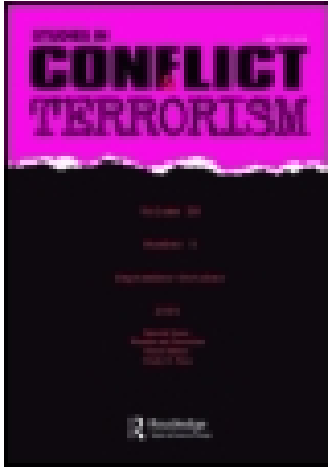


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### The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?

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# The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?

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*What threat do foreign Arab jihadists returning from the war in Syria and Iraq pose to their home states and the broader Arab world? Foreign fighters come back as hardened veterans, steady in the face of danger and skilled in the use of weapons and explosives. While in the conflict zone, they will form networks with other radicals, embrace techniques like suicide bombings and beheadings, and establish ties to jihadists around the world. Different countries have different mitigating factors that limit the danger. The presence or absence of strong and focused security services is particularly important. Returnees' ambition, regional focus, lack of discipline, and brutality often mean they create more enemies than they vanquish and anger local populations. Most terrorism will be locally and regionally focused, with international terrorism probably less of a priority. Area regimes can reduce the risk of bleedout by hindering the travel of volunteers and constraining their ability to organize, stressing the internecine nature of the violence in the Sunni Muslim community, and developing effective de-radicalization programs. Regional and international cooperation to monitor and disrupt travel is also valuable. Many regimes, however, are also likely to take advantage of the jihadists' presence to gain more support from the United States, delay democratic reforms, and crackdown on non-jihadist opposition. Improving intelligence sharing and offensive counterintelligence is important, and the United States can play an important facilitating role.*

What threat do foreign Arab *jihadists* returning from the war in Syria pose to their home states and the broader Arab world? Much as the anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan and the Iraqi civil war did in years past, the Syrian civil war is breeding and training *jihadists*—but on a far greater scale than in those conflicts.<sup>1</sup> Even worse, there is no end in sight: the Syrian civil war has metastasized and, as it has done so, has inspired and enraged Muslims around the world. The regime's supporters and opponents increasingly consider the conflict sectarian (and some see it in eschatological terms), pitting Syria's Sunni majority against the 'Alawi regime and its Shi'a Muslim supporters in Syria, Iran, and elsewhere.

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Now Iraq is also caught in the conflict, bringing in a new set of actors but also reinforcing the sectarian dynamic.

Although much of the attention on foreign fighters has focused on Europeans and Americans going to fight in Syria, the conflict has particularly inspired Sunni Muslims in the Arab world. Exact figures are elusive, but in February 2015, the head of the National Counterterrorism Center testified that over 20,000 foreign fighters from at least 90 countries had gone to Iraq and Syria. Only 3,400 from the United States and Western Europe—the rest came from Muslim countries, particularly those in the Arab world.<sup>2</sup> Few countries are spared: longstanding jihadist hotbed Saudi Arabia is again a reliable supplier of fighters, but so too are countries far from Syria and Iraq like Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco.<sup>3</sup>

Foreign fighters who gain combat experience in Iraq and Syria pose a double danger. Many of those who go to war will come back as hardened veterans, steady in the face of danger and skilled in the use of weapons and explosives—ideal terrorist recruiting material. More important, their worldview may change. While in the conflict zone, they will form networks with other radicals, embrace techniques like suicide bombings and beheadings, and establish ties to *jihadists* around the world, making them prone to further radicalization and giving them access to training and weapons they might otherwise lack.

There is no exact parallel to the radicalizing effect of the Syria and Iraq conflicts, but this is far from the first *jihadist* struggle that has attracted foreign fighters. The anti-Soviet struggle and the chaos in Afghanistan that followed played an important role not only in creating Al Qaeda but also fostering *jihadist* groups around the Muslim world. Struggles in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere received a boost, with some becoming more violent and more radical. In other conflicts, such as the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, fighters from the Arab world flocked to join the fray, but it did not have such far-reaching consequences. Chechnya, Kashmir, Mali, and Somalia are only a few of the other conflicts that have attracted significant numbers of foreign fighters.

This article seeks to assess the threat of “bleedout” from the Syria and Iraq conflict. It studies the experience of Sunni Arab returnees from foreign *jihad*s in order to anticipate likely trends among returnees from Syria.<sup>4</sup> Among the key questions it asks are:

- How did groups working with foreign fighters try to use them and indoctrinate them?
- Will sectarianism spread when they return home?
- What factors make violence more (or less) likely to occur?
- Why might some Arab countries have more success than others?

This article looks out on the Arab world in the medium term—two to five years out—and argues that several countries in the Arab world, notably Libya and Lebanon, face considerable risk of bleedout from returning fighters and that several more face more modest dangers, particularly Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen. However, there is no simple model of bleedout, in part because the groups in Syria and Iraq, and the global *jihadist* movement in general, are divided as to focus and strategy. In addition, different countries have different mitigating factors. In particular, the presence or absence of strong and focused security services will have a profound impact on the risk of bleedout. Although many countries are at risk of violence, the strategic impact of returning fighters, this article argues, is likely to be more limited. Militarily and tactically they can create new groups or strengthen existing ones; however, their ambition, regional focus, lack of discipline, and brutality often mean they create more enemies than they vanquish and anger

local populations, strengthening the government's hand. They may use terrorism (indeed, this is likely), but this article contends that it will be locally and regionally focused, with international terrorism probably less of a priority.

The bleedout issue has important policy implications and is a significant potential threat to regional stability. Area regimes can reduce the risk of bleedout by hindering the travel of volunteers and constraining their ability to organize, countering the narrative more effectively by stressing the internecine nature of the violence in the Sunni Muslim community, and developing effective de-radicalization programs. Regional and international cooperation to monitor and disrupt travel is also valuable. They are also likely to take advantage of the *ihadists'* presence to gain more support from the United States, delay democratic reforms, and crackdown on non-*ihadist* opposition.

The intelligence ramifications are also considerable.<sup>5</sup> Improving intelligence sharing is vital for speedy action, and the United States can play an important facilitating role. Analysts should also seek to identify likely alternative locations where foreign fighters might migrate to should their return home be blocked or simply because some fighters will go from *ihad* to *ihad*. From a counterintelligence point of view, groups in Syria are highly vulnerable and can be persuaded to exclude or otherwise suspect foreign volunteers. Finally, when intelligence is presented to policymakers it must be clear that much if not most of the terrorism risk is local and regional and does not involve international terrorism.

This article has five sections. It first examines the basic question of what is a foreign fighter and gives a rough approximation of the flows to Iraq and Syria. The next section examines *potential* dangers, drawing on the experiences of previous *ihad*s. Section three looks at mitigating factors that make many of these dangers less likely to come to pass—but only in specific countries, and only under some conditions. Particular attention is paid to the role of security services and the different potential models for *ihad* upon return. Section four then assesses which countries are most vulnerable and examines the associated terrorism risks while also noting that the military and strategic impact of the returning fighters is often quite mixed. The fifth and final section examines the policy implications and offers several recommendations for intelligence as well.

### Who Are the Foreign Fighters?

Foreign fighters have become ubiquitous in conflicts in the Muslim world, particularly those involving fights against non-Muslims. Yet not all struggles are alike. Terrorism scholar Thomas Hegghammer finds that of almost 20 conflicts that attracted foreign *ihad*ists, 13 involved fewer than 300 foreigners, while only 6 involved more than 1,000. Three conflicts—Afghanistan in the 1980s, Iraq after 2003, and Syria after 2011—involved mass mobilization with more than 4,000 foreigners joining the fray.<sup>6</sup>

These conflicts attracted volunteers from around the Muslim world, although the particular breakdowns vary by conflict.<sup>7</sup> Saudi Arabia has long been a supplier of foreign *ihad*ists, but Yemenis and Libyans were also common volunteers for fights abroad, in part because government policy was permissive. The Syria conflict has proven the most compelling of all modern conflicts that did not directly involve states. There are thousands of Saudis fighting in Syria; Jordan, Lebanon (both Shi'a and Sunni), Libya, and Tunisia are also sending large numbers—though, perhaps surprisingly, Yemen is not (though Yemenis interested in *ihad* may simply be staying home).<sup>8</sup> New countries are also being infected: Turkey, for example, did not see significant numbers of its citizens

going to fight with Al Qaeda in past *jihad*s, but by the end of 2014 over 1,000 Turks have joined the Islamic State and several hundred fight with Jabhat al-Nusra—and these numbers may be understatements.<sup>9</sup>

Being a foreign fighter offers many rewards. Adventure motivates some. Many find that joining the *jihad* is cool, earning them social capital at home that they hope will enhance their status, getting them a better job or spouse than they might otherwise obtain. Although any polling should be taken with several grains of salt given the subject matter, the Arab Opinion Project found in late 2014 that 11 percent of those surveyed in the Arab world have a positive opinion of the Islamic State.<sup>10</sup>

Not all foreign fighters are alike. As Barak Mendelsohn notes, analysts often ignore “the different levels of ‘foreignness.’” In Somalia, for example, many of the “foreign” fighters are from the Somali diaspora. So of the over 1,000 fighters with a foreign passport fighting for Al Shabaab, only perhaps 200 to 300 were not of Somali heritage.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the Somali diaspora itself varies widely: those from neighboring states like Kenya appear well integrated into Al Shabaab, while many from families that have lived in the West for many years do not speak the language well or otherwise do not fit in with the locals. Similarly, many Europeans of Moroccan descent have mobilized for Syria, according to Moroccan officials.<sup>12</sup>

Critically, foreign fighters are not necessarily terrorists. Perhaps the best study so far found that 1 in 9 foreign fighters become linked to international terrorist groups, and my own research found that this figure may be high because it over-represents the Afghanistan experience before 9/11. Becoming a foreign fighter is still a danger sign when trying to anticipate whether someone will become an international terrorist, but for most foreign fighters, as Hegghammer contends, “They are insurgents in every respect but their passports.”<sup>13</sup>

### Potential Bleedout Dangers

There is no single path for *jihadist* returnees to the Arab world. As Mohammed Hafez points out, “The stereotypical view of Arab Afghans leaving Afghanistan to start revolutions in their home countries or to terrorize the world is incorrect.”<sup>14</sup> Some came back as heroes and led normal lives. Governments exploited others: for example, the Yemeni government used returnees as foot soldiers to fight socialist forces in South Yemen in the 1994 civil war. Still others never returned at all, and instead traveled to another conflict zone to continue the fight. Nevertheless, past experiences illustrate that Hafez’ conclusion is too rosy, and in several instances Arab Afghans and other foreign fighter returnees posed significant dangers to their home countries—and these dangers are relevant to the experience of future returnees from Iraq and Syria.

In all *jihad*s, volunteers pick up skills, tactics, and ideas that they can then use in the next conflict—and Syria is no exception. In Iraq and Afghanistan, foreign volunteers were hardened in battle, and in Iraq they learned how to construct increasingly sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs), developed assassination tactics, and gained experience with the mass use of suicide bombings. In addition, the organizational style of “hub” groups spreads—in Somalia, for example, Al Shabaab leaders who fought with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan put in place a leadership structure similar to that of Al Qaeda.<sup>15</sup>

Fighters also network, gaining contacts from outside their region and country, setting the stage for future cooperation. Often the recruits provide *jihadists* with latent potential. In Saudi Arabia, those who had “retired” after fighting in the 1990s in Afghanistan were

later mobilized by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) when it began attacks in the Kingdom in 2003.<sup>16</sup>

Suicide bombings and beheadings are tactics particularly likely to spread from those who fought in Syria and Iraq. Given the use of beheadings by the Islamic State's predecessor organization, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and the tremendous prominence its greater use by the Islamic State has received, this method is already showing signs of gaining popularity. Foreigners were often used for suicide bombings in Iraq following the U.S. invasion, in part because non-Iraqis stood out from the population and thus were less use as guerrillas. The U.S. military found that foreigners conducted roughly 90 percent of AQI suicide attacks. For some nationalities, particularly Moroccans and Libyans, more than half of the volunteers were assigned to be suicide bombers.<sup>17</sup>

Foreign fighters, now linked to international terrorist groups, often worsen the violence in their home countries when they return and increase the use of terrorism in war.<sup>18</sup> The Islamic State's predecessor organization in Iraq trained foreign fighters to execute terrorist operations such as assassinations and vehicle bombings even more than it did suicide bombings: who did what depended heavily on nationality and previous experience. As the role of foreign fighters and returnees grows, so too does the use of terrorism in war. For example, in Chechnya, the second war that began in 1999 had far more foreign fighters and saw far more terrorism both inside and outside the war zone than the first war in the mid-1990s.<sup>19</sup>

Technology and tactical transfers also occur more quickly due to foreign fighters. The use of suicide bombers was rare in the 1990s, but it quickly spread as Al Qaeda encouraged other groups to embrace this method and served as a hub for transmitting it. Similarly, the use of more sophisticated IEDs or dramatic brutality like beheadings spreads more rapidly from group to group as individuals serve as connectors and incubators.

Perhaps the most important change, but the one hardest to quantify, is the change in mindset. Volunteers come to a conflict zone for many reasons, ranging from a sense of adventure to a desire to protect fellow Muslims. While in the conflict zone, however, they learn new ideas, often linking causes or expanding their range of enemies. Not surprisingly, returnees view problems differently at home after their return. Algerians returning from Afghanistan came to view their own government as yet another variant of the "infidel" Soviet-backed regime they had fought in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> In Algeria, "*les Afghanis*" became known for wearing Afghan-style clothes, turbans, and beards.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, foreign *jihadi* organizations may "seed" local groups. Using money from bin Laden, Algerians in Afghanistan formed the core of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which emerged as the most deadly and brutal of Algerian *jihadi* groups in the early years of the civil war in the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Some of the early *jihadi* groups in Yemen originated from Yemenis returning from the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group was founded in Afghanistan in 2000 and received training and indoctrination from Al Qaeda before conducting several bloody attacks in Morocco in 2003.<sup>24</sup> Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia was founded by veteran jihadists who had fought in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

Often these groups adopt a *takfiri* ideology—a highly intolerant strain of *ihadism* in which anyone who does not conform to "correct" Islamic belief and practice—even rival Salafi *jihadists*—is labeled an apostate and thus sentenced to death. Although Al Qaeda itself largely opposes a *takfiri* agenda, some returnees from Afghanistan—notably those going to Algeria—embraced it. They proved willing to massacre civilians who did not side with them, arguing that even neutrality meant they had fallen from the true faith.<sup>26</sup> Iraq under AQI was a hotbed of *takfiri* thought.

Conflicts involving foreign fighter veterans often shift from local to regional enemies. In general, the enemy is defined along religious lines, not national (or geographic) ones. When foreign fighters returning from Afghanistan joined the fray in Kashmir, they sought to make Kashmir a base for attacks on India itself rather than on concentrating solely on the disputed Kashmir area.<sup>27</sup> Chechnya offers one of the best examples. Relatively few Arabs fought in the first Chechen war (1994–1996), with one study putting the figure at roughly 80 fighters.<sup>28</sup> However, these fighters—valued for their military experience and ability to attract money from sympathetic Salafis in the Gulf area—stayed on in Chechnya and trained fighters from other countries in the Caucasus. They attracted money from Saudi Arabia and other states, enabling them to promote their ideology effectively.<sup>29</sup> The Chechen *de facto* state was weak after its 1996 victory, and poor leadership, corruption, and infighting made it weaker still, allowing foreigners and their ideological allies to create a state within a state in Chechnya. These fighters became involved in a local struggle in neighboring Dagestan, where a few villages sought to create an Islamic state independent of Russia, and allied with fighters there—the goal was to unify the two republics. This expansion alarmed Moscow, leading to a resumption of the fighting.<sup>30</sup>

Returnees may also have a more global agenda, seeing the local struggle as only one of many legitimate causes. Some fighters go from conflict to conflict. Much depends on which conflict is “hot,” with antforeign struggles historically proving the most attractive. Many of the foreigners who fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets joined the struggle against India in Kashmir, the most popular of the follow-on *jihad*s in the early 1990s, serving as shock troops or as *fedayeen*—gunmen who fight until they are killed.<sup>31</sup> About one-third of the Turks fighting for *jihadi*st groups in Syria are veterans of past *jihadi*st wars in the Balkans, Chechnya, Iraq, and elsewhere.<sup>32</sup>

Some groups, particularly ones failing at a local level, use the fight abroad to enhance their legitimacy. Algerian *jihadists* of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) were faring poorly at home while the Iraq fight against the United States was deeply popular, so the GSPC encouraged Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians to go to Iraq to fight, tying its cause to that of AQI.<sup>33</sup> Significant numbers traveled there: in 2005, the U.S. military found that 20 percent of the foreigners in Iraq were from Algeria, and another 5 percent from Tunisia and Morocco.<sup>34</sup>

Returnees often play an important role as recruiters. One study of foreign fighters found that foreign fighters are often “bridge figures”—*jihadi*st “rock stars”—who radicalize new recruits to join the fight.<sup>35</sup> More practically, returned foreign fighters are often key links for would-be fighters to find travel facilitators.<sup>36</sup>

New information tools also play an important role. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter all emerged during the 2000s as new tools for *jihadists* to use to mobilize followers.<sup>37</sup> Such tools have taken off around the world and are playing a tremendously influential role in the Syria conflict—it has been called “the most socially mediated civil conflict in history.”<sup>38</sup> Social media enables the rapid dissemination of *jihadi*st ideas through a range of contacts. Sermons, videos of fighting, images of atrocities, and other forms of propaganda are used to motivate supporters.<sup>39</sup> Groups like the Islamic State are particularly skilled at using social media to shape its image and recruit fighters.<sup>40</sup> *Jihadi*st recruiters stress not only bringing items like hiking boots but also iPads so fighters can stay in touch with those back home.<sup>41</sup> At the individual level, foreign fighters use social media to boost their social standing at home—in other words, to look cool—and often pose with impressive-looking weapons and brag about the fighting they have done.

## Mitigating Factors

Most foreign fighters do not become terrorists or otherwise go on to pose a threat when they return. Several factors explain this apparent puzzle.

Many foreign fighters die in the conflict zone. Figures are rarely exact, but available data suggest a wide, but usually bloody, range. In Afghanistan, relatively few died in the 1980s—perhaps less than five percent. However, the death rate picked up when the Taliban fell and going to Afghanistan meant engaging in direct combat against U.S. or allied forces.<sup>42</sup> In Chechnya, figures are hard to come by but the arena is known as a harsh one, and one study found that foreign fighters were “prone to death or capture” even though the *jihadi* groups deliberately blocked inexperienced *jihadists*, taking only the cream of the crop.<sup>43</sup> The death rate there in the late 1990s may have been more than 90 percent.<sup>44</sup>

If the Iraq model of the past decade follows, perhaps half of the Arabs who go to fight in Iraq and Syria today will end up as suicide bombers.<sup>45</sup> Syria, however, contains safe havens where fighters are not always at risk—in contrast to Iraq in the 2000s, Chechnya, or post-2001 Afghanistan. This may make Syria less dangerous for foreigners.<sup>46</sup> Of the perhaps 3,000 Tunisian fighters who went to Syria, perhaps 450 were killed by October 2014—a loss rate of roughly one in seven.<sup>47</sup>

Many of those who volunteered and subsequently died were among the most zealous and adventurous potential *jihadists* at home. By going abroad, they drained energy and recruits from organizations at home. Saudi *jihadists*, for example, found their antiregime struggle hindered after 2003, when many potential sympathizers chose to fight next door in Iraq instead of taking on the Al Saud.

Many fighters also become professional *jihadists* and do not return home. Between 3,000–4,000 Algerians trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight the Soviets: many perished, but perhaps 1,000 returned home; another 1,000 became professional *jihadists* and fought in Bosnia and elsewhere: a return rate of roughly one-third.<sup>48</sup> Becoming a professional *jihadi* may stem from necessity more than conviction. Some fighters from Tunisia, for example, cannot return home today as they know they will face arrest. The groups themselves make take a volunteer’s passport, making it difficult for him to return home, or the volunteer may burn it himself.<sup>49</sup>

## No Single Jihadist Model

Part of what made Afghanistan and Pakistan such nightmares for international terrorism is that the group that was founded there, ran camps there, and was based there—Al Qaeda—embraced a global terrorism agenda. Indeed, the proliferation of Al Qaeda affiliates—at times led by individuals who had fought with the Al Qaeda core—has validated this concern.<sup>50</sup> Yet Al Qaeda is unusual, perhaps even unique, in its focus on the United States and the West in general. Many *jihadi* groups in Syria do not share Al Qaeda’s international agenda, or at least do not prioritize it.

Several possible models of *jihadism* coexist. First, groups can simply oppose what they see as a hostile, illegitimate, and un-Islamic government in their own country: a viewpoint that motivated many Islamist and *jihadi* organizations in past decades, including such important organizations as al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya in Egypt and Islamist groups in Algeria in the early 1990s. Second, groups might favor expelling foreign infidel invaders: the Soviet Union, the United States, Israel, India, and so on: an approach championed by anti-Soviet ideologue Abdullah Azzam and one that retains wide popularity among *jihadists* and many ordinary Muslims. Third, groups may embrace the ideas of

Jordanian ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, using *jihad* to gain territory but then, once they hold it, preaching and providing services to win over the population rather than terrorizing them. Ansar-e Shari'a in Tunisia long embraced this concept. Fourth, they can adopt the approach of the Islamic State, trying to carve out, consolidate, and expand existing territory in Iraq and Syria—and perhaps emulate this with self-proclaimed emirates elsewhere—using force to compel both Muslims and non-Muslims under their sway to accept their rule. Those Muslims who do not support them—minority sects, pro-regime Sunnis, and so on—are not merely labeled as misguided, as Maqdisi would argue, or even as potential enemies, but as apostates deserving of the death penalty; non-Muslims who refuse to convert may be required to pay exorbitant “taxes” or may simply be killed. The Islamic State model has spread to other countries, like Nigeria and Libya, but so far the goal remains the same: establish the state where the fighters are rather than conduct international terrorism and make the United States the center of the campaign. Fifth is the Al Qaeda model, which prioritizes the struggle against the West but also fights against local dictators, seeing the two as tied together.<sup>51</sup>

Of these models, only the last—that of Al Qaeda—directly favors global terrorism, but even there, most Al Qaeda affiliates and those inspired by Al Qaeda operate at a regional level. Anti-Western action by returnees usually occurs within a local and regional context, not an international one. For example, Saudis returning from the Afghan and Bosnian *jihads* carried out the 1995 attack on the U.S. training mission in the Kingdom, killing five Americans. When Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula began a full-scale campaign in 2003, it regularly attacked Western targets, but it focused on those located inside the Kingdom.<sup>52</sup> Al Qaeda affiliates in Iraq, the Maghreb, and elsewhere have largely (but not entirely) followed that model. Several of the other models, particularly that of the Islamic State, favor terrorism at a regional level. All of them, however, embrace the use of terrorism as part of a local struggle against an un-Islamic regime, particularly against the security establishment.

The Islamic State model is the deadliest for civilians. Because it seeks to consolidate territorial control by force, those who oppose it—or who are deemed infidels or apostates—either flee or are killed. In addition, the groups embrace of sectarian war leads to repeated attacks on civilians in rival religious communities.<sup>53</sup> Al Qaeda, in contrast, has long tried to avoid killing Sunni Muslim civilians, and it usually has tried to limit those Sunnis it does kill to targets associated with the regime and security forces.<sup>54</sup> Those who are fighting with Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, are imbibing this Maqdisi-influenced view of the struggle, trying to fight locally and create an Islamic State there while minimizing the conflict with fellow Muslims. However, far more foreign fighters in Syria—and nearly all of those in Iraq—are fighting with the Islamic State. As this group's propaganda and image have captured the zeitgeist of the *jihadist* world, this is of grave concern given its willingness—if not eagerness—to kill civilians. Groups like Jund al-Khilafah in Algeria and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Sinai have already shown their willingness to follow the Islamic State.

Antiforeign sentiment is more appealing than revolutionary change in many countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Although AQAP in its 2003 incarnation sought to overthrow the Saudi regime, it has tried to conceal the extent of its revolutionary agenda and has focused on the Al Saud's ties to the United States, realizing revolutionary discourse would fail.<sup>55</sup>

Local groups may shift models in their fights—but this is not cost free. Indeed, embracing a broader agenda like that of Al Qaeda is often a sign of weakness. For example, when the GSPC was sending fighters to Iraq, its own membership was plummeting from perhaps 4,000 fighters before the Iraq war to fewer than 500 in 2006.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Ayman al-

Zawahiri's own Islamic Jihad organization integrated into Al Qaeda only after the group failed to find an independent haven in Chechnya, ran out of money, and had its infrastructure in Egypt destroyed—and even then the move was unpopular among many of its cadre.<sup>57</sup>

Another reason why some returning fighters do not become terrorists in their home countries is that they do not see their home countries as a legitimate place for *jihad*. Reasons may range from a strong Islamist presence in the government (as in Tunisia) to a belief that legitimate *jihad* involves fighting foreign occupiers, not local Muslim regimes—no matter how brutal they are or if they are allied to the United States. Thousands of Saudis returned to the Kingdom from fighting the Soviets and fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan, but relatively few joined terrorist groups there. In any event, the legitimacy of a local struggle will be far less than the fight in Syria, which enjoyed wide support after it began in 2011.<sup>58</sup>

Command and control from abroad is difficult, but inspiration and strategic nudges are not. When leaders are abroad, communications are vulnerable to disruption, and it is difficult to manage the pressing day-to-day issues without inhibiting effectiveness. However, dense personal ties, charismatic leaders, and the use of social media all enable ideas and goals from a group in one country to influence fighters in another. This is more the pattern than the exception: Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other conflicts often involved informal arrangements among commanders and organizations more than a strict hierarchical relationship.<sup>59</sup>

### ***The Vital Role of the Security Services***

The *jihadists'* goals and networks are not the only determinants of the returnee danger: how well local security services respond can have a decisive impact. Indeed, repression shapes the nature of the foreign fighter flow. When Syria cracked down on Islamists in the 1980s, many made their way to Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup> In some countries, individuals already at risk from security services for suspected *jihadist* activity are more likely to travel to Syria or Iraq; and, not surprisingly, they are seen as a risk when they return. One estimate finds that almost a third of Moroccans who went to Syria had previously served time in Moroccan jails because of their supposed links to terrorism.<sup>61</sup>

Upon return, strong security services can arrest foreign fighters, monitor them, or otherwise make them less able to conduct attacks, seed new groups, serve as bridge figures to recruit new fighters locally, transfer tactics and ideas, or link up with global networks. Jordan, for example, has long faced a *jihadist* threat—Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI's founder, was of Jordanian origin and violently opposed to the Hashemite regime. Jordan borders Iraq and Syria and hosts millions of refugees from these conflicts, and it also has a large Palestinian community that is not fully integrated and is therefore potentially susceptible to *jihadist* recruitment efforts. Amman also lacks the money of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which can buy off their populations when they feel at risk. Jordan, however, has perhaps the most effective security service in the Arab world, enabling it to identify potential radicals, penetrate groups and cells, and otherwise keep a lid on a dangerous problem. Large numbers of returnees, however, pose a challenge as they can overwhelm the resources of local services.

In contrast, Lebanon lacks strong security services and is highly vulnerable to even small numbers of returnees. Lebanon, which had far fewer returnees from the 2003 Iraq war than many other Arab countries, saw a new group, Fatah al-Islam, take over a Palestinian refugee camp primarily with foreign fighters and fight fierce battles with the

Lebanese army in 2007. Almost 200 Lebanese soldiers died, and the refugee camp was reduced to rubble.<sup>62</sup>

Security service strength can vary within a country, and border security in particular may be lax. Although the Algerian services are skilled and ubiquitous in major cities like Algiers, the GSPC and later Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) found it easy to operate around the Sahel belt as the borders there were largely unguarded.<sup>63</sup> In Egypt today, the police and security services are becoming stronger after the post-Arab Spring weakness, but they have limited control of parts of the country, particularly the Sinai. This problem is compounded when an existing *jihadi* group already exerts some territorial control or otherwise has a large infrastructure. They can work with returning fighters, making it far less likely that they will be apprehended on return.<sup>64</sup>

In Libya, the central government is divided and ineffectual (or non-existent) at the local level, enabling returnees to enter the country freely and hook up with local groups. Relatively small numbers of returnees can carve out space to dominate local areas. Libyan returnees linked to the Islamic State established a strong presence in Darnah, long a hotbed for *jihadists* (Darnah produced more Libyan fighters to the previous war in Iraq than any other Libyan city, despite being relatively small),<sup>65</sup> and as Frederic Wehrey has reported, "In early October 2014, the Darnah-based Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC) pledged loyalty to the Islamic State, declaring eastern Libya to be a province of the Islamic State."<sup>66</sup>

On the bright side, groups with links to foreign fighters may be vulnerable when returnees include non-nationals. Arrests in Saudi Arabia, for example, involved citizens of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq.<sup>67</sup> These foreigners stood out from the local population, making intelligence collection easier.

Of course, even competent security services must pay attention and see the threat in order to manage the problem. Before 1995, Saudi Arabia had a policy of tacit support for *jihadists* fighting abroad, and although it has frequently cracked down since then, it often used only brief detentions and treated many foreign fighters leniently. In general, the Saudi regime believed helping Muslims fight non-Muslims abroad to be more legitimate than going after Muslim regimes.<sup>68</sup> Saudi Arabia allowed many Saudis to return from Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, with little scrutiny. These returnees became the core of AQAP, which launched a bloody revolt against the Al Saud in 2003.<sup>69</sup> After they focused on the problem in 2003, however, Saudi security services proved able to manage bleedout: Saudi Arabia did not experience a massive wave of terrorism linked to Iraqi returnees, although it did arrest many suspected of plotting such attacks.<sup>70</sup>

Crackdowns on fighters returning from Syria may be politically difficult for Arab regimes. Arab states with many volunteers often agree with the fighters that the Asad regime is illegitimate and oppose what they see as Iranian and Hizballah adventurism and attempts to dominate the Sunni world. Even if the regime is more skeptical, their publics favor the anti-Asad fight. This makes crackdowns on returning foreign fighters harder to justify at home.

Security services can be too harsh as well as too lenient. A number of Saudis who were part of the 2003 AQAP campaign had been imprisoned and tortured in the Kingdom or in other countries.<sup>71</sup> Tunisian services have gone after Salafis in general, and the resulting denial of religious freedom has convinced some that the regime itself opposes religion.<sup>72</sup>

Tunisia shows how dramatically things can shift. After the 2011 revolution, Tunisia's security services were discredited, and Islamists of all stripes had free rein to preach and organize. In 2013, however, growing violence led the Tunisian government to ban many

practices linked to *Salafi-jihadist* activities—most notably, the government banned the annual meeting of the hard-line Salafi organization Ansar al-Shari'a, provoking violent clashes between the group's supporters and security services.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps even more important, the security services, now with the full imprimatur of democratic legitimacy, have become more popular, even though their techniques are as brutal as they were under Tunisia's former president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. As a result, many Tunisians now see the fight in Syria as an outlet for their fervor that is perceived as legitimate—and one that is far beyond the reach of the fearsome Tunisian security services<sup>74</sup> As one lawyer for many of the returnees put it, some think, "If I am going to get arrested and beaten here anyway, I might as well go where I can have an impact."<sup>75</sup>

As the flow of foreign fighters to Syria increased in 2013 and as the Islamic State danger became clearer, Arab governments began recognizing the risk and empowering their security services. In February 2014 the Saudi government announced it would jail citizens who fight in conflict abroad and later designated Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State as terrorist organizations. Kuwait in late 2014 is considering laws to imprison those who join foreign terrorist groups.<sup>76</sup> Morocco and Tunisia have stepped up efforts to go after recruiters and others facilitating volunteers in Syria.<sup>77</sup>

### Potential Impact on the Arab World

Predicting the impact of returning foreign fighters on Arab countries is difficult, even with the above variables in mind. Nevertheless, some developments seem likely to occur.

In areas where existing militants are active or states and their security services are weak, some returnees are likely to take up arms. Such a move is more likely if the returnees are not being integrated into society, if there are significant sectarian divides, and if important groups like the Islamic State see the country or its territory as a relative priority.

Foreign fighters have at times created their own Islamic emirates, and the Islamic State example will make this even more compelling. In 1989, Afghans influenced by foreign fighters declared an independent Islamic emirate in Kunar province, fighting other *jihadists* and imposing a harsh version of Islamic law.<sup>78</sup> In Derna, a Saudi preacher who arrived in September 2014, backed up by several hundred Libyans who had fought in Syria, imposed an Islamic State-style government on the region.<sup>79</sup>

The humanitarian situation is likely to worsen. Returnees will have learned brutal tactics and some will have come to view civilians as legitimate targets, particularly religious minorities but also those who work for or collaborate with whichever regime the particular fighters oppose. Returnees may also pass along methods like beheadings, which generate considerable publicity and are in vogue due to the Islamic State's popularity—although, of course, existing local groups knew about this tactic well before now, and some are already adopting it after having seen the level of publicity it has generated via traditional and social media. Indeed, Islamic State-inspired groups such as Jund al-Khili-fah in Algeria are already using this tactic.

Foreign fighters are often highly hostile to Western charities and international organizations and target their personnel—an approach they took in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as in Syria today.<sup>80</sup> The withdrawal or curtailing of relief organizations in response will further strain the humanitarian situation in conflict zones and contribute to greater refugee flows. It will also create dilemmas for Western governments whose citizens are hostages.

Returnees may also contribute to a broader jihadist basing and training network developing across the Arab world. Should this occur, individuals in these countries may be more likely to receive some training before they go off to war zones, making them

more valuable to groups like the Islamic State (and less likely to be given the honor of becoming a suicide bomber). The GSPC, for example, trained fighters in the Maghreb before they embarked to Iraq in 2007, making them more effective there.<sup>81</sup> This network can be used for new conflicts, enabling a faster and more effective surge in skilled recruits.

Local rebels may change their orientation in several ways. Sectarianism remains the dominant narrative attracting foreign fighters to the Syria–Iraq conflict, having largely displaced a simple desire to defend against regime abuses continue the initial successes of the Arab Spring. Indeed, sectarian sentiment—often framed as “support for the Sunni Muslim community” or even just “opposition to the (Shi’a) Iranian and Iraqi and (‘Alawi) Syrian regimes”—is a major reason for the support the Islamic State enjoys among some Arabs.<sup>82</sup> When returnees come home, they bring this sectarian worldview back with them. In fact, returnees are already spreading sectarianism back in their home countries. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the government claims that an attack on Saudi Shi’a worshippers that killed seven in early November 2014 was organized by a Saudi who returned from the fighting in Iraq and Syria.<sup>83</sup> So far this uptick in sectarian tensions has not resulted in massive violence in the Kingdom, but the political danger for the regime is that it may be forced to defend the Shi’a, putting it in an unpopular position and decreasing its legitimacy.

Here we may be on new ground. In the past, sectarian fights and other intra-Muslim struggles had less appeal than “defensive” *jihads* like the one in Afghanistan against the Soviets and in Iraq against the Americans, which involved expelling a foreign invader and had broad support among leading clerics.<sup>84</sup> Few foreign fighters traveled to conflicts that had a sectarian hue like the Iran–Iraq war or fights between Shi’a and radical Sunni groups in Pakistan. But sectarianism has now become mainstream, with important figures like the Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Yusuf al-Qaradawi—one of the most influential Sunni theologians in the Muslim world—endorsing it. Indeed, sectarianism has become blurred with antiforeign sentiment: Shi’a are seen as apostates and thus, like foreign-backed regimes, are illegitimate. Iranian and Hizballah ties to Shi’a communities gives them a foreign dimension as well. As with antiforeign *jihads*, the faithful are portrayed as under siege by evil outsiders. As Hegghammer puts it, “foreign fighter doctrine is more about who you help than who you fight.”<sup>85</sup>

This shift toward sectarianism and other less traditional goals may lead to a decline in nationalism and local focus among existing *jihadist* groups that may ultimately end up discrediting them in the eyes of their local constituents. As the influence of foreign returnees grew, Al-Shabaab shifted its rhetoric to mirror Al Qaeda and avoided Somali nationalist rhetoric.<sup>86</sup> Other Al Qaeda affiliates made similar shifts in their rhetoric and became more regional. Often this caused them to lose local support. The Islamic State, of course, rejects borders in the Muslim world, and local groups seeking to emulate it may do so as well. This may spread the fighting, but it may also make local groups less able to garner broader support or challenge a government successfully.

### ***Mixed Strategic Impact***

The return of highly motivated, well-trained fighters often transforms the military dynamics of a local conflict—but not always in a way that helps the supposed allies of the returning fighters. Returning *jihadists* are often more skilled fighters, or at the very least braver and willing to take more risks—than they were before they left. In Afghanistan and the Balkans, local fighters often used foreigners to spearhead operations: as Jeni Mitchell

puts it, the *jihadists* want to die, while traditional fighters are merely *willing* to die.<sup>87</sup> In Syria, *jihadist* groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State have proven more competent on the battlefield than other opposition groups, including those like the Free Syrian Army allied with the West, which has further increased their appeal.<sup>88</sup>

Foreign fighters are particularly valuable where military experience, and particularly skills related to insurgency, is weak among the existing population. This may not be the case for a country like Yemen, where weapons are abundant, many locals have basic military skills, and the long history of tribal warfare has endowed many fighters with proficiency in guerrilla tactics; in many other Arab countries, though, military knowledge is more restricted, and it is in these places that foreign fighters have the most potential to change the dynamics of conflict.<sup>89</sup>

Local rebel groups may also want foreign fighters to serve a brutal purpose: ethnic and sectarian cleansing. The foreign fighters, even if their atrocities are few in number, come with a reputation, magnified by social media, that makes them attractive to rebels endeavoring to carve out a more secure area or expand their territory.

Returning foreign fighters, moreover, may not be team players. The fighters may disrupt a local group's command and control structure.<sup>90</sup> Over time, the returning foreign fighters may distract existing groups from the focus on the local regime and create new enemies. In the Balkans, foreign fighters struck at Western peacekeepers and aid workers—even though Bosnian Muslims were benefitting from Western help.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, a fundamental question is often whether to expel the non-Muslim invader, overthrow a local regime, or create a Muslim society in part of a conquered land first. Some returned foreign fighters may opt to change society first, an unpopular priority. The returnees are highly vulnerable to overreach. Because they tend to have a more regional focus, they often dissipate their attacks by striking multiple countries, thereby bringing in new enemies and failing to rally local populations.

In many ways, foreign fighters help the government opposing them defeat rebels. Returnees' foreign ties, links to international terrorism, and brutality increase support for governments—even brutal ones—and play into regime propaganda. Algeria was able to put aside its disruption of the democratic process and government brutality in the 1990s, pointing out that Algerian rebels, who initially took up arms in reaction to an aborted election, were brutal *jihadists*. Russian leader Vladimir Putin successfully portrayed Chechnya as yet another *jihadi* front in the U.S.-led war on terrorism.<sup>92</sup> Dictators can put themselves on the side of civilization.

In the end, foreign fighters may have a paradoxical impact: they make the group they help more deadly and militarily stronger, but they make it politically weaker and divide the antiregime movement as a whole. The brutality and foreign interpretations of Islam alienate the people they claim to liberate, and a local group's reliance on foreigners means it has less reason to cultivate the population—a key to long-term success. In addition, they make the regime politically stronger both among its people and internationally.

### **Which States Are at Risk?**

Determining which states face the greatest danger from returning fighters is difficult to judge, as many factors come into play. Examining the factors described above, ranging from the security service quality to the conditions on the ground that a group like the Islamic State might exploit, suggests a wide range of risk in the Arab world, presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Risk states of selected Arab countries

Risk factor	Algeria	Egypt	Jordan	Lebanon	Libya	Morocco	Saudi Arabia	Tunisia	Yemen
High number of volunteers	✓	✓	✓	✓ (very)	✓ (very)	✓	✓ (very)	✓	
Unskilled/weak security services				✓	✓			(changing)	✓
Existing civil strife/war	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓
Sectarian issues				✓	✓		✓		✓
Islamic State focus			✓	✓			✓		?
Overall level of risk	Medium	Medium	Low	High	High	Low	Low	High/Medium	High/Medium

As Table 1 indicates, in my judgment the countries at highest risk are Lebanon, Libya, and perhaps Tunisia and Yemen, which have large numbers of volunteers relative to the size of their populations, existing issues or cleavages groups can exploit, and weak security services. In contrast, Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia<sup>93</sup> may face an occasional terrorist attack, but the returnees will not be able to integrate into existing groups, exploit sectarian cleavages, or otherwise exploit a dangerous situation. Algeria and Egypt are not at grave risk, but they face significant opposition or have potential for strife, at least in parts of their territory.

### ***Implications for Terrorism***

Foreign fighters returning to their homelands are likely to change the prevalence and nature of terrorism in several ways.

In general, returnees prefer insurgency to terrorism. Most foreign fighters are insurgents, and among Arab publics guerrilla war has more legitimacy than terrorism: in fact, that is partly why many of the fighters who went off to Syria and Iraq chose that path.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, foreign fighters often compete with international terrorist groups, usually successfully, denying them resources.<sup>95</sup> This has often cost Al Qaeda dearly. Some ideologues tied to anti-Western operations have thus inveighed against becoming a foreign fighter.<sup>96</sup>

Yet many foreign fighters received training relevant to terrorism while overseas, and they will bring this knowledge home. As such, they are likely to increase terrorism as an adjunct to revolutionary war. This will not usually involve international terrorism, but it will involve attacks on regime targets and strikes on civilian areas in order to discredit the government. Like AQI in the past, the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra regularly conduct terrorist attacks on police and military targets outside the immediate war zone, in addition to their other activities that are more akin to insurgency and even conventional warfighting. In cases like Lebanon, where there is a powerful Shi'a community, attacks on Shi'a areas are likely, both for ideological reasons and to stoke sectarian fires in the (unfortunately correct) belief that when sectarianism is rampant, support for Sunni *jihadists* is likely to increase.<sup>97</sup>

Returnees are also more likely to use violence against civilians in or near war zones. Part of this is ideological, as they seek to kill or expel those who do not embrace their view of Islam within the area they control. Part of this is also tactical: selective violence intimidates civilians, making them more willing to be taxed, to provide fighters, or to otherwise work with militants.

Terrorism on Western targets *in the region* is also likely to grow. Those who fight with the Islamic State imbibe its hostility to the West, both as a military enemy but also as a presence that ideologically is opposed to "true" Islam. Kidnapping of Westerners for ransom is also likely, largely for financial reasons but also because of the publicity such actions bring.

### **Policy and Intelligence Implications and Recommendations**

The analysis above suggests several implications for U.S. policy and U.S. intelligence services, and several policy changes could further reduce the dangers to the United States and its allies.

The best way to reduce a foreign fighter returnee problem is to never have them go in the first place. Part of this is a job for security services. This may involve confiscating passports, taking down websites linked to travel, and detaining or imprisoning those

linked to terrorist groups. Egypt, for example, now requires young males to apply for security approval before transiting Turkey, the most common gateway to Syria.<sup>98</sup>

Also vital, however, is stopping radicalization in home countries. In particular, an effective narrative is helpful to counter the pull of Islamic State and other groups' propaganda. Because many volunteers see themselves as defending fellow Sunni Muslims, counternarrative efforts should stress *jihadist* infighting and the killing of Muslims. A Tunisian lawyer who represents returnees noted that the majority of those returning express disappointment at the fighting between the Islamic State and groups like Jabhat al-Nusra: "They never thought there would be a fight between Muslims. They find that they have been deceived and sold like mercenaries."<sup>99</sup>

Counternarratives can also help foster community support. Western countries have found that some of the most important tips come from family members of the fighters concerned about the safety of their relatives. In addition, if communities see volunteers as deluded or worse, the stature that foreign fighters seek would diminish, potentially reducing the allure of becoming a foreign *jihadi*.

Upon return, deradicalization programs are also valuable, although they cannot solve the problem alone. Before Saudi Arabia began its program, fighters' absences made their economic position even worse, and often regime security efforts made it harder for them to find a job. Arrest and detention may also further alienate them from the regime and society.<sup>100</sup> The Saudi program put in place during the mid-2000s seeks to reeducate foreign fighters, countering the ideology they learned in foreign training camps that calls for fighting Muslim regimes and denigrates non-*jihadis*.<sup>101</sup> Saudi Arabia's program has reportedly met with some success, with the government claiming that only roughly 12 percent of those who went through it have returned to terrorism. In Yemen, in contrast, past rehabilitation programs were much less effective, with little social support or security monitoring of those who were released. Moreover, the Yemeni program focused on discouraging attacks in Yemen, but tolerated individuals who were focused on striking abroad—fine for Yemen, perhaps (at least in the short run), but not so helpful for the rest of the world.<sup>102</sup> The contrast between the Saudi and Yemen cases is instructive. Saudi Arabia has both the economic resources to provide substantial help to former fighters, the intelligence capacity to monitor them extensively should bribes and reintegration alone fail, and greater political will. Yemen was short in all these areas.

Middle Eastern states should also prepare for returnees to be traumatized, which may lead to violence. One study found that combat trauma is affected by the nature of combat, the social environment in combat, and the social environment returnees face when they are home—and this is for real soldiers, not for terrorists who are often unbalanced already. As Andrew Exum points out, "the trauma of war is likely to be harsher for jihadists" who lack strong unit cohesion, support at home, and other key factors.<sup>103</sup>

U.S. Arab allies' own policies do not always converge with U.S. counterterrorism goals. Allies often have an incentive to tolerate some level of violence or to promote policies that strengthen *jihadists*. A *jihadist* threat enables regimes to gain international support, particularly from the United States—support that often comes in the form of money, fancy new high-tech weapons, and advanced training, which incidentally can also be used to suppress any other domestic political opposition the regime may be facing. In addition, if the threat is limited, the regime can resist calls to reform and otherwise use violence as an excuse to stress security and stability, thus enhancing regime's own power. Some allies see moderate Islamists as a bigger political threat than *jihadists*. In Egypt, for example, the al-Sisi regime's systematic repression of the Muslim Brotherhood may lead radicals

to split off and turn young Islamists to violence: moves that will weaken the Brotherhood but allow *jihadists* to get stronger.

The foreign fighter issue also has implications for U.S. democracy promotion. *Jihadist* organizations exploit the freedom of assembly that typically arises when countries begin to implement democratic reforms. In Turkey, rule by the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) led to a growth in Islamic organizations and activism along religious lines. Some of these organizations embraced radical activity, which the AKP tolerated as long as it did not challenge AKP power. *Jihadists* formed social centers and publishing houses and recruited in mosques, taking advantage of what two analysts call the “dark side” of civil society.<sup>104</sup> In Tunisia, groups like Ansar-e Shari’a recruited openly until 2013, often encouraging individuals to go abroad to fight, in part because the Tunisian government after the revolution at first did not take the *jihadist* threat at home seriously. This openness—although a critical step toward democratic reform—had the unfortunate side effect of making the mass mobilization of Tunisians for the fight in Syria far easier.

### Intelligence Concerns

Intelligence collectors and analysts should consider several issues when assessing the bleedout question for the Arab world.

The first question is simply where fighters would go should they seek to leave Iraq and Syria. Some of those fighting today, inevitably, would return home should the conflict die down, but many might migrate to another battlefield, either in the Arab world or involving other Muslim communities. Others may go elsewhere simply because their home government has tightened re-entry restrictions, taken away their passport, threatened arrest upon return, or otherwise made it impossible or unwelcome to go back; such measures may help an individual country, but they often merely shift the burden elsewhere. An important determinant of where fighters go next is ease of access. After the anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan had ended, Al Qaeda sought to make Somalia a base of operations and expand activities in the Horn of Africa in the early 1990s. However, it was expensive to get in and out of Somalia, and Somali clans and bandits often attacked *jihadists* or extorted money from them.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, many fighters sought to go to Chechnya—indeed, that was one of the most compelling causes of the 1990s—but Russian border security measures and the skepticism of many Chechen groups about Arab fighters limited the number who traveled there.

Returning foreign fighters offer new opportunities to gather intelligence that regional services may be slow to collect and process. In particular, the heavy use of social media like Facebook and Twitter by today’s foreign fighters is a source of vulnerability, allowing for easy collection and knowledge of broader networks as well as real-time information about the movements and activities of fighters.<sup>106</sup>

To disrupt fighters as they travel to and from the war zone, information sharing within the Arab world is vital. Bilateral or multilateral sharing allows area services to respond quickly to a fighter transiting their territory. In cases where suspicions (or just politics) limit cooperation, the United States can play an important role bringing services together, or at least facilitating the flow of information.

The Islamic State and other *jihadist* groups in Iraq and Syria are also highly vulnerable to offensive counterintelligence—that is, playing on fears of spying. By relying on foreign volunteers, they are leaving the door open to spies—and they know it. They have taken measures to guard against infiltrators among foreign volunteers, but the large

numbers of volunteers flowing in makes this difficult if not impossible for them to do with 100% success.<sup>107</sup> In addition, sowing suspicion of foreigners can lead them to reject many genuine candidates, conduct purges, or otherwise reduce the value of foreign volunteers—all of which have negative effects on the group's cohesion and effectiveness.

Finally, when conveying information on the threat to policymakers, it is vital to sort out the different kinds of terrorism and avoid the reflexive use of the word “terrorist” to describe returnee violence. Much of their violence indeed is likely fall under the exceptionally broad U.S. definitions of terrorism, but most of it is not likely to be linked to international terrorism, and confusion will be inevitable. A poor policy response will follow unless distinctions among categories of terrorism are made clear.

## Notes

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5. See Daniel Byman, “The Intelligence War on Terrorism,” *Intelligence and National Security* 29(6) (December 2013), pp. 837–863.

6. Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security* 35(3) (Winter 2010/11), p. 60. The figures are updated to include Iraq.

7. According to Sinjar Records, 41 percent of the foreign volunteers were Saudi and 19 percent were Libyan. The next three most common nationalities were Syrian, Yemeni, and Algerian. Afghanistan’s numbers are all over the map. Some estimates put the foreign Muslim volunteer numbers as high as 100,000, but other estimates are far smaller. Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout: Al-Qa’ida’s Road in and out of Iraq*, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point (2008), p. 5; Vahid Brown, “Foreign Fighters in Historical Perspective,” in Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout: Al-Qa’ida’s Road in and out of Iraq*, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point (2008), p. 23.

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13. For the one in nine figure, see Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107(1) (February 2013), p. 7. For the quote, see Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," p. 55; for a contrasting view, see Daniel L. Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadis," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2014). Available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142025/daniel-byman-and-jeremy-shapiro/homeward-bound> (accessed February 21, 2014); Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *The Brookings Institution* (November 2014), pp. 1–30.

14. Kirkpatrick, "New Freedoms in Tunisia Drive Support for ISIS."

15. Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia," p. 207.

16. Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy* 13(4) (Winter 2006), p. 47.

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