

Up to 600 European Jihadist Fighters among Syrian Rebels

By [RT](#)

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Hundreds of European Muslims have joined the Syrian rebels in their fight against the rule of Bashar Assad, the latest study reveals. Most of them hold UK passports.

An estimate of the International Centre of for the Study of Radicalization (ICRS), based on more than 450 open sources, has found that up to 5,500 foreign fighters have traveled to Syria since the beginning of the uprising against the ruling regime. Of them, up to 11 per cent originate from Europe.

“Between 140 and 600 Europeans have gone to Syria since early 2011,” researcher Aaron Y. Zelin says.

Britain accounts for the biggest number of arrivals, with up to 134 people joining the cause. The Netherlands comes second with up to 107 people, next are France (up to 92), Belgium (up to 85) and Denmark (up to 78).

“As with previous conflicts, the picture is far from complete and will probably remain so for years to come,” said Zelin on the numbers presented in the study.

“There is no ‘true census’ of foreign fighters, and publicly available sources are inevitably incomplete.”

The research suggests most foreigners have not yet returned to their home countries.

“Based on the conflict totals, we estimate that 70 to 441 Europeans are still currently present in Syria,” ICSR report states. “This suggests that most of the Europeans who have travelled to Syria are still on the battlefield.”

Some of the data for the research was pulled from the so-called online martyrdom notices of jihadists, ideologically affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Out of 249 such martyrdom notices, about 3 per cent identify countries of origin as European. People travelled “to die in Syria” from Albania, Britain, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Kosovo, Spain and Sweden.



British Islamists protest outside the French Embassy in London January 12, 2013. (Reuters/Suzanne Plunkett)

The researchers say, neither political motivations, nor jihadist ideology are among the primary reasons for the people to go to Syria, but the atrocities of war.

“The most commonly cited reasons for joining rebel forces are the horrific images of the

conflict, stories about atrocities committed by government forces, and the perceived lack of support from Western and Arab countries," ICSR reports explains.

"In many cases, these individuals fully adopt the jihadist doctrine and ideology only when they are on the ground and in contact with hardened fighters."

This 'ideological' borrowing cannot but worry the European governments. For instance, the Netherlands raised the threat of a terror attack to "substantial" last month, saying the increased risk stemmed mainly from jihadists returning from fighting in Syria. British security services are also concerned the returnees may [use their military know-how](#) to wreak havoc back home.

The researchers, however, do not believe there is an immediate connection between fighting in Syria and terrorism in Europe.

"Not everyone who has joined the Syrian rebels is Al-Qaeda, and only a small number may ever become involved in terrorism after returning to Europe," Zelin said.

"That said, it would be wrong to conclude that individuals who have trained and fought in Syria pose no potential threat," he remarked. He pointed at the recently-published research by the Norwegian academic Thomas Hegghammer, which reveals that terrorists with foreign experience are far more lethal, dangerous and sophisticated than purely domestic cells.

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