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BOMBS AT HOME OR FIGHTERS ABROAD:
DOMESTIC SECURITY POLICY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE
MIGRATION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

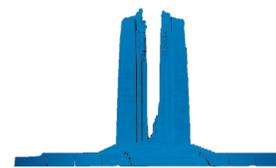
RAPHAËL LEDUC

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151 Slater Street, suite 412A
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5H3
613 236 9903
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BOMBS AT HOME OR FIGHTERS ABROAD:
DOMESTIC SECURITY POLICY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE
MIGRATION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

RAPHAËL LEDUC

MA CANDIDATE

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS, UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

INTRODUCTION

As it stands, over 20,000 foreign fighters are currently involved in the conflict in Syria and Iraq.¹ Decision-makers have rightly defined foreign fighters as a domestic and international threat. However, there is currently a lack of theories to measure the effectiveness of policies designed to counter their movement. This is problematic; without such an empirical background, it is *a priori* unlikely that any policy can be effective in countering the movement of foreign fighters. This is particularly true if we do not understand how the policies that decision-makers are currently crafting to counter them affect their movement and decisions on an individual level. For example, Canada's effort in stopping the movement of foreign fighters (which it terms "Extremist Travellers") has been limited to the *Combating Terrorism Act*, which came into effect in July 2013, as well as revoking the passports of suspected travellers.² As of today, there is little evidence that those policies have been effective at stemming the movement of foreign fighters. The aim of this paper will thus be to lay the theoretical foundations upon which we can measure the effectiveness of government policies at stopping the movement of foreign fighters. The intent is to pave the way for further research into this phenomenon in order to better understand the phenomenon of foreign fighters and to help in creating policies that can meaningfully impact their movement. In order to achieve this goal, this paper will be divided into two parts. In the first part, an operational definition of violent dissidents and of the contemporary foreign fighter will be developed. The second part will consist of an analysis of counter-foreign fighter policies, to be conducted with the goal of assessing their impact on the security of the countries that enact them.

CONTEMPORARY FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Today's states have to compete against transnational collective identities in order to protect their space of legitimacy. The consequence of this competition is that many of the traditional aspects of states are now being challenged by non-state actors. One example is how the individual decisions of isolated actors can have collective impact on the states themselves. Events since 9/11 have increasingly shifted the focus on the threat of Islamist fundamentalists who exist through a network of non-state actors. While these networks are quite varied in their scope and focus, one aspect that unites them is a shared vision that the foundations of Western society are flawed. This can be seen very clearly in their actions and narrative, in which they seek to change or undermine the political choices of Western states.³ In opposing the construct of the Western state, they fall under a broader category of dissenters. The operations in Afghanistan have helped decision-makers develop tools for understanding how non-state armed actors wield their political and social influence among the civilian populations in which they operate.⁴ This understanding should not only be limited to operations in weakened states. Instead, the relationship between loyalty to the state and loyalty to non-state entities can be used to understand violent dissent on the



home front. This is especially true due to the fact that the process, which has seen a shift of loyalty from the state to other forms of social organization, has been growing since at least the Second World War.⁵

The easiest way to understand the relationships between the state and its citizens is to split the latter into two groups. There are those who agree with the policies, politics, and ideas of their state and those who do not. The second group is what can be called “dissenters,” which are any persons willing to take violent political action in order to change the behaviour of their state. This distinction can already be used to explain the difference between a strong and weak state. Strong states will have a much lower proportion of dissenters than weak states.⁶ Dissenters can further be broken down into non-violent and violent dissenters. As their titles suggest, some dissenters are willing to use violence to achieve their means while others make use of civil means such as protests, rallies, discussions, migration, and political organization.

The category of violent dissenters represents a particular threat for states; it not only undermines existing state legitimacy but also undermines the ability of states to sustain their legitimacy by directly attacking state institutions. Violent dissenters can be divided into several categories, but for the purposes at hand it is easiest to group them into four broad, but not necessarily exhaustive categories:

1. Terrorists;
2. Rebels;
3. Organized crime syndicates; and
4. Foreign fighters.

The first three categories all have fairly well understood definitions and theories to explain their recruitment, behaviour, and strategies. For example, there is extensive research and explanations for the formation of rebel groups in countries and the likelihood of civil war, mostly based on the greed and grievance models.⁷ As a concept, foreign fighters are only beginning to develop similar epistemological foundations. Foreign fighters used to be seen as members of broader terrorist movements within a global theater of operations.⁸ However, more recent literature on the subject argues that they should be seen as an increasingly distinct type of actor altogether.⁹

For the purpose of this paper, the definition of a foreign fighter will be drawn from the work of David Malet, which defines them as “noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts.”¹⁰ What is important to underline here is that the movement is usually illicit and is thus done against the will of either the departing or receiving state, which thus excludes the joining of a foreign



formal military or of a private security company. What is not clear from his definition is if it is necessary for foreign fighters to actively participate in violence. An individual can, after all, provide technical or financial knowledge to an insurgency without taking part in combat operations. This paper will assume that it is not necessary for foreign fighters to take part in violent acts to support the group they join, but that merely joining it and supporting the group in any way is enough to classify an individual as a foreign fighter. Non-combatants are included due to the fact that a successful rebellion rests on the ability to create an alternative space of legitimacy, separate from the state. This space usually includes parallel institutions and social structures that seek to replace the state's. Thus, women who migrate in order to join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to become bride for fighters contribute to the organization's attempt at creating a space of legitimacy *vis-à-vis* the state.

Foreign fighters who join the conflict in Syria and Iraq follow a narrative that is similar to Islamic domestic terrorists. Both are influenced by the Al-Qaeda narrative in their actions and as such act in order to support the narrative. The difference lies in the fact that instead of trying to change the politics of their home states through the use of terrorism, foreign fighters choose to migrate to what they see as a more legitimate entity – in this case, the Islamic State – in order to help in its permanent establishment. Either way, the individual manages to get what they want; in other words, a social infrastructure which matches their ideals. Understanding the choice between these different options is crucial in building policies that can effectively counter the migration of foreign fighters who join ISIL.

PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT COUNTER-FOREIGN FIGHTER POLICIES

The response of most governments to foreign fighters has been to tailor their counter-terrorism policies to the rise of foreign fighters. Russia, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Tunisia, and the United States have all tailored current legislation to either criminalize the migration of foreign fighters to join ISIL, block their movement, or both.¹¹ These policies have either been rushed to meet what is perceived as a threat or rest heavily on previous legislation or executive powers. This would indicate that these policies are stop-gap measures designed to ease the worry of the population and give the appearance that policy-makers are combating the threat. There currently is very little empirical knowledge to support these policies and as such their effectiveness is difficult to measure. In concrete terms, the number of cases in any single country is too small to know if the success (or failure) of policies aimed at combating the movement of foreign fighters can be ascribed to the policies themselves or to chance. For this reason, it is more useful to contrast the movement of foreign fighters across several countries with the goal of finding common variables that impact their recruitment.

Since the current knowledge on foreign fighters is so limited, it is necessary to look at proxy actors who



share similar characteristics. In particular, terrorism and international criminal organizations offer an interesting point of comparison. A problem commonly encountered in trying to find the root causes for these actors is the fact that many of them appear to be idiosyncratic. The reasons for joining a terrorist or criminal organization are quite diverse, which makes it particularly difficult to use any set of factors for predictive purposes.¹² Part of this difficulty stems from the fact that conventional analysis of root causes usually assumes individuals transform directly from good citizens into terrorists. Such analysis forgets that terrorism is only one avenue of dissent against the political environment.

The traditional definition of terrorism hinges on the fact that it is a form of violence meant to cause terror or panic and done for political purposes. This does not mean that it is the only form of political violence. States all require a unifying idea to remain stable. This abstract concept is basically the will of its citizens to live together and to listen to the rules of their society under a social contract.¹³ A state's integrity is fractured when their unifying idea is weakened due to cultural fragmentation, economic turmoil, or by the inability of the state to provide basic political goods such as security. Weak states will see a rising number of dissidents who form their own networks to pursue a political discourse that is relevant to their needs. These dissidents use a varying number of tactics,¹⁴ all of which have an impact on state stability. Migration, civil uprisings, terrorism, organized crime, and rebellions are all means by which dissidents undermine the idea of the state. It is thus not surprising that police states like North Korea oppose emigration almost as vehemently as rebellions. Both have the consequence of undermining the idea of the state and thus its stability. In light of this, the difficulty of linking root causes to particular tactics is made clear. By trying to find the particular reasons behind a choice of tactics for individuals, we are directly entering the realm of idiosyncrasies.

The difficulties in trying to understand how dissidents choose a tactic were already encountered in the field of criminology, which tried to explain the fluctuations in the rate of certain type of crimes without a similar fluctuation in their assumed causal factors. This led the field to introduce the concept of Opportunity Theory, which found that crime rates could be affected by change in three main factors: the motivation of offenders, availability of targets, and absence of credible deterrence.¹⁵ These factors point to a cost-benefit analysis done on the part of offenders and is thus well suited to rationality-based models. Such models have been successfully used to explain why some terrorist organizations choose tactics like hostage taking over bombing.¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that those models are often criticized for placing too much emphasis on a belief that actors can and do act rationally. This critique is especially true in contexts where actors seem to have no potential physical gains. For example, suicide terrorism is often argued to be irrational since death is a physical cost that no benefit should be able to outweigh for any individual. However, the literature on social networks would seem to indicate that preferences are not



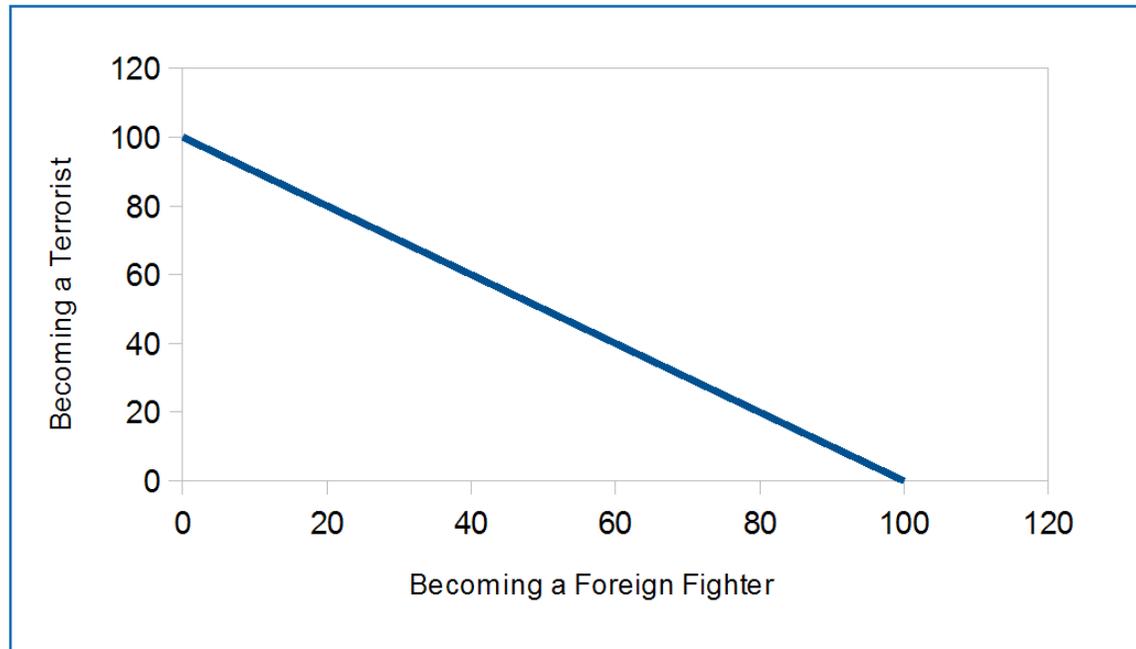
just constituted of personal, physical gains but can also be determined by social structures which place pressure on an individual to meet group expectations;¹⁷ thus foreign fighters can still see a benefit from joining a conflict from which they have very little to gain (in material terms). Similar logic supports even more self-destructive actions such as suicide terrorism, which can be seen as a form of altruistic suicide but that creates real perceived benefits for the individual.¹⁸

The field of economics uses the consumer-choice model to aggregate variations in consumption across different individuals. This helps study consumption in a way that is useful for systemic analysis. For the choices faced by dissidents, it is particularly useful as it can allow us to investigate the impact of public policies and economic factors on the choice of tactics for potential violent actors.¹⁹ To understand how this model can be applied to the choices of dissidents, it is necessary to understand how the conventional model works. In traditional economics, the consumer-choice model is used to explain how individuals choose to consume one good over another under a set of economic constraints. Those constraints are their needs, their budget, and the cost of the goods. This can be used to explain how consumers behave when confronted with a choice between two goods. For the purposes of explaining the behaviour of dissidents, their needs are represented by their political objectives (personal or organizational), their budget (available resources such as money, time, and networks), and the cost in terms of how much of said resources are necessary in order to enact their chosen tactic in relation to the chances that it succeeds. Todd Sanders and Walter Endlers use a similar model to explain how terrorists will choose a certain tactic over another.²⁰ A similar model can be used to explain how dissidents choose to become a terrorist or a foreign fighter. This can serve to highlight the impact of government policy on their choice. It is important to note that this model is not meant to explain the behaviour of any given individual but instead to evaluate the systemic impact of government policy on dissenters. It is quite possible that no amount of deterrence will stop some individuals from committing acts of domestic terrorism or becoming foreign fighter, in the same manner that not all criminals can be deterred. However, what this model can do is demonstrate how government policies can affect the aggregate behaviour of dissenters and thus influence overall trend.

It is necessary to define some key variables before using the consumer-choice model to explain the choice between becoming a domestic terrorist or migrating as a foreign fighter. First, the overall political objectives (needs) of individuals who migrate to join ISIL can be defined as an attempt at advancing the broader Al-Qaeda narrative, which claims that the West is in a state of war with Islam and Muslims and that Muslims thus have a divine mandate to fight in violent jihad.²¹ Second, the resources for potential foreign fighters consist of their personal property and income as well as their ability to access the ISIL network (at home or abroad). Third, the cost that they face is the economic cost of migrating and the



FIGURE 1: Choice between Domestic Terrorism and Becoming a Foreign Fighter



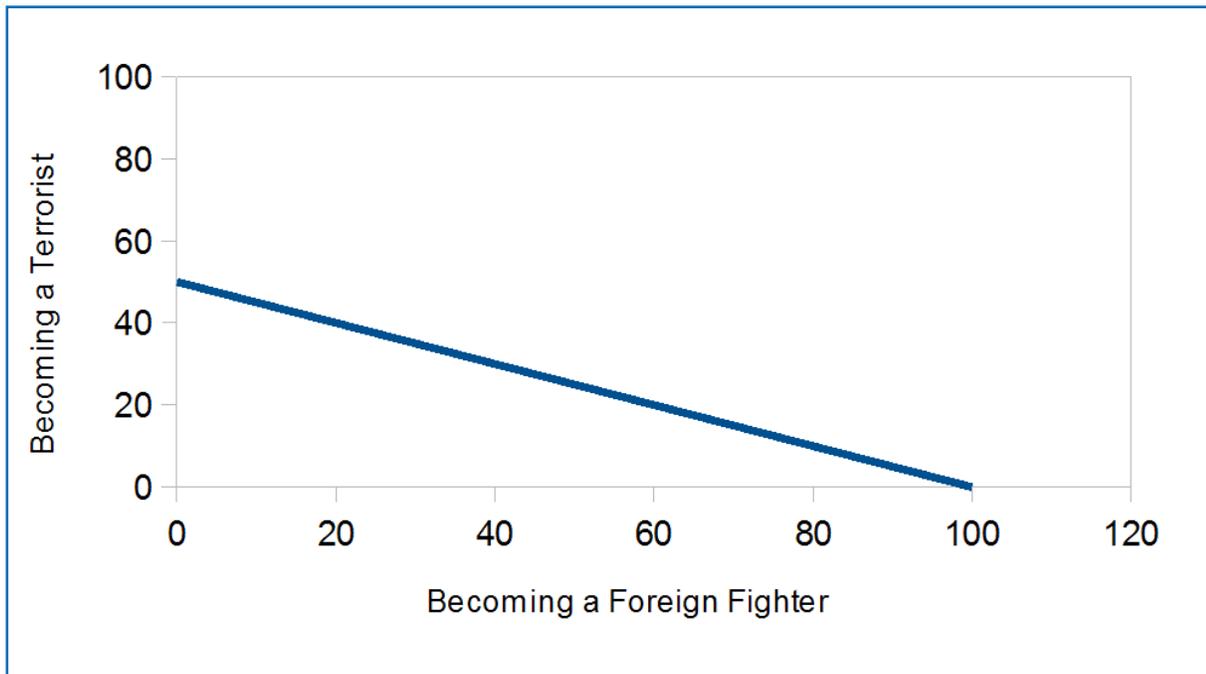
(Source: author)

risk of getting caught, including the opportunity cost of not doing a different strategy. By understanding these variables, a theory of what can affect their decision can be developed. What is important to note at this point is that it is assumed that violent dissidents will choose a tactic to accomplish their goal since doing nothing would be the worst outcome and would indicate that their political objectives have changed. A graphical representation of the consumer-choice model for violent dissidents could thus look like Figure 1.

In order to help read Figure 1, it is necessary to understand that the individual can consume at any point on or below the line, but because the individual wants to maximize his returns, he will spend all his resources on a point on the line to get the expected returns. In order to move up or down on the line, the individual must give up some of the payout of one good to receive more of the other. The proportion of this trade-off is called the marginal rate of substitution and is useful under conditions in which the payout is asymmetrical. Figure 1 represents a theoretical situation in which the costs and expected payouts of becoming a foreign fighter are equal (symmetrical). That is to say, if this hypothetical violent dissident spent all of his resources on migrating to become a foreign fighter or on conducting domestic terrorism, he would get a payout of 100 in both cases. This means that the net benefit of the violent dissident is the same everywhere along the line. There are thus equal chances that the violent dissident will become either a domestic terrorist or a foreign fighter.²²



FIGURE 2: Choice between Domestic Terrorism and Becoming a Foreign Fighter after the Implementation of Counter-Terrorism Policies



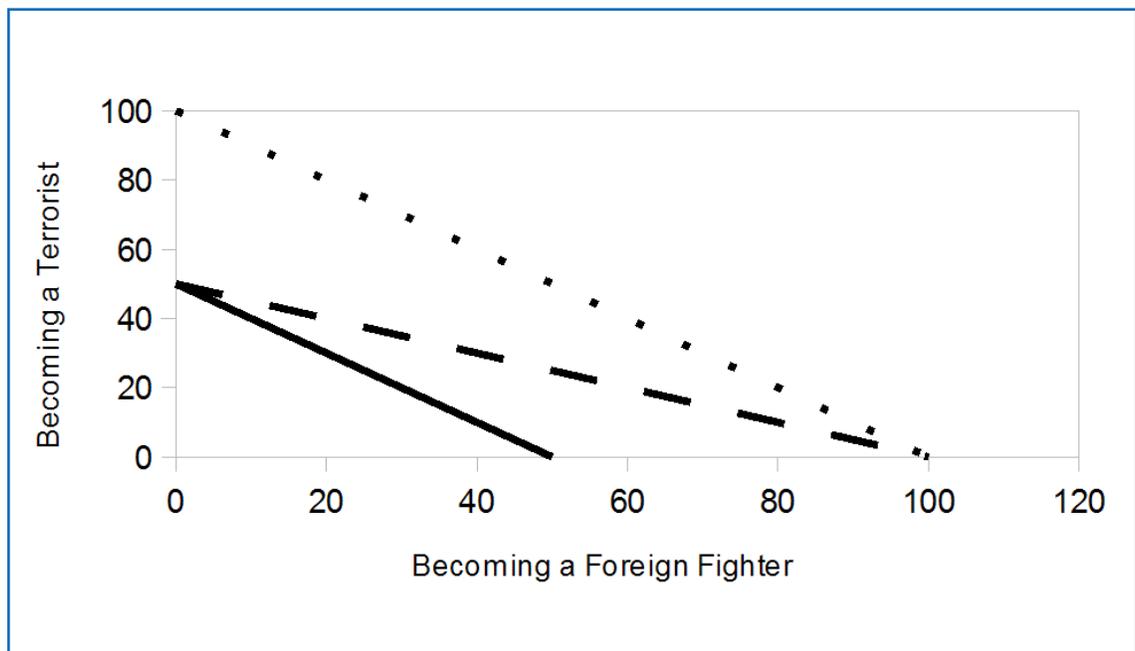
(Source: author)

Figure 2 represents the post 9/11 trend which has seen the establishment of a number of policies aimed at stopping terrorism. As an example, Canada did not have dedicated counter-terrorism laws or policies. Following 9/11, Canada enacted Bill C-36 in December 2001, defining terrorism for the first time in the Criminal Code. This was followed by other policies and national strategies, such as the *Building Resilience Against Terrorism: Canada's Counter-terrorism Strategy* enacted in 2011.²³ Counter-terrorism policies such as those enacted by Canada thus had the effect of raising the cost of becoming a terrorist but left the cost of becoming a foreign fighter comparatively unaffected. This means that in order to get the same payout, a would-be terrorist would have to spend much more resources than a would-be foreign fighter. Some payout is now even impossible if the person were to choose the tactic of terrorism (Figure 2, the maximum payout for terrorism is 50 instead of 100). This represents the fact that high-visibility and organized terrorist strikes are becoming more difficult, if not impossible, for individuals or groups with limited resources. Before the rise of ISIL in Syria and Iraq in 2013, there was no transfer from terrorism to foreign fighters due to the fact that this option was not as easily available. This is arguably one of the successes of ISIL. Their ability to communicate and advertise their message attracts those violent dissenters in Western countries for whom terrorism is not a viable option. Figure 2 indicates that incidents of domestic terrorism should become lower as more violent dissidents migrate to fight with ISIL.



Figure 3 represents the situation following the implementation of policies aimed at stemming the migration of foreign fighters mentioned earlier in this paper. Using this model, one could predict that the number of domestic terrorism incidents is likely to increase in countries that have implemented counter-foreign fighter policies. Such a prediction would agree with the norm hypothesis which assumes that, all else being equal, dissidents will first choose to become foreign fighters before any other tactic.²⁴ Thus, by raising the cost of becoming both a foreign fighter and a terrorist, it is likely that we will see what is termed a transference effect,²⁵ where potential foreign fighters are inclined to become domestic terrorists. On Figure 3, the dotted line represents the initial situation (Figure 1), the dashed line represents the situation after the implementation of counter-terrorism policies (Figure 2), and the full line represents the situation after the implementation of the aforementioned policies to counter foreign fighter migration. As can be seen, the end result is that the full line is very similar to the dotted line in Figure 1, with both policies having the effect of cancelling each other out in terms of relative payout. What is interesting to note though is that the payout of any tactic for violent dissident is now lower. This means that the scale of domestic terrorism should be lower while the number of foreign fighters migrating should be less than that represented in Figure 1. The number of incidents of domestic terrorism, however, should rise as this tactic has a marginally much better payout (due to lower marginal cost) than under a situation in which there are no counter-foreign fighter policies.

FIGURE 3: Choice between Domestic Terrorism and Becoming a Foreign Fighter after the Implementation of Counter-Terrorism Policies and Counter-Foreign Fighters Policies



(Source: author)

The data on foreign fighters is very limited. The ITERATE (International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events) project accumulates data on transnational terrorism but does not code foreign fighters as a unique category nor does it capture them as terrorists unless they are conducting terrorist act (as opposed to acting as 'regular' combatants).²⁶ The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR) is beginning to aggregate some limited data on foreign fighters as well but this data has not yet been made openly available to use in research. At this time, it is thus not possible to test this theory using quantitative evidence to support the model. Thus the hypothesis cannot be tested. However, there are cases which can serve as practical applications of the model. The cases of Martin Couverture-Rouleau and Michael Zehaf-Bibeau in Canada are two examples of the impact of Canadian policies on the decision of individuals. In October 2014, both of these individuals committed terrorist attacks in Canada. While the circumstances and means of their attacks were radically different, one point they had in common was the fact that both of them had the intention of becoming foreign fighters and joining ISIL before the government of Canada stopped them.²⁷ This would indicate that the government of Canada successfully raised the cost of becoming a foreign fighter to the point where these individual violent dissidents saw small-scale domestic terrorism as a better alternative (Figure 3).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the logical end of the use of the consumer-choice model would tend to indicate that we must raise the cost of all violent dissident tactics to the point where their payout is effectively zero, that is to say that any action against the state would bring them no net benefit. As many of the policies aimed at deterring violent actors also imposes a cost on the rest of civil society, this approach could prove to be counter-productive, as it could potentially incite more people to violently dissent. There is also an old moral element which is often encountered in security studies which claims that the rights and liberties of the many must be weighed against the benefit of these security policies.

This paper has focused on the dynamics between terrorism and foreign fighters but the consumer-choice model could also be used to look at the dynamics between any number of tactics used by violent dissidents. One of the important arguments which the consumer-choice model has allowed security experts to make is that any security policy must comprehensively raise the cost of violent action across the whole spectrum of possibilities, otherwise it is likely that dissidents will simply change their tactics as has already been seen in the study of terrorist tactics.²⁸ Furthermore, there is also the threat of returning foreign fighters who might decide to become domestic terrorists and thus also need to be deterred. For Western countries, the most cost-effective strategy would be to try and prevent individuals from becoming violent dissidents. But this would require further study into root causes of political violence. For this, a process of triangulation which looks at the factors behind the choices actors make when selecting a



strategy will provide a clear starting point from which further understanding of the motivation of violent dissidents can be attained.

Raphaël Leduc is a master's candidate at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs of the University of Ottawa. His research interests focus on critical security studies and transnational insurgencies. He currently investigates the factors that influence the movement of foreign fighters. He seeks to further his studies at the PhD level where he hopes to create a comprehensive database on foreign fighters. He has nine years of service in the Canadian Armed Forces, including tours in Kuwait and Afghanistan. He holds a Honours Bachelor of Social Sciences in Conflict Studies and Human Rights with a minor in Political Science.

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L'INSTITUT DE LA CONFÉRENCE DES ASSOCIATIONS DE LA DÉFENSE

151 Slater Street, suite 412A , Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5H3
Phone / Téléphone: +1 (613) 236 9903

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