



Britons have already said no to citizens travelling abroad to fight, no matter what the cause

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As part of a May 2014 survey focused on British foreign policy attitudes, we asked UK respondents how the British Government should deal with UK nationals travelling abroad to fight against al-Assad in Syria, in Ukraine, and against Boko Haram in Nigeria. Pluralities of respondents in all three situations favour stripping such individuals of UK citizenship, and less than 20% of those surveyed believe the Government should allow its citizens to fight in any of these emerging conflicts. Home Secretary Theresa May has the public behind her if, as planned, new measures are brought forth to crack down on UK citizens fighting for foreign armies or groups.

In the wake of the horrific beheading of reporter James Foley, apparently by an ISIS jihadist with links to the UK, the British Government pledges closer scrutiny and regulations to counter the threat posed by British citizens who join foreign and insurgent militaries. Home Secretary Theresa May highlights steps the Government takes to prevent UK citizens from travelling abroad to fight in Syria and Iraq, which include withdrawing passports when there is evidence an individual has the intention to travel to participate in terrorist activity, police and security services investigating the estimated 400-500 Britons who already travelled to the Middle East to take up arms, stripping British citizenship from dual nationals who take up arms in support of terrorist groups, and vigorously prosecuting those returning to Britain after fighting for ISIS and other jihadist groups.¹

The sad events of the past week bring into sharp focus the issue of Britons fighting in foreign conflicts and there is unquestionable anger and soul searching that comes when evidence emerges that a UK national is part of a group willing to engage in violence against the West. However, there is a long history of Britons travelling abroad to fight for foreign armies and groups. For example, twenty years ago, a number of ex-servicemen travelled to the war torn region of former Yugoslavia to fight alongside Bosnian Muslims.² It is not earthshattering to find that Britons oppose any leniency for those fighting alongside the militia of the Islamic State and engaged in heinous acts, but do these feelings generalise to opposition to the whole idea of Britons travelling abroad to serve in the militaries of other nations or factions?

Our survey of a representative sample of British respondents from May 2014 sheds some light on the answer to this question. At the time, the frame of the conflict in Syria is that the nation's President, Bashar al-Assad is an enemy of the UK and brutally oppressing his people.³ The question we ask of 4,027 Britons is as follows, with the percentage selecting each choice in parentheses:

The UK government has asked British citizens not to fight in the Syrian Civil War. When British citizens decide to leave the UK to fight in the Syrian civil war, which of the following do you think the British government should do?

1. Take away British citizenship from these fighters, and prevent them from ever returning to the UK (42%)
2. Allow these fighters to return to the UK, but register with British law enforcement when they return. (21%)

¹ May, Theresa. We Must Give Ourselves All the Legal Powers we Need to Prevail." *The Telegraph*, August 2014.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11052510/We-must-give-ourselves-all-the-legal-powers-we-need-to-prevail.html>.

² For more details on the topic, see the following ITV news story from February 1993, as archived on YouTube:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmW8Wa_26d0.

³ To be clear, evidence supports the dominant frame—war crimes by forces loyal to al-Assad are well documented: UN implicates Bashar al-Assad in Syria War Crimes.' *BBC News*, December 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25189834>.

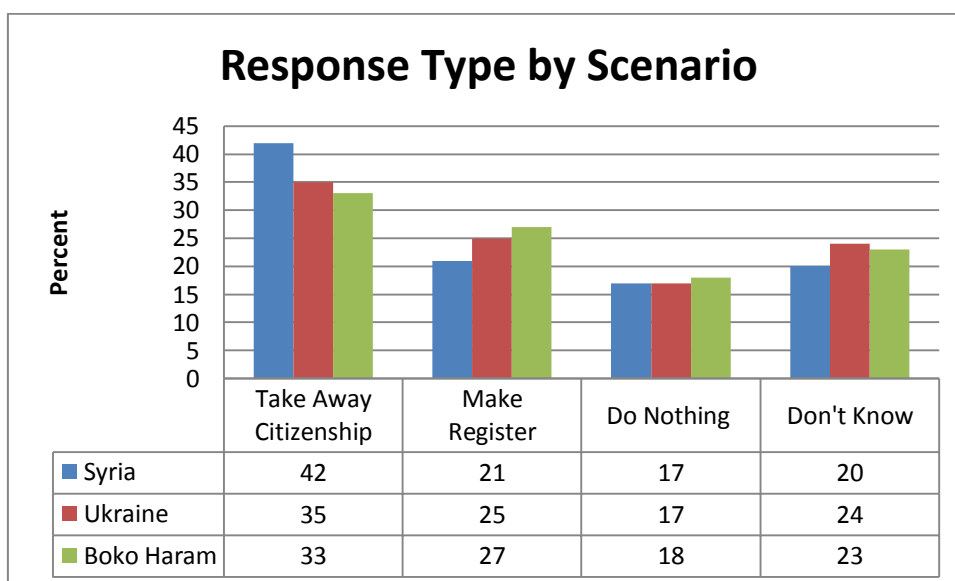
3. Do nothing. People should be allowed to do what they want. (17%)
4. Don't Know (20%)

Britons are not comfortable with citizens travelling to Syria to fight—a clear plurality support stripping British citizens who partake of such actions of their citizenship, and only a small minority say the British Government should just leave these people alone. A follow-up question asks, on a 0-10 scale, the level of threat posed by citizens who travel to Syria to fight in that nation’s civil war. Britons sense a clear threat—the median response is 7, and fewer than 10% of respondents place the threat at less than 5 on the scale.

Even though the frame of news reports in May 2014 was anti-al-Assad, the numbers of our respondents who believe that opponents of the Syrian President are Islamic radicals outstrip the numbers who believe the anti-al-Assad forces are moderates by more than 3-1. Is it simply the situational aspect that leads to a willingness to see Britons travelling abroad to fight stripped of their citizenship? To attempt to answer this question, at different points in the survey, respondents receive the following questions (with answer choices the same as those above):

- a) *Suppose the UK government asks British citizens not to travel to Ukraine to fight against pro-Russian forces. If British citizens decide to leave the UK to fight in Ukraine, which of the following do you think the British government should do?*
- b) *Suppose the UK government asks British citizens not to travel to Nigeria to fight against the militant Islamic group known as Boko Haram. If British citizens decide to leave the UK to fight against Boko Haram, which of the following do you think the British government should do?*

Situation ‘a’ has citizens travelling abroad to fight on a side sympathetic to Britain, but an escalating crisis in Ukraine and provoking Russia has the potential to threaten UK security interests. So, even respondents who sympathize with Ukrainians might think twice before saying Briton should simply do nothing to people travelling abroad for this cause. Situation ‘b’ is an instance where those travelling abroad to fight would be targeting a group, Boko Haram, that clearly is hostile to the UK and is known for a lack of respect for human rights. Here is how our respondents evaluate each situation:



It is the case that support for stripping citizenship of citizens going abroad to fight declines as the situation becomes less threatening to UK interests, but it is also clear that the public is sceptical of



citizens going abroad to fight even as the context varies. The 'Do nothing' option is embraced by less than one in five respondents across the three situations. The modal response for the three questions is to strip those travelling to fight in foreign lands of their citizenship. As the context becomes friendlier to UK interests, the percentage of those willing to see foreign fighters stripped of their citizenship does decline; however, most respondents still believe that, at a minimum, the fighters must be monitored.

Responses to our May 2014 survey suggest that the Home Secretary has the public behind her if she wishes for further legislation to reign in British nationals fighting for other armies, even when their interests may coincide with those of the United Kingdom. However, such legislation is not without pitfalls—many UK citizens have dual nationality with friendly EU nations (e.g. Greece and Cyprus) where military service is compulsory. Our survey suggests that citizens will be supportive of a crackdown of those fighting for foreign entities, but legislation must be carefully crafted.

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