



The Flow of Foreign Fighters to the Islamic State

Assessing the Challenge and the Response

By Hardin Lang and Muath Al Wari

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Introduction and summary

Foreign fighters have long been a key element of transnational jihad. In the 1980s, foreigners flocked to South Asia to fight alongside the Afghan mujahedeen. The same thing occurred to a lesser extent in Bosnia and Chechnya in the 1990s and again following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But the Syrian civil war and the subsequent rise of the Islamic State—also known as IS, ISIS, or ISIL—have broken new ground. Never before have jihadi foreign fighters rallied at the speed and scale as they have in the territory that IS now controls. Today, between 31,000 and 27,000 fighters from more than 86 countries are estimated to have made the journey to join the ranks of IS and other extremist groups, doubling the 2014 numbers.¹

These foreign fighters fill leadership roles within the organization's hierarchy and seem to be disproportionately responsible for the atrocities and brutality for which IS has become infamous. IS uses this extreme violence to create a climate of impunity and to intimidate both civilian populations and potential enemies. In addition, the recent attacks in Paris vividly demonstrated the international terrorist threat that foreign fighters pose. Finally, these fighters present a long-term challenge to their source countries if and when they return.

In response, the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIL has prioritized the flow of foreign fighters as one of its five major lines of effort. In 2015, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178, or UNSCR 2178, was adopted with the specific aim of addressing the foreign fighter threat.² Similarly, the coalition has established a working group to coordinate multilateral efforts to impede the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq and to implement the UNSCR.³ But much work remains to be done.

A key to stemming the flow of foreign fighters will be not only to treat the problem at its sources but also to prioritize within these sources. While foreign fighters come from across the globe, 12 countries have provided some 75 percent of all the fighters in Iraq and Syria. This report provides a brief snapshot of the foreign fighter threat and the government response in each of these 12 countries.

Particular attention is paid to the legal framework each of these countries has established to address the foreign fighter challenge. These laws, as proscribed by the U.N. resolution, empower law enforcement and intelligence agencies as they attempt to confront the threat.

The report concludes by recommending the following five steps that the United States can take with its allies and partners to stem the flow of foreign fighters:

1. Focus on a list of core source countries.
2. Establish and implement a legal framework of best practices to counter the flow of foreign fighters.
3. Prioritize measures to curb the use of Turkey as a transit hub.
4. Improve multilateral intelligence and information sharing.
5. Focus on gains on the battlefield against IS.

Many of the findings in this report are relevant to the developing situation in Libya, which now hosts the most significant IS presence outside Syria and Iraq.⁴ The Libyan town of Sirte, in particular, has become a top destination for foreign fighters, especially those coming from neighboring North African countries.⁵ Efforts to combat the flow of foreign fighters should be nestled within a wider strategy to combat IS in Libya and stabilize the country, which is beyond the scope of this report.

Background

Over the past four years, an estimated 27,000 to 31,000 foreign fighters from at least 86 countries have traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight with the Islamic State and other extremist groups.⁶ Around 4,250 of these foreign fighters are European, and a further 250 are American.⁷ By comparison, the Soviet war in Afghanistan saw at most 20,000 foreign fighters make the journey between 1980 and 1992.⁸ As the United States assembled an international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy IS, impeding the flow of foreign fighters became the coalition's second main line of effort.⁹ Despite the priority given to this task, foreign fighters continued to flow into Syria and Iraq in increasing numbers over the course of 2015.¹⁰

No one factor can explain the foreign recruitment success of IS and other extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, but information technology certainly plays a role. The rapid spread of propaganda on new media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter has strengthened IS's recruitment capability considerably. For example, IS uses these platforms to recruit worldwide. Early on, IS targeted European audiences with slick, specifically tailored recruitment videos.¹¹ It regularly issues a publication aimed at English-speaking audiences and recruits.¹² Ease of travel to territories that IS holds is another factor. Turkey, whose border with Syria is described as the "Jihadist highway," has direct flights into multiple cities in at least 107 countries.¹³ But the actual existence of IS—its hold on territory—remains the single most important factor in explaining the appeal of the journey to Syria and Iraq.

The nature of the threat

Foreign fighters pose a series of challenges for those opposed to IS. First and foremost, foreign fighters play a key role in nearly every component of the organization's operations¹⁴ and an especially outsized one when it comes to its displays of savagery.¹⁵ IS uses foreign fighters and their proclivity for extreme violence to intimidate local populations, where native fighters may be less willing to brutalize

their neighbors. These atrocities help maintain order through fear and by projecting an image of impunity, a macabre exercise in population control and public relations. These acts of depravity also help provoke wider sectarian conflict by targeting minority groups, allowing IS to assume the role of defender of the Sunnis.¹⁶

Foreign fighters also are used to plot and execute terrorist attacks against targets worldwide, as was the case with Paris in November.¹⁷ American and European intelligence and law enforcement officials also are concerned with the threat posed by returnees no longer actively fighting for IS. These individuals have acquired combat skills and relationships with other jihadis from around the world while fighting for IS and could be persuaded to conduct organized or lone-actor style attacks in their home countries.¹⁸ As a recent Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands noted, returning fighters “are not only coming back with radical ideas; they are also traumatized and fully prepared to use violence.”¹⁹ Making matters worse, today’s foreign fighters could serve as the foundation for the next generation of transnational jihad. The networks they build can last decades and pose a threat long after IS is destroyed.

Additionally, IS and other extremist groups have signaled their intent to infiltrate the two main refugee routes through Turkey and Libya into Europe. Concerns over IS infiltration of refugee flows into Europe became more acute in the wake of the Paris attacks in November. One of the bombers was found to have used the Turkey refugee route into Europe.²⁰ Where possible, measures should be taken to strengthen registration and screening processes for refugees into the European Union. At the same time, traversing the access routes to Europe is a dangerous and complicated affair. While the potential for penetration of these routes merits continued scrutiny, of greater concern is the risk posed by the sizable number of Europeans fighting for IS who enjoy free movement in the Schengen Area—the 26 European countries with a common visa policy that allows unrestricted travel between them.²¹

International response

In response to this threat, the coalition has taken steps to impede the flow of foreign fighters, creating the Coalition Working Group on Foreign Terrorist Fighters, or WGFTF, Working Group, led by the Netherlands and Turkey. One of the working group’s main objectives is to ensure that coalition members implement the obligations and recommendations set forth in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2178. These include stepped-up intelligence cooperation,

sharing best practices on border controls, effectively regulating the issuance of travel documents, sharing travel manifests, and addressing any gaps that may exist in national criminal codes with regard to joining foreign terrorist groups.²²

To date, approximately 45 countries have enacted laws or amendments to impede travel into Iraq and Syria. Some 35 countries have arrested foreign terrorist fighters or those who aspire to fight with IS, and 12 of these countries have successfully prosecuted foreign terrorist fighters.²³ Information sharing has improved as well. At least 50 countries now share foreign fighter profiles through Interpol's Counter-Terrorism Fusion Center. This marks a 400 percent increase since the emergence of IS. In addition, the United States has bilateral arrangements with 40 separate countries to share information on terrorist travel.²⁴

Country breakdown

Origins of foreign fighters

While Islamic State fighters hail from across the globe, a handful of countries provide the bulk of the terrorist group's foreign recruits. Fighters from 12 countries make up at least 75 percent of the total foreign fighter contingent.²⁵ Between 6,000 and 7,000 Tunisians have gone to fight in Iraq and Syria, well above the next highest contingent of 2,500 individuals from Saudi Arabia. Turkey, Jordan, and Russia have all sent between 2,000 and 2,500 fighters each, while 1,200 to 1,500 Moroccans and 1,700 French nationals have joined IS. Indonesia, Egypt, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Lebanon have all seen between 500 and 1,000 of their citizens travel to Iraq and Syria to fight with IS.²⁶

There is no consistent profile among these 12 countries, nor among the recruits they produce. These countries include all gradations of governing systems. The predominant form of Islam practiced by Muslims differs within and between countries, while IS recruits come from all socio-economic backgrounds. Counterterrorism policies and internal security measures in these 12 nations range from robust to lax. Given their diverse profiles, efforts to stem the flow of foreign fighters from these countries will need to be tailored to the conditions of each local context to be effective. Put simply, there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Given this backdrop, the following is an examination of the facts on the ground in each of the 12 countries that looks at the specific threat and corresponding response.

Indonesia

Threat: In 2014, 60 Indonesians were estimated to be fighting with IS.²⁷ As of January 2016, the Indonesian government put that number at 700. The government attributes this increase to recruitment from Indonesian migrant workers and students living in the Middle East.²⁸ Independent research on Indonesian foreign

fighters in Syria found that several of these fighters had been students in Yemen and Pakistan.²⁹ The most notable of these fighters—Riza Fardi—released a recruitment video for Indonesian jihadis known as “Join the Ranks.”³⁰

Response: In August 2014, Indonesia banned IS and its online recruitment videos. Additionally, the government announced it would take steps to prevent Indonesian citizens from traveling to Syria or Iraq.³¹ While Indonesian law does not criminalize the act of travel itself, pledging allegiance to a foreign state can be grounds for losing citizenship. The law also states that those entering into “foreign military service without the approval of the president” can be stripped of their citizenship.³²

Egypt

Threat: The number of Egyptians fighting in Syria and Iraq is estimated to be between 600 and 1,000 individuals.³³ While significant, these numbers are relatively low for a country of Egypt’s size and with its history of jihad. Events since the 2011 overthrow of former President Hosni Mubarak have contributed to this flow of fighters. President Mubarak’s ouster weakened elements of Egyptian state security and intelligence, creating a security vacuum that allowed up to 300 jihadis to escape Egyptian prisons.³⁴ Egypt’s social and political climate subsequently oscillated from almost unlimited tolerance for Islamists of all stripes to an unprecedented crackdown, which in turn has led to radicalization with a largely domestic focus. Egyptian Islamists tend to give priority to confrontation with the Egyptian government and to remember the brutal failure of their turn to violence in the 1990s. Moreover, the rise of a local IS affiliate, Wilayat Sinai, provides a domestic alternative to would-be Jihadists wishing to revisit that path.

Response: Egypt has taken a number of steps to crack down on jihad, but few of these interventions specifically target the flow of foreign fighters. In August 2015, the government released a list of countries to which travel would require prior security clearance. The list applies to all citizens between ages 18 and 45 and includes travel to Syria and Turkey but not Iraq.³⁵ In 2015, Egypt passed a sweeping counterterrorism law under which individuals found to have joined terrorist groups overseas are to be punished with 10 years in prison and those found to have received military training face up to life imprisonment.³⁶

United Kingdom

Threat: Like other countries on this list, the United Kingdom has had a long history with transnational jihad. According to MIS, the United Kingdom's domestic security agency, over the past decade, British fighters have traveled to Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. But the Syrian conflict has become a particularly attractive destination, with an estimated 760 British fighters in that country.³⁷ MIS suggests that "a significant proportion" of British foreign fighters have joined IS. While half of British foreign fighters have returned to the United Kingdom, Britain has not experienced terrorist attacks linked to IS. However, several IS plots have been disrupted,³⁸ including some planned and directed from IS territory in Iraq and Syria.³⁹

Response: British law criminalizes the act of traveling abroad for the purposes of terrorism. It also allows the government to withdraw British citizenship on the grounds of terrorist involvement.⁴⁰ New counterterrorism legislation passed in November 2014, expanding government powers to withdraw passports, allowing for temporarily banning British foreign fighters from returning to the United Kingdom, and requiring more passenger information from international airlines in advance of flights to the United Kingdom.⁴¹

Germany

Threat: Some 760 German nationals have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq.⁴² German nationals play key leadership roles in IS, most significantly Reda Seyam, an important facilitator, financier, and recruiter for foreign fighters in Bosnia and Chechnya. Moreover, Seyam was a member of the "Hamburg cell" that planned 9/11.⁴³ Today, Seyam serves as IS's minister of education in Mosul and previously recruited and trafficked fighters from Germany to Syria.⁴⁴ His role and a recent profile of 378 German foreign fighters suggests that self-radicalization is a marginal phenomenon. According to the profiles, "offline social contacts played no role" in only 3 percent of the cases of foreign fighter recruitment.⁴⁵

Response: In February 2015, Germany passed a new counterterrorism law—one of the toughest in Europe.⁴⁶ The law was built on a 2014 measure that banned IS and gave authorities the ability to "revoke or refuse to issue a national identity card for IS supporters."⁴⁷ The 2015 language criminalizes not just the act of traveling for terrorist purposes but also the "intent" to do so. German law already allowed

for the withdrawal of passports from individuals deemed a threat to national security,⁴⁸ but the new law goes a step further by requiring that such individuals be issued new identification cards that are not valid for travel outside Germany—serving effectively as travel bans.

Lebanon

Threat: Lebanon is politically divided into two main camps: one led by the Shiite Islamist Hezbollah, which supported the 30-year Syrian occupation of Lebanon and is backed by Iran.⁴⁹ The other is led by the Future Movement, a largely Sunni bloc opposed to the occupation of Lebanon. It blames Syria and Hezbollah for the assassination of its former leader, Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Today, Hezbollah is fighting inside Syria alongside Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime against what is largely a Sunni opposition. As a result, the Syrian conflict has become as much a domestic Lebanese matter as a foreign one. In particular, Lebanon has been unable to elect a new president for nearly two years.⁵⁰ In this climate, some 900 Lebanese Sunnis have traveled to Syria to fight with IS and other extremist groups.⁵¹

Response: It is nearly impossible for the Lebanese political system to approve and implement any kind of measure to address the challenge of foreign fighters, thanks to the extreme polarization of the country's politics. The work of stopping the flow of Sunni foreign fighters falls on the overstretched and underarmed Lebanese armed forces. As a result, the United States and France have increased their assistance to the Lebanese military throughout the conflict in Syria.⁵²

Morocco

Threat: Morocco is one of the main exporters of foreign fighters to Syria, with up to 1,500 individuals having made the journey, and it has a long history of nationals joining militant jihadi groups abroad. In the 1980s and 1990s, dozens of Moroccans traveled to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets and subsequently joined the Taliban. After 2003, some 200 to 300 Moroccans traveled to Iraq to fight with extremist groups, including Al Qaeda in Iraq. Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, more than 1,000 Moroccans went to Syria to join various anti-Assad groups, with the flow peaking in late 2013. Following the declaration of Caliphate of the Islamic State, many Moroccans are believed to have left other extremist groups for IS, which is now the primary address for Moroccan foreign fighters.⁵³

Response: Until 2014, Moroccan authorities took a lax approach to the flow of foreign fighters, apparently willing to see their own militants travel to fight the Assad regime. But with the advent of IS, the Moroccan government grew concerned over local repercussions, including the threat posed by returnees. The response has been hard line and security focused. In 2015, Morocco amended its counterterrorism law to criminalize joining groups such as IS and gave its national courts universal jurisdiction over citizens involved in terrorist crimes.⁵⁴ Punishments for joining any domestic or foreign nonstate actor are “five to fifteen years in prison and fines up to 500,000 Moroccan Dirham [\$50,000].”⁵⁵ Foreign fighters are imprisoned upon their return to Morocco.⁵⁶

France

Threat: An estimated 1,700 French nationals have gone to fight with IS and other extremist groups in Syria—the most from any single European country. France also has been the target of IS’s most spectacular out-of-area operation: November’s attacks in Paris. Although the perpetrators of the attacks were not French citizens, the cell had contact with a French member of IS leadership.⁵⁷ The prominent role that Belgian nationals played in the attack underscored the challenge presented by the European Union’s open borders. The cell ringleader, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, was a Belgian citizen who had fought with IS in Syria, and according to news sources, served as a link “between IS’s operations in Syria and its pool of would-be recruits and returnee fighters in Europe.”⁵⁸

Response: The Paris terrorist attacks helped focus concerns surrounding the threat of foreign fighters. French law as currently written requires “systematic questioning”⁵⁹ of all returning foreign fighters. Since 2012, French law no longer distinguishes between terrorist acts committed in France or abroad, and returnees are “almost always detained and charged with conspiracy with a terrorist enterprise.”⁶⁰ Additionally, a November 2014 law that gives the government the right to place a travel ban for up to two years—pending renewals at six-month intervals and appeals—on individuals suspected of attempting travel for terrorist purposes. The law also allows the French government to withhold passports from such individuals.⁶¹

Turkey

Threat: Turkey is the main artery for foreign fighters to travel to Syria and join IS. Turkey's role is complicated by its own involvement in the Syrian civil war. For years, the Turkish state allowed foreign nationals, and as many as 2,200 of its own citizens, to cross into Syria to fight the Assad regime. Ankara also armed, financed, and facilitated the travel of a number of rebel groups.⁶² As far back as 2013, U.S. President Barack Obama reportedly complained to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that, “was letting arms and fighters flow into Syria indiscriminately and sometimes to the wrong rebels, including anti-Western jihadists.”⁶³ Turkey maintains that its policy is aimed at empowering moderate elements to topple the Assad government. In June 2015, President Obama publicly criticized Turkey's handling of its porous border with Syria, saying that the NATO member had not “fully ramped the capacity they need.”⁶⁴

Response: Turkey faces two main challenges when it comes to foreign fighters. First, it must stop its own citizens from fighting with IS and other jihadi groups. More importantly, however, plugging the holes in Turkey's porous border will be critical to stopping foreign fighters of all nationalities from crossing into Syria. In this respect, the situation appears to be showing some signs of improvement: News reports in 2015 detailed how the flow of foreign fighters crossing from Turkey is drying up.⁶⁵ Following the Paris attacks, calls for Turkey to seal off its border with Syria intensified. Turkey is said to have further improved its efforts while attempting to continue allowing refugees into the country.⁶⁶

Jordan

Threat: With between 2,000 and 2,500 Jordanians having traveled to Syria, Jordan is the largest source of IS foreign fighters per capita and is in the top five source countries in absolute terms.⁶⁷ Jordan has a long history of providing manpower to jihadi groups: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of Al Qaeda in Iraq, was a Jordanian national.⁶⁸ Moreover, foreign fighter recruits from Jordan are drawn from a diverse socio-economic profile. Zarqa, Zarqawi's birthplace and namesake, has been the source of one-third of all Jordanian foreign fighters in Syria.⁶⁹ The southern city of Ma'an has served as another recruitment hub.⁷⁰ Well-educated and employed professionals are also represented in the ranks of fighters.⁷¹ The Salafi jihadi leadership in Jordan has prioritized the civil war in Syria rather than confronting the Jordanian monarchy. The hope is to increase its domestic support in Jordan through success on the battlefield in Syria.⁷²

Response: The Jordanian government is deeply concerned that nationals fighting with IS will return to form sleeper cells.⁷³ Senior Jordanian officials cite this as justification for closures of the border with Syria and the government’s refusal to accept new refugees gathering at the remaining border crossing.⁷⁴ Jordan does not have a law specifically dedicated to foreign fighters. The country’s legal framework for counterterrorism is based on a 2006 law, amended in 2014, which refers to acts committed “inside the Kingdom, or against its nationals or interests abroad.”⁷⁵ This provision is used for arrest and prosecution of Jordanian foreign fighters.⁷⁶

Russia

Threat: With a contingent of 2,400 fighters, Russia is the third largest source of foreign fighters after Saudi Arabia and Tunisia—with “some estimates [suggesting] a 300% increase in the number of known fighters since June 2014.”⁷⁷ A significant number of Russian foreign fighters have links with the Caucasus Emirate, a separatist jihadi militia operating in southern Russian regions such as Chechnya and Dagestan.⁷⁸ Fighters from that region have joined—and, in some cases, have assumed leadership positions in—IS.⁷⁹ However, links between the Caucasus Emirate and Al Qaeda have meant that most have fought alongside Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra.⁸⁰

Response: Russian law already provides for the prosecution and imprisonment of Russian citizens found to have joined a foreign militant group if it is not recognized by the state and/or operates against state interests. In 2013, Russia amended its counterterrorism law to allow the prosecution as terrorism of participation in a foreign militant group whose actions are contrary to Russia’s interests.⁸¹

Saudi Arabia

Threat: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a complex and tortured relationship with transnational jihad. Following 9/11 and subsequent attacks in Saudi Arabia, Saudi counterterrorism took on the jihadi community inside the kingdom and largely defeated domestic groups aligned with Al Qaeda by 2009.⁸² But a number of these actors re-emerged in fragile states in the region, especially after the 2011 Arab uprisings. Like a number of Sunni Arab states, Saudi Arabia took a benign view of militant Islamists traveling to Syria to fight the Assad regime and took a lead role in actively supporting the opposition. Notable religious figures praised those who joined the rebels in Syria,⁸³ and they encouraged the jihad there.⁸⁴

Additionally, the sectarian dimensions of the Syrian civil war mutually reinforced sectarian tensions inside the kingdom. Both fed hostilities—and were reinforced by them. The result was a climate of passive tolerance for Saudi citizens to travel to Syria and join that fight.⁸⁵

Response: The kingdom's response to foreign fighters following the emergence of IS has been mixed. Cells have established themselves inside Saudi Arabia and have claimed credit for several terrorist attacks. In 2014, a royal decree imposed a prison sentence of between 3 and 20 years on citizens who join in fighting outside the kingdom.⁸⁶ Saudi internal security also has cracked down on extremists at home through mass arrests and executions. But calls of support for jihad in Syria from religious figures continue,⁸⁷ as does Saudi support for Islamist militants fighting the regime in Syria.⁸⁸

Tunisia

Threat: With at least 6,000 fighters, Tunisia is the single largest exporter of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq by a significant margin.⁸⁹ Although the authoritarian regime of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali maintained a tight, repressive grip on mosques and religious institutions, these restrictions were lifted almost overnight following his ouster in 2011.⁹⁰ Foreign fighter recruitment also has been buoyed by recruitment and travel networks previously tolerated by the Ben Ali regime as a means of exporting domestic extremists.⁹¹ More than one-third of all Tunisian foreign fighters come from three cities and towns: the capital of Tunis at 11 percent; Bizerte at 11 percent; and the southern smuggling town of Ben Gardane at 15 percent.⁹²

Response: From 2011 to 2014, the Islamist-led government initially took a less security-focused approach to domestic extremism and the flow of foreign fighters to Syria. But by 2015, a set of counterterrorism measures was instituted after IS claimed credit for a mass shooting at a tourist resort.⁹³ These measures included travel restrictions on Tunisians under age 35 to a number of countries, including Syria.⁹⁴ The government reports that these restrictions have blocked the travel of some 15,000 Tunisians to conflict zones in the region.⁹⁵ In August 2015, President Beji Caid Essebsi approved a new counterterrorism law passed by parliament that criminalizes joining terrorist organizations in or outside Tunisia.

Recommendations

The existence of the Islamic State is obviously key to the flow of foreign fighters, but there are other important factors that contribute as well. The collapse of state authority in Iraq and the Syrian civil war paved the path for the emergence of IS. But IS' ability to attract men and women from around the globe is strengthened far more by conditions in source countries than in Syria and Iraq. This requires a multi-faceted response to the flow of foreign fighters, one that identifies the key domestic and international nodes and addresses them. Absent that, the flow of foreign fighters may be rendered dormant following the destruction of IS only to be activated by another potential conflict in the future. The following recommendations detail some of the interventions that the international community should prioritize.

1. Focus on a list of core source countries

Rather than casting a wide net, the coalition should prioritize the 12 countries that provide roughly three-quarters of foreign recruits for IS and other extremist groups and channel its resources accordingly. Within this group, the coalition should triage those most badly in need of support. European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany already have strong legal frameworks, law enforcement and security services, and abundant national resources. Other countries may be less amenable to coalition help: Russia, for instance, has little interest in external support, while Lebanon's domestic political paralysis prevents it from taking action. But the coalition should give top priority to countries such as Tunisia and Jordan, which are among the top contributors of foreign fighters and face challenging internal security problems. At a minimum, this should take the form of assistance that specifically targets gaps in enforcement capacity. But both Jordan and Tunisia highlight how fighters from some of the at-risk countries come from specific towns or cities. Coalition efforts should be tailored to such realities of so-called hotbed localities.⁹⁶ Indeed the U.S. Department of Homeland Security came to a similar conclusion in confronting the foreign fighter challenge in the United States.⁹⁷

Special attention should be dedicated to core countries even within the list above. The specificity required by a country-specific approach will be costly and time consuming, but it also would be more sustainable in the long term. In Tunisia, for instance, assistance should focus on professionalizing the security apparatus away from regime security and toward national security. Additionally, Tunisia should be assisted as it attempts to find a balance between combating violent extremism and allowing for the free practice of religion. Similarly, in Jordan, systematic counter-violent extremism work should be encouraged. In November 2015, Jordan established the Directorate for Countering Violent Extremism⁹⁸—a welcome development that should be monitored and evaluated as economic and security assistance to Jordan is increased.⁹⁹

2. Prioritize measures to curb the use of Turkey as a transit hub

While foreign fighters are drawn from a wide variety of countries and backgrounds, many do share one central commonality: The vast majority appear to travel to IS-controlled territory via Turkey, where they benefit from direct flights to more than 100 hundred countries. Making matters worse, as Turkey’s role as a transit point for foreign fighters is scrutinized, individuals are utilizing so-called broken flights to hide their final destination by stopping at multiple stops on the way to Turkey.¹⁰⁰ Regardless, Turkey’s porous southern border remains the focus of increased international attention not only due to the flow of these fighters but also due to the transit of illicit goods that sustain extremist groups in Syria.¹⁰¹

Turkey is a member of NATO and co-lead of the Counter ISIL Coalition Working Group on Foreign Terrorist Fighters, or CWFTF, but it has yet to secure the border it shares with Syria. Since Turkey declared an American assessment of the number of troops required to secure the border inflated,¹⁰² it should be pressured to provide its own assessment and implement it. Turkey has valid concerns around Syrian Kurds controlling a contiguous area on the Syrian side of the border. The Turkish suggestion that parts of the border can be secured with Sunni Arab and Turkmen Syrian forces merits close review.¹⁰³ However, Turkey has received financial aid and offers of border technology assistance from the West; in return, it must demonstrate serious steps to secure the border. According to Pentagon officials, this can be achieved “using conventional forces.”¹⁰⁴

3. Establish and implement a legal framework of best practices to counter the flow of foreign fighters

Governments with a significant foreign fighter problem have taken different approaches to building a legal framework to deal with it. Some countries have effectively criminalized travel with the intent to support a terrorist organization. France and Germany have done so, albeit via different legal mechanisms. Tunisia has chosen to ban travel to Syria by Tunisians of fighting age. Others have chosen to criminalize or otherwise penalize membership in IS or other foreign terrorist organizations. For example, Indonesia's president can revoke citizenship for those found to belong to IS. Morocco imprisons those who have returned from fighting with IS, while Egypt imprisons for life its citizens who have undergone military training with extremist groups.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 2178 called on member states to ensure that their laws are appropriately responsive to the challenge of foreign fighters. Building on that, the coalition's working group on foreign fighters should take the lead by establishing a legal framework of best practices. This framework should be compared with existing legal measures that coalition members employ. The goal of this process should be to create a complimentary legal approach at a national level that contributes to an integrated international system. National experiences and data on domestic enforcement and impact should be collected, since certain laws may be more appropriate to local conditions or legal systems. The United States should play an active role in seeing through the implementation of these best practices by offering—along with capable partners—technical, financial, and personnel assistance.

4. Improve multilateral intelligence and information sharing

It is important not to overstate the scope of the problem—this is not an existential threat to Europe or the United States. In general, the rate of return by foreign fighters to their country of origin is between 20 percent and 30 percent.¹⁰⁵ This suggests that 1,500 Europeans and Americans at most will return after having fought with IS. In the case of previous conflicts, about one in nine foreign fighters went on to perpetrate acts of violence after their return.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the vast majority of foreign fighters appear to be traveling to IS-controlled territory with “the intention of acting there rather than training to become domestic terrorists.”¹⁰⁷ This would

put the potential projected caseload of high-risk American and European returnees at around 160 individuals. Admittedly, this is far from an exact science. The likelihood of returnees committing terrorist attacks is no doubt linked to priority given by a terrorist group to conducting overseas operations, and IS has shown a clear desire to spread its terror overseas.¹⁰⁸

The diffuse and transnational nature of the threat demands a transnational response, particularly in the area of intelligence, where bilateral and regional cooperation remains the norm. However, concerns in the intelligence community over information sharing, particularly with counterparts that have less rigorous protections for sensitive data, remain an obstacle to multilateralism. One goal should be to strengthen collective capability and lay the groundwork for a multilateral approach, while taking steps in the interim to deepen and blend bilateral channels of cooperation. For example, Counter-ISIL Coalition members could be encouraged to use Interpol's databases as a clearinghouse for sharing the names of and other nonsensitive information about suspected foreign fighters in real time.¹⁰⁹ When a coalition member identifies a suspected foreign fighter transiting its country via Interpol, bilateral channels then could be utilized to share intelligence on the suspect in question.

Additionally, countries responsible for the largest flow of foreign fighters should share suspect identities with Turkey, which remains the key transit destination for fighters going into Syria and Iraq. This can take the form of providing advanced flight manifests similar to the Advance Passenger Information System currently in place in the United States.¹¹⁰

5. Focus on gains on the battlefield against IS

Simply put, the core of IS's appeal is that it exists, controlling territory and imposing its austere form of Islam. The slogan it has adopted—"the Islamic State endures and expands"¹¹¹—reflects its primary claim on the hearts and minds of jihadis worldwide. That claim is tethered to its demonstrable ability to face a large international coalition and persevere. The proto-state established by IS continues to brutally lord over some 6 million people more than a year after the beginning of the campaign to destroy it.¹¹² As one expert notes, "what little appeal the Islamic State has rests on its ability to endure and expand."¹¹³ Stopping the flow of foreign fighters altogether will require a reversal of this narrative.

This naturally complicates the effort to impede and ultimately stop altogether the flow of foreign fighters. Governments can, and must, take steps to impede their citizens from travel to fight with IS in Syria and Iraq.¹¹⁴ But absent significant progress against IS on the battlefield, efforts to curb the supply of foreign fighters will remain wanting.

Conclusion

The June 2014 establishment of the Caliphate of the Islamic State turned the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq into a flood. In the process, an unprecedented concentration of jihadis emerged. These jihadis are a central part of the IS machine: They terrorize local populations; they perpetuate its rule; and they threaten their source countries and the international community. The U.S.-led coalition has identified impeding the flow of foreign fighters as a key component of its strategy. Significant steps have been taken in that regard, including implementing U.N. Security Council Resolution 2178 and working with Turkey to prevent foreign fighters from using its territory as a transit point into Iraq and Syria. In the second year of the coalition's mission, these steps must be accelerated and complimented by localized approaches that addresses source country factors. Ultimately, however, all of these efforts need to be anchored in the fact that only the destruction of IS will put a definitive end to the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria.

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