



26 June 2014

## Developments in the Threat from Foreign Fighters from Denmark in Syria

### Summary

Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) assesses that the number of people who have left Denmark to engage in the conflict in Syria now exceeds 100 and that at least 15 of these have been killed. The conflict continues to attract people from militant Islamist circles in Denmark. CTA assesses that more women will begin to leave Denmark for Syria.

CTA assesses that the majority of those who have left Denmark are fighting alongside militant Islamist groups in Syria. CTA assesses that some of the foreign fighters from Denmark are fighting with the group ISIL in Iraq.

CTA assesses that a significant number of travellers from Denmark have gained specific military skills as a result of their training and participation in the fighting in Syria. This capacity can be used for carrying out terrorist attacks in Denmark.

CTA assesses that the advance of ISIL in Iraq combined with their intensified and brutal propaganda may increase the number of militant Islamists leaving Denmark to fight alongside groups such as ISIL, and may have a further radicalising effect on young people who are already part of militant Islamist circles in Denmark. CTA assesses that this may contribute to increasing the terror threat to Denmark. CTA assesses that increased support for ISIL may lead to an elevated terror threat against soft, unprotected targets in Denmark. This does, however, not for the present give cause to alter the overall assessment of the terror threat to Denmark, which remains serious.

CTA assesses that attack plans directed at Denmark may be made by returnees from Syria in other European countries.

## **1. Introduction**

The armed conflict in Syria continues to attract a large number of people from all over the world. CTA assesses that at least 1,500 people from Europe have travelled to Syria to take part in the conflict, and that the number of persons who have travelled from Denmark now exceeds 100. There is some uncertainty concerning these numbers, which may be even higher. A significant number of persons travelling from Denmark continue to join militant Islamist groups.

In the analysis dated 24 November 2013, CTA described the threat from foreign fighters in Syria. The present analysis assesses developments in the terror threat to Denmark in light of the most recent development in Syria and the region in general: The situation between the Assad regime and the opposition groups remains unresolved, although the regime is in a relatively stronger position. At the same time, there has been an increased rivalry between the militant Islamist opposition groups in Syria, mainly between the al-Qaida (AQ) affiliated group the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In neighbouring Iraq, ISIL has captured large areas of land and major cities, which threatens to escalate the sectarian Sunni-Shia conflict in Iraq and the entire region.

## **2. Who travels to Syria and why?**

There are still individuals who leave Denmark to take part in the conflict in Syria. The travellers from Denmark are mainly young Sunni men of various ethnic origins. Danish converts have also left for Syria. CTA assesses that the travellers from Denmark are mainly affiliated with Islamist circles in cities such as Copenhagen, Aarhus and Odense. A small number are affiliated with criminal circles in Denmark.

In Europe, an increasing number of women have been seen to engage in the conflict in Syria. They do so through activities in their home countries such as dissemination of propaganda, radicalisation and fund-raising or by travelling to Syria. CTA assesses that the majority of the women leave to join their husbands. Some of the women leave with their children. There are also examples of unmarried women who have travelled to Syria with the purpose of getting married. CTA assesses that women from Denmark have also left for Syria.

The motivation for going to Syria still ranges wide. Some wish to help their fellow Muslims in Syria and assist in the humanitarian work. Others wish to fight the Assad regime. For some, the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Syria is a main priority

and they may be motivated by achieving what they regard as martyrdom. Finally, there may still be some who go to Syria in search of excitement and adventure.

CTA assesses that the departure for Syria is most often brought about by active recruitment within Islamist circles in Denmark<sup>1</sup>. Radicalisers within Islamist circles increasingly use Syria as a platform for conducting their activities. The radicalisation often includes attempts to justify the use of violent means in the fight against perceived enemies of Islam. CTA assesses that religious study trips to certain countries in the Middle East may have contributed to the radicalisation of some of those who have left Denmark for Syria.

### **3. Staying in the conflict zone**

CTA assesses that the majority of those who have left Denmark are fighting alongside militant Islamist groups in Syria. CTA assesses that some of these foreign fighters from Denmark have stayed in Syria for a long period of time and that some are travelling back and forth between Denmark and Syria. CTA further assesses that some of the foreign fighters from Denmark travel on to Iraq to fight alongside ISIL.

CTA assesses that the foreign fighters from Denmark who join groups in Syria are given basic combat training and that a few of them may have received specialised weapons training. CTA assesses that the vast majority of those who have left Denmark for Syria have taken part in the fighting and that this has further strengthened their capacity. Within the past six months, there have been several examples of foreign fighters from the West who have committed suicide attacks in Syria and Iraq.

Due to the intensified rivalry between the militant Islamist groups, there is an increased risk that foreign fighters from Denmark will be faced with direct combat against other opposition groups, and thus potentially other foreign fighters from Denmark. However, CTA assesses that this has only caused a very limited number to leave Syria.

CTA assesses that it may be difficult to leave some of the militant Islamist groups in Syria and that it can be dangerous to attempt to do so.

CTA assesses that at least 15 foreign fighters from Denmark have been killed, including in ISIL-related suicide attacks in Iraq.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of these circles, please see the CTA analysis "Danish Islamist circles with an impact on the terrorist threat to Denmark" dated 28 May 2014.

CTA assesses that the women who have travelled to Syria are mainly looking after the families and engaging in activities to support the men who are fighting. Women may also contribute to propaganda activities. CTA assesses that women who have left for Syria may have access to weapons and weapons training, although this does not necessarily mean that they are taking part in the fighting.

Some foreign fighters from Denmark engage in propaganda activities on internet forums, for instance by sharing photos of those who have been killed among their own ranks and those of the opponents. Several of the propaganda videos from Syria have a particularly macabre content.

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

CTA assesses that nearly half of the travellers from Denmark have returned home. CTA assesses that some of the returnees are trying to put their experiences from Syria behind them and move on with their lives. A number of individuals return home only for a short period of time before leaving again. Others continue their involvement in the conflict through activities within Islamist circles in Denmark.

CTA assesses that travellers from Denmark who return to Islamist circles can use their special status to recruit new members to the militant Islamist circles and recruit and assist new travellers to the conflict in Syria. Returnees may also contribute to the financing of the activities of the militant Islamist circles, dissemination of propaganda and further radicalisation within the circles.

Travellers returning to criminal circles may contribute to increasing the radicalisation and proneness to violence as well as the capacity to commit violence within these circles.

#### **5. Assessment of the terror threat to Denmark posed by returnees**

Not all of those who have taken part in the conflict in Syria pose a threat to Denmark upon their return. Having engaged in the fighting or stayed with militant Islamist groups does not in itself mean that a person is ready to commit an act of terrorism in Denmark.

CTA assesses that the majority of travellers come into contact with individuals and groups who support a global militant Islamist ideology and who perceive attacks against western targets as legitimate.

## UNCLASSIFIED

CTA assesses that a significant number of travellers from Denmark have gained specific military skills as a result of their training and participation in the fighting in Syria. CTA assesses that the returnees have mainly built up a capacity for using small arms, and, in a few cases, may have received specialised weapons training. This capacity can be used for carrying out terror attacks in Denmark. Training in a conflict zone increases the risk that an attack can be planned and executed quickly and with a greater impact.

CTA assesses that several of the travellers who have stayed with militant Islamist groups may have witnessed aggravated violence and brutal killings, which may add to a strong radicalisation, brutalisation and proneness to violence.

CTA assesses that the advance of ISIL in Iraq combined with their intensified propaganda may increase the number of persons from militant Islamist circles leaving Denmark to fight alongside militant Islamist groups such as ISIL.

CTA further assesses that the propaganda from Syria, which includes very brutal ISIL-produced videos being shared on social media, may have a further radicalising effect on young people who are already part of militant Islamist circles in Denmark. CTA assesses that this may increase the probability of such individuals being ready to commit acts of terrorism.

CTA assesses that the development in Iraq may affect the target designation and choice of modus operandi in relation to potential terror attacks in Denmark. ISIL has demonstrated that it does not shrink from carrying out attacks that result in large-scale civilian casualties. CTA assesses that increased support for ISIL may lead to an elevated terror threat against soft, unprotected targets in Denmark. This does, however, not for the present give cause to alter the overall assessment of the terror threat to Denmark, which remains serious.

CTA assesses that a reinforcement of the sectarian factor in the conflict in Syria as well as in Iraq can potentially lead to more tension between Sunnis and Shias in Denmark. This could result in Shia-related interests in Denmark becoming legitimate targets for Danish ISIL supporters.

CTA assesses that returnees from the conflict zone who want to commit terrorism may act on the basis of instructions given by groups or individuals in Syria with a global

militant Islamist ideology or at their own initiative, either in a group or individually. As seen in several previous Danish and international terror cases, the attack planning may take place in one European country, while the target is in another European country.

Individuals who have been to Syria and are suspected of planning terrorist attacks against targets in the West have been arrested in several European countries. The individual arrested for the attack on the Jewish museum in Brussels on 24 May 2014 had been in Syria before the attack. The individual, who is a former criminal, had lived in France before going to Syria, but went to Belgium to carry out the attack. There are indications that he may be an ISIL supporter.

CTA assesses that more women will begin to travel from Denmark to Syria and contribute to the radicalisation and recruitment within Islamist circles in Denmark. CTA assesses that women who have stayed with militant Islamist groups may pose a terror threat to Denmark.

CTA assesses that the combination of obtained skills among foreign fighters and sympathy with the global militant Islamist ideology may also result in an increased terrorist threat to Danish interests abroad.