



Foreign Fighters and Regional Security in the Black Sea Region: Policy Imperatives Amid the Russia-Ukraine War

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This policy memo examines the complex and evolving security threats posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) in the Black Sea region, particularly in the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. This memo assesses the scale of the FTF threat across key Black Sea states, including Türkiye, Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova, and outlines the multifaceted risks posed by returning or transiting fighters, including future terrorist activity, regional destabilization, and violations of international humanitarian law. In response, the memo calls for a comprehensive and cooperative regional security strategy that includes Canadian support. Recommended actions include strengthening border surveillance, enhancing intelligence-sharing mechanisms, expanding legal frameworks aligned with international human rights standards, and implementing community-based deradicalization and reintegration programs. Canadian experience in counterterrorism and human rights advocacy is positioned to facilitate regional dialogue, contribute technical expertise, and promote long-term security in this geopolitically volatile region.

Introduction

[IS](#) (or ISIL/ISIS - Islamic State) is one of the 21st century's largest terrorist organizations. With a territory once equivalent to the size of Portugal and a population of some 8 million people, it strives to establish an 'Islamic State' based on the fundamentals of Islamic Law and modelled on the Umayyad Caliphate.

The Islamic State (IS) drew on ideas of a shared Muslim community, or Umma, to extend its outreach and indoctrination efforts to Muslims abroad – particularly in the West. This appeal found traction among small numbers of young Muslim men born and raised in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), France, and Belgium. Known as “homegrown jihadis,” these individuals responded to IS’s call to wage holy war against what is framed as “The Global Crusade.” The recruitment process of these individuals took place via shell organizations and religious authorities affiliated with IS members, which radicalized these youth in their home countries.

With IS having lost virtually all of its territory in the Middle East, a problem now persists regarding the prospect of these Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) returning to their home countries. This presents a specific issue for countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, given the scarce resources to tackle and monitor threats posed by this group, as well as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, in which many former members [of the IS take part, or wish to take part in the near future.](#)

The purpose of this document is to assess the risks associated with the repatriation process of these FTFs in the Black Sea region, which serves as a critical transit corridor between the Middle East and Europe and thus a point of vulnerability. In conducting this analysis, this memo discusses the implications of these developments for regional security and proposes respective policy solutions.

Issue Definition

After the [fall of Baghouz](#) in March 2019 - the last territorial stronghold of the [IS](#) on the Syrian-Iraqi border - IS's self-declared "[caliphate](#)" was effectively dismantled. Many former members of IS, as well as the members of their families, remain either under arrest by Iraqi authorities or in [detention camps](#) controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The condition of these camps has been described as [“apocalyptic”](#) by the Red Cross, with detainees and their families being subject to serious human rights abuses. Despite evidence of abuse, countries in the Black Sea region have generally failed to coordinate or negotiate with local authorities to either repatriate their citizens or at least improve the conditions of these camps.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war introduces a new level of risk and uncertainty in the region, not only because of the large-scale violence but also because of the risk of returning [FTFs](#) who wish to actively engage in this conflict. An urgent and complex challenge lies in addressing the fate of [FTFs currently engaged in the Russia-Ukraine war.](#) These individuals, often ideologically driven and combat-experienced, pose a significant threat to regional and international security both during and after the conflict. As the war evolves, many of these fighters may attempt to return to their home countries, seek refuge in third states, or move clandestinely through porous borders to reach Western Europe. In all scenarios, there is a risk of future terrorist activity, radicalization of others or involvement in transnational criminal networks. It is also important to note that the largest battalions active in the conflict, [in terms of the number of FTFs,](#) are from the Black Sea region.

Motivated by jihadist ideology, FTFs seek to radicalize combatants, gain combat experience, as well as use the region as a gateway into Europe to carry out terrorist acts. Despite existing bilateral efforts and improvements in border security, the region’s intelligence, legal, and surveillance infrastructures remain uneven and often under-resourced, which makes it difficult to deal with security challenges.

Regional Overview

Georgia

[The 2017 shootout](#) between IS Mujahideen, led by Chechen [Ahmed Chatayev](#) and Georgian security forces in the heart of the country's capital, highlighted the severity of the threat posed by FTFs who either wish to enter the country or seek to return to the Northern Caucasus via Georgian transit routes. It has been reported that around [50 to 100](#) Georgian citizens have joined up and fought for the IS, which for a country of three million inhabitants, remains quite significant. The whereabouts of those who have managed to escape Raqqa following the Syrian war are largely unknown. As far as the recruitment process goes, [Georgian citizens were identified as having joined IS](#) or any other terrorist organization or having moved to Iraq and Syria in 2021.

Türkiye

Existing in a strategic location between Greece, Syria, and Iraq, Türkiye has emerged as both a transit and destination point for former IS affiliates. While the fall of IS's territorial control in Syria and Iraq marked a pivotal counterterrorism victory, the residual threat posed by FTFs persists. Türkiye's 911km border with Syria and 378km border with Iraq have rendered it a key corridor for transnational jihadists. [Between 2014 and 2023](#), over 19,000 individuals have been detained in Türkiye for suspected IS affiliations.

Estimates indicate that [between 5,000 and 9,000 Turkish citizens moved to IS-controlled territory during the Syrian war](#), posing a challenge to national security, particularly through the risks of re-patriating these fighters, as well as concerns over further radicalization efforts. This threat is reflected in a [series of IS-linked terrorist attacks](#) targeting political rallies, tourist areas, airports, and places of worship. The most recent IS-linked terrorist attacks in Türkiye occurred on [January 28, 2024](#), when two gunmen targeted the Roman Catholic church of Santa Maria in Istanbul during Sunday Mass. This incident marked the first successful IS attack in Türkiye since the [2017 Istanbul nightclub shooting](#).

Russia

Actors from the Islamic North Caucasus regions represent the bulk of FTFs from Russia. This is a testimony to the severity of the Chechnyan wars of the 1990s-2000s and economic desperation. Additionally, the Syrian war has offered Russian Islamists a sanctuary and a new cause. This development has resulted in an important foreign policy question for Russia, namely: how many Russian-speaking FTFs managed to avoid death and capture in the Middle East?

[It can be estimated that around](#) 3,100–3,700 of the 10,000 Russian-speaking FTFs in total were killed or [imprisoned](#) during the Syrian war. Thus, [no less than about 6,500 Russian-speaking FTFs managed to survive and preserve their freedom](#). Very few of them can, in some limited way, continue the fight in Syria. A vast majority of them managed to leave the combat region. These FTFs represent a challenge to Russia's efforts to fight terrorism. [Despite taking steps to prevent incidents of violent extremism within Russia](#), attacks by North Caucasus individuals are still prevalent. According to the [Institute for Economics and Peace](#), the Terrorism Index in Russia increased to 6.27 Points in 2024 from 3.02 Points in 2023, indicating a notable rise in terrorist activity. This uptick is not solely linked to the Crocus City Hall attack, perpetrated by ISIS-K (Khorasan Province), but also reflects increased insurgent activity in

Russia's North Caucasus region, including a deadly shoot-out between Islamic State–Caucasus Province militants and security forces in Ingushetia ([Karabulak clash in March 2024](#)), and a series of armed IS-linked assaults on police and religious sites in Karachayevo-Cherkessia and Dagestan in [April](#) and [June](#) 2024.

Ukraine

Between 2014 and 2019, there was an estimated number of [1,500–2,000](#) FTFs active in Ukraine. [The experts](#) conclude that the FTFs active in Ukraine are more capable due to their fighting experience, ammunition, and training compared to amateurs who had been fighting in Syria. Out of all Russian detachments active in Ukraine, the [Prizrak brigade](#) attracts the largest number of foreign fighters to the Russian cause. However, it is also important to mention pro-Kadyrov Chechen fighters, as well as some Ingush, Ossetian and Abkhazian (“[Pyatnashka regiment](#)”) groups who have actively participated in the [Battle of Avdiivka](#) (2023). [Kremlin propaganda has attracted many radical Islamists](#) through the message that the Ukrainian government is the “puppet regime of Western Imperialism”, while the pro-Ukrainian Islamist groups that are active in this war include [Al-Ajnad Al-Kavkaz](#), which is led by [the same group](#) who harbored strong anti-Russian sentiment from their experience in the Chechen wars.

Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova

While the threat of terrorism in Bulgaria remains low, foreign terrorist groups take advantage of active illicit smuggling and trafficking networks in the country to attempt to facilitate the entry of terrorists into Europe from the [Middle East and South Asia](#). According to estimates from Bulgarian security services and [Europol](#), fewer than 10–15 Bulgarian nationals are believed to have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join Jihadi groups, including IS. Like Bulgaria, Romania is part of the Balkan migration route, raising concerns about [potential terrorist transit](#). Romania stated that its territory has occasionally been used as a transit area, as part of a secondary route used by FTFs/returnees to/from Iraq and Syria, but that the migration flow did not have a significant influence on the level of terrorist risk in the country. Over the last 10 years, there have been no terrorist acts in Romania and while [29 people have been arrested during this period](#) due to Jihadist terrorism-related offenses, this number represents one of the lowest in the Black Sea region. While the Republic of Moldova has not emerged as a major source of foreign terrorist fighters affiliated with IS, its geographic position and involvement in transnational smuggling routes present notable security challenges. In particular, the unresolved status of the Transnistrian region, combined with limited institutional oversight in certain border areas, raises concerns regarding potential exploitation by [illicit networks](#). Given the role of these countries as transit corridors and their proximity to conflict zones, sustained vigilance and enhanced international cooperation are critical.

Policy Recommendations

The first and foremost recommendation to Canada to deal with the above-mentioned challenges in the region is for the Canadian government to assist Black Sea region countries with modernizing their intelligence and security infrastructure. The importance of Canada's role in this regard is reflected in its past activities, such as [Global Affairs Canada](#), which already runs anti-crime and counterterrorism capacity-building programs that provide training, funding, and equipment to partner states. This demonstrates an existing platform Canada could leverage and scale-up for the Black Sea region.

The Black Sea region is a central transit hub for FTFs who are motivated to join the Russia-Ukraine war in an attempt to disseminate jihadist ideas for potential recruiting or as a means of gaining access to European territory to carry out potential terrorist acts. This centrality necessitates enhanced security screening and monitoring at border checkpoints for countries in this region, particularly for individuals affiliated to FTOs, those listed by INTERPOL, or any person whose background raises credible suspicion. A further expansion of real-time biometric databases and joint patrols, especially on maritime routes, would significantly mitigate transit threats.

While bilateral cooperation exists, there is an urgent need for multilateral frameworks dedicated to counterterrorism. Therefore, Canada could assist countries in the Black Sea region, should improve data sharing on FTF movements, radicalization indicators, and arrest records that could aid early warning systems. To prevent such individuals from reaching their objectives, Canada could work with regional partners to establish a Black Sea maritime monitoring task force composed of naval assets from Black Sea littoral states. This task force should integrate satellite surveillance, biometric identification systems, and AI-assisted behavioral analytics to enhance detection and interception capabilities.

The pressing issue of the returning FTFs induces both uncertainty and security risks. However, it still requires a humanitarian response in accordance with international law and with active participation from national governments. The countries of the Black Sea region need to actively participate in the process of repatriation of their FTFs. In such conditions, the rich experience that Canada and its judicial system have to offer is essential. Foreign nationals from the Black Sea countries remain in detention camps under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) or Kurdish administration. Countries should establish Repatriation Focal Units within their foreign or interior ministries to negotiate with the SDF, Iraq, and other international actors for the lawful and safe return of detainees. Additional investment in legal infrastructure and counterterrorism expertise is also critical. States should build and strengthen terrorism research institutes in the Black Sea region, equipped with advanced technology and staffed by trained professionals. Canada can act as a human rights advocate and intermediary, promoting humane legal practices and supporting the development of regional frameworks.

Moreover, countries need to implement critical programs that will ensure the resocialization of returning citizens, as well as monitoring and efficient surveillance to ensure that returned FTFs will not engage in further terrorist activities once they have returned to their country of origin. Such programs can be swiftly implemented with the help of the Canadian government and human rights organizations. It is essential to find an effective alternative to prolonged detention, involving developing community-based deradicalization programs. These should include psychological counselling, religious re-education, vocational training, and family reunification initiatives.

In addition to strengthening intelligence and surveillance capacities, Canada could support legal harmonization efforts among Black Sea states by promoting a rights-respecting framework for addressing the threat posed by FTFs. Canada can also offer technical legal assistance to help ensure that counterterrorism laws in the region are aligned with international human rights standards. This would involve crafting legislation that enables the prosecution, detention, and surveillance of suspected FTFs without resorting to arbitrary detention, torture, or the erosion of due process rights.
