

# Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid:

## The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq

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**O**n May 24, 2014, a man walked into the Jewish Museum in Brussels and opened fire with a pistol and an AK-47, killing four people in just seconds. This attack was more than just another incident of senseless gun violence. The alleged perpetrator, Mehdi Nemmouche, was a French citizen who had spent the last year fighting Syria. As such, this attack appears to have been the very first instance of spillover of the Syrian civil war into the European Union. For many U.S. and European intelligence officials, it seemed a harbinger. They fear that a wave of terrorism will sweep over Europe, driven by the civil war in Syria and the crisis in Iraq.

Despite these fears and the real danger that motivates them, the Syrian and Iraqi foreign fighter threat can easily be exaggerated. Fears about foreign fighters were raised concerning many conflicts, especially after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq; yet for the most part, these conflicts did not produce a surge in terrorism in Europe or the United States. Indeed, in the case of Iraq in particular, returning foreign fighters proved much less of a terrorist threat than originally predicted by security services. Previous cases and the information already emerging from Syria suggest several mitigating effects that reduce—but hardly eliminate—the potential terrorist threat from foreign fighters who have gone to Syria. Mitigating factors include:

- Many die, blowing themselves up in suicide attacks or perishing quickly in firefighting with opposing forces.
- Many never return home, but continue fighting in the conflict zone or at the next battle for jihad.
- Many of those who go quickly become disillusioned, and even many of those who return often are not violent.
- Others are arrested or disrupted by intelligence services. Indeed, becoming a foreign fighter—particularly with today’s heavy use of social media—makes a terrorist far more likely to come to the attention of security services.

The danger posed by returning foreign fighters is real, but American and European security services have tools that they have successfully deployed in the past to mitigate the threat. These tools will have to be adapted to the new context in Syria and Iraq, but they will remain useful and effective. Experience thus far validates both perspectives on the nature of the threat. The Nemmouche attack demonstrates the danger, but European security services have also disrupted five plots with possible links to Syrian foreign fighters to date, in locales ranging from Kosovo to the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of violent plots in Europe involving Syria returnees, see Andrew Zammit, “List of alleged violent plots in Europe involving Syria returnees,” *The Murphy Raid* (blog), June 29, 2014, <http://andrewzammit.org/2014/06/29/list-of-alleged-violent-plots-in-europe-involving-syria-returnees/>.

Even the one successful attack in Brussels demonstrates why Syria's foreign fighters are less of a danger than is often supposed. Nemmouche was known to French counterterrorism officials who had placed him under surveillance after his return from Syria, specifically because he had been in Syria. He escaped greater notice probably because he acted alone, but that also limited his impact. And while Nemmouche appears to have picked up some weapons skills in Syria, he apparently had no idea how to operate as an undercover terrorist in Europe. He failed to get rid of the guns he used in the attack and boarded a bus on a well-known cannabis smuggling route, leading to his capture.

Many security officials do not find Nemmouche's shortcomings very reassuring. Security officials are paid to worry about threats and, despite the mitigating factors, foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria provide ample room for worry.

Thousands of Sunni Muslims have gone to fight alongside their fellow Sunnis against the Syrian and Iraqi regimes. (Thousands more Shi'a have gone to fight on the side of those governments.<sup>2</sup> But it is the Sunni foreign fighters from Europe and America, with passports that enable them to go anywhere in Europe or the United States without a visa, who worry Western officials.) The overwhelming majority of foreign fighters who have gone abroad to join the fight in Syria and Iraq have come from the Arab world. But Western Europe's sixteen million and America's two million Muslims also feel the pull: the carnage in Syria, the refugee crisis, and the violence between religious communities there have echoed throughout the West. Satellite television and social media bring images of sorrow and slaughter into

the homes of Western Muslims every day. All sides increasingly consider the conflict sectarian, pitting Iraq and Syria's Sunnis against the Iraqi and Syrian regimes and their Shi'a supporters in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere.

Western security services fear that the foreign fighter threat in Syria and Iraq is different in important ways than past foreign fighter problems. Young European and American Muslims will go off to fight in Syria and Iraq as Sunni idealists but will return as anti-Western terrorists.<sup>3</sup> They see combat experience in the region as a double threat. 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. While in the combat zone, they will form networks with other Western Muslims and establish ties to jihadists around the world, making them prone to further radicalization and giving them access to training, weapons, and other resources they might otherwise lack. Charles Farr, director general of the UK's Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism,<sup>4</sup> claims that “Syria is a very profound game-changer,” while the Netherlands' national coordinator for security and counterterrorism warns that “these people are not only coming back with radical ideas; they are also traumatised and fully prepared to use violence.”<sup>5</sup> This fear of violence is particularly acute because many of those going to Syria and Iraq are social misfits and “marginalized... juvenile delinquents. It's often people who were criminals before,” according to French officials.<sup>6</sup>

American officials have similar fears. FBI director James Comey stated that “All of us with a memory of the '80s and '90s saw the line drawn from

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel L. Byman, “Syria's Other Foreign Fighters,” *Lawfare* (blog), January 12, 2014, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/01/the-foreign-policy-essay-syrias-other-foreign-fighters/>; for a broader overview of foreign fighters in history, see David Malet, “Foreign Fighters Playbook,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 8, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141107/david-malet/foreign-fighters-playbook>.

<sup>3</sup> For a take on how these foreign fighters can negatively affect the insurgents they claim to aid, see Kristin M. Bakke, “Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies,” *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Spring 2014), pp. 140-187.

<sup>4</sup> Colum Lynch, “Europe's New ‘Time Bomb’ is Ticking in Syria,” *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2013, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/09/european\\_fighters\\_jihadists\\_syria?page=0.1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/09/european_fighters_jihadists_syria?page=0.1).

<sup>5</sup> “Press Release: NCTV maintains threat level at substantial,” National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, Minister of Security and Justice, July 1, 2013, [http://english.nctb.nl/currenttopics/press\\_releases/2013/nctv-maintains-threat-level-at-substantial.aspx](http://english.nctb.nl/currenttopics/press_releases/2013/nctv-maintains-threat-level-at-substantial.aspx).

<sup>6</sup> Lynch, “Europe's New ‘Time Bomb.’”

Afghanistan in the '80s and '90s to Sept. 11.” He then warned: “We see Syria as that, but an order of magnitude worse in a couple of respects. Far more people going there. Far easier to travel to and back from. So, there’s going to be a diaspora out of Syria at some point and we are determined not to let lines be drawn from Syria today to a future 9/11.”<sup>7</sup> Comey also explained that because the European Muslims are from countries whose citizens can travel to the United States without a visa, they are of greater concern, as they can more easily slip through U.S. security.<sup>8</sup>

Most importantly, the foreign fighter problem in Iraq and Syria is simply bigger than past cases. Recent reports estimate that between 2,000 and 3,000 foreign fighters from Western countries have traveled to Syria and Iraq as of September 2014, including over 100 Americans; France, Britain, Belgium, and Germany have the largest numbers of citizens in the fight.<sup>9</sup> However, these figures may underestimate the flow of fighters: Syria has many entry points, and Western security services recognize that they often do not know who has gone to fight.

As the wars continue, the flow is likely to increase. The problem may prove a long-term one, as the networks and skills formed in Syria and Iraq today are used in the coming years to fight against the next grievance to emerge. One expert compared it to a “ticking time bomb,”<sup>10</sup> and Andrew Parker, director general of MI-5 (Britain’s domestic intelligence service) has affirmed that “A growing proportion of our casework now has some link to Syria.”<sup>11</sup> This paper

attempts to understand the foreign fighter threat to the West, both the real dangers it presents and the mitigating factors. The foreign fighter threat—and the mitigating factors—can be pictured as a process from recruitment to fighting abroad to terrorism. But this process is not inexorable, and there are many possible exits and roadblocks on the route to terrorism. Indeed, the vast majority of individuals do not pass through the entire process. Most move off the road to terrorism, exiting at different stages in the process. Each conflict has its own dynamics that influence the likelihood that a given individual will travel all the way through the process to terrorism.

Using this framework, our policy recommendations focus on trying to identify opportunities to encourage potentially dangerous individuals to take more peaceful paths and to help determine which individuals deserve arrest, visa denial, preventive detention, or other forms of disruption. Steps include increasing community engagement efforts to dissuade potential fighters from going to Syria or Iraq; working more with Turkey to disrupt transit routes; improving de-radicalization programs to “turn” returning fighters into intelligence sources or make them less likely to engage in violence; and avoiding blanket prosecution efforts. Most important, security services must be properly resourced and organized to handle the potential danger. Taken together, these measures will reduce the likelihood that any one individual will either want to move or succeed in moving all the way down the path from concerned observer to foreign fighter to terrorist.

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<sup>7</sup> Sari Horowitz and Adam Goldman, “FBI Director: Number of Americans Traveling to Fight in Syria Increasing,” *Washington Post*, May 2, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fbi-director-number-of-americans-traveling-to-fight-in-syria-increasing/2014/05/02/6fa3d84e-d222-11e3-937f-d3026234b51c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fbi-director-number-of-americans-traveling-to-fight-in-syria-increasing/2014/05/02/6fa3d84e-d222-11e3-937f-d3026234b51c_story.html).

<sup>8</sup> Horowitz and Goldman, “FBI Director.”

<sup>9</sup> Dafna Rand and Anthony Vassalo, “Bringing the Fight Back Home: Western Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria,” Center for a New American Security, August 2014, p. 1, [http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS\\_ForeignFighters\\_policybrief.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_ForeignFighters_policybrief.pdf); Richard Barrett, “Foreign Fighters in Syria,” The Soufan Group, June 2014, p. 9, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>; Agence France Presse, “3,000 European jihadis now in Syria, Iraq: EU official,” *The Daily Star*, September 23, 2014, [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Sep-23/271704-3000-european-jihadis-now-in-syria-iraq-eu-official.ashx?utm\\_source=twitterfeed&utm\\_medium=twitter#ixzz3ErtvjyOW](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Sep-23/271704-3000-european-jihadis-now-in-syria-iraq-eu-official.ashx?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter#ixzz3ErtvjyOW).

<sup>10</sup> Lynch, “Europe’s New ‘Time Bomb.’”

<sup>11</sup> Guy Faulconbridge, “British spy chief warns Snowden data is a ‘gift’ for terrorists,” *Reuters*, October 8, 2013, [http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/08/us-usa-security-britain-idUSBRE99711A20131008?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews&utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter&dlvrit=992637](http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/08/us-usa-security-britain-idUSBRE99711A20131008?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter&dlvrit=992637).

This paper first lays out the standard schematic view of how and why some foreign fighters become dangerous terrorists, drawing on the Afghanistan experience in the 1980s to illustrate the arguments. The second section discusses why many seasoned observers believe the Syria conflict is likely to be particularly dangerous. In the third section, we examine

why terrorism in Europe and the United States was less than expected from previous jihads such as Iraq, again drawing implications and lessons specific to Syria, as well as examining factors unique to the Syrian conflict itself. The fourth and final section identifies policy implications and recommendations.

## THE STANDARD SCHEMATIC MODEL OF FOREIGN FIGHTER RADICALIZATION

No single model exists to explain why foreign fighters turn into terrorists upon returning home, but looking at the arguments advanced by experts and the experiences of past foreign fighters, particularly those who went to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight against the Soviets, we can discern a standard, schematic model.<sup>12</sup>

The first step is for fighters from a foreign country to **decide** to join a conflict. At the start, the motivation for the fight abroad is usually specific and local—fighting against the invader or oppressor—rather than struggling against injustices at home. Overall, security officials believe that the decision to go fight in a foreign conflict is usually less an act of religious commitment than of young male rebellion and thirst for adventure.<sup>13</sup> One intelligence official notes that many recruits “just want to fight in Syria” but are vague on why. “Only one percent know a theologian” or are informed on dogma in any way.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, two British foreign fighters on their way to Syria found it necessary to purchase *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies* for the trip, which at least shows an interest.<sup>15</sup> As with all such adolescent rebellions, their parents and communities rarely encourage them to pursue their youthful enthusiasms.

In the second step, the foreign fighters **travel** to the war zone. The aspiring jihadi makes contact with

recruitment networks. He begins the sometimes long and arduous journey to the foreign field of battle, through normal and specialized travel networks. In the process, he is put into contact with a fighting group, often through friends who had preceded him to the field of battle. They vet and assess him and assign him to a task—to fight his enemies, to martyr himself, or just to dig latrines.

In the third step, the journey transforms as the recruits **train and fight** in the field of jihad. Thomas Hegghammer, director of terrorism research at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, points out that “the majority of al-Qaida operatives began their militant careers as war volunteers, and most transnational jihadi groups today are by-products of foreign fighter mobilization.”<sup>16</sup> Training camps give recruits a sense of mission and focus, helping them develop an *esprit de corps*.<sup>17</sup> While in the war zone, callow youths become seasoned combatants. Brutal combat hardens the fighters, making them steady under pressure and giving them a deep sense of loyalty to their comrades-in-arms. They also gain immediate and practical skills. Clint Watts noted that Iraq and Afghanistan were “training grounds” for foreign fighters where they learned urban warfare and how to use weapons, including advanced technology.<sup>18</sup> Hegghammer finds that the presence of a veteran from a foreign jihad both increases the chance that a terrorist plot will succeed and makes the overall lethality higher.<sup>19</sup>

Established insurgent and terrorist groups welcome—and exploit—foreign fighters. Some seek the

<sup>12</sup> For an implicit overview of this model, see Clint Watts, “Countering Terrorism from the Second Foreign Fighter Glut,” *Small Wars Journal* (2009), <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/countering-terrorism-from-the-second-foreign-fighter-glut>; another important work on the subject is Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds, “Blowback Revisited,” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2005), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61190/peter-bergen-and-alec-reynolds/blowback-revisited>;

<sup>13</sup> One reviewer of this paper stated that his data does bear out the notion that people in the radicalization stage are non-ideological. This is also the prevalent view among security officials.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Danish official, May 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Robinson, “British Terrorists from Birmingham bought ‘Islam for Dummies’ book before traveling to Syria,” *Daily Mail*, July 8, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2684714/I-tell-I-m-going-jihad-Lol-I-ll-arrested-What-British-terrorist-Birmingham-told-childhood-friend-travelled-Syria-join-rebel-fighters.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security* Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010/11), pp. 53-94, p. 53, [http://www.mitpressjournals.org.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00023](http://www.mitpressjournals.org.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Peter Neumann, June 17, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of this model, see Watts, “Second Foreign Fighters Glut.”

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go?” *American Political Science Review* (February 2013), p. 11, [http://hegghammer.com/files/Hegghammer\\_-\\_Should\\_I\\_stay\\_or\\_should\\_I\\_go.pdf](http://hegghammer.com/files/Hegghammer_-_Should_I_stay_or_should_I_go.pdf).



manpower and funds (and funding networks) that foreign fighters can bring. Western foreign fighters often have their passports taken away when they join the group and, lacking family or cultural ties to others in the region, become highly dependent on the group they've joined. A few foreign fighters may be medics, mechanics, or otherwise have valuable skills, though this is the exception, not the rule. Others welcome the foreigners for ideological reasons. Still others recruit foreign fighters because they make good cannon fodder and suicide bombers. One study of Iraqi suicide bombing during the height of the civil war found that there were more Europeans serving as suicide bombers than Iraqis.<sup>20</sup> David Malet points out that groups often value foreign fighters because these fighters do not have to worry about retaliation against their families and are therefore more willing to target civilians as part of a group's efforts.<sup>21</sup>

In the war zone, the fighting groups cross-fertilize, with the ideas of all the different groups and individual fighters influencing the others. In addition, those who run the training camps and other members of established groups regularly proselytize to new recruits. In Afghanistan in the 1980s, Egyptian groups that saw Arab regimes as the primary enemy mixed with those opposed to the Soviet invaders, leading to the development of the broader ideology Al Qaeda would eventually champion. Many foreign fighters who go to a war zone are young and ideologically unformed, and the combatant groups see converting them to their worldview as part of their mission: training camps emphasize teaching "true" Islam and the duty of jihad as well as weapons training. So individuals may enter the war with no intention of attacking at home, but their views change and come

to encompass a broader set of goals. As one official succinctly put it, "They come back fucked up."

Networks form and strengthen as groups and individuals become connected to one another. Some groups, like Al Qaeda, keep meticulous records, enabling them to track those who work with them and whom they train long after the conflict has ended.<sup>22</sup> As Britain's MI-5 explains, "foreign fighters can gain combat experience, access to training and a network of overseas extremist contacts. The skills, contacts and status acquired overseas can make these individuals a much greater threat..."<sup>23</sup>

Lone fighters go to the war zone but become part of something bigger.<sup>24</sup> This larger jihadist network and the associated bonds can be invoked when extremist groups seek to foment violence back in the West. Some returned fighters might also simply do violence on their own without any central direction, having been radicalized, or just psychologically disturbed, by the fighting in Syria or Iraq.

In the fourth step, the fighters **return** to their home countries in the West and keep the circle turning. Returned foreign fighters have gained in status—obtained a sort of "street cred"—that makes them able to recruit and radicalize others.<sup>25</sup> Sympathizers admired returnees from Iraq and Afghanistan, giving them the prestige to convince others to enter the fray.<sup>26</sup>

In the final step, the returned fighters begin to **plot** terrorist attacks in their homeland. Slowly, they turn their attention away from the foreign struggle that took them abroad and begin to focus on perceived injustices at home: insults against Islam from their country's politicians and opinion leaders, support

<sup>20</sup> Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), pp. 251-4.

<sup>21</sup> Malet, "Foreign Fighters Playbook."

<sup>22</sup> Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> Security Service MI5, "Foreign Fighters," (n.d., accessed June 1, 2014), <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/the-threats/terrorism/international-terrorism/international-terrorism-and-the-uk/foreign-fighters.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with French government official, May 2014.

<sup>25</sup> "The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria," Center for Terroranalyse (PET), December 4, 2014, p. 5, <https://www.pet.dk/English/CenterforTerrorAnalysisCTA/-/media/CTA/20131203SyrienUKLASSENGFINALpdf.ashx>.

<sup>26</sup> "The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria," Center for Terroranalyse (PET), December 4, 2014, p. 5, <https://www.pet.dk/English/CenterforTerrorAnalysisCTA/-/media/CTA/20131203SyrienUKLASSENGFINALpdf.ashx>.

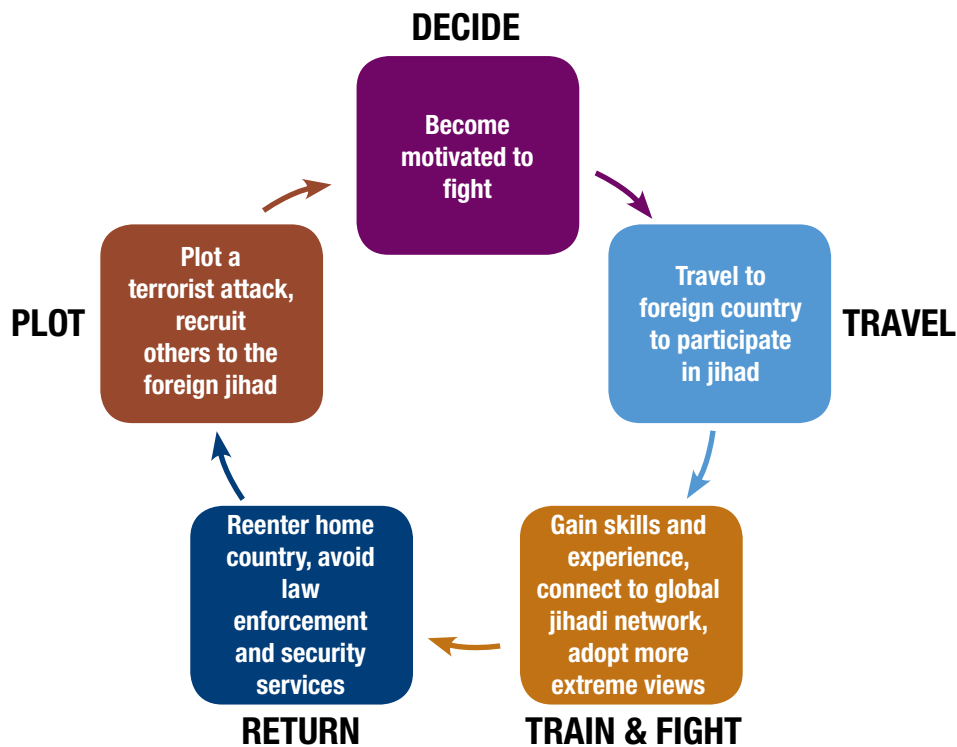
for the forces oppressing Muslims abroad, or the daily prejudices faced by Muslims in America and especially Europe.

Not surprisingly, this standard model alarms U.S. and European counterterrorism officials who fear that returning foreign fighters will produce a spate of terrorism. For example, one French intelligence official warned about foreign fighters in Iraq in 2004: “There, they’re trained, they fight and acquire a technique and the indoctrination sufficient to act on when they return;”<sup>27</sup> another declared in a confidential assessment that returned foreign fighters are “a grave threat for the national territory of France.”<sup>28</sup>

Foreign fighters traveling to Somalia to participate in the civil war there were also a major concern for European officials. The head of MI-5, Jonathan Evans, said in September 2010 that “a significant number of UK residents” were training in Al Shabaab camps in Somalia. He stated, “I am concerned that it’s only a matter of time before we see terrorism on our streets inspired by those who are today fighting alongside al-Shabaab” and warned that “Somalia shows many of the characteristics that made Afghanistan so dangerous a seedbed for terrorism in the period before the fall of the Taliban.”<sup>29</sup>

For European Union member states, the problem often appears worse, as the actions of one member

FIGURE 1. STANDARD SCHEMATIC MODEL OF FOREIGN FIGHTER RADICALIZATION



<sup>27</sup> Craig Smith and Don Van Natta Jr., “Officials Fear Iraq’s Lure for Muslims in Europe,” *The New York Times*, October 23, 2004, [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/23/international/europe/23france.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/23/international/europe/23france.html?_r=0).

<sup>28</sup> Elaine Sciolino, “Return of jihadists: Europe’s fears subside,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/07/world/europe/07iht-terror.4.11744190.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/07/world/europe/07iht-terror.4.11744190.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Richard Norton-Taylor, “MI5 chief warns of terror threat from Britons trained in Somalia,” *The Guardian*, September 16, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/sep/17/mi5-chief-somalia-terror-threat>.

can endanger the security of others. Europe faces a least-common-denominator effect: because of the lack of border controls, “the whole area will only be as strong as the weakest link.”<sup>30</sup>

The model presented in Figure 1 represents a schematic guide to the transformation of foreign fighters into jihadists. As the model suggests, the process is circular, with today’s recruits becoming tomorrow’s recruiters.

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<sup>30</sup> Sharon L. Cardash, Frank J. Cilluffo, and Jean-Luc Marret, “Foreign Fighters in Syria: Still Doing Battle, Still a Multidimensional Danger,” Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, note number 24/12, August 2013, p. 3, <http://www.frstrategie.org/barreFRS/publications/notes/2013/201324.pdf>. This is a reference to the Schengen area within the European Union, which consists of the entire EU except the United Kingdom, Ireland, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, and Romania. The latter four will join in the future. It also includes Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.

## SYRIA/IRAQ AS THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO?

Much of the traditional, Afghanistan-based schematic model of foreign fighters turning into terrorists seems to apply to the current conflict in Syria and Iraq. As in past cases, the flow of Western fighters has alarmed American and European intelligence services.<sup>31</sup> And, as in past conflicts, foreign fighters appear to be gaining valuable skills and access to terrorist networks. For example, Danish intelligence argues that foreign fighters from Denmark “have gained specific military skills” from their time in Syria that would facilitate a terrorist attack and reports that some Danish fighters are returning to Denmark, where they can further radicalize local Muslims.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Danish jihadists made a video titled “The forgotten obligation” that shows Danish foreign fighters in Syria firing (rather unsuccessfully) at photos of six prominent Danes.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, just as they did in past conflicts, foreign fighters today are building networks with dangerous terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). Western foreign fighters in Syria have also forged closer ties to Chechen operatives, many of whom have significant military experience.<sup>34</sup> Given language barriers and larger numbers of Europeans, some nationalities are now forming their own units that are organizationally distinct from, but subordinate to, jihadist groups.

For Western security services, the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq is of even more concern than similar flows to Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and other countries were in the past. The reasons for this increased concern include the larger numbers of fighters; the ease of travel; the new and distinct motivations of fighters; the ties to existing and new networks; the presence of Al Qaeda core members; and the emergence of social media.

### Larger Numbers

Many of the concerns regarding Syria stem from the large number of foreign fighters involved. The Obama administration estimates that as many as 12,000 to 15,000 foreign fighters have gone to Syria and Iraq as of September 23, 2014.<sup>35</sup> The fighters come from at least 80 countries: perhaps 15-25 percent have come from Western Europe and North America; the vast majority of the rest have come from the Arab and broader Muslim world.<sup>36</sup>

The growth in foreign fighters, including Western foreign fighters, is also increasing dramatically as the conflict continues and expands into Iraq.<sup>37</sup> The second half of 2013 saw a huge surge in Sunni foreign fighters. The Syria conflict saw the fastest mobilization of foreign fighters in the history of the modern jihadist movement, suggesting that these staggering numbers may increase dramatically in the coming years. Indeed, more Europeans have gone to fight in Syria than in all modern jihadist struggles combined.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See, inter alia, Agence France-Presse, “Norway in danger from Syrian jihadists, says intelligence agency,” *The Daily Star*, February 24, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Feb-24/248330-norway-in-danger-from-syria-jihadists-intelligence-agency.ashx>.

<sup>32</sup> “The Threat to Denmark,” Center for Terroranalyse, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> “Foreign Fighters in Syria,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, December 2013, p. 22, paragraph 29, [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art\\_20607/E\\_207\\_13\\_1157524947.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20607/E_207_13_1157524947.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Agence France-Presse, “Americans among 12,000 foreign fighters in Syria: US,” *Yahoo News*, August 21, 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/americans-among-12-000-foreign-fighters-syria-us-225059981.html>; Justin Sink, “WH: Radicalized Americans back in US,” *The Hill*, September 22, 2014, <http://thehill.com/policy/international/218494-white-house-radicalized-americans-back-in-us>.

<sup>36</sup> Bruce Riedel, “Syria’s Terror Blowback Threatens Europe and the United States,” *The Daily Beast*, May 5, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/05/syria-s-terror-blowback-threatens-europe-and-the-united-states.html>; Aaron Y. Zelin, “ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans,” The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, December 17, 2013, <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>; “Foreign Fighters in Syria,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, p. 26, paragraph 34; Zeke J. Miller, “Some Americans Fighting With Terror Groups Have Returned to the U.S., Obama Administration Says,” *TIME*, September 22, 2014, <https://time.com/3418455/isis-isil-barack-obama-us/>.

<sup>37</sup> Zelin, “ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria.”

<sup>38</sup> House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, “Counter-terrorism,” Seventeenth Report of Session 2013-2014, April 13, 2014, p. 18, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmhaff/231/231.pdf>.

Quantity has a quality all its own; thus, even if this problem has proven to be manageable in the past, its massive growth has caused Western security services to fear that they will not have the resources to deal with the Syria problem. Officials in every government we talked to feared that the scale of the flow would overwhelm existing resources. Gilles de Kerchove, the European Union's counterterrorism coordinator, warns that "The scale of this is completely different from what we've experienced in the past."<sup>39</sup> French officials note that they had fewer than 10 citizens who went to Iraq in the 2000s and Yemen and fewer than 100 who went to Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> They currently estimate that 930 have already gone to Syria (as of September 2014) and perhaps 150 have already returned.<sup>41</sup> As one government official commented, the scale is "totally unprecedented." British expert Peter Neumann contends that Syria is the top "mobilizer for Islamists and jihadists in the last 10 or 20 years...more people from Europe are being mobilized than in all the other foreign conflicts that have happened for the past 20 years taken together."<sup>42</sup> Under these circumstances, some attacks in Europe by returnees from Syria and Iraq are, according to one French official, "a statistical certainty."<sup>43</sup> The problem is particularly acute for small countries like Belgium that have many foreign fighters but small security services and little history of militancy, forcing them to play catch-up even as the problem escalates.

## Ease of Travel

Traveling to Afghanistan was difficult for would-be jihadists from Europe and the United States. They

had to leave Europe or America and transit Pakistan or Iran—an expensive, time-consuming, and dangerous process. Facilitation networks were only just beginning, and information about where to go and whom to contact was often limited and passed by word of mouth. Iraq was easier than Afghanistan: physically closer to the Arab heartland, would-be fighters could travel through Syria or enter from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, or elsewhere. Europeans and Americans, however, would often have to travel through an Arab country or through Kurdish areas, both of which offered opportunities to disrupt their travel.

Syria is simpler still. As Brian Fishman contends, "it is far easier for foreign fighters to enter Syria than it was Iraq."<sup>44</sup> Western volunteers can simply fly, drive, or take a train to Turkey and quickly enter the fray across the border in Syria. Turkey does not require a visa for travelers from EU countries, enabling foreign fighters to slip in among the millions of tourists from European countries—a relatively cheap and easy journey compared to traveling to Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> Trips are self-funded and social media or even just normal travel agencies can help guide recruits on the trip from Europe across Turkey. Some go as if on vacation, spending a few days or weeks and then returning; some people even bring their families. By transiting Turkey, the fighters often leave few if any clues for security officials to detect.<sup>46</sup>

No real facilitation network is even necessary until the Turkish-Syrian border. Turkey has a 560-mile-long border with Syria, with numerous crossing points.<sup>47</sup> Jihadists inside Turkey, usually affiliated

<sup>39</sup> Eric Schmitt, "Worries Mount as Syria Lures West's Muslims," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/world/middleeast/worries-mount-as-syria-lures-west-muslims.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/world/middleeast/worries-mount-as-syria-lures-west-muslims.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>40</sup> Note that Filiu estimates that 20 French citizens went to Iraq. Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Ansar al-Fatah and 'Iraqi' Networks in France," in Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares, *The Evolution of the Global Terrorism Threat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, forthcoming), pp. 353-372.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with French officials, May 2014; "930 French residents have joined jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria, minister," *RFI* (Sept. 14, 2014), <http://www.english.rfi.fr/france/20140914-930-french-residents-have-joined-jihadi-groups-iraq-and-syria-minister>.

<sup>42</sup> Ella Flaye, "At least 500 Europeans fighting with Syria rebels, study finds, stoking radicalization fears," *CBS News*, April 30, 2013, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202\\_162-57582040/at-least-500-europeans-fighting-with-syria-rebels-study-finds-stoking-radicalization-fears/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57582040/at-least-500-europeans-fighting-with-syria-rebels-study-finds-stoking-radicalization-fears/).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with French official, May 2014.

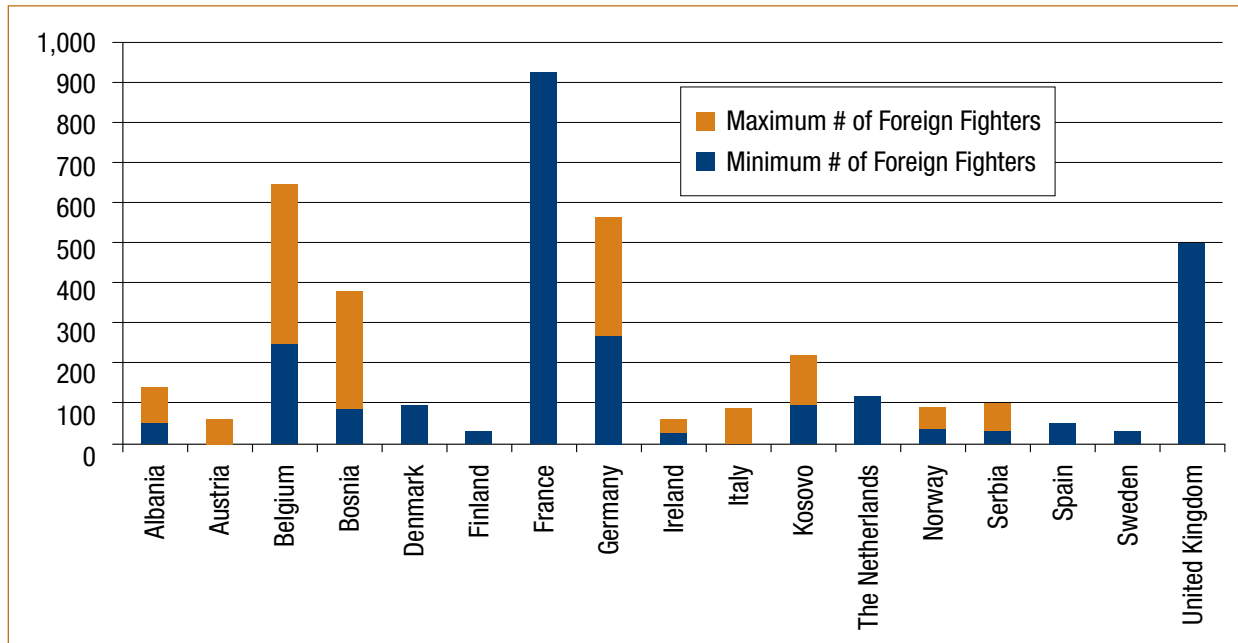
<sup>44</sup> Brian Fishman, "Syria Proving More Fertile than Iraq to Al-Qa'ida's Operations," *CTC Sentinel*, November 26, 2013. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/syria-proving-more-fertile-than-iraq-to-al-qaidas-operations>.

<sup>45</sup> Turkey does require an "e-visa" for travelers from some EU countries, including the United Kingdom.

<sup>46</sup> Cardash *et al.*, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> "Foreign Fighters in Syria," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, p. 33, paragraph 45.

FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA (BY COUNTRY)<sup>48</sup>



Note: Chart excludes countries that are currently believed to have fewer than 10 foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria. Luxembourg, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Switzerland all reported foreign fighter flows, but current estimates put the numbers of fighters for each of those countries below 10. Sources: “930 French residents,” *RFI*; Richard Barrett, “Foreign Fighters in Syria;” Timothy Holman, “Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria,” *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 7, No. 6 (June 2014), pp. 8-13, p. 8, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss6.pdf>; Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “The Clear Banner: Update on the Belgians in Syria,” *Jihadology*, May 7, 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/05/07/the-clear-banner-update-on-the-belgians-in-syria/>; David Osborne, “UN Security Council passes resolution restricting movement of foreign fighters intent on joining Isis,” *The Independent*, September 25, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/islamic-state-un-security-council-passes-resolution-restricting-movement-of-foreign-fighters-intent-on-joining-isis-9754269.html>; Zelin, “ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria.”

with JN or ISIS, often assist foreign fighters, facilitating their travel. On the Syrian side of the border, rebel groups—including both jihadist and more mainstream groups—control many border crossings.<sup>49</sup> Although Iraq also borders Turkey, the experiences of foreign fighters trying to join the fight in Iraq in the 2000s revealed the difficulty of that route: would-be fighters had to transit remote parts of Turkey and areas controlled by Iraqi Kurds, who are hostile to Al Qaeda and aligned with the West.

Turkish officials, supportive of the anti-Asad effort, have often been accused of making little effort to

stop the flow. They didn’t designate Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist group until June 2014, and even then they appear to have done little to stop it and other groups from recruiting.<sup>50</sup> One European official noted that for a long time, Turkey was essentially “obsessed with the PKK” (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or “Turkish Workers’ Party,” the militant organization that has been fighting against the Turkish government for years to establish an independent Kurdistan), and not at all worried about extremist Islamist groups that seemed uninterested in carrying out attacks within Turkey. The PKK focus has also made Turkish officials bitter when European govern-

<sup>48</sup> From a methodological point of view, the numbers should not (but do) include those already violent, radicalized, and trained. The danger of Syria for Western countries is that individuals may return more anti-Western, more skilled, or both. However, a figure like Mouhannad Almallah Dabas, a naturalized Spaniard who went to Syria, was already involved in the 2004 Madrid train bombings and other jihadist activity before leaving for Syria. See Fernando Reinares and Carola Garcia-Calvo, “Jihadists from Spain in Syria: facts and figures,” Real Instituto Elcano, December 12, 2013, [http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano/contenido?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano\\_in/zonas\\_in/international+terrorism/reinares-garcia-calvo-jihadists-from-spain-in-syria](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/international+terrorism/reinares-garcia-calvo-jihadists-from-spain-in-syria).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35, paragraph 48.

<sup>50</sup> Tulin Daloglu, “Turkey finally designates Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist group,” *Al-Monitor*, June 6, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/turkey-al-nusra-terrorist-organization-syria-al-qaeda.html>.

ments ask for help, as they believe Western European countries are lax on policing the PKK. But that same official admitted that recent bombings and the explosive growth of ISIS into Iraq have caused a shift in the Turkish attitude.<sup>51</sup> The Turkish government claims they have arrested and deported over 1,000 Europeans who came to Turkey intending to join the fight in Syria, sending them back to their own countries.<sup>52</sup>

## New Motivations

Motivations of Western foreign fighters going to Syria vary somewhat from what motivated jihadists in the past. In the schematic model, Western foreign fighters were motivated to join the fight by a romantic desire to defend Islam and Muslims under threat. Most cases historically involved Muslim countries that suffered from invasion or attacks by non-Muslim countries: Afghanistan (the Soviet Union and later the United States), Bosnia (Serbia), Chechnya (Russia), Kashmir (India), Iraq (the United States), and Somalia (Ethiopia) are among the most prominent examples.

At the start, simply defending the Syrian people against the regime's brutality was the primary motivation of many foreign fighters, not defending them against a Western or other "foreign" enemy. A few shared an ideological commitment to global jihad from the start, wanting to "protect their brothers and sisters," as one intelligence official put it, and seeking to use Syria as the base for creating a global caliphate.<sup>53</sup> A few others went there to live in a "true Islamic society," according to a European official,<sup>54</sup> even bringing family members to live with them in areas controlled by jihadist groups. Most, however,

joined the fight to gain bragging rights among their friends or to seek "excitement and adventure."<sup>55</sup> In their eyes, Syria seemed an admirable and an honorable way for them to do so.

But in contrast to most previous struggles, the fight in Syria and more recently Iraq does not involve a non-Muslim invader or an established and corrupt (at least in the eyes of the jihadists) Sunni regime like in Yemen. Rather, the conflict plays on Sunni prejudices against (and sometimes even pure hatred of) Shi'a Muslims: a sentiment that grew during the Iraqi civil war and has blossomed further during the Syrian conflict. The Syrian and Iraqi regimes have deliberately and successfully portrayed the conflict as sectarian to discredit the opposition and unify non-Sunnis around the governments. Many in the opposition in turn have embraced sectarianism.<sup>56</sup> Many volunteers who came to Syria in large numbers in the latter half of 2013 were inspired by calls from prominent religious leaders like Yusuf al-Qaradawi to defend Sunnis against Shi'a groups like Hizballah, which had recently triumphed in the battle of Al-Qusayr along with regime forces.<sup>57</sup>

A second new motivation is eschatological: recruiters play on a discourse that the apocalypse is underway and that the conflict in Syria is the battle between the forces of God and His enemies. This motivates only a fairly small minority of those going to fight in the new wars, but it reflects the view that Syria is at the heart of the Arab and Muslim worlds, both historically and symbolically. Syria quickly fell as Muslim armies spread out from the Arabian Peninsula after the birth of Islam, and it was the heart of one of Islam's most important dynasties, the Umayyads—"the first great Muslim dynasty to rule the empire of the Caliphate (661–750 CE)."<sup>58</sup> As such,

<sup>51</sup> Interview with French officials, May 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Senada Sokollu, "European jihadists use Turkey as transit country," *Deutsche Welle*, May 14, 2014, <http://www.dw.de/european-jihadists-use-turkey-as-transit-country/a-17632725>.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with European intelligence official, May 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with British government official, June 2014.

<sup>55</sup> "The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria," Center for Terroranalyse, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel L. Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* Vol. 56, No. 1 (February–March 2014), pp. 79–100.

<sup>57</sup> "Foreign Fighters in Syria," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, p. 15, paragraph 15.

<sup>58</sup> "Umayyad dynasty," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2014), <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/613719/Umayyad-dynasty>.

Syria's suffering and its ultimate fate are at the core of Muslim identity for millions of people. The *hadith* (sayings of the prophet Muhammad) emphasize the importance of Syria as the scene of the last battles. As Islam expert William McCants explains:

Syria is very important to this narrative. In the early Islamic prophecies about the end of days, few regions matter more than Syria. The prophet recommends during the last battles to go fight in Syria if you can; if you can't, go to Yemen. The prophet also talks about a group of believers—the true believers—who are going to persevere until the end and fight in the last battles. They will gather in Syria—in Damascus—and around Jerusalem, where they will fight for God until the final hour.

As the savagery and sectarianism in Syria have grown, a new motivation has emerged: the desire to prove one's toughness. British officials noted that ISIS atrocities have played well with certain segments among Muslim youth, particularly those already involved in criminal activity. ISIS also offers its fighters uniforms, has English-language media, and otherwise appeals to young Westerners. Because ISIS controls territory in Iraq and Syria, it can also claim that it is building an "Islamic State"—a common theme in its propaganda.<sup>59</sup> ISIS is developing a "badass" brand, one that may be superseding that of the Al Qaeda core, which some see as weak compared with ISIS.<sup>60</sup>

Support for Syrian fighters is popular among Muslim communities in the West, according to Western intelligence officials, enhancing the status of volunteers within their communities back home. As one

official put it, going to Syria often makes a fighter a hero back home, as he is seen as standing up for his community.<sup>61</sup> In addition, local Islamist groups play up the violence there to gain recruits and fundraising. These local groups often link the conflict in Syria to problems at home, such as discrimination, or specific affronts, such as the cartoons published by a Danish newspaper that mocked the prophet Muhammad.<sup>62</sup> Thus, new motivations are mixed with existing grievances, and global ones with local ones.

Western governments lack a coherent counter-narrative for dissuading potential recruits from volunteering. As Shiraz Maher points out, "would-be jihadists find themselves adopting a not dissimilar view to Western governments—that Assad is guilty of committing atrocities against civilians, and that he should be removed."<sup>63</sup> At the same time, Western governments are criticized by jihadists (as well as many non-jihadists) for their passivity in the face of Muslim (or simply Syrian or Iraqi) suffering. The U.S. decision to intervene in Iraq to defend the Yazidis, an ethnic and religious minority whose members are considered infidels (unbelievers) by many Muslims (and devil-worshippers by some<sup>64</sup>), has only reinforced this narrative. Foreign fighters, in this sense, are stepping into a void left by the failure of their home governments to respond to the Assad and Maliki regimes' crimes against Sunni Muslims in Syria and Iraq.

## Ties to New and Existing Networks

When the conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Somalia began, there was no Al Qaeda or global jihadist presence there, and it took years, in some cases even decades, for it to emerge as a strong force. Iraq was an exception to this—part of the reason it was of grave

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Shiraz Maher and Peter Neumann, June 17, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Shiraz Maher and Peter Neumann, June 17, 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with European government official, June 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Shaarik H. Zafar, "Western Foreign Fighters in Syria: Implications for U.S. CVE Efforts," prepared remarks delivered at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 14, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/ZafarPreparedRemarks20140314.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Shiraz Maher, "ICSR Insight: British Foreign Fighters in Syria," The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, October 15, 2013, <http://icsr.info/2013/10/british-foreign-fighters-in-syria/>.

<sup>64</sup> Raya Jalabi, "Who are the Yazidis and why is Isis hunting them?" *The Guardian*, August 11, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/07/who-yazidi-isis-iraq-religion-ethnicity-mountains>.



concern to European officials at the time—but even there it took two years for a formal Al Qaeda affiliate to emerge. In Syria, extreme jihadist groups like JN and ISIS, both of which espouse an Al Qaeda-like ideology, quickly joined the fray.<sup>65</sup> By mid-2014, when ISIS expanded the war to western and northern Iraq, jihadist groups seemed to be dominating the struggle.

Although the Syrian opposition still consists of a wide range of groups, Western foreign fighters have long flowed primarily to those with a jihadist agenda such as JN and ISIS.<sup>66</sup> It is incredibly difficult to state with any degree of certainty the exact numbers of fighters in JN and ISIS, but Seth Jones of RAND put the number of fighters in JN by early 2014 at between 2,000 and 6,000,<sup>67</sup> and U.S. intelligence officials estimate that ISIS has as many as 31,500 fighters, including as many as 15,000 from countries beyond its base in Iraq, though that figure may include foreigners fighting for other groups.<sup>68</sup> Foreign fighters make up a large component of these groups, especially ISIS. They are attracted to these groups because these groups are more open to foreign fighters, their pay is often higher, their sectarianism is appealing, and they are seen as more proficient fighters.<sup>69</sup> As more have joined, the personal and organizational networks connecting new recruits to former fighters have naturally begun to concentrate on these groups, creating a self-reinforcing dynamic. Finally, ISIS's recent advances in Iraq have given it prestige and created a sense that it is a winner, making it more attractive to young recruits.

Often, which group an individual joins depends more on their facilitator than the recruit's preferences, as foreign fighters rarely arrive with such specific preferences about the different factions. ISIS, a group that entered the Syrian civil war from Iraq, has most actively sought foreign recruits. JN, like most other Syrian groups, was less interested in recruiting foreign fighters, as few have military experience and are therefore often seen as liabilities on the battlefield. In addition, JN feared some foreign fighters were spies. Nonetheless, JN and other groups have been willing to take in foreign fighters, using them particularly for menial tasks and suicide bombings.

While in Syria, the fighters develop new networks or become integrated into existing ones. Foreign fighters are often segregated by country of origin or language, strengthening their ties to their own nationals.<sup>70</sup>

## Presence of the Al Qaeda Core

In addition to Al Qaeda affiliates like JN and rival groups like ISIS, several Al Qaeda core members from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen have also traveled to Syria.<sup>71</sup> According to U.S. officials quoted in the *Associated Press*, these militants did not go to Syria to fight the Assad regime, but rather to recruit Europeans and Americans to attack U.S.-bound aircraft.<sup>72</sup> Intelligence officials fear that the Al Qaeda core could gain access to new Western operatives via its Syria presence and rejuvenate itself. The combination of experienced Al Qaeda operatives dedicated to planning terrorist

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<sup>65</sup> "The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria," Center for Terroranalyse, p. 3. For a comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of Al Qaeda-related groups in both Syria and Iraq, see Fishman, "Syria Proving More Fertile than Iraq to Al-Qa'ida's Operations."

<sup>66</sup> "The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria," Center for Terroranalyse, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Seth G. Jones, "A Persistent Threat: The Evolution of al Qa'ida and Other Salafi Jihadists," RAND Corporation (2014), p. 28, [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR637.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR637.html).

<sup>68</sup> Greg Miller and Juliet Eilperin, "U.S. intelligence agencies remain uncertain about danger posed by Islamic State," *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-intelligence-agencies-remain-uncertain-about-danger-posed-by-islamic-state/2014/09/13/23245e84-3aa6-11e4-bdfb-de4104544a37\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-intelligence-agencies-remain-uncertain-about-danger-posed-by-islamic-state/2014/09/13/23245e84-3aa6-11e4-bdfb-de4104544a37_story.html).

<sup>69</sup> "Foreign Fighters in Syria," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, p. 2, paragraphs 2-3, pp. 6-7, paragraph 5; Jomana Karadsheh, Jim Sciutto, and Laura Smith\_Park, "How Foreign Fighters are swelling ISIS ranks in startling numbers," *CNN*, September 14, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/12/world/meast/isis-numbers/>.

<sup>70</sup> "Foreign Fighters in Syria," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, p. 37, paragraph 52.

<sup>71</sup> Eric Schmitt, "Qaeda Militants Seek Syria Base, U.S. Officials Say," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/26/world/middleeast/qaeda-militants-seek-syria-base-us-officials-say.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Ken Dilanian and Eileen Sullivan, "Al-Qaida's Syrian Cell Alarms US," *The Associated Press*, September 13, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-enterprise-al-qaidas-syrian-cell-alarms-us>.

spectaculars in the West with numerous fresh young recruits with American and European passports is the nightmare of Western security services.<sup>73</sup>

## Use of Social Media

Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter all emerged during the 2000s as new tools for jihadists to use to mobilize followers.<sup>74</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>75</sup> A Danish intelligence report notes that the foreign fighter flow to Syria is younger than for past conflicts, with typical recruits being between 16 and 25 years old—a prime social media age.<sup>76</sup> Social media enables the rapid dissemination of jihadist ideas through a range of contacts. Sermons, videos of fighting, images of atrocities, and other forms of propaganda are used to motivate supporters.<sup>77</sup> Some groups advertise on Facebook, and some individuals use social media to call for attacks on their home countries.<sup>78</sup> Groups

like ISIS are particularly skilled at using social media to shape their image and recruit fighters.<sup>79</sup>

Many Westerners fighting in Syria and Iraq used Tumblr, Ask.fm, Twitter, and other forms of social media to learn about the conflict and are now using these platforms to disseminate their own views to followers back home.<sup>80</sup> Jihadist recruiters stress not only bringing items like hiking boots but also iPads so fighters can stay in touch with those back home.<sup>81</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. They also post pictures of cats.<sup>82</sup>

Taken together, these factors—some of which are undisputed, others of which are informed conjecture—suggest Western security services have good reason to be particularly concerned about the flow of their citizens to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

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<sup>73</sup> James R. Clapper, “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community,” statement for the record submitted to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2014, <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/140129/clapper.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> Maher, “ICSR Insight: British Foreign Fighters in Syria.”

<sup>75</sup> Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, “Syria’s Socially Mediated Civil War,” *Peaceworks* No. 91 (January 2014), <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW91-Syrias%20Socially%20Mediated%20Civil%20War.pdf>.

<sup>76</sup> “The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria,” Center for Terroranalyse, p. 2. One study of the median age for Arab foreign fighters to Iraq was 22-23 years old. See Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, “Al Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (West Point, NY: November 2007), p. 16, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-a-first-look-at-the-sinjar-records>.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Carter, Shiraz Maher, and Peter Neumann, “#Greenbirds: Measuring the Importance and Influence of Foreign Fighter Networks,” The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, April 2014, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Influence-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf>; A. Roussinos, “Jihad Selfies: These British Extremists in Syria Love Social Media,” *Vice*, December 5, 2013, [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/syrian-jihadist-selfies-tell-us-a-lot-about-their-war](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/syrian-jihadist-selfies-tell-us-a-lot-about-their-war); Zafar, “Western Foreign Fighters in Syria.”

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Marc Hecker, May 2014; Abul Taher and Amanda Perthen, “From shop assistant to the British Bin Laden,” *Mail Online*, May 31, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2644895/The-British-Bin-Laden-House-Fraser-trainee-unmasked-sadistic-Al-Qaeda-killer.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Jeff Stone, “ISIS Attacks Twitter Streams, Hacks Accounts To Make Jihadi Messages Go Viral,” *International Business Times*, June 17, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-attacks-twitter-streams-hacks-accounts-make-jihadi-messages-go-viral-1603842>.

<sup>80</sup> Taher and Perthen, “From shop assistant to the British Bin Laden.”

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Shiraz Maher and Peter Neumann, June 17, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Jon Stone, “Islamist Fighters in Iraq and Syria Keep Tweeting Pictures of Cats,” *Buzzfeed*, June 16, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jonstone/foreign-jihadi-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria-keep-tweeting-pict#2m9yskx>.

## MITIGATING FACTORS

The concern about foreign fighters becoming terrorists—and the particular fears about Syria and Iraq—are both justified and overstated. As the historical record makes clear, most foreign fighters do not end up as terrorists. Some of the above factors have silver linings or are otherwise more complex than they first appear, and there are numerous mitigating factors that make the conversion rate of foreign fighters into terrorists far lower than might be expected. Government policies can play an important role in further decreasing the dangers foreign fighters pose.

It is useful to consider the precedent of the Iraq War of the 2000s. Two sober and informed analysts, Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds, warned in 2005 that the Iraq War foreign fighter flow could be “even more dangerous than the fallout from Afghanistan” with regard to terrorism.<sup>83</sup> That same year, then-CIA director Porter Goss told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that “Islamic extremists are exploiting the Iraqi conflict to recruit new anti-US jihadists.”<sup>84</sup> Many dozens of young Western Muslims—one source gives 70 from the United Kingdom and 20 from France through 2006—went to fight in Iraq and, as feared, returned from the fighting with greater prestige.<sup>85</sup> In that conflict, volunteers were specifically motivated by anti-American sentiment and anger at specific European countries like the United Kingdom that supported the Iraq War.

However, a survey of major terrorist attacks in Europe from 2003 through 2014 reveals that Iraq did not play nearly as devastating a role as feared. In fact, the number of individuals who went to fight in Iraq and came back to commit terrorist acts may actually be *zero*, and in any event is a far lower number than was originally anticipated.<sup>86</sup> Analyst Jean-Pierre Filiu finds that the Iraq experience contributed to network formation, but that these networks were disrupted.<sup>87</sup> As Teun van Dongen contends, “Plausible as this may have sounded, no successful terrorist attack has been carried out by a jihadist who gained experience by fighting in Iraq.”<sup>88</sup>

So what explains why foreign fighters never successfully engaged in anti-Western terrorism in Europe or the United States? A number of factors played contributing roles: the lack of desire to carry out attacks back home; the death of many fighters; the fact that some fighters never came home and simply continued fighting in the next field of jihad; the type of training received; and, especially, the role of security services.

## Degree of Anti-Western Sentiment

Some individuals began as anti-Western jihadists, while others never acquired a fierce hatred of the West. French officials regularly cite the case of Mohammad Merah—who killed three soldiers in France and attacked a Jewish school, where he killed another four people, including three children—to illustrate the danger of returned foreign fighters in

<sup>83</sup> Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds, “Blowback Revisited,” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2005), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61190/peter-bergen-and-alec-reynolds/blowback-revisited>.

<sup>84</sup> Porter Goss, “DCI Testimony: Global Intelligence Challenges 2005,” prepared remarks delivered before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 16, 2005, [https://www.cia.gov/news-information/speeches-testimony/2005/Goss\\_testimony\\_02162005.html](https://www.cia.gov/news-information/speeches-testimony/2005/Goss_testimony_02162005.html).

<sup>85</sup> See Jean-Pierre Filiu, “Ansar al-Fatah and ‘Iraqi’ Networks in France,” in Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares, *The Evolution of the Global Terrorism Threat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, forthcoming), pp. 353-372.

<sup>86</sup> Several cases involve indirect links to Iraq. For example, the bungled June 2007 attacks on the Glasgow airport and nightclubs involved individuals who had Al Qaeda in Iraq members’ numbers in their cell phones. One U.S. official stated: “The event is best viewed as A.Q.I.-related, rather than A.Q.I.-directed.” See Raymond Bonner, Jane Perlez, and Eric Schmitt, “British Inquiry of Failed Plots Points to Iraq’s Qaeda Group,” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/14/world/europe/14london.html>. A terrorist attack in Stockholm in 2010 that killed three people was carried out by a Swede of Iraqi origin who was angry about the Iraq war and may have traveled to Iraq during the war. See Jonathan Paige, “Stockholm suicide bomber: Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly profile,” *The Guardian*, December 12, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/12/stockholm-suicide-bomber-profile>.

<sup>87</sup> Filiu, “Ansar al-Fatah and ‘Iraqi’ Networks in France,” p. 357.

<sup>88</sup> Teun van Dongen, “Foreign fighters in Syria: a terrorist threat to Europe?” Aspen Institute Italia, April 11, 2013, paragraph 7, <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspensia-online/article/foreign-fighters-syria-terrorist-threat-europe>. See also Martin Harrow, “The effect of the Iraq war on Islamist terrorism in the West,” *Cooperation and Conflict* Vol. 45, No. 3 (2010), pp. 274-293, p. 285, <http://cac.sagepub.com/content/45/3/274.abstract>.

Europe. Merah, however, was already committed to anti-Western terrorism before he traveled abroad to seek additional training. His attacks in France were chosen by him, not by the Al Qaeda core or any other foreign organization. In his case, going abroad meant little for acquiring the motivation or the skill to carry out a terrorist attack at home.

Indeed, it is plausible that foreign jihads can actually serve as a diversion for those already radicalized. Hegghammer finds that radicalized Western fighters are more likely to go abroad than to choose violence at home.<sup>89</sup> And in any event, Merah is an exception to the Afghanistan-based model: most foreign fighters are not committed to anti-Western violence before they leave home or when they return. And, as one study of foreign fighters in history found, “The vast majority of them went on to lead essentially ordinary lives,” even if they remained politically active.<sup>90</sup>

Many of those who traveled to fight in past conflicts did not end up acquiring a strong anti-Western sentiment while overseas. In the most comprehensive study done so far of jihadist foreign fighters, Thomas Hegghammer finds that only one in nine who travel abroad come back determined to do terrorism at home—a high percentage, but still only a small minority.<sup>91</sup> There are several possible reasons for this.

Although Al Qaeda and similar movements share general anti-Western goals, they vary tremendously in the degree to which they prioritize this: most, like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al Shabaab, have not focused on attacks in the West. Officials we interviewed as well as a British parliamentary report noted that those who trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan became far more dangerous to the West than those who went to Iraq (despite

the presence of an Al Qaeda affiliate there), “where there was not the same degree of hostility against the West.”<sup>92</sup>

The groups fighting in Syria and Iraq today are not focused primarily on the United States or Europe: in this sense, they are more like the groups that operated in Iraq after the 2003 U.S. invasion than the Al Qaeda core in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As Hegghammer contends, the groups in Syria and Iraq today “are not systematically trying to mount operations in the west”<sup>93</sup> and are far more focused on killing Shi’a than on killing Westerners (especially Westerners far outside the conflict zone). Indeed, the most dynamic group that has attracted the most Westerners—ISIS—is at war with Al Qaeda in part because of its sectarian focus.

Of course, to the degree that the West becomes more engaged in these conflicts, the focus of these groups may change. Officials in France worried that their country’s intervention in Mali would spark terrorism from French residents. As French anti-terrorism judge Marc Trévidic told reporters, “With this military intervention, we’re on the front lines. Suddenly, France is a priority target.”<sup>94</sup> Similarly, the recent U.S. intervention against ISIS in Iraq may change that group’s approach to the United States. The execution of the freelance American journalist James Foley in August 2014 by ISIS was explicitly intended as a warning to the United States not to continue its intervention against them in Iraq.

But for now, even groups like JN that are linked to the globally-oriented Al Qaeda core are still focused on the local struggle. As Marc Hecker contends, the jihadist groups in the Levant believe fighters are more useful in Syria and Iraq than in France.<sup>95</sup> These jihadist groups are fighting a civil war, and the

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<sup>89</sup> Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go?” p. 6.

<sup>90</sup> Malet, “Foreign Fighters Playbook.”

<sup>91</sup> Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go?” p. 10.

<sup>92</sup> House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, “Counter-terrorism,” p. 19; interviews with British counterterrorism officials, June 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Statement of Thomas Hegghammer in House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, “Counter-terrorism,” p. 85.

<sup>94</sup> Elaine Ganley, “France Girds for New Threats Amid Mali Operation,” *Associated Press*, January 15, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/france-girds-new-threats-after-mali-operation>

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Marc Hecker, May 2014.

demands of combat are overwhelming. They want foreign fighters to help the fight; attacking the West is usually a lesser priority.

The case of Moner Mohammad Abusalha illustrates their priorities. Abusalha raised alarms in the United States by becoming the first American to conduct a suicide attack in Syria, heightening fears that others like him might carry out similar attacks at home. Leaving his home in Florida, Abusalha joined JN, whose formal affiliation with Al Qaeda makes it nominally more focused on the United States and the West. Yet even he—a seemingly perfect candidate to strike the United States—was used for JN’s local campaign.

Another reason that these individuals often don’t end up posing a threat to the West is that many have little or no desire to ever attack their home countries, no matter how much anti-Western sentiment they are exposed to in the conflict zone. They were motivated to join the fight by something that happened abroad and they do not associate that fight with struggles in their homeland. The teachings of many mainstream but militant preachers reinforce this, arguing that fighting foreign “invaders” in places like Iraq is justified but carrying out terrorist attacks at home is not.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, the social status that comes with fighting abroad is far greater than that of committing terrorist attacks at home—it’s one thing to be seen as a heroic soldier fighting an invading army and quite another to be seen as a terrorist who bombs his own country.

Finally, foreign fighters may not want to carry out attacks back in their home countries for the simple fact that such attacks could endanger their own friends and family. Abdisalan Hussein Ali, a Somali-American from Minnesota who blew himself up

in an attack on African Union troops in Mogadishu in October 2011, told a friend in Minneapolis a couple years before he left for Somalia that he would never attack the United States. “Why would I do that?” the friend recalled Ali saying. “My mom could be walking down the street.”<sup>97</sup>

## The Consequences of Infighting

In some cases, the jihad itself may have turned off some foreign fighters. Civil wars are brutal and often involve attacks on civilians and—particularly in the Syrian and Iraqi cases—fellow Muslims. Even when fighters are not turned off by the brutality, the tough living and fighting conditions often sour the adventure and make them want to leave. According to one intelligence official, “some come back and are terrified.” Many of these guys “went for the t-shirt and the pictures” but saw awful things.<sup>98</sup> That official believed perhaps 30 to 40 percent of those who went to fight return disillusioned or have no intention of attacking at home.

Infighting among jihadist groups is making this disillusionment even more real in Syria and Iraq and is already discouraging would-be foreign fighters from traveling to the conflict zone. JN and ISIS have been engaged in a bitter struggle for supremacy, which erupted after the Al Qaeda core rejected ISIS and its claims to represent true jihad in Syria. As of late June 2014, this fighting had reportedly claimed as many as 7,000 lives—and since then probably far more; 86 were killed in one clash alone on August 8, 2014.<sup>99</sup> Such infighting particularly affects the foreign fighters, who cannot fall back on local networks to protect them.

In the first half of 2014, there were five known deaths of British nationals in Syria: four were from

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<sup>96</sup> Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go?” pp. 7–8.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Josh Kron, “American Identified as Bomber in Attack on African Union in Somalia,” *The New York Times*, October 30, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/31/world/africa/shabab-identify-american-as-bomber-in-somalia-attack.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/31/world/africa/shabab-identify-american-as-bomber-in-somalia-attack.html?_r=0).

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Danish official, May 2014.

<sup>99</sup> The Associated Press, “Syria Activists: 7,000 Killed in Rebel Infighting,” *Newsmax World*, June 29, 2014, <http://www.newsmaxworld.com/MiddleEast/Syria-jihadists-Assad/2014/06/29/id/579855/>; Agence France Presse, “‘86 dead’ as Syria’s Qaeda, allies repel jihadists,” *The Daily Star*, April 11, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Apr-11/252993-syria-death-toll-from-rebel-infighting-jumps-to-68.ashx>.

infighting.<sup>100</sup> One study of returnees to the Netherlands and Belgium from March 2013 found that infighting among Muslim groups disillusioned many of the returnees—and this study was carried out before serious fighting between ISIS and JN began.<sup>101</sup> Volunteers hoping to kill regime forces and apostates now find themselves in a bitter internecine conflict killing fellow jihadists and civilians. Danish officials found that the stories of infighting are one of the few arguments that dissuade potential foreign fighters from leaving in the first place: “we tell them you might end up shooting at one of your comrades down the block.”<sup>102</sup> Social media conversations also suggest that the infighting is leading potential foreign fighters to refrain from traveling to Syria and Iraq.

Most of the Westerners who travel to Syria and Iraq are unskilled; as a result, many of them are unwelcome or abused by local groups—they do not speak the language, do not understand local culture, and are poor fighters. In addition, they are easier to mistreat because, unlike local fighters, they do not have families who would protest or take revenge. A European intelligence officer indicated that some foreign fighters are executed as presumed spies.<sup>103</sup> Despite rather glamorous photos posted online, many are actually tasked with performing dull logistical duties (including unpleasant ones such as burying bodies) or are quickly given the honor of becoming suicide bombers.<sup>104</sup>

Others may have turned away from the struggle because of de-radicalization programs or other efforts to re-integrate them into the community. Returnees from the Afghan jihad, for example, faced highly

varied conditions upon return: some, like those from the United Arab Emirates, were welcomed back and given generous social welfare packages to encourage their integration; others, such as those in Egypt and North Africa, faced far more suspicion.<sup>105</sup> Individuals who face a lack of alternatives in their home societies are particularly vulnerable.<sup>106</sup> In Denmark, for example, the authorities have specific re-training programs that aim to capitalize on the fatigue and disillusionment that some returnees feel and to offer them the possibility of re-integration into their home societies.

Indeed, it is possible—though by no means certain—that the Syria conflict will produce *less* anti-Western sentiment than previous conflicts. British officials worry that Western countries are damned either way: criticized if they intervene and thus appear as imperialists, but also blasted if they stand aside and Muslims die.<sup>107</sup> Because the conflict is far more sectarian and apocalyptic than previous conflicts, the concerns of the fighters are on intra-Muslim problems, not on the policies of Western governments. In contrast, Iraq’s insurgency in the mid-2000s was directly battling U.S. and European forces, giving volunteers an immediate grievance against their home governments. The anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan did produce Al Qaeda, but it took years from the organization’s founding in 1988 for it to truly focus on the United States, and this shift occurred when the organization was based in Sudan.<sup>108</sup> Of course, to the extent that the United States and other Western countries intervene in Iraq, as began in August 2014, this dynamic may change and anti-Western sentiment may increase.

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Shiraz Maher and Peter Neumann, June 17, 2014.

<sup>101</sup> Ronald Sandee, “Inside the Jihad: Dutch Fighters in Syria,” KRONOS, October 24, 2013, [http://www.kronosadvisory.com/Kronos\\_DUTCH\\_FIGHTERS.IN.SYRIA.pdf](http://www.kronosadvisory.com/Kronos_DUTCH_FIGHTERS.IN.SYRIA.pdf).

<sup>102</sup> Interview with European intelligence officer, May 2014.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with European intelligence officer, May 2014.

<sup>104</sup> “Foreign Fighters in Syria,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, p. 38, paragraph 54.

<sup>105</sup> Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 110.

<sup>106</sup> For an overview of this model, see Watts, “Second Foreign Fighters Glut.”

<sup>107</sup> Interviews with British government officials, June 2014.

<sup>108</sup> Kim Cragin, “Early History of Al-Qa’ida,” *The Historical Journal* Vol. 51, No. 4 (2008), pp. 1047–1067.

Many of those who return are not fixed in their views. British officials, when categorizing foreign fighters, believe that “confused” may constitute the largest group: they may be traumatized or otherwise unsure of what to do next.<sup>109</sup> They might later become violent, but they could also lead peaceful lives.

## The Wrong Training and Focus

The focus on the immediate civil war shapes the skills fighters learn. Small arms proficiency and guerrilla tactics, for example, are at the core of many Syrian groups’ tactics; conducting surveillance, building an underground network, operating clandestinely, and other skills useful for conducting terrorist attacks—especially terrorist attacks in hyper-vigilant Western countries—are not always part of the curriculum. In Afghanistan, the foreign fighters did not become a threat to the West during the struggle against the Soviet Union or during the Afghan civil war that followed. Rather, they became a threat after the Taliban took control of most of Afghanistan in the mid-1990s and Al Qaeda was able to profit from the relative calm to set up camps that trained foreign fighters in the techniques of terrorism.

In Syria and Iraq, the civil war rages on, and those foreign fighters who are trained at all are trained to fight in that war. Danish intelligence notes that Danes who travel to Syria learn how to handle weapons but is more speculative on whether they are actually trained in terrorist-related skills, noting simply that individuals have an “opportunity” to do so.<sup>110</sup> Interviews with European intelligence officials also suggest that training is limited—the emphasis is on small arms training, though there is probably some explosives and sniper training.<sup>111</sup> However,

these officials were careful to stress that they often do not know the type of training a particular individual received. An Israeli think tank affiliated with Israeli intelligence declares the training “rudimentary” and believes that only those who already have combat experience are given more training.<sup>112</sup>

But proficiency with small arms and guerilla tactics are still valuable skills, and the networks and steadiness gained from combat are useful to domestic groups. Still, these are not master terrorism classes. Mehdi Nemmouche, the French national who fought in Syria and is suspected of murder at the Jewish Museum in Belgium, proficiently used his weapons to do the killing—a skill he might have picked up in Syria—but the fact that he did not quickly dispose of his weapons and attracted the attention of security services looking for drug runners illustrates both the dangers and limits of the skill set.<sup>113</sup>

## Living Dangerously

Many foreign fighters die in combat: the fighting is bloody, and the volunteers rarely have effective training.<sup>114</sup> Martin Harrow put the percent of foreign fighters killed in combat in Iraq in the 2000s at perhaps 5 percent,<sup>115</sup> and the death toll is likely to be far higher in the current conflict in Syria and Iraq than in most other conflicts due to the ferocity of the fighting (and infighting) there. Even preliminary numbers are vague, but estimates by European intelligence services given in interviews suggest that perhaps 20 percent of those who have traveled from Europe to join the fight have died in combat and that these numbers may be increasing due to infighting.<sup>116</sup> In contrast, most of those who traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan went to train, not to fight,

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<sup>109</sup> Interviews with British government officials, June 2014; interview with Danish government official, May 2014.

<sup>110</sup> “The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria,” Center for Terroranalyse, p. 4.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Marc Hecker, May 2014.

<sup>112</sup> “Foreign Fighters in Syria,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, p. 35, paragraph 47.

<sup>113</sup> Anshel Pfeffer, “Analysis / They looked for drugs and found the Brussels suspect instead,” *Haaretz*, June 1, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/.premium-1.596574>.

<sup>114</sup> Filiu, “Ansar al-Fatah and “Iraqi” Networks in France,” p. 362.

<sup>115</sup> Harrow, “The effect of the Iraq war,” p. 286.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with European Intelligence officer, May 2014.

according to a European intelligence official. As one European government official commented, “they are not a concern if they die; only if they come back.”<sup>117</sup>

## Staying on to Fight

Some of those who survive still do not return home, either because they are now committed to finishing the fight (or taking it to a new foreign land) or because they can no longer return to their home country without fear of arrest—or both.

When conflicts end, some fighters may remain fully committed to global jihad and seek to aid Muslims embattled elsewhere. When the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan ended, fighters dispersed to Bosnia, Chechnya, and other conflict zones as well as to Pakistan and Sudan. Most did not seek to carry out attacks in the West. In Syria and Iraq, many foreign fighters have made a point of declaring that they have no intention of returning home, even burning their passports in videos posted to the Internet.<sup>118</sup> One European intelligence official estimated that perhaps 10 to 20 percent of foreign fighters do not plan to go back to their home countries—ever. Many of these are probably among the most zealous.

## The Role of Security Services

Western security services paid little attention to foreign fighters who had returned to their midst from Afghanistan and the Balkans in the 1990s. Not surprisingly, these veterans of foreign jihad were able to organize cells, plot attacks, engage in fundraising and recruitment, and otherwise pose a danger to Western countries. However, after 9/11 and during the Iraq War in the 2000s, security services were on full alert—as they are now with regard to the fight in Syria and Iraq.

As a result, individuals who went to Pakistan to train after 2001 were far more likely to be caught than they were before 9/11. So it is important to recognize that the one in nine foreign fighters who came back and conducted attacks in the West that Hegghammer identified includes fighters from a time when security services were not on full alert. Indeed, as Hegghammer modestly notes, “The thing about the average that I have put forward is that it is just that: is an average. The challenge is that the return rate—the blow-back rate if you will—varies enormously between conflicts.” He goes on to add, “Afghanistan, or the AfPak region, has a relatively high return rate. In fact, as many as three-quarters of the foreign fighters involved in plots in Europe have their background from AfPak, so the point is we cannot extrapolate this ratio to Syria.”<sup>119</sup>

Western security services vary tremendously in their competence, size, and approach to counterterrorism. In addition, their laws vary on important questions, such as how easy it is to prosecute individuals suspected of affiliating with a Syrian jihadist group and how extensive monitoring of suspects can be upon return. A particularly important question is how much Western services can stop mobilization for jihad in Syria or Iraq: in Denmark, for example, one local imam praises “martyrs” who go to Syria as heroic and godly.<sup>120</sup> In most Western countries, it is not illegal to fight abroad, only to belong to or provide material support for a group designated as a terrorist group by the European Union or the United States: currently only ISIS and JN in Syria and Iraq. Standards vary as to what constitutes “joining.”

Yet regardless of all these differences, the travel of Western foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq offers security services several advantages in detecting and disrupting potential plots. When these individuals travel, their absence is usually discovered by the local

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<sup>117</sup> Interview with European government official, May 2014.

<sup>118</sup> See, for example, “European ISIS Foreign Fighters (Jihadist) Burn their passports after arriving in Syria,” June 27, 2014, [http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=509\\_1403900374](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=509_1403900374).

<sup>119</sup> Statement of Thomas Hegghammer in House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, “Counter-terrorism,” p. 84.

<sup>120</sup> Paul Sauer, “Danske muslimer opildnes til hellig krig i Syrien,” *Jyllands-Posten*, March 1, 2013, <http://www.jyllands-posten.dk/premium/indland/EC5226905/danske-muslimer-opildnes-til-hellig-krig-i-syrien/>.



security services. Our interviews indicate that many volunteers come from known criminal or radical circles that police or security services were already monitoring. Danish intelligence found that the “vast majority” of those who went to fight in Syria were affiliated with Islamist or criminal circles—“a totally fucked up mix,” in the words of one interviewee.<sup>121</sup> Other information may come from a sudden absence from receiving various social welfare benefits, appalled and fearful family members, or informants within the community. Often the information comes from the volunteers themselves: they broadcast their presence on social media and otherwise make their decision to travel known.

Community members are often particularly useful for identifying individuals who have already radicalized but who are not on the radar screen already. In addition, such efforts are usually cumulative: individuals who go to Syria or Iraq may be linked to other current or potential volunteers as well as existing radical networks of which security services may not previously have been aware. Because so many returnees are known, it is hard for them to form the types of large, local networks that would be necessary to carry out a large-scale attack without attracting the attention of the security services. European security services attest that although the number of their citizens going to Syria is large and threatening, they have a fairly good handle on who these individuals are. As one French official told us, “Every time a network gets big, they make mistakes and get discovered.”<sup>122</sup>

Because it is easy to join these networks, it is relatively easy to infiltrate agents into them, particularly for

Arab governments allied with the West. Additionally, some of the individuals who join can be turned, used as informers or as spokesmen to discredit the group. Playing up grievances individuals have from their jihadist experiences, threatening the guilty with jail time, and other methods can work to transform fighters into intelligence assets.

## The Other Side of Social Media

Social media is an important means of fundraising, recruitment, and travel facilitation for jihadist groups, but it also involves huge risks for them. By publicizing activities on social media—so useful for bragging rights back home—individuals identify themselves to security services and at times provide incriminating information and valuable intelligence such as their group affiliation, presence when atrocities are being committed, intentions, and comrades. In addition, social media and the associated analysis of “friends” and “followers” can enable intelligence services to rapidly understand broader networks of influence and conspiracy, as well as identify when foreign fighters might return home.<sup>123</sup> As one observer put it, some potential terrorists were “totally invisible” until they went off to fight and exposed themselves via the Internet.<sup>124</sup> A European government official noted that despite the recent revelations by Edward Snowden about the National Security Agency (NSA) and years of spying on terrorists, many remain “totally oblivious” to the abilities of Western signals intelligence agencies.<sup>125</sup> As John Mueller put it, “[w]e’ve had 13 years in which officials talk about how they listen to ‘chatter’ by jihadists, and yet the jihadists continue to chatter.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> “The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria,” Center for Terroranalyse, p. 2.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with French government official, May 2014.

<sup>123</sup> Although individual jihadists may have many “followers” on social media, security officials are often able to develop a set of indicators that reveal when a particular follower is more likely to join a violent group.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with Danish official, May 2014.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with British government official, June 2014.

<sup>126</sup> E-mail communication with authors, September 2014.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As the above analysis makes clear, the threat of Westerners traveling to Syria and Iraq is not negligible, but nor should it be overstated. Some individual fighters may try to use violence when they return, but the vast majority will die in the war zone, stay on to continue fighting, return home and refrain from violence, or be quickly caught and jailed.

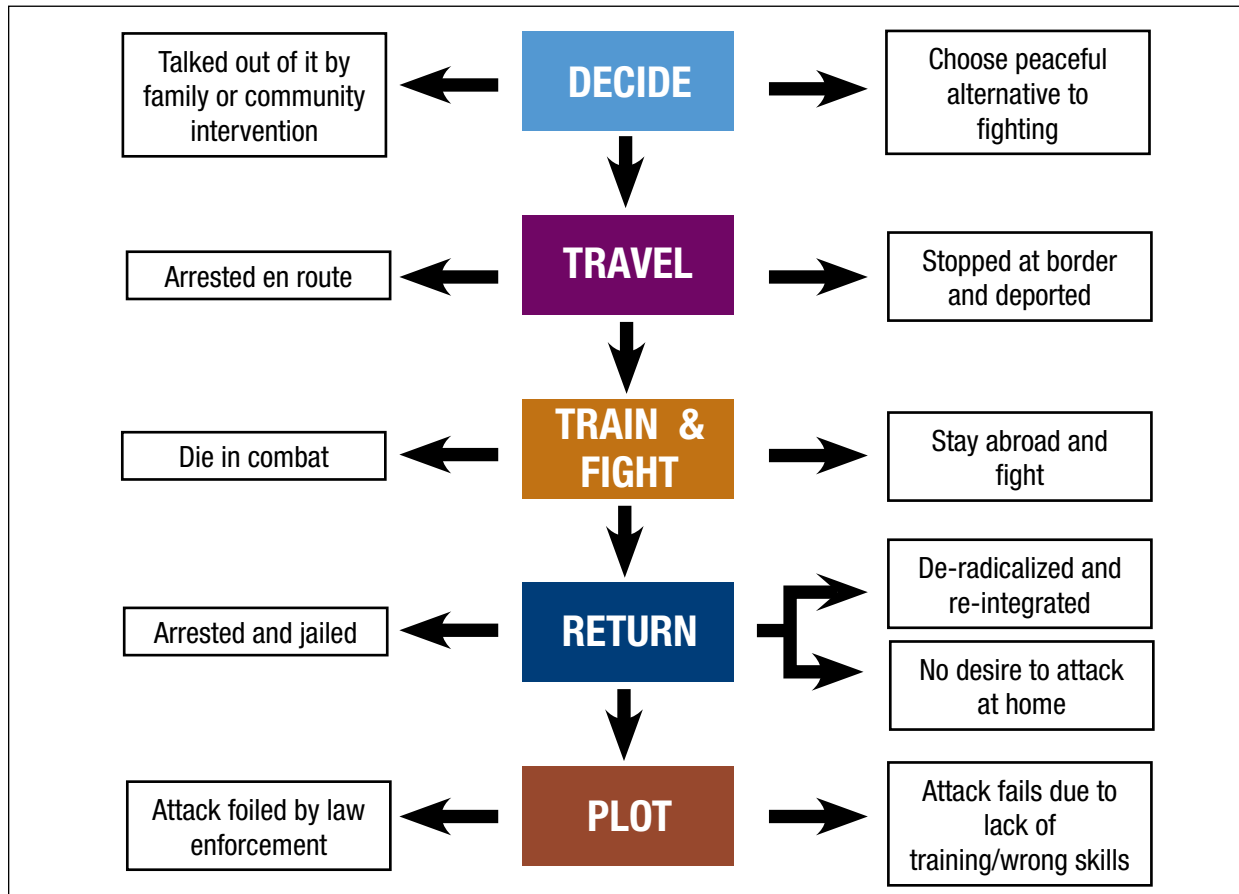
Of course, terrorism is a small-numbers game, and it only takes a few sufficiently trained and motivated individuals to produce a horrific tragedy (19 in the final stage of 9/11). But following the model outlined in the first section, we can think about the conflict in Iraq and Syria as a “terrorist production system” with five stages. There is no single point of failure in

this production system, and inevitably some individuals will complete the journey and become successful terrorists. But by intervening at every stage in the process, there are ways to reduce the numbers and thus dramatically decrease the odds that foreign fighters will become a problem in the West.

The model presented in Figure 3 shows how the various mitigating factors and effective policies can (though not necessarily will) lessen the danger presented by foreign fighters.

First is the **decision** stage. It makes sense to reduce the numbers of those going to the conflict zone in the first place by interfering in the decision to go. After all, those who do not go cannot be radicalized by foreign fighting. The Danish government has an extensive program to talk to potential volunteers before they go to Syria, working with families and local

FIGURE 3. COMPLEX MODEL OF FOREIGN FIGHTER RADICALIZATION



authorities. They stress the dangers of fighting and the consequences, such as losing welfare benefits, as well as peaceful alternatives to help the Syrian people. So far, this program has paid only limited dividends. Both Denmark and France have recently set up hotlines for family and community members to alert authorities that someone might travel to Syria. In the United Kingdom, the British government has appealed to Muslim women to persuade their sons and brothers not to join the fray.<sup>127</sup> Britain also has a “Prevent” program designed to decrease extremism. Aaron Y. Zelin and Jonathan Prohov write:

One way Britain has tried to combat the recruitment of its citizens is by removing recruitment material from the Internet. Between January and March 2014, Britain had 8,000 “takedowns” of online content—a sudden and dramatic increase, considering there were only 21,000 takedowns conducted over the previous four years combined. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has also been putting money into a social media program aimed at deterring British citizens from traveling to Syria to fight. In addition, the British police recently announced that they will be partnering with charitable organizations in a campaign to prevent young people from going to Syria. As reported by *The New York Times*, “Officers plan to hand out leaflets at British ports warning of the risks of traveling to Syria, and officers plan to advise people who want to support humanitarian efforts in Syria to avoid traveling there and to donate to non-profit organizations instead.”<sup>128</sup>

Western countries should push a counter-narrative that stresses the brutality of the conflict and the internecine violence among jihadists. In the United States, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)’s Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) group, in partnership with the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), has created community awareness briefings designed “to educate communities about the threat of online, international, and homegrown radicalization.”<sup>129</sup> According to WORDE:

These briefings are a unique opportunity to foster trust between local communities and the U.S. Government, which over time can establish a two-way means of communication whereby the community can learn about the government’s efforts to counter extremism, as well as services offered by law enforcement to protect their neighborhoods from these and other threats, and public officials can receive information from the community about emerging threats.

However, in general, governments are poor at developing counter-narratives and lack community credibility. As one French official admitted, “we are not good at this.”<sup>130</sup> It is usually better to elevate existing voices of community leaders who already embrace the counter-narrative than to try to handle this directly through government channels. Pragmatic arguments are better than theological ones, as governments make bad religious authorities. “Turned” jihadists and their stories would be particularly convincing. One possible model for Western countries to emulate comes from Saudi Arabia, where the

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<sup>127</sup> Murad Batal al-Shishani, “The challenge of keeping Denmark’s Muslims out of Syria,” *BBC News*, May 19, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27423789>.

<sup>128</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin and Jonathan Prohov, “The Foreign Policy Essay: Proactive Measures—Countering the Returnee Threat,” *Lawfare* (blog), May 18, 2014, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/05/the-foreign-policy-essay-proactive-measures-countering-the-returnee-threat/>. A reviewer of this paper notes that Internet takedowns have little effect on recruitment as websites just reappear hosted in non-UK locations the very next day.

<sup>129</sup> “The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC),” The World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), 2014, <http://www.worde.org/programs/1013-2/the-national-counterterrorism-center-nctc/#sthash.GBdSFEkJ.dpuf>; Zafar, “Western Foreign Fighters in Syria.”

<sup>130</sup> Interview with French government official, May 2014.

Saudi government has sought to discourage its citizens from traveling to Syria to fight by running interviews with returned, and disillusioned, jihadis on Saudi state television.<sup>131</sup> These interviews also send a message to those who want to come in from the jihadist cold that society will welcome them back.

Also vital is developing peaceful alternatives for helping the people affected by the conflicts in the Middle East. Some fighters—certainly not all, but a significant portion—were originally motivated by a genuine desire to defend the Syrian people against the brutality of the Asad regime. And indeed the rhetoric of Western leaders, including President Obama, embraces this goal as well. Encouraging charitable activities, identifying legitimate channels for assistance, and otherwise highlighting what concerned individuals can do to help alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people may siphon off some of the supply of foreign fighters. As the nature of the conflict in Syria and Iraq has shifted and involved more intra-Muslim violence (and many associated brutalities), the potential for turning off fighters motivated by humanitarian concerns is far higher. Of course, if the United States becomes more involved in the Iraqi conflict, this dynamic may change.

Local programs for providing assistance can also improve domestic intelligence gathering capabilities in two ways, according to Western security service officials. First, simply being out and about in the community gives government officials more access to information about potential radicals. Families become comfortable with intelligence services, as do community leaders. Second, such programs allow intelligence officials to gain access to individuals who can potentially be recruited to inform on other would-be jihadists.

The second stage in the foreign fighter radicalization process is the **travel** to Syria. Disrupting the transit

route via Turkey is one of the most promising ways of reducing the threat of foreign fighters to Europe and the United States. Doing so will primarily require better cooperation between Western governments and Turkish authorities, who have not always seen stopping fighters who seek to overthrow Asad from reaching the battlefield as their highest priority. But as Turkish authorities are now becoming more worried about the jihadist threat to Turkey, Western security services should establish channels with Turkish intelligence and police to warn them of the presence of specific individuals headed to Syria through Turkey and to encourage Turkey to turn them away from the Turkish border or stop them at the Syrian border and deport them. Though there are other ways into Syria, all are far harder and more costly for Western fighters.

Security cooperation among European services and between European and American services is also essential. Nemmouche, for example, was known to French intelligence, and the German government was aware he was passing through Frankfurt: unfortunately, reports indicate that the French may have mistakenly issued a warrant in the name of his uncle, enabling Nemmouche to slip through.<sup>132</sup> Intelligence collected from the communications of foreign fighters, shared open-source monitoring, and other information from one service can prove vital for discovering transnational networks. Cooperation within Europe is indispensable for stopping travel as jihadists from one European country often try to travel to Turkey and then on to Syria via another European country in order to avoid detection.

In the third stage of the process, the foreign fighters are **training and fighting** in Syria, mostly out of the reach of European or American influence. But even here, there are subtle ways of influencing the terrorist production function. Western security agencies should do everything they can to sow doubt in the

<sup>131</sup> Sultan al-Barei, "Disillusioned by al-Qaeda: Saudi fighter in Syria airs confessions," *Al-Shorfa*, March 20, 2014, [http://al-shorfa.com/en\\_GB/articles/meii/features/2014/03/20/feature-01](http://al-shorfa.com/en_GB/articles/meii/features/2014/03/20/feature-01).

<sup>132</sup> This mistake was reported by *Nouvelle Observateur* but denied by the French Interior Ministry. See Yifa Yaakov, "France was warned in advance about Brussels killer," *The Times of Israel*, June 4, 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/france-was-warned-in-advance-about-brussels-killer/>.

minds of extremist leaders in Iraq and Syria about the true loyalties of Western Muslim volunteers. Highlighting information gained from recruits and even disinformation about the degree of infiltration by security services can heighten fears. If jihadist organizations come to view foreigners as potential spies or as corrupting influences, they might assign them to noncombat roles, test their allegiances by offering them the one-way ticket of suicide bombings, or even avoid recruiting them altogether.

Upon the foreign fighters' **return**, the fourth stage, it is critical to turn them away from violence and jihad. Western services report that they usually know when individuals return and that many return with doubts. As a first step, security services must triage returnees, identifying which ones deserve the most attention: our interviews indicate triaging is done inconsistently (and in some cases not at all) among the Western security services. Inevitably, some dangerous individuals will be missed, and some individuals identified as not particularly dangerous might later become a threat, but a first look is vital for prioritization.

Efforts to promote a counter-narrative are valuable, particularly if they involve parents, preachers, and community leaders.<sup>133</sup> Community programs deserve considerable attention. The goal should be to move potential terrorists towards non-violence; since many are in that category already, hounding them with the threat of arrest or otherwise creating a sense of alienation can backfire. In the past, family and community members have at times been successful in steering returned fighters toward a different path, even getting them to inform on their former comrades.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, sending returnees to jail

for relatively minor crimes such as going abroad to fight with a foreign terrorist organization against a distant enemy may simply put them in prison for a few years and expose them to the radicalizing elements present in many European prisons, where many minor players become exposed to hardened jihadists and integrate into broader networks.<sup>135</sup>

Politically, of course, it is easier to arrest them than to re-integrate them: a terrorist who acted after security services passed on a chance to arrest him would embarrass the service and enrage the public. And communities and particularly families are often a source of assistance—but only if they trust the government.<sup>136</sup> In Britain, one official worried that using community-based programs to win over families and then passing the information to intelligence services to detain family members would prevent fearful mothers and other concerned individuals from coming forward and identifying at-risk individuals.<sup>137</sup>

The experiences of Denmark and France make a useful contrast. French policy is to systematically prosecute returnees on charges of terrorism. According to Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve, the formula is straightforward: "I'm often asked what happens to people who leave to wage jihad in Syria when they return to France. It's simple: They're connected with a terrorist enterprise, [so they're] arrested and handed over to justice."<sup>138</sup> True to that view, two underage boys from Toulouse who went to Syria and returned to France after being disillusioned by the fight were arrested, much to the consternation of their parents.<sup>139</sup> France also recently announced that those suspected of wanting to become foreign fighters would have their passports confiscated and their

<sup>133</sup> House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, "Counter-terrorism," p. 48.

<sup>134</sup> See John Mueller, ed., *Terrorism since 9/11: The American Cases*, March 2014, cases 24, 28, and 33, <http://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/since.html>.

<sup>135</sup> Filiu, "Ansar al-Fatah and 'Iraqi' Networks in France," p. 358.

<sup>136</sup> See Ahmad Mansour, "Mum, I'm Fighting for Allah Now," *Fikra Forum*, February 6, 2014, <http://fikraforum.org/?p=4599>.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with British officials, June 17, 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Jamey Keaten, "French Police Arrest 6 Suspected Syria Jihadists," *The Associated Press*, May 13, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/french-police-arrest-6-suspected-syria-jihadists>.

<sup>139</sup> "Toulouse: les deux apprentis jihadistes retracent leur périple en garde à vue," *Le Parisien*, January 29, 2014, <http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/video-toulouse-les-deux-ados-candidats-au-jihad-en-garde-a-vue-29-01-2014-3539361.php>.

names put on a Europe-wide watchlist.<sup>140</sup> Britain also emphasizes prosecution and is even withdrawing the passports of fighters and stripping those with dual-citizenship of their British citizenship.<sup>141</sup>

In Denmark, by contrast, returnees are carefully evaluated for risk: those who are considered traumatized are sometimes recruited as informants, and in general there is an attempt to get them into school or into a job and to otherwise remove them from a dangerous milieu. Danish and Dutch observers fear that being more coercive might strengthen “the victim discourse” within the Muslim community and thereby exacerbate the social conditions that can lead some individuals to participate in jihad.<sup>142</sup>

Harsh steps are at times necessary, but they must be applied gingerly or else they may backfire. For example, when an individual on the fence knows he will face imprisonment upon return, he may feel he has less to lose by moving toward terrorism at home. As Shiraz Maher put it, “this makes the decision for you.”<sup>143</sup> When networks see their members systematically targeted, some may focus their energies on the government rather than the struggle in Syria. Such coercive measures can also create “suspect communities” where radicalization is more likely and where community members are less likely to work with the police and government in general.<sup>144</sup> As one expert told us, in these communities young Muslims “hear they are different and dangerous” and thus are more prone to leave for Syria and Iraq.<sup>145</sup>

Politically, however, it is easier to take harsh steps, as missing a threat is treated more harshly than is creating one that didn’t exist before. A Dutch expert

also pointed out that in countries like the Netherlands, where right-wing political parties critical of many aspects of Islam are strong in mainstream politics, working with highly conservative figures against extremism is politically difficult.<sup>146</sup> Even more challenging, some fighters may need psychological counseling: the horrors of Syria and Iraq are as bad as any war, and many returnees have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), according to Western security officials.<sup>147</sup> But although it may be politically difficult to propose spending money to care for people whom many consider terrorists, failing to do so is likely to lead to violence that could have been prevented. If individuals who need counseling fear they are likely to be imprisoned instead, any psychological disorders they may have are more likely to be left untreated.

To disrupt foreign fighters in the fifth and final stage of **plotting** terrorist attacks, security services must remain focused on the returnee problem and have sufficient resources to monitor the problem as it emerges in their countries. The good news is that going to Syria and Iraq and returning home usually does bring one to the attention the security services. But maintaining vigilance as the numbers increase will be difficult purely for reasons of resources. Marc Hecker commented that France could handle the “dozens” who returned from Iraq but would be overwhelmed by the “hundreds” who may come back from Syria.<sup>148</sup>

Keeping track of that many suspects, particularly if it involves full-time surveillance, is exceptionally resource intensive. The Australian security services estimate that it will cost 8 million Australian dollars

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<sup>140</sup> Elaine Ganley, “France Unveils Plan to Stop Youths from Fighting in Syria,” *The Associated Press*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/world/2014/04/24/france-unveils-plan-stop-youths-from-fighting-syria/nMPM1oS6gELPAjm77WiZrJ/story.html>.

<sup>141</sup> House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, “Counter-terrorism,” pp. 35-38.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Floris Vermuelen, July 2014; interview with Danish official, May 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Shiraz Maher and Peter Neumann, June 17, 2014.

<sup>144</sup> Floris Vermeulen, “Suspect Communities: Targeting Violent Extremism at the Local Level,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* Vol. 26 (2014), pp. 286-306, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2012.705254#preview>.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Floris Vermuelen, July 2014.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Floris Vermuelen, July 2014.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with European security officials, June 2014.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Marc Hecker, May 2014.

(US\$7.4 million) a year to monitor just one returning jihadist around the clock.<sup>149</sup> Yet failing to monitor a known suspect would be difficult to justify in hindsight after an attack. As one intelligence official explained, “This is what gets directors fired.” For intelligence services, often the problem is not in accessing or gathering the data, but in processing, analyzing, and following up on it in a timely manner. “The data are buried in a mountain of data,” noted the same European analyst.<sup>150</sup>

At the same time, their own effectiveness can work against them: by reducing the problem considerably, they decrease the danger, thereby creating the impression that they need fewer resources. One way to mitigate this effect is for security services to spread the burden of responsibility around by training and sharing information with local police and other law-enforcement and community organizations. But they will still need to continually make the case to the people holding the purse strings that the sheer volume of fighters coming from Syria and Iraq requires an increased and sustained effort to successfully manage the threat. In making this case, it is tempting to engage in hyperbole and threat inflation. But security services should resist that temptation, as a distorted view of the threat will ultimately distort the response.

European and American laws vary considerably when it comes to the power and authority of security services, the tradeoffs between the protection of free speech and the risk of incitement, and the rights of returnees. In Denmark, there is no administrative detention, and the government cannot force returnees to check in; everything must first go through the court system. In addition, the burden of proof required to establish that an individual is linked to a jihadist group is high: Danish government officials

must prove that the individual actually committed a criminal act, not simply that they had ties to a listed terrorist group. In France, a conspiracy to commit terrorism must involve at least three persons. In addition, individuals cannot be arrested for merely plotting attacks—the authorities must wait until they actually begin to carry out the attack.<sup>151</sup> Only very recently did conspiracies to commit terrorist attacks abroad become illegal in France.

Security cooperation among European services and between European and American services is absolutely necessary. During the last war in Iraq, networks of fighters with Iraq experience were disrupted in part by European, Arab, and American security cooperation.<sup>152</sup> Intelligence from the communications of foreign fighters, shared open-source monitoring, and other information obtained by one service can prove crucial for discovering transnational networks. As noted earlier, cooperation within Europe is critical for stopping travel, as jihadists from one European country often try to travel to Turkey and then on to Syria via another European country in order to avoid detection. Many European countries are more worried about attacks emanating from their neighbors (Denmark from Sweden; France from Belgium) than they are about attacks from their own soil, where they are confident in their surveillance capabilities.

In sum, there is much that can be done to reduce the threat of foreign fighters committing terrorist attacks in the West. But almost inevitably, there will be some terrorist attacks in Europe or the United States carried out by returnees from Syria or Iraq. Terrorism, unfortunately, has become a feature of modern life. It cannot be eradicated, only controlled. And the fallout of the civil wars in Syria and Iraq will certainly make that problem even more difficult. Yet

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<sup>149</sup> Cameron Stewart, “Jihadist watch to cost \$8m a suspect,” *The Australian*, August 8, 2014, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/jihadist-watch-to-cost-8m-a-suspect/story-e6frg8yo-1227017233690#>.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with European intelligence officials, May 2014.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with French official, May 2014.

<sup>152</sup> Filiu, “Ansar al-Fatah and “Iraqi” Networks in France,” p. 357.

it is important not to panic and to recognize that both the United States and Europe have dealt with this problem before and already have very effective measures in place to greatly reduce the threat of terrorism from jihadist returnees and to limit the scale of any attacks that might occur. Those measures can

and should be improved—and, more importantly, adequately resourced. But the standard of success cannot be perfection. If it is, we are doomed to failure and, worse, doomed to an overreaction which will waste resources and cause dangerous policy mistakes.



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