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Foreign Fighters in Syria: Still Doing Battle, Still a Multidimensional Danger

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Résumé

La Syrie attire de nombreux combattants étrangers qui acquièrent une expérience opérationnelle. Une partie de ces combattants appartient au camp djihadiste-terroriste. Ces personnes peuvent retourner dans leur pays d'origine et le cibler en utilisant leurs nouvelles compétences. Pour contrer cette menace, une réponse transnationale multidimensionnelle est nécessaire. Une contre-stratégie doit être incorporée dans un plan d'action plus large visant à lutter contre l'extrémisme islamiste violent et l'idéologie qui le soutient.

Abstract

Syria is the new hub for foreign fighters who are gaining battlefield experience. A subset of these fighters falls within the jihadist-terrorist camp. These individuals may return to their home country and target it, using their newfound skills and their native knowledge. To address this threat a multidimensional, transnational response is needed. Foreign fighter counter-strategy should be incorporated into a broader action plan to combat violent Islamist extremism and the ideology that supports and sustains it.

As news from Egypt evolves from bad to worse the fighting in Syria continues. There is the new hub for foreign fighters who are gaining battlefield experience and emerging with hardened ideas and extremist mindsets. The slow-motion disintegration and reconsolidation of Bashar al-Assad's regime holds important ramifications for the region and for the United States. While part of the Syrian influx is sympathetic to the rebel forces' quest for freedom, pure and simple; another element falls within the jihadist-terrorist camp. Members of the second group are a relatively small but particularly dangerous cadre. They may return to their home country or other European countries and target them, using their newfound skills and their native knowledge.

With sophisticated tradecraft and the potential to train others, this group is all the more dangerous. The threat is further compounded by relative ease of travel, especially on the outbound side: Syria may be reached through Turkey, a route which may leave fewer (if any) footprints than previous conflict zones. Fighters in possession of a European Union (EU) passport are also advantaged by the longstanding Schengen Agreement, which established a 26-country area that is effectively borderless. Cooperation between and among the various EU Security Services is thus all the more integral.

By the Numbers

How many people are involved? Newspaper reports peg the number of foreign fighters in Syria [in the thousands, with the high end reaching 10,000](#). Journalists note that the inflow [exceeds that which existed in Iraq at the time of peak conflict](#). The breadth of representation is impressive: [from fourteen European countries](#); from [Chechnya, China, North Africa](#) and [the Balkans](#); from countries in the immediate neighborhood to continents an ocean away like [Australia](#) and North America. This year alone, [over 100 Canadians](#) are estimated to have joined the fight, "raising fears among security services at home about Al Qaeda's access to Western recruits." When considered in the context of country population and demographic makeup, the Canadian figures are [striking](#) (though it is not clear what proportion is fighting "specifically with jihadists").

Membership in, or connections with, jihadist organizations may be murky however, and thus by definition difficult to establish definitively. The same holds true in the foreign fighter context, where clarity about which nongovernment force the fighter is a part of, is hard to come by.

For any country of foreign fighter origin, this ambiguity represents both a sensitive issue and an important legal question. French counter-terrorism officials are presently struggling with the matter and in particular, the challenge of assessing individual cases against the backdrop of French support for the Syrian opposition - into which jihadist elements have unfortunately integrated.

Bearing this in mind and turning now specifically to the European foreign fighter picture, according to the European Union's Counterterrorism Coordinator, [hundreds of Europeans](#) (approximately 500) are involved in one way or another in Syria. This figure is reported to include [up to 150 British](#); and according to the German Interior Minister, [no less than 50 Germans](#). A careful [empirical study](#) also offered the following ranges: from France, between 30 and 92; and from Belgium, between 14 and 85. Senior counterterrorism officials in the Netherlands indicate over 50 Dutch, and possibly up to 100.

Getting to the Crux of the Problem

The bottom line is that terrorism is a small numbers game. One or just a few actors can bring about significant impact. And with Syria becoming a center of gravity for foreign fighters, along with continuing revelations that [the West remains in our adversaries' crosshairs](#), the intersection of these two points is a genuine concern. As always, it is wise to keep eyes, ears, and channels open to pick up chatter and clues that may serve as tripwires to alert us to plots - and with diligence and some luck, to prevent them. These are crucial measures, of course. But they seek to address symptoms rather than cause, which is problematic since Al Qaeda is evidently resurgent and resilient. To get to the underlying aspect, namely the continuing flow of fighters into conflict zones the world over, we must ask and assess: Why are these venues still attractive, and what can we do to diminish their pull, especially on those living in the West? How and why does the foreign fighter phenomenon persist, and what more can we do to disrupt and destroy it?

Not a New Challenge

The problem is not new and [our 2010 study of foreign fighters](#), undertaken jointly with the Swedish National Defence College (SNDC), offered some ideas that bear re-examination today. For starters, an ideology and a narrative that can inspire are particularly dangerous in the hands of a skilled field operator (including

bridge figures with cross-cultural fluency such as English-speaking Anwar al-Awlaki, French-speaking Malika al-Aroud, or the German Eric Breininger) who can punch up the message to make it spread farther and more powerfully and thereby expand the pool of recruits and sympathizers. Yet the United States has not done all it can to fight back on this front and the same is true of our partners. A joint and concerted focus on undermining the adversary's ideology and its spread involves challenging the myths and falsehoods it relies upon; and should further highlight the disillusionment of returned foreign fighters - those who have opted to disengage, and those whose dreams of swashbuckling dissolved once immersed in conflict zone realities. As we have [written elsewhere](#): "The goal is to knock terrorist groups off balance; embarrass their leadership by bringing to light their seamy connections to criminal enterprises and drug trafficking organizations; and broker infighting among al Qaeda, its affiliates and the broader jihadi orbit in which they reside — which will damage violent extremists' capability to propagate their message and organize operations."

At the same time, the basics must not be neglected: funding networks and pipelines (for importing people, weapons, etc.) are the foundations of adversary capability and opportunity. Tactics, techniques, and procedures for subverting these flows remain essential elements for taking down the movement, piece by piece.

Europe and the Case of France

Summer may be drawing to a close but the tumult that marked it seems destined to continue. With resolve and prudence, the United States and its allies can effectively undermine aspiring and actual foreign fighters who seek to serve the larger jihadist-terrorist cause abroad or, later, at home. The transatlantic bond is strong on the ground - a circumstance that the prevailing threat climate should serve to reinforce. Europe as a whole and France in particular have reason to be concerned, as does the United States. The [French intervention in Mali](#) to push back Islamist extremists who had progressively gained a foothold in the northern part of the country since the mid-1990's was a bold move that put France in a confrontational position vis-à-vis the adversary, including Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar al-Dine. According to one recent study of jihadist messaging, [France is now the number two Western target](#) of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and second only to the United States. Analysts attribute this largely to Mali and

though AQAP is based in Yemen, the French intervention has stirred the interest and ire of al Qaeda affiliates outside the Sahel.

The [recent merger](#) of a former AQIM brigade (Al-Mulathameen / katiba Al-Mouthalamine, also known as Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Masked Men Brigade) and MUJAO (the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa), though largely tactical, is claimed by the leaders of these groups to have occurred for the purpose of retaliating against France for its intervention in Mali. To date however, the French intervention does not seem to have crystallized Mali as a magnet for attracting violent Islamist extremists from the around the world. Why? Reasons could include the speed and size of the French military intervention; and the fact that northern Mali is essentially isolated from global transportation networks, as well as perceived (by aspiring foreign fighters) to be a less "theologically prestigious" battle venue than Syria.

Inside France and before Mali, an Islamist extremist killed eight people (including three children, a rabbi, and four French paratroopers) in multiple attacks spaced days apart in 2012. The suspect in these murders died in a shootout with police but is reported to have traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and met with radical organizations. The [French Interior Minister has said](#) that the suspect's motivation was "to avenge the Palestinian children and take revenge on the French army because of its foreign interventions." While France has stood firm in its foreign policy decisions, some analysts have suggested that [French policy on Syria today reflects concern](#) that pockets within France's own sizeable Muslim community may offer a hospitable climate for fighters returning from Syria who may wish to radicalize others (including by inspiring them with the sense of adventure and aura of "prestige" that comes from doing real battle), and do France harm. Notably the country has experienced further violence in recent months. A French soldier was stabbed while on patrol just outside of Paris. The French Defense Minister confirmed that the victim was [targeted because he was a soldier](#), amidst speculation on the part of observers that the incident may have been a "copy-cat" act, following the brutal and fatal stabbing of a British soldier in Woolwich just days earlier.

The challenge posed by foreign fighters returning to the West is also exacerbated for structural reasons, at least within the European Union, which is by design largely free of border controls. [Perimeter security for the EU](#) thus becomes all the more important since the whole area will only be as strong as its weakest link.

Countries that border the EU but are not members of it - such as certain Balkan states - may merit particular attention. Note regarding Syria that the Balkans have served as both source and return point for foreign fighters in that conflict, and could serve as springboard into the EU. Against this background nine EU countries, including France, are urging the European Parliament “to support the establishment of a European database of airline passengers who enter and leave the European Union.” Collection of this data is already underway to a significant degree but the task is undertaken nationally and the yield is not shared across the EU due to abiding concerns about privacy on the part of the European Parliament. Yet Passenger Name Record (PNR) information such as travel dates and itineraries, which is provided to airlines at the time booking of a flight, is crucial for counterterrorism purposes as well as transatlantic cooperation in this area. European security services may also have their own individual reservations, separate and apart from those of the European Parliament, about sharing data with counterpart agencies on the Continent.

Public Safety and Risk Management: Always a Balancing Act

Given the threat from within and without, public safety concerns should rank at least equal to other important equities such as privacy. Competing concerns should not be viewed in opposition as an either-or proposition, but rather as a balancing exercise, which does proper justice to the multiple fundamental interests at stake. The ambitions of terrorist aspirants do not always match up with their skills; but foreign fighters are more likely to bring these two elements into alignment. As Norwegian Defense Research Establishment scholar Thomas Hegghammer argues, “Most foreign fighters do not return for domestic operations, but those who do return are [more effective operatives than nonveterans](#).” Whether they remain abroad or return home, foreign fighters are well positioned to train and to inspire others.

No country is out of the woods yet. Last fall French authorities rounded up a group of native-born suspects in an attack on a kosher market outside Paris. The prosecutor described the terrorist group as “[probably the most dangerous brought to light in France since 1996](#),” when the first truly globalized jihadi cell - the Dumont-Caze group, which was radicalized in Bosnia - waged a series of attacks in northern France. Investigators working the 2012 case discovered bomb components in an

underground garage, and officials noted that the group also intended to fight alongside jihadists in Syria.

The French Interior Minister has called [Syria his top concern](#) and has urged rebel forces there to “triage” (read expel) Islamist extremists within their numbers. Similarly, outgoing CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell has identified Syria as “[the greatest threat to U.S. national security](#).” Outgoing FBI Director Robert Mueller, too, has echoed the point and “warned that an increasing flow of U.S. citizens heading to Syria and elsewhere to wage jihad against regional powers could end up in [a new generation of homegrown terrorists](#).” Just one returning fighter with lethal intent and competence could cause serious harm, hence the sooner the process can be interrupted and disrupted, the better. The ideal would be to extinguish plans to kill before those who harbor them ever reach a battlefield or take experience there back home. To nip things in the bud like so requires (among other things) a combination of old-fashioned police and careful intelligence work, and a powerful counter-messaging campaign designed to undermine and ultimately destroy the adversary’s narrative and ideology.

Foreign Forces Not Just Fighting: Iraq Comes to Syria, Tailors the AQ Brand

Ideology is critical to the adversary for a number of reasons including the roles it plays in recruitment and in the ongoing motivation of fighters and other adherents and sympathizers. On this point, press accounts note the efforts of terrorist group [Al Qaeda in Iraq \(AQI\), on the ground in Syria](#), to “shape society”; and to distribute propaganda that speaks directly to local circumstances. From the adversary’s perspective, the goal is to grow the movement and further extend its global reach while maintaining an appreciation of site-specific context, needs, and parameters of operation. Such skillful adaptation to local circumstances has served the adversary well over time; and where it has failed to show due regard for the local community, the group and its brand have suffered — for example, when AQI targeted civilians in Iraq in the mid-2000’s. AQI has, however, proven to be a resilient organization over the years.

The Way Forward

From the standpoint of individual countries as well as transnational response, we have not yet

done all that we could to advance counterstrategy - this despite the fact that the foreign fighter phenomenon continues and carries with it the potential for significant loss of life. Yet consider the power of harsh reality to alter outlooks and potentially outcomes. For instance, when faced with rudimentary conditions in a foreign fighter training camp in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) back in 2008, [a group of Belgian-French nationals lamented](#) (in a statement given to French officials following their capture while in transit) that they were "increasingly cut off, bored, and frustrated with the primitive living conditions in their mountain shacks." Such statements can be helpful as tools of dissuasion and disengagement, when directed to individuals who are contemplating the path to militant violence. We should make more of this discontent and disaffection, and use it to greater advantage.

No single action will drain the swamp but a multidimensional and transnational response drawing upon all elements of statecraft could help to contain the adversary and ultimately, even reverse its recent gains. To be successful, such efforts must incorporate and situate a powerful foreign fighter counterstrategy into a broader action plan to combat violent Islamist

extremism - including and in particular the ideology that supports and sustains it. No domain or space must be left untouched in this fight, whether online or off, or at the nexus of the two. The digital and kinetic battlefields feed one another, as well as the process of radicalization and recruitment. Just as the adversary has demonstrated skill and resilience in the physical world and in cyberspace, so too must we.

The European Union has recognized the need for multi-instrument plans and policies to address and combat the threat posed by foreign fighters in Syria and beyond. There exists an EU "roadmap" in this regard, which includes consideration of a wide range of tools, applied to and in many different mediums and forums - from relatively granular efforts to map foreign fighter travel routes, to capacity building projects, to high-level diplomatic outreach focused on areas of concern. These are important components of a transnational solution to a transnational problem. The present challenge, however, is to move quickly and effectively from consideration and conceptualization through to implementation and execution. Anything less will accord advantage to terrorist organizations and leave vulnerable civilian populations in the West less protected than they should or could be.♦

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