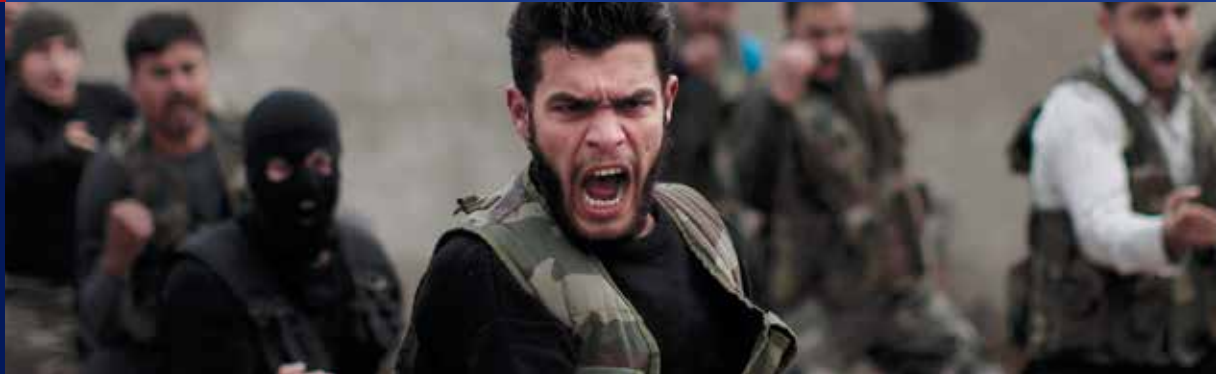


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## Bringing the Fight Back Home *Western Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*

POLICY BRIEF



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In September, President Obama will preside over a United Nations Security Council session focused on the surge of global foreign fighters who have been drawn to Syria and Iraq. The foreign fighter threat has become more urgent over the past few months, as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has established control over vast swaths of territory across two states. Over 12,000 foreign fighters from around the world are fighting with Sunni extremist groups in the now contiguous territories that span from Syria to Western and Northern Iraq.<sup>1</sup> A smaller subset of this group, the approximately 3,000 Western foreign fighters, present a unique threat to the U.S. homeland:<sup>2</sup> These foreign fighters with Western passports are gaining valuable battlefield experience by fighting with opposition or extremist groups such as ISIS and the al Qaeda (AQ)-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra.

These individuals, including over 100 American citizens, are being exposed to the melting pot of extremist ideologies and veteran fighters flowing into and out of Iraq and Syria. They now have

a viable safe haven from which to plot against American interests, and could travel home to initiate acts of terror alone or as part of a larger, sanctioned plot.<sup>3</sup>

The threat from Western foreign fighters is not new. Indeed, the U.S. government has been watching for and planning to confront foreign fighter attacks involving U.S., European and other Western fighters since the beginning of the Syria crisis. Yet the rapidly changing dynamics on the ground in Iraq are accelerating the urgency of the threat. Even before the United States initiated military action in Iraq in mid-August, this threat was growing. As this brief explains, there are four areas where the United States and its allies are currently focused but where additional creativity, persistence and planning can build on existing efforts: bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, counterradicalization, U.S. government organization and counterfinance.

### **Who are the Western Foreign Fighters?**

Analysts assess that the approximately 3,000 Western foreign fighters are primarily from the United States, Canada, Australia, and across Northern Europe, with approximately 700 from France and 400 from the United Kingdom fighting with ISIS alone.<sup>4</sup> These numbers far surpass the number of Western foreign fighters who made their way to Iraq to fight U.S. coalition forces from 2004 to 2006.<sup>5</sup> As ISIS' onslaught in

Iraq grows and the organization boasts of its recent military victories, the group is likely to attract even more foreigners to its fight.<sup>6</sup> The persona of ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who claims that he is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, may also prove to be an attraction to Western would-be jihadists. Baghdadi, who recently led the Friday sermon in Mosul, may convince some Western Muslims, particularly those who are recent converts to or relatively unfamiliar with Islam, that indeed he is the true heir of the Prophet Muhammad.

On average, the Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are younger than those Westerners who joined the fights in Iraq and Afghanistan a decade ago.<sup>7</sup> These youthful foreign fighters, many of them barely out of high school, are describing their experiences on the battlefield live on social media. Although the content they are sharing is probably heavily edited and controlled by the affiliated groups, these personal narratives and first-person accounts of individuals are influencing their respective communities in Europe, North America and Australia – contributing to a circular dynamic of radicalization, mobilization and action. Many of these Western foreign fighters are self-radicalized; that is, faced with limited economic and educational opportunities at home, they are deciding to join the fight. ISIS and other groups have not been actively recruiting Westerners, although recent battlefield changes of momentum in Iraq might be changing that dynamic.<sup>8</sup> For example, a recent ISIS propaganda video featured English-speaking jihadists from Britain and Australia, suggesting that the organization has begun an effort to boost its foreign-fighter ranks.<sup>9</sup> Most of the foreign fighters learned about the Syrian conflict (and now the Iraqi battlefield) through “disseminators” in their home countries – unaffiliated but broadly sympathetic individuals who offer moral and intellectual support in the foreign fighters' native language.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, unlike in past jihadist conflicts, there is evidence that today's foreign fighters are more likely to return home. In the 2000s, foreign fighters in Iraq were often used as suicide operatives or quickly died fighting American and other coalition forces on the ground. For the most part, the current generation of fighters self-deploying to Syria and Iraq has, so far, met neither of these fates. ISIS' tactics in Iraq might change over time, and the group may decide to use its foreign fighters as suicide bombers, it seems more likely that ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups would take advantage of the ample human capital provided by foreign fighters with personal ties to the West to plan and facilitate attacks against the American homeland, as well as against U.S. interests in the region and beyond, including in Europe.

### **Why Would These Foreign Fighters Target the United States and its Allies?**

There are both ideational and organizational reasons why the Western foreign fighters will set their sights on targets within the West. U.S. military intervention in Iraq in August 2014 may have amplified these risks and might accelerate current plotting but certainly did not in and of itself generate the threat in the first place.

At base, many of these individuals are disaffected by the treatment and status of Muslims in the West. An analysis of social media reveals the foreign fighters' stated motives for traveling to fight in Iraq and Syria. They include: (1) the belief that the fight to establish a caliphate in the Levant and Iraq is part of a larger struggle by Sunnis against both the West and Shia Islam, particularly with the perceived increased involvement of Iran and Hezbollah in support of the Syrian and Iraqi governments; (2) the belief that the fight in Syria is a defensive struggle by the Ummah (the global community of Muslim believers) against the corrupt and apostate Asad regime; (3) outrage at the atrocities

perpetrated by the Asad regime and a perception that the West has failed to respond to the tragedy in Syria; and (4) the desire by some to take part in what might be thought of as a form of adventure tourism, particularly as the jihadist enterprise is deemed increasingly successful and travel to and from the region continues to be relatively easy.

The United States and other Western allies are implicated in many of these motives. However, while the U.S. military action in Iraq in August 2014 may confirm or reify many of these ideological predispositions and beliefs, it will certainly not introduce the notion that the West is the enemy or dramatically change basic ideological viewpoints and worldviews held by possible recruits. Meanwhile, events on the ground in Iraq are exacerbating many of these motives. For example, as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah redeploy Shia jihadists fighting in Syria to fight in Iraq against Sunni communities, many would-be recruits watching the fight from the West now see the first motive above materializing.

Second, the competitive organizational politics of the extremists in Syria and Iraq may increase the chances that the groups – now focused on seizing and keeping territory and routing enemies in Syria and Iraq – could shift focus toward planning attacks in the West. ISIS was formed among members of the defeated al Qaeda in Iraq in 2010-2011 and until recently served as core al Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq. Its stated goal has always been to defeat the Iraqi government and replace it with an Islamic caliphate. Over the course of its evolution fighting the Asad regime in Syria, however, ISIS began clashing with al Qaeda. Disagreement and rivalry began emerging between Baghdadi, the ISIS chief, and the head of AQ, Ayman al Zawahiri. Jabhat al-Nusra was a splinter of ISIS that had been sent to Syria by Baghdadi to establish al Qaeda in Syria.



This image made from video posted on a militant website Saturday, July 5, 2014, which has been authenticated based on its contents and other Associated Press reporting, purports to show the leader of the Islamic State group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, delivering a sermon at a mosque in Iraq in what would be a rare - if not the first - public appearance by the shadowy militant.

(ASSOCIATED PRESS/Militant video)

In early 2013, ISIS claimed that it controlled al-Nusra. Meanwhile, Baghdadi began defying orders from al Qaeda's leader, Zawahiri, to kill fewer civilians in Syria. These tensions led to an al Qaeda communiqué issued in February 2014 disavowing any connection between AQ and ISIS because of the latter's excessive violence. This communiqué was issued after almost a year of acrimony between ISIS and al-Nusra and other groups within the Syrian armed opposition, concerning the issue of ISIS' brutality toward its competing groups within the armed opposition and civilians who supported those groups.<sup>11</sup>

With ISIS' recent victories, al Qaeda has allegedly tried to empower and buttress al-Nusra, and the two latter groups might collaborate to plan Western attacks in order prove their relevance and authority. In short, the competition between al-Nusra and ISIS, as well as core al Qaeda's need to reassert its authority over its once subordinate organizations, may lead to a dangerous spiral among these extremists. Each group may consider a large attack against a Western

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target as an important way to demonstrate their bona fides and to compete with other extremists. ISIS' military success may also motivate other, more far flung al Qaeda affiliates and extremists beyond the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Since the United States began conducting targeted airstrikes against ISIS positions in mid-August, ISIS has employed its robust social media capabilities to call for attacks against American targets and to warn that its sleeper cells might awaken in the West.<sup>13</sup> In a documentary released after the U.S. airstrikes began, ISIS fighters promise to continue to fight until ISIS "raise[s] the flag of Allah in the White House," indicating that ISIS fighters intend to strike targets within the United States.<sup>14</sup> While this response to the U.S. military action is clearly propaganda, it is uncertain whether it also signals a more substantial shift in strategy, away from focusing efforts on claiming territory in Iraq and toward efforts to attack Western targets.

Regardless, for both ideational and organizational reasons, the chances that ISIS, al-Nusra and associated groups would deploy foreign fighters to target the West were increasing before the U.S. military intervention. By 2014, Western foreign fighters were already beginning to return home to Europe and individuals were planning attacks in Europe and Turkey. The May 24, 2014 shooting

at the Jewish Museum in Brussels was linked to a foreign fighter who had fought in Syria.<sup>15</sup> The suspect, Mehdi Nemmouche, is believed to be the first foreign fighter to have committed a politically motivated attack in Western Europe after returning from the Iraqi/Syrian battlefield.<sup>16</sup> European law enforcement agencies have reportedly disrupted additional plots linked to foreign fighters, including one in London in October 2013.<sup>17</sup>

### **Responding to the Threat**

The Obama administration and its allies have recognized the magnitude of the foreign fighter threat for some time. In mid-2013, GEN Lloyd J. Austin III, commander of U.S. Central Command, noted that the threat of extremists in Iraq and the Levant would "export mischief to the rest of the region and to Western Europe and eventually to our homeland."<sup>18</sup> Since 2013, Obama administration officials have testified openly before Congress, warning of the severity of the threat to the U.S. homeland.<sup>19</sup>

The administration is successfully coordinating among policymakers and the intelligence community across the U.S. government, trying to communicate and integrate information and operations among different agencies.<sup>20</sup> Domestic law enforcement is a large part of this puzzle, particularly in preventing the recruitment and radicalization of Americans, and employing criminal justice tools used to combat terrorism more generally. These instruments include arresting individuals who plan to leave the United States to fight in a foreign conflict or are supporting recruitment efforts.<sup>21</sup> In June, an FBI operation led to the arrest of Rahatul Khan and Michael Todd Wolfe, both of whom sought to support jihadists through overseas recruitment and travel to Syria.<sup>22</sup> Attorney General Eric Holder announced in July 2014 that the administration is developing a comprehensive law enforcement approach, including enacting

statutes to prosecute individuals who seek to aid terrorist organizations, increasing information-sharing among agencies and expanding community outreach, in addition to continuing undercover operations.<sup>23</sup>

While domestic law enforcement efforts are underway and the national security agencies have begun to prioritize this threat, U.S. policymakers should focus on ensuring progress in several key areas: elevating the foreign fighter threat in all bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagements with allies, particularly with Turkey and European governments; updating counterradicalization messaging campaigns; organizing interagency U.S. efforts around this particular threat to the homeland and U.S. interests; and designing a multipronged counterfinance strategy to squeeze ISIS, al-Nusra and other groups' resources.

#### **ELEVATING THE FOREIGN FIGHTER THREAT IN BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY**

U.S. bilateral and multilateral diplomacy is perhaps the most critical tool enabling successful U.S. counter foreign fighters efforts. Europe, including Turkey, represents ground zero for Western foreign fighters: the majority of the fighters come from European countries and transit through southeastern Europe into Turkey on their way into Iraq and Syria.<sup>24</sup> The porous 565-mile border between Turkey and Syria has become a “two-way jihadist highway,” providing an entry point for foreign fighters looking to join the fight in Iraq and Syria, as well as an open gateway for returning to Europe and beyond once their time on the battlefield is complete.<sup>25</sup> Prior to making his final trip to Syria, Moner Mohammad Abusalha, the American suicide bomber, initially traveled to Turkey before carrying out an attack against Syrian military forces earlier this year.<sup>26</sup> Turkey, a NATO member that borders both Iraq and Syria, has already experienced attacks on its soil as a result of conflicts in both countries.

The State Department and other agencies are working with European and Turkish allies to share intelligence, track suspects and improve border security in southeastern Europe and Turkey. Earlier this year, the State Department appointed Ambassador Robert Bradtke as the primary U.S. diplomat tasked to liaise with EU partners to “interdict foreign extremist travel to Syria.”<sup>27</sup>

There has been some progress in prodding the Europeans to work together to address the threat: The EU recently convened in Luxembourg to discuss the issue of border security, concluding that EU states should “increase their vigilance” and “take appropriate measures to prevent the flow of foreign fighters to and from Syria” using existing counterterrorism and law enforcement measures.<sup>28</sup> Many member states that have witnessed unprecedented numbers of their citizens leave to fight in Syria have begun to implement criminal procedures to prosecute those suspected of aiding or planning terrorist activities, as well as to undertake counterradicalization strategies.<sup>29</sup> There is also evidence that Turkish officials are beginning to improve their efforts at blocking ISIS and al-Nusra fighters from using the Turkish borders with Iraq and Syria as critical resupply and logistics routes.<sup>30</sup>

There are a number of challenges impeding these efforts, as well as the U.S. diplomatic ability to cooperate with these allies. First, during U.S. meetings with the Europeans and Turks, the foreign fighter threat is but one item on a busy diplomatic agenda. During the upcoming NATO summit in September 2014, for example, the issue of foreign fighters will undoubtedly be discussed, but it will have to compete with the crisis in Ukraine, and threats from Russia to NATO member states, among other urgent issues.<sup>31</sup> That said, the foreign fighter threat is emerging as a central agenda item within multilateral diplomatic fora, including the

Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), a group of 30 member states intent on approaching counterterrorism from a criminal justice perspective by sharing technical best-practices related to police, legal and border security work.<sup>32</sup>

Second, since 2013, the Snowden revelations have created significant tensions straining collaborative intelligence efforts between the United States and Europe. To some extent the tensions are political and symbolic. Behind closed doors, intelligence and information sharing is continuing. However, in the wake of Snowden, the European Union Parliament threatened to revoke two data-sharing deals with the United States: the Terrorist Finance Tracking Program (TFTP) and Passenger Name Records (PNR). Both were enacted in the last decade, despite European concerns that they would grant the United States excessive access to European data to provide the U.S. government with data on European financial transactions and data provided by European passengers when booking tickets and checking in on flights.<sup>33</sup> Although the threat to suspend these data-sharing agreements never materialized, last year, the European Parliament blocked a bill that would have established a strictly European PNR system, on the grounds that such a system would infringe on European privacy rights. The new PNR would have allowed law enforcement authorities to use rail and air passenger details for investigations, thus potentially tracking all European citizens traveling to Syria.<sup>34</sup>

Third, American officials are also finding it challenging to work with Turkish officials, particularly in collecting information on those transiting Turkey to travel in and out of Syria. There are uneven capacities within Turkish domestic and foreign intelligence agencies, as well as inconsistent willingness by the Turkish government to share such information with partners.<sup>35</sup> Turkish foreign policy toward Syria and Iraq has also been

muddled. There is increasing tension between the European countries, such as France, and Turkey on the issue of foreign fighters, extremism, border security and intelligence sharing. The United States finds itself in a balancing act. It is brokering Turkish cooperation on behalf of the intelligence and law-enforcement needs of European allies, while recognizing that the Western foreign fighter concern is in part a function of European countries' inability to confront the long-simmering social, cultural and economic grievances among its growing, very young, Muslim urban communities.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Turkey's counterterrorism laws remain extremely broad and vague and focus too narrowly on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and other domestic terrorist threats, rather than threats from regional terrorist groups. As the State Department's 2013 counterterrorism report stated: "Efforts to counter international terrorism are hampered by legislation that defines terrorism narrowly as a crime targeting the Turkish state or Turkish citizens. This definition of terrorism can be an impediment to operational and legal cooperation against global terrorist networks."<sup>37</sup>

While these challenges are vast, diplomatic efforts must nonetheless be central to U.S. efforts to confront the foreign fighter threat. U.S. officials should focus on:

#### **PASSING AND IMPLEMENTING DOMESTIC EUROPEAN LEGISLATION**

U.S. diplomats should continue to push several European governments where there is legislation pending to criminalize unauthorized participation in a foreign war. Such legislation will not in all cases stop the flow of foreign fighters, but may at least provide an additional law enforcement tool in countries that do not already prosecute for such crimes. Although most of these countries have already passed laws that penalize membership in particular designated groups, such as ISIS or the

al-Nusra Front, the collection of reliable evidence tracing European citizen participation within these groups remains difficult. In many European countries, prosecutors must also demonstrate that the group in question, such as ISIS, intends harm to national interests.<sup>38</sup> It is usually far simpler to criminalize participation in foreign war. U.S. diplomats should engage institutions such as the European Union, Europol and Interpol to ensure a coherent and collaborative European domestic law enforcement implementation regime.

#### DEEPENING NATO INVOLVEMENT

The new secretary general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, should prepare NATO members to help Turkey address the spillover from the Syrian conflict and, in particular, the threats from foreign fighters transiting its territory. NATO could conduct planning exercises, in particular for a scenario where there is an Article V threshold for defending Turkey from the threat of foreign fighters. The secretary general should push the alliance toward scenario-based planning and assess what forms of diplomatic and military assistance might be provided should things deteriorate further in the region. The alliance should also consider deploying expanded intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets to monitor terrorist infiltration from the conflict zone, potentially building on existing NATO intelligence sharing protocols. Further, it should consider pushing Ankara to crack down on jihadi flows into Bulgaria and Greece. Individual NATO members could provide capacity building to other partners, particularly in the Balkan states, and especially where local militaries have taken a role in internal security.<sup>39</sup>

#### ENHANCING BORDER SECURITY WITH EUROPEAN CAPITALS

With NATO's support, the United States should work with European and Turkish allies to secure external borders and to improve border security

within Europe, in order to disrupt the travel of foreign extremists in Europe's southern and eastern rim. Many partners in Europe will need help – and in some cases prodding – to identify and disrupt the travel and financing of foreign fighters and their facilitators. The GCTF offers one multilateral venue to improve border security capacity particularly focused on the problem of foreign fighters.

#### Focusing Counterradicalization Efforts and Messages

U.S. efforts should also remain focused on the sources of radicalization – the ideas and beliefs that are influencing individuals to join the fight in the Levant and Iraq. There is well-founded skepticism about the ability of the U.S. State Department and other relevant actors to: a) decide on the right messages that will influence potential foreign fighters and b) determine which modalities, voices, surrogates and influencers can best transmit these messages. Messaging efforts are complex, in part because it is often uncertain how the intended audiences will receive them. For example, one of the main narratives motivating Western recruits involves a desire to fight Bashar al-Asad's regime and a sense that the West has stood by idly while Asad has killed his people with abandon. These potential recruits, however, may find it neither satisfactory nor a deterrent to their involvement in the conflict to hear messages detailing the scope and size of the assistance efforts given by the United States to the Syrian people, even though this \$1.7 billion total represents the largest humanitarian contribution to the Syrian people by a foreign government.<sup>40</sup>

With new U.S. actions in Iraq, the United States faces a similar conundrum. The United States cannot advertise its military actions without risking inflaming ISIS propaganda and hastening the shift in attention among ISIS members from the near

enemy (the Iraqi and Syrian governments) to the far enemy – the United States and its allies. Noting U.S. success in pushing back ISIS may encourage potential hardline Islamist recruits in the West, particularly because the American intervention in Iraq sought in part to save many non-Muslim Yazidis and Kurds. Indeed, skeptics will ask why American airpower was not dedicated to save Syrian Sunnis threatened by Asad's regime.

Despite these challenges, the following guidelines can help to improve the effectiveness of the counterradicalization messages and the means of delivering them:

#### IDENTIFY AND PARTNER WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The United States and its partners should conduct a study of local religious, political and educational leaders who exert influence in those communities particularly vulnerable to radicalization – the key hometowns of Western foreign fighters. Once this analysis is done and the surrogates are selected, the U.S. government should focus on countering violent extremism (CVE) projects aimed at combating the narratives that have proven particularly appealing to the locals who have joined the fight in Iraq and Syria. These narratives often vary based on local community grievances and on the sources of information among the local population about the battle space. CVE activities must partner with and rely on local leaders as surrogates. Within local, U.S. communities, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the FBI can support the State Department's counterradicalization efforts, collaborating on "community awareness briefs" – that is, material for local leaders and influential voices across the United States to identify at-risk individuals and engage them in a dialogue that precludes their further radicalization or potential mobilization and travel to Syria.<sup>41</sup>



(Photo courtesy of the State Department's Twitter)

#### COORDINATE SUCCESSFUL CVE PROGRAMS WITH EUROPEAN ALLIES

Allies will need help better addressing the grievances of their domestic Muslim communities. NCTC, DHS and the FBI should partner with European equivalent agencies to consider how to mitigate the disaffection of Europe's Muslim youth.

#### USE A DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH TO IMPROVE COUNTERRADICALIZATION EFFICACY

The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) has developed a pilot program for English-speaking international audiences – #thinkagainturnaway – that seeks to dissuade radicalization by highlighting the brutality of terrorist organizations.<sup>42</sup> More work needs to be done, however, to verify what types of messaging would actually deter would-be foreign fighters and which messages actually reach putative sympathizers. For example, it is unclear whether exposure to the brutality of the terrorist organizations and the violence that they are committing against Syrian and Iraqi civilians is dissuading would-be jihadists. In fact, the brutality might entice certain individuals to join. There is some initial evidence to suggest that publicizing the internal inconsistencies within the doctrine and practices of various Islamist and jihadi groups can



be particularly effective in repulsing Westerners interested in joining. For example, the recent media exposure of ISIS leader Baghdadi's expensive wrist-watch led some would-be jihadists to view him as hypocritical, given his exhortations against indulgent lifestyles.<sup>43</sup>

#### **TWITTER JIHAD: CONFRONT EXTREMIST VIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

By participating in Twitter, Facebook and other social media conversations begun by ISIS and al-Nusra, using text and videos, the State Department's CSCC can make ISIS and its ilk look incompetent or hypocritical. They could highlight cases in which other Westerners came away disillusioned by what they found in Syria, or other jihadi battle spaces such as Somalia. This could be done in coordination with other governments and even civil society actors. It could be particularly effective if they mimic and caricature the videos broadcast by al-Hayat Media Center (ISIS' newsroom and propaganda outfit) and include interviews from Syrians explaining what they think of the foreign fighters' "contributions" to the revolution.<sup>44</sup> Such testimonials are unlikely to be positive.

#### **Organizing the National Security Agencies**

Given the likelihood that the foreign fighter threat will persist for many years, how the U.S. government is organized to respond to this threat is critical. A coherent, streamlined approach that balances empowering agency-led efforts while ensuring a strategic level senior coordination platform will ensure that clear tasking, guidelines and processes are coordinated and synchronized, particularly among those working on the disruption operations. The following recommendations should guide the internal organizational decisions.

To successfully combat the foreign fighter threat, coordination efforts should focus on how intelligence collection serves the operational action

against targets. The collection and flow of information and intelligence through and across military, intelligence community, diplomatic and law enforcement domains is only a first step. The second, more critical and challenging step is to share the intelligence for operational activities in a timely manner across the U.S. government, particularly among the Department of Defense, the intelligence community, the State Department and DHS.

#### **IMPROVE COOPERATION BETWEEN U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCIES AND FOREIGN PARTNERS**

For most U.S. homeland security and counterterrorism operations against Western foreign fighters moving into and out of Syria and Iraq – as well as against those facilitators assisting in these individuals' movement – the critical U.S. partner is the allied nation's law enforcement and internal security forces. It is critical that European, Turkish and Arab allies in particular can clearly see how the administration's diplomatic, military, law enforcement and intelligence actions are coordinated as part of an inclusive and coherent approach to the foreign fighter problem. The recently appointed Ambassador Bradtke must be empowered to speak to foreign partners on nondiplomatic issues related to intelligence, law enforcement and military actions related to the foreign fighter problem.

#### **PREPARE FOR THE SPECIFIC TYPES OF ATTACKS THAT FOREIGN FIGHTERS RETURNING FROM THE SYRIAN BATTLEFIELD ARE MOST LIKELY TO PLAN AND ATTEMPT TO EXECUTE**

For example, something akin to the no-notice, multiple-site, coordinated urban attack that Lashkar-e-Taiba conducted in Mumbai, India, over four days in November 2008.<sup>45</sup> Lone-wolf attacks perpetrated by foreign fighters are also a possibility, but they are harder to stop and usually lower-impact. Planning should focus on the high-impact potential threat posed by organized, trained and committed operatives. This type of event would

present unique challenges to both law enforcement and emergency response professionals.

The administration might consider a bottom-up review aimed at identifying challenges and improving the capabilities and performance of the various state and major urban area Fusion Centers. Recent U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representative oversight reports have criticized the functioning of these centers, where the FBI, DHS and other agencies are meant to cooperate with local law enforcement and the intelligence community in disrupting the type of threat posed by the new wave of Western foreign fighters seeking to conduct an attack against the U.S. homeland.<sup>46</sup>

### Designing a Counterfinance Strategy

In addition, national security planners should consider all available tools to target and squeeze the extremists' assets. Planning an attack abroad requires significant resources, both human and financial. Extremist leaders' decisionmaking about whether to pursue a large-scale attack on the West could come down to a question of financial viability. While more work needs to be done to determine how to counter the finances of ISIS, al-Nusra and other groups, such a strategy should begin with targeting resources toward increasing intelligence collection and analysis on these questions. The operational strategy would nominally include three elements: First, the United States must target the private donors, particularly in the Gulf countries, who are providing cash to the extremists, including al-Nusra and other groups. In early August, the Department of Treasury designated three Kuwaiti men as "key supporters of terrorists in Syria and Iraq," with one of the individuals, 'Abd al-Rahman Khalaf 'Ubayd Juday' al-'Anizi, sanctioned, at least in part, for having "worked with an [ISIS] facilitator to pay for the travel of foreign fighters moving from Syria to Iraq."<sup>47</sup>

Second, targeted financial measures, including potentially sanctioning banks, couriers and other entities that might be connected to these extremists groups, could be beneficial. A greater focus by the United States on entities and individuals providing "material support" to known bad actors would increase the number of those identified and publicized as being involved. This would have a multiplier effect, not just because those listed would be impeded from accessing formal U.S. finances and even dollar-based donations, but also because many financial institutions, corporations and governments around the world use the U.S. list to impose their own domestic constraints on identified entities and individuals. If the European Union followed suit, the combination of a ban from both U.S. and European markets could be very impactful.

Third, focusing on ISIS' sources of economic funds in the areas now under its control is key because ISIS, unlike other extremist groups fighting in Syria and Iraq, may not depend as much on foreign patronage. In fact, ISIS' documents and internal edicts warn against overreliance on foreign donors.<sup>48</sup> According to documents recently released, most of ISIS' funding derives from protection rackets that extort the commercial, reconstruction and oil sectors of northern Iraq's economy.<sup>49</sup> The group also made considerable money through war itself, plundering millions of dollars from the local Christian and Shia communities that have been occupied. A conservative calculation suggests that ISIS may generate a yearly revenue surplus of \$100 million to \$200 million, which it will reinvest somehow – either within the areas it now controls or for use for foreign operations.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, to target ISIS' coffers in particular it is necessary for the United States to help the Kurds, Turks and the Iraqi government analyze ISIS

financial information collected in raids and from informants and then use that information to plot counterfinance operations. The United States has significant experience in this regard and could employ the expertise developed by the Treasury/Department of Defense Afghan Threat Finance Cell initiative. Iraqi and Kurdish forces should continue to focus militarily on pushing back ISIS from the oil production sites it has seized in northern Iraq, and to restrict its ability to process oil at its refining facilities in eastern Syria. The Iraqi government must also engage Turkey, Jordan, the new Iraqi government and the Kurds to plot a joint strategy to prevent ISIS from further seizing oil facilities in the region. It is especially important to wrest Baiji back from ISIS control, as this is one of Iraq's largest oil refinery sites.<sup>51</sup> A related part of this strategy requires communicating the danger to the global oil industry – traders, shippers, insurers and purchasers – to make sure companies are aware of the risks.<sup>52</sup>

### Conclusion

The thousands of individuals from Western countries joining the fight in Iraq and Syria may return home to execute an attack. Individual and group motivations to target the West existed before the August 2014 U.S. military intervention in Iraq, but this intervention may become a rallying cry to expedite attacks. Additionally, the competitive nature of relations between ISIS, al-Nusra and even core al Qaeda might push each group to accelerate planning for an attack against the West, given the propaganda benefit such a successful effort would engender. The bottom line is that the threat is serious, and was so even before the U.S. airstrikes targeted ISIS in northern Iraq. The above recommendations are critical elements of a successful strategy to counter the foreign fighter threat. Undertaking these recommendations will not be easy, in part because the foreign fighter threat is a moving target. While the above recommendations

cannot eliminate the threat, the right attention, resources and creativity must be brought to bear before it is too late.

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## ENDNOTES

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Syrian rebels attend a training session in Maaret Ikhwan, near Idlib, Syria in 2012.

(MUHAMMED MUHEISEN/Associated Press file)