

Beat: Politics

More than 3,000 Europeans have joined Islamists in Syria and Iraq, EU says

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USPA News - More than 3,000 citizens from the European Union are now believed to have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join Islamist fighters there, with most of them coming from Western countries such as France and Britain, the EU's counter-terrorism chief said Friday. Gilles de Kerchove, the union's counter-terrorism coordinator, said the figure of more than 3,000 European fighters was based on his contacts with EU Member States and includes fighters who have been killed or have since returned home.

The majority are believed to have joined Islamic State militants, who have declared a caliphate in the region, but some may also have joined other groups. "These figures are a personal estimate, based on my own contacts with the Member States, and based on the fact that not all foreign fighters departing to Syria and Iraq are known to the authorities," de Kerchove said. "In addition, each Member State seems to use different criteria when counting the total number of foreign fighters. Some Member States for instance do not include those foreign fighters who have returned, or [who] died in Syria or Iraq." Most European fighters have come from countries in Western Europe, but other EU countries such as Romania have also experienced the departure of a number of citizens to join Islamist fighters in Syria and Iraq. "Most European foreign fighters come from France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Belgium and to a lesser extent The Netherlands and Denmark," de Kerchove explained. Friday's estimate comes just two weeks after the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) said it believes the number of ISIS fighters across Iraq and Syria has risen to between 20,000 and 31,500, a significant increase from the previous estimate of 10,000. "This new total reflects an increase in members because of stronger recruitment since June following battlefield successes and the declaration of a caliphate, greater battlefield activity, and additional intelligence," CIA spokesman Ryan Trapani said on September 11. The Islamic State (IS), which was previously known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS), is an al-Qaeda splinter group which declared itself an Islamic caliphate earlier this year after seizing much of northeastern Syria and making huge gains in parts of Iraq. Their rule has been marked by brutal violence - such as beheadings and crucifixions - of anyone opposing the "caliphate." Since early August, U.S. forces have carried out around 200 airstrikes in Iraq to protect U.S. interests and to assist Iraqi forces as they attempt to fight off ISIS. A coalition of countries - including France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands - have since joined that effort. The United States - along with several Arab countries - have also launched a separate air campaign against ISIS in northern Syria.

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UPA United Press Agency LTD
483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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