

Policy Brief: Canadian Foreign Terrorist Fighters: A Gendered Perspective of Activities and Outcomes

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Top Line Overview

Canadian foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) present complex national security and public policy challenges, particularly as individuals seek repatriation from conflict zones. Drawing on a new database of 129 Canadian FTFs from 1990–2025, this study provides a comprehensive examination of trends, individual characteristics, and criminal justice system (CJS) outcomes of Canadian FTFs, with a particular focus on gender-based differences.

Key Findings

While the majority of Canadian FTFs analyzed were male (n=111, 86%), female FTFs (n=18, 14%) differ in many ways, including later mobilization temporally, a greater likelihood of being White, and are more commonly born in Canada. Women were also more likely to travel abroad successfully, survive while participating in the conflict, return to Canada, and receive less severe CJS sanctions upon return. Additional sample characteristics include:

- 75% of the sample had at least some post-secondary education, and 82% were employed prior to their attempted travel.
- 90% of the sample were Canadian citizens (88% of men and 100% of women).
- 98% of the sample followed a radical Islamist ideology.
- Common destinations include Syria (n = 62), Afghanistan (n = 12) and the U.S. (n = 12).
- Of the 29 known FTFs who are deceased, all are male.
- Since 2014, there has been a greater proportion of unsuccessful travel attempts.

Background

While the Syrian Civil War generated the largest wave of travel, Canadian FTFs have been associated with numerous conflicts over the past three decades. Canada does not revoke citizenship for terrorism offences, meaning that many Canadians who travelled abroad to support terrorist organizations may attempt to return. At the same time, prosecution of returning FTFs is often complicated by evidentiary challenges related to offences committed overseas.

To better understand these challenges and the characteristics of these individuals, the Canadian Foreign Terrorist Fighters Database (CFTFD) was developed, comprising 129 individuals who travelled or attempted to travel internationally to support terrorism between 1990 and 2025. The database includes demographic information, travel histories, ideological and group affiliations, CJS outcomes, and their current status (e.g. deceased, returned to Canada, still abroad).

Considerations

Despite the greater proportion of male FTFs in Canada, this report demonstrates that women and men follow different pathways into engagement with foreign terrorist entities, as well as differential CJS outcomes upon their return. These differences suggest that prevention, disengagement, and reintegration strategies should account for gender-specific recruitment and experiences.

Female returnees were more likely to receive peace bonds and less likely to receive custodial sentences, which may reflect women's differential roles within terrorist organizations (such as indirect support or travelling with their spouse), but also may indicate potential inconsistencies or gendered biases in risk assessment and threat management of returning FTFs.

Ultimately, achieving a balanced approach that addresses national security concerns while also promoting the reintegration of FTF returnees remains a critical security challenge.

Policy Recommendations

- 1. Increase community-based prevention to divert Canadians from potentially attempting travel** as 90% of this sample are Canadian citizens. It is essential to invest in psychosocial programming and community engagement initiatives to address underlying needs that may drive both Canadian men and women to want to support conflicts abroad.
- 2. Develop individualized multidisciplinary rehabilitation strategies for all returning FTFs**, while considering unique risk and needs to effectively support rehabilitation and reintegration that is proportionate to each individual's current threat level. For example, models similar to the United Kingdom's Fixated Threat Assessment Centres (FTACs) may provide a useful framework for Canada.
- 3. Ensure gender-responsive and equitable CJS responses** for returning FTFs. Differences in arrest, charging, peace bond use, and sentencing outcomes warrant further examination. Policymakers should assess whether current practices appropriately reflect individual risk or whether unintended gender disparities exist.