Return of Tunisian Fighters: A State and Community Impasse

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In the second decade of the 21st century, several Arab countries witnessed consecutive rapid changes following the Arab Spring revolutions and the subsequent collapse of security forces. Some failed to get a grip on their borders, and the consequences of these transformations continue to this day, causing chaos and security confusion.

Highest Risk

The situation in Syria was probably the most serious, most evidently reflecting security vulnerability at the time. ISIS' terrorist activity grew immensely over larger areas, from Mosul in Iraq to Raqqa and Idlib in Syria under the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the alleged Caliphate State, polarizing thousands of recruits from various countries.

Despite the root or circumstantial causes of the emergence and empowerment of this terrorist entity, successive events have manifested its brutality and violent crimes against humanity that spare no one, young or old, in capitals and urban centers. This prompted the establishment of the Global Coalition Against Daesh in 2014, comprising 85 countries. The coalition managed to hunt down ISIS and restore all lands usurped in Iraq and Syria, which prompted many of its members to flee back to their homeland or other more fragile countries where it may flourish again .

However, the return of those fighters has become a huge pain for security services in many Arab countries and the whole world. Returning foreign fighters pose a serious threat to the security of their own countries as they, most likely, become active factors behind the spread of violent extremism. Thus, governments must take prompt and serious action to prevent such a threat. Besides, among countries facing this challenge, Tunisia is even more serious given the crucial internal situation, economic crises, and political conflicts that wearied state apparatuses and institutions .

Lack of Information

Examining the return of Tunisian fighters, there seems to be an intelligence issue regarding the absence of an official database of the numbers, names, and actions of Tunisians fighting for ISIS. That was mainly why security services failed to address the issue, which led to the incompetence of airport authorities, border services, and land crossings towards identifying returnees based on prior information. However, unofficial estimates indicated that nearly 7,000 Tunisians joined ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, forming ISIS' largest foreign fighters' battalions. Many even became leading fighters on the front lines .

Returning Tunisian fighters amounted to nearly 800 in 2017. With the growing numbers in recent years and the probability of more returning, there are concerns over their capacity to create sleeper cells in Tunisia after having been involved in fighting, or North Africa in general becoming ISIS' next hub, which requires a solid plan to address the issue .

Waves of Violence

Tunisia has been hit by successive waves of violence in 2011, when armed groups carried out several terrorist attacks that shook Tunisian security services and put them in a tight spot. 2015 witnessed multiple bloody crimes plotted by terrorist ISIS which claimed responsibility, including the Bardo museum heavy mass shooting in the Tunisian capital, killing 22 and injuring 50, mostly tourists. ISIS praised the attackers and how they managed to terrorize the Tunisian infidels and their crusader guests .

Three months later, a young Tunisian man pulled out a Kalashnikov and opened fire on a beach in Sousse, Tunisia, killing 38 people and injuring 39 others. A suicide bomber killed 12 Tunisian presidential guards in November 2015. ISIS announced at the time that many Tunisians wanted to fight for ISIS, implying that ISIS has loyal followers in Tunisia who are willing to follow orders from ISIS leadership.

According to reports, fighters were trained outside of Tunisia. ISIS built up training camps for fighters and made explosives for terrorist attacks while Libya was in disarray. The extensive borders of Tunisia, notably with Libya, added to the vulnerability of the security situation. With the aid of trafficking organizations with significant influence in border regions, they were utilized by returning fighters as an illegal transit route. The movement of fighters from Libya to Turkey and subsequently to Syria was made easier

by this very strategy. Returnees were able to plan and carry out terrorist activities due to lack of intelligence information and inadequate organizational capabilities.

Bitter Dispute

With the lack of expertise in addressing such growing terrorist groups and waves of violence in Tunisia, there have been discordant viewpoints on how to handle the crisis of returning fighters. Some believe they should be imprisoned and argue against their reintegration into the Tunisian society, believing that the psychological makeup of returning fighters poses a threat to social peace and security given how they have become experts in hit-and-run tactics and camouflage since they have been involved in combat with terrorist groups. They have also been involved in killings, slaughters, and beheadings, and have believed in the alleged Caliphate State in Iraq and the Levant but have failed to make it a reality, and have thus returned quite discouraged. Hence, they are likely to pursue this dream in Tunisia, which means their presence as free citizens is considered a threat, especially under the current political and economic turmoil. Not holding retuning fighters accountable for crimes they committed may encourage them to commit the same crimes in Tunisia. Other experts, however, believe that imprisonment may not yield the desired outcomes. They fear that in prisons terrorists may be able to polarize and recruit others by advocating terrorist and extremist ideologies to non-ideologized criminals. In addition, people join ISIS for different motives; some perhaps actively participate in terrorist acts, while others are only involved in minor, non-violent crimes. Some return to their homelands having been disappointed by the extremist ideology they believed in someday or to recruit others and expand on terrorist operations in their countries and abroad. This requires deciphering those returnees on an individual basis and bringing those convicted with serious crimes to justice.

Former Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki supported the second point of view. He proposed a legislation that would allow some returnees to reintegrate into society. This approach, however, received little support. The Tunisian parliament passed a counter-terrorism law in 2015, allowing law enforcement authorities to prosecute anyone who committed terrorist acts outside the country. In practice, however, the approach has encountered significant legal challenges, as authorities frequently lacked clear evidence of suspects' terrorist activities in conflict zones.

Meanwhile, a third point of view argues for the necessity of isolating returning fighters in special centers and providing them with long-term psychiatric treatment for years

until their supervisors are satisfied that they have abandoned the deviant, extremist, and takfiri ideologies in order to be reintegrated into society.

Tunisian Society

Another dilemma arises when handling returning Tunisian fighters regarding the willingness of Tunisians to assimilate or reintegrate those returnees. The dilemma is directly impacted by their return since they are part of their social structure, united by ties of blood or social relationships. It is society that can embrace them and facilitate their reintegration. Meanwhile, the problem with reintegration is that those fighters left the country and held aggressive stances against their people, joined a terrorist organization with extremist ideologies, values, relations, and practices, and engaged in a world of terror and deadly violence. Thus society—as in families, relatives, neighbors, and friends—finds it hard to deal with, meet, and coexist with such returnees .

There is another humanitarian aspect to this dilemma regarding returning women and children, where the potential risks associated with the returning men do not apply of course to children and most women. Accordingly, human rights organizations interfered, calling for the humane treatment of returnees, not condemning children for crimes committed by their fathers, and giving women their full rights to due legal process while in custody .

They also called upon Tunisian authorities to exert their utmost efforts to retrieve children stranded in camps and prisons in Libya, Syria, and Iraq. Leaving them there evidently threatens Tunisia and other countries. Although the issue took a long time and successive statements by Tunisian officials emphasizing the great efforts made to retrieve those children, the authorities were accused of not handling the issue seriously enough, given that only a handful of children returned to Tunisia, whereas 44 children remain in prisons. Accordingly, civil society organizations cooperated with families to pressure the authorities to raise the issue and retrieve the children.

Conclusion

The best strategy for dealing with fighters returning to Tunisia from conflict zones is still undetermined. The problem continues to be examined from various perspectives. In order to build a comprehensive strategy and a practical plan that truly address and embrace the risks and pertinent issues of returning fighters, it is necessary that governmental apparatuses, institutions, and the broad spectrum of civil society work together as soon as possible. It must be stated that solving the problem requires more

than just a security approach; it also calls for other strategies to welcome back refugees, cleanse them of the remnants of deadly violence and subversive extremist ideology that contradicts Islamic teachings, stop them from resuming terrorist activity, learn from various international experiences, and work together with them to address the issue. It is not only Tunisia's problem, but the problem of the entire world.