also linked with criminal circles potentially have easier access to funds, weapons and explosives and may therefore pose a particular threat.

CTA assesses that some foreign fighters from Denmark have no immediate plans to return to Denmark. Their intention to remain in Syria may, however, change in a post-conflict scenario, if their expectations of martyrdom or victory are not fulfilled. CTA assesses that foreign fighters in Syria who join militant Islamist groups may pose a terrorist threat to Danish interests abroad; for instance if their groups wish to attack Danish targets in Syria or in its neighbouring countries.

CTA assesses that the threat to Denmark may also come from the increasing number of Europeans who take part in the fighting in Syria. When and if they leave Syria, they can either be instructed by militant Islamists to attack targets in Denmark or be motivated to do so on their own initiative. A number of previous terrorism-related cases targeting Denmark have been planned abroad.

Finally, CTA assesses that the terrorist threat from individuals who have returned to Denmark after staying with groups which do not share the AQ ideology and who are not in contact with Islamist circles in Denmark is limited. However, it should be noted that having engaged in combat, these individuals may become more brutal and increasingly prone to violence.