

CERWYN MOORE

TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM THROUGH THE AGES

Although transnational activism has changed dramatically as a result of globalisation, the process of travelling to participate in conflicts in different parts of the world is not new. There are many reasons why people decide to travel to participate in activism, and these reasons should also be reflected in ways authorities deal with those who return. It is useful, then, to revisit some examples of transnational activism and consider different types of returnees in order to better understand the direct and indirect consequences of desistance, re-integration and rehabilitation.

MANY FORMS OF ACTIVISM

While much of the analysis of those who travel to overseas conflicts focuses on foreign fighters, it is important to recognise different forms of transnational activism. In past conflicts, just as in Syria, ideologically-inspired activism took many forms. It was not uncommon for medical specialists including nurses, or writers and artists involved in fund-raising, to travel to join the International Brigades in 1930's Spain. Then, in the latter part of the 1940's, dozens of British volunteers – from many different walks of life – travelled to fight in the 1948 Palestine war. Many also volunteered to participate in post-conflict nation-building.

In 1870 the UK government passed the Foreign Enlistment Act to prevent volunteers travelling to participate in foreign conflicts. The act was deployed again in the 1930s, in a largely symbolic attempt to prevent participation in the Spanish Civil War. By the late 1940s, the act was again discussed as a way to regulate British volunteers travelling to engage in Israeli state-building efforts.

More recently, the initial rallying cry in Syria focused on providing charitable and medical support for refugees fleeing violence in the Middle East.

As the conflict became more entrenched, local groups sought to raise support through new information and communication networks, including Twitter. This produced forms of activism that were both physical (providing medical support) as well as virtual (providing moral and ideological support).

The declaration of Islamic State's caliphate in August 2014 sparked a different wave of activism, mobilising those who travelled to participate in what they saw as state-building. Specialists with engineering or medical training were joined by those who saw migration as a religious obligation. Some travelled as families – seeking the promise of a life within an Islamic state. IS started to introduce formal structures of governance, adding to the façade of a legitimate state.

HOW TO DEAL WITH RETURNEES

Just as there are many reasons why people became transnational activists, so there needs to be a variety of responses to those who return from overseas conflict zones. In the case of the Spanish Civil War, even those who fought for the fascists were not necessarily imprisoned when they returned.

The author Peter Kemp went almost seamlessly from Franco's nationalists to the UK's fledgling Special Operations Executive. His experiences in Spain were used to support the UK during the war.

At the other extreme, when the 1980s conflict in Afghanistan finished, some of the Afghan Arabs travelled back to their homes as heroes, while small numbers sought out new places to wage jihad. However, some former activists – including fighters – faced uncertain futures, barred from return to their own countries. This was especially true of Egyptian militants.

The threat of arrest had the indirect effect of creating a new clandestine milieu – out of which a new movement, al-Qaeda, emerged.

The options for returning fighters who choose to desist from violent activism are clearly mixed: some may be detained, arrested or imprisoned, while others might enter rehabilitation programmes in their home countries. However, the options for those returning volunteers who were activists but not combatants are even more uncertain.

This group of returnees includes male and female activists or, as John Horgan notes in his article in this edition of CSR, child soldiers. The many forms of activism – and activists - linked to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq will require innovative thinking to address a new generation of returnees.