

Foreign Fighters, U.S. EU efforts to counter violent extremism

TRANSCRIPT PODCAST INTERVIEW TOM ROGAN - U.S. MISSION TO THE EU - 26 MAY 2015

Hi, my name is Tom Rogan and I am in the Political Section at the U.S. Mission to the European Union in Brussels. I manage counter terrorism issues among other things including countering violent extremism is a part of that.

The foreign fighter problem and the countering violent extremism problem in the United States and Europe are somewhat different in the sense numbers, the quantity involved. [The United States] we are aware of perhaps 150 individuals of who we are aware of who tried to get to Syria and Iraq and fight with Islamic jihadist groups there whereas in Europe the number is quite a bit higher because of the proximity and ease of getting to the battle field from here. We estimate that there is more than 2000 perhaps more than 3000 people from Europe who have tried to go there. The numbers are probably the biggest difference but in terms of the threat that these individuals pose is very similar in both countries.

The reason that we are concerned about this both in Europe and in the United States is that people returning from Syria and Iraq may have been tasked to carry out terrorist attacks back in the countries that they came from in Europe or the United States or they may independently chose to do that upon their return. There is another aspect to this of course, there are people who become radicalized at home without ever having gone to Syria or Iraq who are nonetheless inspired through social media, through peer pressure, news accounts, whatever it may be, to carry out attacks also and we see that in cases like say the Boston marathon bombings. Those people do not appear to have travelled there but were nonetheless inspired to carry out terrorist attack there and instances of that in Europe as well.

In the United States we are trying to tackle this problem with a whole of government approach. The White House recognized this threat several years ago and there has been a government wide strategy developed. Various agencies have roles in this. The Department of Homeland Security had one of the biggest roles. They do a lot of community outreach to communities at risk trying to help people identify signs of radicalization and provide assistance to families who are looking for some place to turn for help with that. The Department of Justice has a very big role as well. Also the Department of Education already had a program to educate children about various threats that exist online and they have added the violent extremism content to that program. The State Department has a role a role abroad and so forth. So all these agencies working together have a coordinated approach and work with our foreign partners as well, including the EU.

The United States works with the EU in a number of ways to address the foreign fighters problem and countering violent extremism. First of all we have a lot bilateral talks, we compare notes on best practices and so forth. On the law enforcement level we work with Europol on certain programs. There is a lot of cooperation at the member state level, between the United

States and member states, but if we are just talking about the EU institutions, the majority of it would not be law enforcement because that is the competence of the member state, other than the Europol aspect. But we coordinate our assistance programs to third countries for instance through institutions like the Global Counter Terrorism Forum where the EU co-chairs a working group, the United States co-chairs a different working group, developing programs in third countries and sort of divide the labor that way, divide up the resources but we also compare notes and share information about new threats that we see in new regions. It is an evolving threat, certainly a growing one.