

3. KEY ELEMENTS OF THE COUNTERTERRORISM CHALLENGE

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Countering terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) today is a complex endeavor. Heightened political turmoil combined with socioeconomic pressures creates conditions conducive to armed militant activity. Extremist groups are also taking advantage of a steady supply of weapons and foreign fighters, porous borders, social media tools, reliable revenue streams, and ungoverned space.

More than a decade of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency activity—both victories and losses—offers key lessons for the United States in today’s struggle.¹ But violent extremists have also learned many lessons after years of parrying with local and foreign forces.² Today’s counterterrorism coalition must understand the value and limits of recent experience as its members craft approaches to an adaptive, highly motivated adversary.

The MENA region offers several counterterrorism challenges. Egypt’s Sinai, Libya, Yemen, and parts of Lebanon

1. Key lessons from over a decade of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency activity include among others, the importance of local partnerships, trusted security services (either local or international), human intelligence, counter messaging, economic development, and political inclusion.

2. These lessons include the importance of diversifying and localizing funding methods, of using social media, of exploiting corrupt government officials, and of carrying out effective governance in safe havens.

are experiencing a range of violent extremist activity. But the Syria-Iraq theater, where Western countries and local partners have undertaken an offensive against the Islamic State, offers the most significant test for counterterrorism strategies as they confront broad safe havens, robust funding portfolios, and a steady supply of motivated foreign fighters.

Each of these elements played a role in conflicts with Islamic State predecessors, and they continue to factor into counterterrorism efforts against other militant groups. Complicating these efforts is that the Islamic State and other violent extremist groups in the region, such as Jabhat al-Nusra (also known as the al-Nusra Front) and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), blend both insurgent and terrorist characteristics, a complicated hybrid that requires a new set of counterterrorism strategies.

Focusing broadly on the MENA region and more narrowly on the Islamic State, this chapter delves into three of the most confounding elements of battling violent extremists: the funding of extremist groups, their use of “foreign fighters,” and their access to safe havens. This chapter begins with a look at terror financing and strategies to counter it over the past decade and the urgent need for adaptation in the face of the Islamic State’s more locally-based funding. It also addresses the impact of Arab Gulf donors’ efforts on a range of Syrian opposition groups. It then turns to the critical role of foreign fighters, including their motivations, recruitment, and battlefield experience—and perhaps most importantly, the fighters’ potential return to the many countries from which they hail. Finally, the chapter reviews the role of terrorist safe havens and discusses the implications of the vast territory now dominated by the Islamic State, and which sits in the heart of the Middle East and next door to NATO member Turkey.

Although many groups present serious threats to regional and international security—including Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, AQAP in Yemen, and local radicalized factions operating in Syria, Iraq, and across North Africa—the focus is on the Islamic

State because it has become the center of gravity for violent extremism in the Middle East.

COUNTERING THE FINANCING OF TERRORISM

As the Syrian conflict has unfolded since early 2011, the structure of terrorist financing has adapted. In the third year of this conflict, insurgent groups—especially the Islamic State—seem to have become less reliant on foreign funds as opportunities for “living off the land” have expanded, stabilized, and proven viable.

Over the last three years, the dynamics between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments and their donor-citizens created a dizzying array of funds that have fractured the Syrian moderate opposition, perhaps beyond repair. At the same time, these funds empowered the radical elements that constitute the current threat in Syria and Iraq. While donor fatigue and penalties against private donors degraded giving over time, neither seems to have significantly stemmed the flow or disrupted the full array of illicit terror financing. The U.S. Treasury Department’s recent update to the Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list³ shows several additional designations of Qataris and Kuwaitis, suggesting there is still much work to do.⁴

But insurgent groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State do not rely only on external donors for funding. The groups’ accumulation of territory has made new revenue options available to them. By looking to their immediate environment for resources, these groups have established a portfolio of assets offering durability and flexibility that is more difficult to attain when funding is dominated by external donations. Money-making activities arising from possession of territory include

3. The Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list is published by OFAC and maintains a list of individuals and companies that are controlled by or act for or on the behalf of a sanctioned company. Additionally, the list bears the names of individuals, groups, and entities, such as terrorists and narcotics traffickers designated under U.S. sanction programs that are not country-specific.

4. U.S. Department of Treasury, “Counter Terrorism Designations: Specially Designated List Update,” September 24, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20140924.aspx>.

taxing civilians under their control, extorting businesses, and kidnapping for ransom, as well as illicit trading of oil, government property, and antiquities. The Islamic State offers the best example of a group whose diverse local revenue generation—aided significantly by its control of a safe haven—lends resilience and capability for engaging a range of adversaries. The long-term viability of a robust “war economy” run by the Islamic State is uncertain, however, especially as pressure points on revenue streams and financial chokepoints begin to appear with the introduction of targeted U.S. and coalition strikes and more aggressive U.S. Treasury actions,

While this capacity to generate revenue locally is increasingly worrisome in the context of Syria and Iraq, the phenomenon is not limited to the Levant conflict. In recent years, the al Qaeda constellation of affiliates has also learned to extract value from territory and populations under its control. Ventures in kidnapping for ransom yielding tens of millions of dollars, smuggling and drug trafficking operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and money-laundering systems involving the exportation of charcoal and importation of sugar in Somalia demonstrate terrorist groups’ attempts to localize their funding and rely less on foreign financing. With the U.S. Treasury unable to seize ill-gotten cash and slap banks with regulations to confront this hybrid model of terrorist funding,⁵ the West must rethink its strategy for countering the financing of terror (CFT). The lessons learned from U.S. engagement in Syria will offer guidance for dislodging locally funded terrorist groups elsewhere.

Historically, terrorist groups have built both local and international funding networks. For example, Hamas finances its charities—and violent attacks—through da’wa committees, which are proselytization organizations that generate financial, popular, and logistical support locally and internationally.⁶ Al

5. Juan C. Zarate and Thomas M. Sanderson, “How the Terrorists Got Rich: In Iraq and Syria, ISIS Militants Are Flush with Funds,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/opinion/sunday/in-iraq-and-syria-isis-militants-are-flush-with-funds.html>.

6. Juan C. Zarate, *Treasury’s War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 70–71.

Qaeda has solicited financial support from Gulf benefactors to fill its coffers in South Asia, using Islamic charities as a benevolent facade for the constant influx of money.⁷

In 1989—in other words, even before the attacks of September 11, 2001—the Group of Seven (G7) countries established the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which sets standards and outlines measures that help governments combat money laundering, terrorist financing, and other threats to the integrity of the international financial system.⁸ In the years since the attacks of September 11, 2001 the U.S. government has sharply refined its CFT strategy. Combining international partnerships, anti-terror-financing and anti-money-laundering laws, and interagency intelligence sharing to identify terrorist operatives and supporters, the United States has managed to disrupt some terrorist funding networks.

The drivers of CFT were Executive Order (EO) 13224, Title III of the Patriot Act,⁹ and international cooperation via Financial Intelligence Units.¹⁰ Signed into law by President George W. Bush on September 23, 2001, EO 13224 authorizes the U.S. Treasury, in coordination with other U.S. agencies, to freeze the assets and transactions of individuals and entities that it designates as offenders or supporters of terrorism. With these drivers and institutions in place the United States could work with foreign governments to lock terrorist groups and their financiers out of the global economy. Given the prevalence of al Qaeda sympathizers in GCC countries, increased coordination with Gulf state actors was crucial to creating an international system for combatting terrorist-financing institutions, banks, and individuals.

In addition to freezing assets and excluding actors accused of financing terrorism from the larger world economy, the United

7. *Ibid.*

8. “Who We Are,” Financial Action Task Force, <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/pages/aboutus/>.

9. “Executive Order 13224,” U.S. Department of State, September 23, 2001, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/122570.htm>.

10. International Monetary Fund, *Financial Intelligence Units: An Overview* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2004), ix, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/FIU/>.

States took other steps to impede funding sources and flows, including supporting military action by regional or state security missions to disable important funding sources for terrorist groups. To confront the al Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab, for example, the United States provided financial support to regional security forces that dislodged the group from its revenue-generating ports.¹¹ A somewhat less successful effort is the U.S. Army's attempt to cripple the Taliban in Afghanistan by destroying the poppy fields upon which its opium trade revenues rely.¹² A more successful effort, jointly carried out by the Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Treasury Department, and U.S. military, was one that targeted the Taliban's financial infrastructure and managed to shut down the money exchange houses and *hawaldars* tied to the group.¹³ After more than a decade of sustained counterterrorism efforts, al Qaeda core leadership in Pakistan is forced to rely on most of its financial support from its affiliates in Yemen and Somalia.¹⁴

However, the CFT strategies that have been successful against combat groups like al Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah are not an option in Syria and Iraq today. There, bad banks, govern-

11. These ports, specifically Kismayo in southern Somalia, were essential to the group's maintenance and generated US\$35 million to US\$50 million in revenue per year. U.N. Security Council resolutions, specifically resolution 2036 (2012), attempted to ban U.N. member states from continuing to import charcoal from al-Shabaab-controlled ports. Despite this resolution, the U.N. found that Gulf Cooperation Council countries, notably Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, were "slow to implement the ban." *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2002 (2011)*, United Nations Security Council, UN document S/2012/544, June 27, 2012, 15, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/544.

12. Alissa J. Rubin and Matthew Rosenberg, "Drug Traffic Remains as U.S. Nears Afghanistan Exit," *New York Times*, May 26, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/27/world/asia/drug-traffic-remains-as-us-nears-afghanistan-exit.html>.

13. Thomas M. Harrigan, statement before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, U.S. Senate, July 20, 2011, 5, http://www.justice.gov/dea/pr/speeches-testimony/2012-2009/110720_herrigan_hearing.PDF.

14. Clint Watts, "Assessing the Terrorist Threat 13 Years after 9/11: Old Guard Al Qaeda, Team Islamic State & the Upstarts," *War on the Rocks*, September 11, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/09/assessing-the-terrorist-threat-13-years-after-911-old-guard-al-qaeda-team-isis-the-upstarts/>.

ment support, and charitable fronts comprise only part of the problem. In addition to these illicit networks of finance, many of the armed groups now involved in the conflict have turned to criminal activity and profiteering to sustain their operations.

EARLY STAGE FUNDING FOR SYRIAN OPPOSITION GROUPS

Funding from the Gulf

As the Syrian conflict evolved, the whims of state and citizen actors led to the funding of various rebel groups. Without coordination, these multiple donors—state and non-state, with different interests and motivations—fomented the fracturing of the moderate opposition and in part fostered the expansion of extremist groups in Syria.¹⁵ GCC states did supply funding to the conflict, but by failing to stop their citizens from funding multiple groups, they harmed the opposition; this was especially true of Qatar and Kuwait.

In a bid to project power into Syria, Qatar located individuals and rebel groups it thought to be “ideologically on the same wavelength”—political Islamists and salafists.¹⁶ Seeking to promote the spread of radical ideologies and provide military support for opposition groups, the Qatari government invited radical Kuwaiti sheikhs like Hajjaj al-Ajmi, a U.S. Specially Designated National accused of providing financial backing to Jabhat al-Nusra, to speak to its citizens and establish collection campaigns parallel to those in Kuwait.¹⁷ In spite of recent designations of Qatari citizens as financing terrorist organizations in

15. Ben Hubbard, “Private Donors’ Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/13/world/middleeast/private-donors-funds-add-wild-card-to-war-in-syria.html>; Joby Warrick, “Private Money Pours into Syrian Conflict as Rich Donors Pick Sides,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-money-pours-into-syrian-conflict-as-rich-donors-pick-sides/2013/06/15/67841656-cf8a-11e2-8845-d970cbo4497_story.html; William McCants, “Gulf Charities and Syrian Sectarianism,” *Foreign Policy*, September 30, 2013, http://mideast.foreign-policy.com/posts/2013/09/30/the_gulf_s_sectarian_syria_strategy.

16. Elizabeth Dickinson, “The Case Against Qatar,” *Foreign Policy*, September 30, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/09/30/the_case_against_qatar_funding_extremists_salafi_syria_uae_jihad_muslim_brotherhood_taliban.

17. *Ibid.*

Syria,¹⁸ Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, maintains that "we don't fund terrorists" and that fund-raising was orchestrated by individuals alone.¹⁹ Despite the emir's claims, the Qatari government seems complicit in "outsourcing" fund-raising roles to its private citizens. Using its citizens as proxy funders, Qatar is able to meddle in the Syrian conflict from the backseat, avoiding liability and acting as though it were incapable of monitoring its citizens' financing activities.²⁰

Funding for Syrian opposition and extremist groups also came from the Kuwaiti government and its citizens. Private donations at the outset of the Syrian revolution, when protests were still localized, were made primarily by Syrian expatriates living in Kuwait, usually to family members in the form of remittances. As the revolutions derailed and civil war ensued, more Kuwaitis sought to contribute humanitarian aid. Then Syrians approached Kuwaitis for donations, outside of the closely-knit Kuwaiti charity networks.²¹ This connection served both sides well: Syrian fundraisers could generate more aid, while Kuwaiti charities received current and accurate information to best direct their support. As the Syrian revolution gave way to the current broader conflict, the intentions of Kuwaiti funders began to shift as well.²² Enabled in part by the government's lax terrorism financing laws and by freedom of speech and association, funder preferences and networks proliferated in Kuwaiti society.²³

18. U.S. Department of Treasury, "Counter Terrorism Designations: Specially Designated List Update."

19. Mick Krever, "Qatar's Emir: We Don't Fund Terrorists," *CNN*, September 25, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/25/world/meast/qatar-emir/index.html>.

20. Dickinson, "Case against Qatar."

21. Tom Keatinge, "The Importance of Financing in Enabling and Sustaining the Conflict in Syria (and Beyond)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (June 8, 2014): 56, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/360>.

22. Elizabeth Dickinson, "Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home," Center for Middle East Policy Analysis Paper 31, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 5, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/12/06-private-gulf-financing-syria-extremist-rebels-sectarian-conflict-dickinson>.

23. Despite the establishment of Kuwait's independent Financial Intelligence Unit in 2013, political appointments of alleged terrorism financiers do little to demonstrate that the country is serious about cracking down on terrorism financing.

The formation of armed groups in Syria in early 2012, documented in part by social media,²⁴ drew new funders and with them a new dynamic—not just in Kuwait but in the Gulf more broadly. Portraying the conflict as a jihad, social media campaigns solicited donations from funders who were invited to wage “financial jihad” by supporting “holy warriors” in Syria.²⁵ Fundraising campaigns like “Wage jihad with your money” and the “Ramadan Campaign” set donor goals, listed the types and amounts of ammunition that could be supplied to fighters with a certain dollar amount, or specified how much it would cost to equip and send one mujahid or “holy warrior” to Syria.²⁶ These fundraising tactics could be very lucrative, and a single evening might yield US\$350,000 dollars.²⁷ Once in the hands of rebel groups, this money could be used to buy weapons on the black market.²⁸

As the conflict dragged on, a combination of fatigue, disgust, and disillusionment diminished the number of donors who

24. “Tashkil katibat al shaykh Hajjaj al-‘Ajmi fi reef Abu Kamal” [The creation of Sheikh Hajjaj al-‘Ajmi’s battalion in the village of Bukamal], YouTube video, 1:48, posted by “Freesyriaali,” June 14, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KN7pYgtgkak>; “Inshiqaq kabir wa tashkil ‘Amro bin al- ‘Aas” [A great split and the creation of Amro Bin Al-Aas Brigade], YouTube video, 1:12, posted by “Channel (qanaat) freedomaleppo,” March 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mODXX88S9U>.

25. On the use of social media, see “Fundraising Campaign in Kuwait for Designated Terrorist Group Jabhat Al-Nusra Using Facebook, Twitter, Skype, YouTube,” *The Cyber & Jihad Lab*, May 17, 2013, <http://cjlab.memri.org/lab-projects/tracking-jihadi-terrorist-use-of-social-media/fundraising-campaign-in-kuwait-for-designated-terrorist-group-jabhat-al-nusra-using-facebook-twitter-skype-youtube/#!prettyPhoto>. For the idea of “financial jihad,” see Aimen Dean, Edwina Thompson, and Tom Keatinge, “Draining the Ocean to Catch One Type of Fish: Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Global Counter-Terrorism Financing Regime,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 4 (August 27, 2013): 63, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/282>.

26. On these campaigns, see Thomas Joscelyn, “Popular Saudi Cleric Endorses Islamic Front, Calls for Cooperation with Al Qaeda,” *Long War Journal*, December 14, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/12/popular_saudi_sheikh.php; Dickinson, “Playing with Fire,” 13, 15.

27. Estimates for the amount of money gathered this way are in the tens, if not hundreds, of millions, but the estimate repeated here is inferred from the public displays of fundraising via social media and transparent donors. The potential for more discreet financial networks is high, and there is no way to know how much money travels through them.

28. Warrick, “Private Money Pours into Syrian Conflict.”

supported the moderate Syrian opposition.²⁹ The remaining donors were highly motivated, deeply ideological individuals whose funding followed their radical preferences. Radical donors funded only the most hard-line groups, which served to bolster extremist elements within the opposition and to fracture the opposition along ideological fault lines.³⁰ According to statements found on social media sites, radical donors directly funded Syrian al Qaeda affiliates or funded Syrian rebel groups that openly cooperated with them, like Ahrar al Sham.³¹ In time, these groups rose to prominence in the conflict, with Jabhat al-Nusra drawing in fighters from the Free Syrian Army and other moderate groups because it could offer salaries and better organization.³²

Funding from the Local War Economy

While international funding has extended the life of the conflict, it has simultaneously degraded Syria's economy.³³ This has

29. Keatinge, "Importance of Financing," 56.

30. McCants, "Gulf Charities and Syrian Sectarianism."

31. Dickinson, "Playing with Fire," 14. Dickinson specifies several Kuwaiti individuals (Shafi al-Ajmi and Mohammad Hayef al Mutairi) and donor foundations (Council of Supporters of the Syrian Revolution) that support al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate or the Syrian rebel groups that cooperate with it.

32. Hassan Hassan, "Influenced by Abu Musab Al Suri, Jabhat Al Nusra Has the Potential to Spread beyond Syria's Borders," *National*, March 4, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/a-jihadist-blueprint-for-hearts-and-minds-is-gaining-traction-in-syria>.

33. It should be noted that private Gulf financing of Syria has been curbed by a number of actions on behalf of the United States and the Kuwaiti government. In 2014, the Office of *Foreign Assets Control* of the U.S. Treasury designated three Kuwaiti-based financiers of terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq as terrorist financiers. Under article 16 of Law No. 106 of 2013, Kuwait has installed its first fully independent Financial Intelligence Unit. The law also stipulates tighter enforcement of anti-terror-finance legislation. It is hard to see Kuwait as serious about reforms, however, given the 2014 appointment of Nayef al-Ajmi, who openly calls Syria a legitimate jihad and appears to be linked to fund-raising for extremist rebels in Syria, to the post of justice minister.

On the degradation of Syria's economy, see Rabbie Nasser, Zaki Mehchy, and Khaled Abu Ismail, "Socioeconomic Roots and Impact of the Syrian Crisis," Syrian Center for Policy Research, January 2013, 41, <http://scpr-syria.org/en/S34/%E2%80%99C%20Socioeconomic-Roots-and-Impact-of-the-Syrian-Crisis%E2%80%9D-2013>.

created space for the emergence of a profitable war economy, built on illicit activities such like looting, smuggling, currency trading, and black market sales.³⁴ As different insurgent groups have expanded control in Syria and Iraq, they have further developed their revenue lines.³⁵ Control of border crossings and land routes around the Turkish frontier now offers insurgents lucrative revenue streams via taxation and extortion, as well as direct access to supply and distribution routes to traffic their own goods.³⁶ A portfolio of revenue-generating illicit activity, now in its third year, offers the core financial support that makes foreign funding less relevant.³⁷

While a number of armed groups in the Syrian-Iraqi theater rely on local funding streams, the Islamic State offers perhaps the best example of a group with a diversified mix of revenue—an arrangement that potentially offers long-term viability for the organization. One study estimates that the revenue from extorted taxes in Mosul alone nets the group nearly US\$8 million each month.³⁸

The Islamic State's appropriation and sale of Syrian and Iraqi state infrastructure and equipment provide another source of funding. With the Islamic State's rapid advance through Iraq in June 2014, the group gained control of several small Iraqi oil fields.³⁹ In July, the Islamic State also consolidated its hold on

34. Abigail Fielding-Smith, "Profiteers Become Another Obstacle to Peace in Syria," *Financial Times*, December 1, 2013, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/f4d8e1ba-5853-11e3-9da6-00144feabdco.html?siteedition=intl#axzzz2mLggRuxK>.

35. Interview with Ahmed Assi, Suqur al Sham spokesman, January 15, 2014, Turkey.

36. Samer Abboud, "Syria's War Economy," *Syria in Crisis* (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 9, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54131>. Northern Storm Brigade, a group linked to the Free Syrian Army, in 2012 seized control of the Bab al-Salam border crossing and later negotiated shared control of the border with and the Islamic Front's Tawhid Brigade.

37. Keatinge, "Importance of Financing," 57.

38. "Al-Qaeda in Iraq (a.k.a. Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria)," Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/al-qaeda-iraq-k-islamic-state-iraq-greater-syria/p14811>.

39. Deborah Amos, "How The Islamic State Smuggles Oil To Fund Its Campaign," *NPR*, September 9, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/09/09/346844240/how-the-islamic-state-smuggles-oil-to-fund-its-campaign>.

oil fields in the eastern Syrian province of Deir ez-Zor when it seized Syria's largest oil field from rival jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴⁰ At the height of the Islamic State's oil production in July 2014, the group reportedly made an estimated US\$3 million each day on the black market.⁴¹ Further territorial advances into Iraq and subsequent expansion inside of Syria have provided additional transportation options for the stolen oil.⁴²

The Islamic State enjoys a variety of different avenues for selling its ill-gotten oil. While some reports have detailed the process by which the group sells oil to Turkish smugglers, evidence suggests that the bulk of the Islamic State's oil sales are within Syria and Iraq, and go through middlemen for various governments or to bootleg refineries in those countries.⁴³ Systemic disorder within Syria and Iraq has ensured steady demand for rebel-controlled oil.

Under heavy sanctions that have helped to decimate the Syrian economy,⁴⁴ the Assad regime has turned to several back channels to ensure that oil continues to flow and that the lights stay on.⁴⁵ The Assad regime reportedly relies on a middleman—Syrian businessman George Haswani—to make cash drops in Palmyra for the Islamic State's oil.⁴⁶

40. "Islamic State 'Seizes Key Syria Oil Field,'" *Al Jazeera*, July 3, 2014, http://live.aljazeera.com/Event/Syria_Live_Blog.

41. Karen Leigh, "ISIS Makes Up To \$3 Million a Day Selling Oil, Analysts Say," *Syria Deeply*, July 28, 2014, <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/07/5856/isis-3-million-day-selling-oil-analysts/>; Borzou Daragahi and Erika Solomon, "Fuelling Isis Inc.," *Financial Times*, September 21, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/34e874ac-3dad-11e4-b782-00144feabdco.html#axzz3ESzCXGml>.

42. Amos, "How the Islamic State Smuggles."

43. Daragahi and Solomon, "Fuelling Isis Inc."

44. U.S. Department of Treasury, "Syria Sanctions," May 2, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/syria.aspx>.

45. Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Syria's Oilfields Create Surreal Battle Lines amid Chaos and Tribal Loyalties," *Guardian*, June 25, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/25/syria-oil-assad-rebels-tribes>.

46. Interview with Nick Blanford, journalist for the Christian Science Monitor, January 24, 2014, Turkey; Tony Badran, "Minority Report: Is the Link between Assad and the Islamic State a Christian One?" *Now Lebanon*, August 9, 2014, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/562681-minority-report/>; "Manhua George Haswani al-l-athi yusahhil bay' wa shiraa' al naft bayn Da'ish wa l-nitham al Suri?" [Who is George Haswani, who facilitates the sale and purchase of oil between the Islamic State and the Syrian Regime?], *all4Syria*, September 2, 2014, <http://all4syria.info/Archive/165946>.

In Iraq, the Islamic State has successfully tapped into a network of homegrown refineries, Kurdish businessmen, and smuggling routes developed over decades when sanctions were in place against Saddam Hussein's Iraq.⁴⁷ Continued disagreement between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad over whether the KRG may export oil directly and over the distribution of government funds to the KRG contributed to the KRG's tendency to overlook the purchase and refining of oil from sources linked to the Islamic State.⁴⁸

Between Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State controls a large network of border crossings, rivers, and trafficking routes that are used to transport the ill-gotten oil into Turkey.⁴⁹ Several reports describe how local merchants move oil via oil tanker trucks, mules, and underwater pipes from the Islamic State across the border, using unpatrolled roads as well as official border crossings into Turkey. Smugglers have also used the Orontes River, which separates northwestern Syria from Turkey, to float barrels of fuel across the border. Depending on the quality of crude oil, the Islamic State can make between US\$26 and US\$60 dollars a barrel.⁵⁰ Once in Turkey, the oil is sold by smugglers for as much as 30 percent less than legitimately processed oil.⁵¹

Under mounting international scrutiny, Turkey has begun to crack down on Turkish smugglers in the city of Hacipasa. Oil smuggling between Turkey and Syria has been a booming business there for decades,⁵² and it has significantly expanded in the wake of the Syrian conflict. One oil smuggler admitted

47. Daragahi and Solomon, "Fuelling Isis Inc."

48. *Ibid.*

49. Benoît Faucon and Ayla Albayrak, "Islamic State Funds Push into Syria and Iraq with Labyrinthine Oil-Smuggling Operation," *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-funds-push-into-syria-and-iraq-with-labyrinthine-oil-smuggling-operation-1410826325>.

50. Nour Malas and Maria Abi-Habib, "Islamic State Economy Runs on Extortion, Oil Piracy in Syria, Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-fills-coffers-from-illicit-economy-in-syria-iraq-1409175458>.

51. *Ibid.*

52. "Turkey Cracks Down on Oil Smuggling Linked to ISIS," *Al Arabiya*, October 6, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/energy/2014/10/06/Turkey-cracks-down-on-oil-smuggling-linked-to-ISIS.html>.

in an interview that he could make as much as US\$6,500 dollars for a single trip transporting smuggled oil to other towns in Turkey. In the first eight months of 2014, the Turkish government seized 20 million liters of smuggled oil at the border, four times as much as the amount intercepted in 2013.⁵³ Residents of Hacipasa say that the government's greater vigilance has eliminated 70–80 percent of the smuggling, but other measures could be taken to reduce smuggling still further.⁵⁴

Given the fluctuating price of oil, U.S. and coalition air strikes on mobile refineries, a lack of access to Islamic State bookkeeping, and contradictory reports on the value of the black market oil trade, it remains difficult to discern how much of the group's funding network comes from oil revenues.⁵⁵ But at the very least, the Islamic State's oil revenues appear critical to the organization's balance sheet, and their removal or sharp reduction would very likely damage the organization's fortunes. The recent escape of oil engineers (needed to run the refineries) from Islamic State control has in fact halved the group's oil revenues.⁵⁶ In the wake of this development, the group has reemphasized its smuggling operations at the expense of some local populations now experiencing fuel shortages.⁵⁷ Although running a robust oil trade generates at least US\$1 million dollars of funding each day for the group,⁵⁸ it also creates dependencies

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.; Steven Mufson, "Islamic State Fighters Drawing on Oil Assets for Funding and Fuel," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/islamic-state-fighters-are-drawing-on-oil-assets-for-funding-and-fuel/2014/09/15/a2927d02-39bd-11e4-8601-97ba8884ffd_story.html; Erika Solomon, "US Strikes at Isis Oil Sites in Syria," *Financial Times*, September 25, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/5a2d2fo4-44a2-11e4-ab0c-00144feabdco.html#axzz3ESzCXGmI>.

56. Hugh Tomlinson and Tom Coghlan, "Isis Oil Bonanza Cut by Half as Engineers Flee Caliphate," *Times* (London), September 13, 2014, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article4205141.ece>.

57. Ibid.

58. Matthew Olson, "A National Counterterrorism Center Threat Assessment of ISIL and Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Syria and Beyond," discussion, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, September 3, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2014/09/03-national-counterterrorism-center-threat-assessment-isil-al-qaeda-iraq-syria-beyond>.

that can be exploited when the Islamic State leaves citizens with a shortfall.

Other Sources of Funding

As a consequence of poor border control and Ankara's support of forces opposed to the Assad regime, criminal activity has flourished across the Syria-Turkey frontier. CSIS field research at the Syria border crossing of Bab al-Salam found a robust trafficking in passports procured from fallen fighters or sold by those entering Syria for battle—presumably on a one-way ticket to a suicide attack.⁵⁹ The recycled passports—some from “visa waiver” countries in Europe—represent a security threat, given that purchasers could use them to carry out violent acts in Europe or the United States.

Antiquities smuggling has further bolstered Islamic State coffers. Although this type of profiteering is not a new phenomenon, its adoption by the Islamic State demonstrates the group's ability to tap into preestablished criminal trades to turn a profit.⁶⁰ Since late 2012, the Islamic State and other insurgent groups have capitalized on the unrest to pillage priceless antiquities from archaeological sites.⁶¹ In Syria's al-Nabuk—an area in the Qalamoun Mountains west of Damascus where antiquities are up to 8,000 years old—the Islamic State is believed to have smuggled US\$36 million worth of artifacts.⁶² Some sources speculate that the group's revenue—generated from the 20 percent “plunder tax” they charge for permitting antiquities traffickers to continue their activities—is one of the organization's

59. Interview with Turkish passport trafficker, January 14, 2014, in Turkey at the Syrian border gate of Bab al-Salam.

60. Kathleen Caulderwood, “How ISIS Pillages, Traffics And Sells Ancient Artifacts On Global Black Market,” *International Business Times*, June 18, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/how-isis-pillages-traffics-sells-ancient-artifacts-global-black-market-1605044>.

61. Mark V. Vlasic, “Islamic State Sells ‘Blood Antiquities’ from Iraq and Syria to Raise Money,” *Washington Post*, September 14, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/islamic-state-sells-blood-antiquities-from-iraq-and-syria-to-raise-money/2014/09/14/49663c98-3a7e-11e4-9c9f-ebb4727e40e_story.html?tid=HP_opinion.

62. Martin Chulov, “How an Arrest in Iraq Revealed Islamic State's \$2bn Jihadist Network,” *Guardian*, June 15, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/iraq-islamic-state-arrest-jihadists-wealth-power>.

major sources of revenue.⁶³ The result is not only funding for terrorist activity, but damage to future generations dependent on the nation's cultural heritage for the tourism industry.

In Iraq, the Islamic State's control of approximately 40 percent of the wheat supply offers yet another reliable revenue source while also enabling the group—through managing bread production and subsidization—to act as a “state” that provides for its people. (The Islamic State also uses wheat as a weapon by withholding the staple from religious minorities.⁶⁴) The group has forced farmers and silo workers to continue working and operating equipment under its watch. Freeing them could cripple the Islamic State's ability to provide wheat beyond that already harvested, and destroying wheat silos could create problems throughout Iraq. With the Islamic State controlling all nine of Nineveh Province's wheat silos, the Iraqi government has already lost a large input for a major source of food.⁶⁵

In amassing a plethora of local funding sources, the Islamic State has proven, at least for the time being, that it is able to sustain a war economy.⁶⁶ As long as the group is able to gain more territory and revenue sources, it can carry on paying local Sunnis and ex-Ba'athists for their loyalty, while also subsidizing goods and providing services to citizens. Given the variety of revenue sources described here—and given recent reports claiming that private outside donations comprise only 5 percent of the Islamic

63. Cem Erciyes, “Islamic State Makes Millions from Stolen Antiquities,” *Al Monitor*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/09/turkey-syria-iraq-isis-artifacts-smuggling.html>.

64. Maggie Fick, “Special Report: Islamic State Uses Grain to Tighten Grip in Iraq,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/30/us-mideast-crisis-wheat-idUSKCN0HP12J20140930>; Filipa Ioannou, “ISIS's Latest Weapon: Wheat,” *Slate*, September 30, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slate_est/2014/09/30/isis_wheat_financing_legitimacy_for_militant_group.html. The Islamic State is also using water as an instrument of control; see Erin Cunningham, “Islamic State Jihadists Are Using Water as a Weapon in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, October 7, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-jihadists-are-using-water-as-a-weapon-in-iraq/2014/10/06/aead6792-79ec-4c7c-8f2f-fd7b95765d09_story.html.

65. Maggie Fick, “Special Report: Islamic State Uses Grain to Tighter Grip in Iraq.”

66. “Can the U.S. Cut off ISIS from Its Funding?” *CBS News*, August 14, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/can-the-u-s-cut-off-isis-from-its-funding/>.

State's operating budget⁶⁷—traditional U.S. CFT approaches will be challenged.

For now, some of those living under the Islamic State have acknowledged the apparent efficiency and stability of its governance, as evidenced by a proportionate tax regime, the issuing of receipts, and subsidization of food.⁶⁸ But changing revenue conditions could undermine the Islamic State's strategy and present a potential opportunity in any CFT strategy.

Implications

The accumulation of territory, and with it the assumption of control over such reliable funding sources as oil fields and wheat supplies, has allowed the Islamic State to become increasingly self-sufficient. Moreover, its diverse local financing methods enable it to evade most Western restrictions. The revenue streams on which it now relies, however, may be less durable than once was thought. Geographic setbacks, in which the group is dislodged from a town, oil field, or border crossing, clearly reduce its potential revenue. So do difficulties in keeping oil fields staffed and operating. Less clear is whether the Islamic State's funding portfolio is sufficiently diversified so as to withstand the loss of one revenue stream. But if funding is hobbled or eliminated, the group risks potential collapse.

Running a state is also expensive. Despite its reported millions of dollars in daily oil revenues, the Islamic State must spend this money to maintain control of its territory and the allies living there. The group has responsibility for governance

67. Hannah Allam, "Records Show How Iraqi Extremists Withstood U.S. Anti-Terror Efforts," *McClatchy*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2014/06/23/231223/records-show-how-iraqi-extremists.html?sp=99/100/&ihp=1>.

68. A Raqqa goldsmith, for example, said of the Islamic State's rule in the group's self-declared capital: "I feel like I am dealing with a respected state, not thugs." Quoted in Anne Barnard, "Hezbollah Takes Risks by Fighting Rebels in Syria," *New York Times*, May 7, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/08/world/middleeast/hezbollah-takes-risks-by-fighting-rebels-in-syria.html>. See also Ben Hubbard, "In a Syrian City, Islamic State Puts Its Vision into Practice," *New York Times*, July 23, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/24/world/middleeast/islamic-state-controls-raqqa-syria.html>.

measures, from shari'a courts to basic sanitation,⁶⁹ and must pay salaries to jihadi commanders—and, increasingly, foreign fighters—which range from US\$400 to thousands of dollars per month. Nor do alliances with local tribesmen come cheap.⁷⁰ As this group continues to operate as a local government, CFT strategies need to exploit these linkages and dependencies on revenue flows.

Response

In light of today's formidable challenges in Syria and Iraq, and indeed across the MENA region wherever instability and violence reign, CFT responses must target havens where insurgents and terrorists establish or participate in a war economy. Eliminating havens will force groups to spend more time raising funds than conducting operations. It will also interrupt important insurgent-partner relationships and provide an opening for coalition forces.

An effective response to the present threat must include dislodging the Islamic State from towns and border crossings it now controls. Given the role that these key nodes play in transport and communication—essential components to the war economy—strikes on these revenue generators will weaken the group. However, carrying out strikes in a comprehensive fashion will likely require a physical presence on the ground, an option that does not yet appear viable.

CFT measures must also focus on the black market trade in the many illicit goods keeping insurgent groups afloat. Cooperation with regional actors is essential on this front, especially in Turkey, where substantial amounts of oil end up heading to market.

Finally, authorities need to map the funding networks that facilitate the black market trade and smuggling upon which the Islamic State relies. They must then interrupt the facilitators,

69. Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Has a Consumer Protection Office," *Atlantic*, June 13, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/the-isis-guide-to-building-an-islamic-state/372769/>.

70. Wassim Bassem, "Money, Power Draw Young Iraqis to IS," *AlMonitor*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/iraq-jurf-al-sakhar-men-join-islamic-state.html>.

nodes of money exchange, and points of entry into the formal financial system. Once it becomes harder and costlier for the Islamic State to do business and access outside donors, charities, and financial facilities, the international coalition can begin to constrict and degrade the group's financial underpinning and ultimately its global reach.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Conflict across the MENA region—in particular in Syria and Iraq—demonstrates the deep impact of Sunni “foreign fighters” on the battlefield. According to Matthew Olsen, the director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, total foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq exceeded 12,000 individuals as of July 2014.⁷¹ This estimate includes as many as 3,000 Europeans and upwards of 100 Americans.⁷² By mid-September 2014, the Central Intelligence Agency had dramatically revised that number upward, estimating that the Islamic State alone might have as many as 15,000 total foreign fighters.⁷³

Hailing from nearly 80 different countries—including Saudi Arabia, France, Indonesia, Russia, Pakistan, and the United States⁷⁴—these men (and some women) join a wide spectrum of insurgent militias, including the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Islamic State. Foreign fighters serve in many roles and can be formidable combatants.⁷⁵ Understanding this

71. Kevin Baron, “The Number of Foreign Fighters in Syria Now Exceeds 12,000 and Rising” *Defense One*, July 25, 2014, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2014/07/the-number-of-foreign-fighters-in-syria-now-exceeds-12000-rising/89732/>.

72. Brian Bennett and Richard A. Serrano. “More Western Fighters Joining Militants in Iraq and Syria,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-foreign-fighters-20140720-story.html#page=1>.

73. “CIA Says IS Numbers Underestimated,” *Al Jazeera*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/cia-triples-number-islamic-state-fighters-201491232912623733.html>.

74. Ed Pilkington, “UN Unanimously Passes Resolution to Combat ‘Foreign Terrorist Fighters,’” *Guardian*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/un-security-council-resolution-terror-threat-obama>.

75. Though significant numbers of Shi‘ite fighters have also traveled to Syria and Iraq to battle violent Sunni extremists, this section focuses exclusively on the more visible and wider Sunni phenomenon, which was in large part propelled by the Syrian civil war and later fuelled by the Islamic State push into Iraq.

large component of the overall body of violent extremists is critical to degrading groups such as the Islamic State and potentially to preventing terrorism on the home front.

Aspiring fighters find relatively easy access to the battle zone. Porous borders, such as Turkey's 500-mile frontier with Syria, offer a two-way channel for fighters moving between operations and recuperation. The fighters, most of them young men, have diverse motivations. Some come to defend civilians from "apostate" Shi'ite government forces and their militias. Others pursue fulfillment absent back home: a sense of self-worth, respect, empowerment, purpose, and jihadi "street cred." Some fighters joining the Islamic State seek to defend the caliphate declared by the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on June 29, 2014.⁷⁶

With violence in Syria and surrounding areas unlikely to abate in the next few years, the influential role of foreign fighters promises to continue. As the fighting advances, these individuals sharpen the skills and networks that make them a potential threat when they return home or move on to other nations.

Historical Context

Foreign fighters are a long-standing problem in the Syria-Iraq region. During the most intense years of the Iraq War, spanning 2005 to 2007,⁷⁷ roughly 4,000 foreign fighters flocked to Iraq via Syria and other nations to fight Western and local Shi'ite forces.⁷⁸ The fighters came from within the MENA region and further afield.

Documentation and analysis of foreign fighters by the West Point Combating Terrorism Center sheds light on the number and origins of fighters present during one of the more dangerous periods of the Iraqi insurgency, from August 2006 to

76. Vera Mironaova and Sam Whitt, "A Glimpse into the Mind of Four Foreign Fighters in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 6 (June 2014): 5, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-glimpse-into-the-minds-of-four-foreign-fighters-in-syria>; Matt Bradley, "ISIS Declares New Islamist Caliphate," *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/isis-declares-new-islamist-caliphate-1404065263>.

77. U.S. and international forces withdrew from Iraq in 2010.

78. Aaron Y. Zelin, "Sunni Foreign Fighters in Syria: Background, Facilitating Factors and Select Responses," PFPC Background Paper I, Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, May 21, 2014, 1-4, <http://www.pfpcconsortium.com/#!/policy-recommendations/c2ab>.

August 2007. The biographical data, which was discovered by U.S. forces in October 2007, was gathered by precursors of today's Islamic State group, known then as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).⁷⁹ These revealing records detail the backgrounds of roughly 700 foreign fighters arriving over a 12-month period. The three largest sources of these fighters were Saudi Arabia (41 percent), Libya (18.8 percent), and Syria (8.2 percent).⁸⁰ The fighters often served as suicide bombers directed against U.S. forces, adversarial Sunni tribes, and Shi'ite targets.

Though this one-year snapshot provides evidence of substantial numbers of foreign fighters, the lack of available data for all insurgent groups deploying these motivated combatants throughout the war precludes a comprehensive assessment of their impact.⁸¹ Nonetheless, it is clear that foreign fighters did remain a threat—one that would have been higher had the Islamic State of Iraq enjoyed a bona fide safe haven. Among other advantages, a sanctuary would have made it possible to obscure foreign fighters whose “accents and lack of local knowledge” resulted in negative exposure for the al Qaeda affiliate.⁸²

With the departure of U.S. and other allied forces from Iraq in December 2011, violence persisted as both Sunni and Shi'ite attacks continued along sectarian lines. Both Sunni (al Qaeda in Iraq, Ansar al Islam) and Shi'ite (Jaysh al Mahdi) militias and insurgent groups failed to disarm after the U.S. withdrawal, and instead accounted for the majority of the ensuing violence.⁸³ ISI also conducted a campaign to free fighters from prisons across

79. Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, “Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records,” Combating Terrorism Center at U.S. Military Academy, December 2007, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/aqs-foreign-fighters-in-iraq.pdf>, 3.

80. *Ibid.*, 7.

81. Anthony Cordesman, *Iraq’s Sunni Insurgents: Looking Beyond Al Qa’ida*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007, 8.

82. Brian Fishman, “Syria Proving More Fertile than Iraq to Al-Qa’ida’s Operations,” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 11-12, (November 2013): 2.

83. Anthony Cordesman, *Iraq After US Withdrawal: US Policy and the Iraqi Search for Security and Stability*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 3, 2012, http://csis.org/files/publication/120702_Iraq_After_US_Withdrawal.pdf, 30.

Iraq, releasing individuals who now fill the ranks of a growing menace.⁸⁴

As 2012 began, the civil war in Syria was already at a full boil. Massacres of Sunni civilians and home-grown opposition forces drew both ISI and foreign fighters to Syria, which had recently served as a way station for international jihadists heading for Iraq. Then, in a reversal, the Assad government became the target of violent Sunni extremists. Syria's territory "provided a haven for the Qaeda affiliate to reconstitute itself with an influx of foreign fighters," who would soon play a key role in future operations.⁸⁵

Motivated in part by Sunni ideologues portraying Syria as a legitimate jihad to defend Sunni Muslims against despotic Shi'ite forces, foreign mujahideen flocked to Syria.⁸⁶ Radical groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State likewise attempted to entice foreign volunteers.⁸⁷ In a video entitled "Those Who Believed, Migrated, and Waged Jihad," the Islamic State calls attention to the presence of foreign mujahideen within the group's ranks and calls for the migration of more foreign fighters to Syria.⁸⁸ One account by a Dutch fighter reveals that appeals from a fellow countryman already in Syria encouraged others to make the journey.⁸⁹

84. "Iraq Jailbreaks: Hundreds Escape in Taji and Abu Ghraib," BBC News, July 22, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23403564>.

85. Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS threat," *New York Times*, September 29, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/30/world/middleeast/obama-fault-is-shared-in-misjudging-of-isis-threat.html>.

86. "Top Cleric Qaradawi Calls for Jihad against Hezbollah, Assad in Syria," *Al-Arabiya*, June 2, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/06/02/Top-cleric-Qaradawi-calls-for-Jihad-against-Hezbollah-Assad-in-Syria.html>.

87. Bill Roggio, "Tunisian Jihadist Calls for Clerics, Youth to Fight in Syria," *Long War Journal*, July 20, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/07/tunisian_jihadist_ca.php.

88. "Al-l-atheen aamanu wa hajiru wa jahadu," [Al-Furqan Media Presents a New Video Message from the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham: "Those Who Believed and Migrated"], *Jihadology*, July 9, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/07/09/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-those-who-believed-and-migrated/>.

89. For a translation of the account see Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "Guest Post: Dutch Foreign Fighters—Some Testimonials from the Syrian Front," *Jihadology*, October 13, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/10/13/guest-post-dutch-foreign-fighters-some-testimonials-from-the-syrian-front/>.

Foreign Fighters' Role in the Conflict

Foreign jihadists are key factors in the Syrian conflict. While some have embedded with preexisting radical groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State,⁹⁰ others have formed distinctly non-Syrian battalions like Jaysh al Muhajireen wal Ansar (JMA)—a predominantly Chechen jihadi group linked to the Islamic Caucasus Emirate.⁹¹ In addition to serving as foot soldiers, foreign militants have also acted as suicide bombers and executioners in publicized videos. The suicide operations carried out by British national Abdul Waheed Majid,⁹² American Moner Mohammad Abusalha,⁹³ and Malaysian Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki⁹⁴ serve as chilling examples of the radicalization of foreigners in the Syrian conflict.

Foreign fighters even ascend to the upper echelons of leadership within their groups. Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili (nom de guerre Omar al Shishani) is an ethnic Chechen with an extensive portfolio in the Syrian conflict, which he joined in March 2012.⁹⁵ Known to be a military commander for the Islamic State's Syrian operations, he is referred to in a recent

90. Joseph Chinyong Liow, "ISIS Goes to Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, September 21, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142004/joseph-chinyong-liow/isis-goes-to-asia>.

91. Bill Roggio, "Chechen Commander Leads Muhajireen Brigade in Syria," *Long War Journal*, February 20, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/02/chechen_commander_le.php.

JMA merged with three other groups to form the Helpers of Islam Front in July 2014. As reported by the blog Chechnensinsyria.com, the new merger includes several other battalions that were primarily composed of foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Morocco.

92. Darshna Soni, "Relaxed and Smiling: Suspected British Bomber in Syria," *Channel 4 News*, February 14, 2014, <http://www.channel4.com/news/syria-abdul-waheed-majeed-suspected-suicide-bomber>.

93. Thomas Joscelyn, "US Officials Have Identified American Suicide Bomber in Syria," *Long War Journal*, May 31, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/05/officials_have_ident.php.

94. "ISIS and the First Malaysian Suicide Bomber," *Star Online*, June 14, 2014, <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/06/14/ISIS-and-the-first-Malaysian-suicide-bomber/>.

95. U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Designates Twelve Foreign Terrorist Fighter Facilitators," September 24, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2651.aspx>.

video simply as “Military Commander,”⁹⁶ suggesting his position as the group’s overall military leader in both Syria and Iraq. This suggestion is supported by further video evidence as well as by a list of specific military operations attributed to him.⁹⁷

As Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s July 2014 audio message indicates, foreigners are needed for maintenance of his group’s territory. Appealing to those who can help build communities, Baghdadi implores Muslim “scholars,” “medical doctors,” and “engineers of all different specializations and fields” to fulfill their *wajib ‘ayni*, or individual religious duty, by moving to the Islamic State.⁹⁸

Although they were actively encouraged to stay home in the early days of the conflict, women also serve the Islamic State.⁹⁹ They may serve as fighters’ wives, run sex-slave brothels full of captured Iraqi and Syrian women, or enforce shari‘a law restrictions on female dress and activity.¹⁰⁰ Women also work as doctors, nurses, and engineers in Islamic State hospitals.¹⁰¹ Exact numbers of women supporting the Islamic State are unknown, but London’s International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) estimates that about 10–15 percent of the total num-

96. “Al-I’tiṣām Media Presents a New Video Message from the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shām: ‘Breaking of the Border,’” *Jihadology*, October 13, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/29/al-iti%e1%b9%a3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-breaking-of-the-border/>.

97. For video evidence, see Bassem Mroue, “Omar Al-Shishani, Chechen in Syria, Rising Star in ISIS Leadership,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 3, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2014/0703/Omar-al-Shishani-Chechen-in-Syria-rising-star-in-ISIS-leadership>. For the list of military operations, see U.S. Department of Treasury, “Treasury Designates Twelve Foreign Terrorist Fighter Facilitators.”

As of September 24, 2014, al Shishani has been added to the U.S. list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists under Executive Order 13224.

98. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan,” Al-Hayat Media Center, July 4, 2014, https://ia902501.us.archive.org/2/items/hym3_22aw/english.pdf.

99. Aryn Baker, “How ISIS Is Recruiting Women from around the World,” *TIME*, September 6, 2014, <http://time.com/3276567/how-isis-is-recruiting-women-from-around-the-world/>.

100. “UK Female Jihadists Run ISIS Sex-Slave Brothels,” *Al Arabiya*, September 12, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2014/09/12/UK-female-jihadists-run-ISIS-sex-slave-brothels.html>.

101. Baker, “How ISIS Is Recruiting Women from around the World.”

bers of foreigners traveling to Syria are female, with at least 30 women traveling from Sweden alone.¹⁰²

Reasons and Motivations for Coming

Aaron Zelin, a leading American authority on foreign fighters in Syria, identifies seven primary factors that help draw people to battle: the simplicity of reaching Syria; the existence of established transit and facilitation networks; social media as a multifaceted enabler; sympathy for Syrian suffering; Syria's "cool" and relatively comfortable appeal (in contrast to hardship locations such as Yemen, Mali, and Afghanistan); the conflict's "religious-historical and millenarian pull;" and the sectarian drive of anti-Shi'ism.¹⁰³

Another motivating factor that often combines with those just listed is the personal hardship that fighters may face in their home countries. Difficult socioeconomic conditions make the decision to fight in Syria an easy one for many aspiring soldiers. A life of marginalization and deprivation and lacking in personal dignity (frequently the result of harsh treatment by local security services) motivates young men to seek empowerment and fulfillment in battle. Such young men are also inspired by witnessing powerful popular movements overthrow oppressive governments across the MENA region.

There are in addition sectarian reasons why fighters go to Syria. Indeed, as the conflict has worsened, fighters, funders, and clerics, both Sunni and Shi'ite, have relied more heavily on a "vocabulary of sectarianism" that appeals to religious loyalties.¹⁰⁴ In response to Shi'ite Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's vow of unwavering military support to the Assad regime,¹⁰⁵

102. "It Ain't Half Hot Here, Mum," *Economist*, August 30, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21614226-why-and-how-westerners-go-fight-syria-and-iraq-it-aint-half-hot-here-mum?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/itaintshalf-hotheremum>.

103. Zelin, "Sunni Foreign Fighters in Syria."

104. Dickinson, "Playing with Fire," 16; Aaron Y. Zelin and Phillip Smyth, "The Vocabulary of Sectarianism," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2014, http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/29/the_vocabulary_of_sectarianism.

105. Dominic Evans, "Hezbollah Will Stay in Syria as Long as Needed: Nasrallah," Reuters, November 14, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/14/us-syria-crisis-hezbollah-idUSBRE9ADoD820131114>.

several prominent Sunni clerics rallied together to incite Sunnis to pursue jihad against the Shi'ite forces.¹⁰⁶ Anti-Shi'ite rhetoric permeates the appeals made to Sunni fighters from around the world to wage jihad in defense of innocent Muslims in Syria. Both radical extremist groups and the moderate opposition use anti-Shi'ite slurs like "Nusayri" and "Safawi" in reference to the Syrian Army or Hezbollah.¹⁰⁷ This sectarian rhetoric seeks to capitalize on a historic division among the sects and at worst attempts to portray the Syrian conflict in terms of a prophesized apocalyptic battle.

At the same time, recruiters also paint a picture of an orderly, pious life with friendship and conveniences fighters may lack in their home country. In a conversation recorded several years ago, an American in Somalia contrasts the religious lifestyle of fighters to the secular morality of home as he seeks to recruit a young American in Boston to join al-Shabaab in Somalia and wage jihad. The Somali tells his Boston contact, Tarek Mehanna, in 2006, "Akhi (brother), pray five times a day. Do you know where I am? You can't even smoke cigarettes. It is illegal." He adds, "I will set you up with everything. I'll have people pick you up, a place for you to stay and, heck, if you want, I can have a wife waiting for you."¹⁰⁸ Eight years later, the rhetoric used to recruit foreigners for jihad is very similar and significantly more accessible.

Syria, or the "land of Sham," is central to the Islamic account of the coming apocalypse. Specifically, the region is the supposed location for the final struggle between the antichrist and

106. "Sunni Clerics Make Joint Call for Jihad in Syria," *Al Arabiya*, June 13, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/06/13/Sunni-clerics-make-joint-call-for-jihad-in-syria.html>.

107. See "Sa'udi yusharik ma' al Jaysh al Hor fi qital al Nusayriyya" [A Saudi participates with the Free Syrian Army in the killing of Nusayri], YouTube video, 0:40, posted by "Vitamin Com," August 22, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZ7BXC2H_MY&feature=youtuve_gdata_player; "(7) Dimn silsilat ghazwat al ayn bi-l-ayn; and "(8) Qasf masakin dubat al jaysh al Nusayri fi Dara'a" [(7) In the series of raids 'an eye for an eye' and (8) Bombing the houses of Nusayri army officers with rockets and mortars in Dara'a], *Jihadology*, August 30, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/30/two-new-statements-from-jabhat-al-nu%e1%b9%a3rah-12/>.

108. "ISIS Operates Sophisticated Propaganda Machine," *CNN*, September 17, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/140917/lvab.02.html>.

Jesus, who “will come down to the white minaret on the east side of Damascus (Dimashq).”¹⁰⁹ This narrative is exploited by jihadi publications seeking recruits. Jabhat al-Nusra’s media wing, Al Minara Al Bayda, is named after the minaret central to the apocalypse mythos. The Islamic State’s English-language magazine publication is titled *Dabiq*, named after a town north of Aleppo in Syria in which a sixteenth-century battle ending in Ottoman victory placed the entirety of modern Syria under Muslim control.

In multiple issues of *Dabiq*, Islamic State propagandists use religious rhetoric and historical references to draw in potential fighters and reinvigorate those already in place. Published in English, the magazine is directly aimed at a Western Muslim audience. With its inclusion of a quotation from deceased al Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab Zarqawi, the second issue of the magazine makes clear its intention to target potential foreign fighters:

The first priority is to perform hijrah from wherever you are to the Islamic State . . . Rush to the shade of the Islamic State with your parents, siblings, spouses, and children. There are homes for you and your families. You can be a major contributor towards the liberation of Makkah, Medinah, and al-Quds. Would you not like to reach Judgment Day with these grand deeds in your scales.¹¹⁰

The issue ends with a quotation from “Allah’s Messenger” emblazoned on a photograph of Islamic State fighters:

“You will invade the Arabian Peninsula, and Allah will enable you to conquer it. You will then invade Persia, and Allah will enable you to conquer it. You will then invade Rome, and Allah will enable you to conquer it. Then you will fight the Dajjal, and Allah will enable you to conquer him.”¹¹¹

109. Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Apocalypse in Islam*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 18.

110. “The Flood,” *Dabiq* (Al Hayat Media Center), 2014, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-2e280b3.pdf>.

111. Ibid. “Dajjal” is an evil figure, or antichrist, in Islamic theology. A common Arabic word, “dajjal” has roots in the words “lie” or “deceit” and references the Islamic belief that a future antichrist will appear pretending to be the messiah.

The religious language is intended to portray the Islamic State as the rightful leader of the Islamic empire's restoration.

While the pathos of Pan-Islamism may draw some to Syria, the reasons for which foreigners flock to Syria are innumerable and individually based. For some foreign fighters, leaving their homes means choosing "a glorious life" over an "animalistic" one.¹¹² Others leave situations of relative wealth and comfort to engage in holy war.¹¹³ For Muslims who are not well integrated in the Western countries where they live, and who may be subject to anti-Muslim sentiment, jihad in Syria may hold particular appeal.¹¹⁴ To the marginalized, Syria and Iraq offer excitement, purpose, and commitment to a larger goal. Recruiters increase incentives for individuals who are unsure about going to Syria, selling the rewards and personal fulfillment of waging jihad.¹¹⁵

Once someone is determined to join the fight, the relative ease of getting into Syria facilitates matters. Marc Pierini, former European Union ambassador to Turkey, called Turkey's lax borders "an open door policy to jihadists in Turkey. So much so that the flight from Istanbul to Gaziantep has been called . . . jihad express."¹¹⁶ Although many countries border Syria, foreign jihadists' stories cite Turkey's southern border as their point of entry into Syria.¹¹⁷ In an interview, a French foreign jihadist who had entered Syria in 2013 described how easily he passed into Syria via Turkey, lying about his intent to do "commercial business" and "philanthropic work."¹¹⁸

112. Mironaova and Whitt, "Glimpse into the Mind," 18.

113. Van Ostaeyen, "Guest Post: Dutch Foreign Fighters."

114. Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "Guest Post: Belgian Jihadis in Syria," *Jihadology*, September 5, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/09/05/guest-post-belgian-jihadis-in-syria/>; "Islamophobia: Understanding Anti-Muslim Sentiment in the West" Gallup, December 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/157082/islamophobia-understanding-anti-muslim-sentiment-west.aspx>; Nadim Roberts, "The Life of a Jihadi Wife: Why One Canadian Woman Joined ISIS's Islamic State," CBC News, July 7, 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/1.2696585>.

115. Nick Paton Walsh, "Syrian Jihadists Using Twitter to Recruit Foreign Fighters," CNN, June 4, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/03/world/meast/syria-defector-recruits-westerners/index.html>.

116. John Vandiver, "Europe's Fear: Turkey's Porous Border Serves as Gateway for ISIL's Spread," *Stars and Stripes*, July 5, 2014, <http://www.stripes.com/news/europe-s-fear-turkey-s-porous-border-serves-as-gateway-for-isil-s-spread-1.291646>.

117. Mironaova and Whitt, "Glimpse into the Mind," 5.

118. Ibid.

Virtual Recruitment

Widely available social media applications allow non-Syrians in the conflict to document their activity, while creating a certain mythos of heroism, righteousness, and noble sacrifice.¹¹⁹ Extremist groups, most notably the Islamic State, run highly sophisticated social media platforms to reach potential jihadists from foreign lands and to broadcast messages of brutality, militarism, religious fanaticism, and humanitarian aid.¹²⁰ The ever-expanding range of social media options offers extremists wide avenues for recruiting foreigners, organizing travel arrangements, and distributing propaganda to their attentive audience.

To help potential fighters arrange their travel to Syria and to directly contact individual fighters in a more private manner, many Islamic State recruiters employ the popular online and smartphone messenger apps Kik, Skype Messenger, and Surespot.¹²¹ If recruits want to ask extremists on the ground more in-depth questions behind anonymous usernames, they can use websites like Ask.fm to find personalized information on topics ranging from grooming to packing lists for jihad.¹²²

Extremists in Syria and Iraq are active on many social media platforms, but they have used Twitter and video-sharing sites most successfully. The Islamic State's media department, Al Hayat Media Center, is in control of video production and various official social media accounts for the group. At its height in June, the group used more than one dozen official provincial

119. Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria* (New York: Soufan Group, 2014), 17, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>.

120. Rita Katz, "Air Strikes Won't Disrupt Islamic State's Real Safe Haven: Social Media," Reuters, September 24, 2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/09/24/beware-of-the-online-caliphate-is-wants-more-than-syria-and-iraq/>.

121. Jarret Brachman, "Transcending Organization: Individuals and 'The Islamic State'" START Analytical Brief, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, June 2014, http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_TranscendingOrganizationIndividualsandtheIslamicState_Analytical-Brief_June2014.pdf.

122. *Ibid.*

accounts spread across the territory it controls to post official releases followed by as many as 50,000 people per account.¹²³

The Islamic State often uses simple “bait and switch” tactics in which links to gruesome videos of beheadings are embedded between popular hashtags like #Brazil during the World Cup, and #ScotlandDecides during the Scottish vote for independence.¹²⁴ Numerous rebel and extremist factions in Syria, including Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State, use Twitter accounts to post photos and videos of battle action, images of stolen materiel, scenes of daily life, pro-Islamist rants, and messages of support to other extremist groups.¹²⁵

Video messages from foreign fighters already in Iraq and Syria represent a major motivating factor for jihadists flowing to the region. In these videos, which are used mainly by the Islamic State, combatants act as spokesmen for the group and issue impassioned appeals to recruits. In an Islamic State video produced in late June 2014, fighters who claimed to hail from the UK and the United States spoke in English and called on fellow Muslims to join them: “You can either be here in these golden times, or you can be on the sidelines commentating.”¹²⁶ In a mid-July 2014 video, also produced by the Islamic State, Canadian foreign fighter Andre Poulin was portrayed in a prerecorded clip released after his death on the battlefield. After describing his

123. Rita Katz, “Follow ISIS on Twitter: A Special Report on the Use of Social Media by Jihadists,” *Insite Blog: On Terrorism and Extremism*, June 26, 2014, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/192-follow-isis-on-twitter-a-special-report-on-the-use-of-social-media-by-jihadists>.

124. Lorraine Ali, “Islamic State’s Soft Weapon of Choice: Social Media,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-islamic-state-media-20140922-story.html>.

125. “My Beloved Brothers in Dawlah, Know That Every Time You Get Bombed It Feels like We of JN Get Bombed, Your Blood Is Our Blood!!!,” Abu Rayan, Twitter post, October 1, 2014, <https://twitter.com/AbuRayanMuhajir/status/517249359717867520>.

126. Al-Hayat Media Center, “There Is No Life Without Jihad,” video, 13:26, 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/19/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-there-is-no-life-without-jihad/>.

The video shows foreign fighters from a variety of regions, including the United States, Europe, and Southeast Asia—and includes some who are portrayed as martyrs following their deaths.

life in Canada as a regular citizen, Poulin called for other Canadians and Westerners to carry out jihad—emphasizing the many roles that foreigners can have within the Islamic State: “We need the engineers, we need doctors, we need professionals, we need volunteers . . . there is a role for everybody.”¹²⁷

Foreigners from non-Western nations have also appeared in passionate video messages. In a late July 2014 video titled “Join the Ranks,” an Indonesian Islamic State fighter called on Indonesian Muslims to leave their homelands and join him in Syria.¹²⁸

A decade removed from the days of terrorist rhetoric disseminated through slow-moving jihadist forums, Islamic State propaganda is almost impossible to eliminate entirely.¹²⁹ Each time Twitter has cracked down on individual or provincial accounts, the militant group has quickly moved to other social media platforms such as Diaspora,¹³⁰ which functions through decentralized private servers and is unable to suspend individual accounts.¹³¹ (The group has even called for so-called lone wolves to kill Twitter corporation employees in retaliation for removal of Islamic State accounts.¹³²) Videos removed from YouTube are re-posted on forums and websites like the public access video-sharing site LiveLeak. For a short time, Islamic State

127. “Canadian Andre Poulin, killed in Syria appears in IS video,” YouTube video, 2:19, posted by “LoneWolf Sager,” July 16, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gx4jTdnVtao>.

128. Al-Hayat Media Center, “Join the Ranks,” video, 8:27, 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/07/22/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-join-the-ranks/>.

129. Rita Katz, “Air Strikes Won’t Disrupt Islamic State’s Real Safe Haven: Social Media,” Reuters, September 24, 2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/09/24/beware-of-the-online-caliphate-is-wants-more-than-syria-and-iraq/>.

130. Aaron Mamiit, “ISIS Turns to Diaspora after Getting Booted by Twitter,” *Tech Times*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.techtimes.com/articles/13888/20140826/isis-turns-to-diaspora-after-getting-booted-by-twitter.htm>.

131. “Islamic State Fighters on Diaspora,” *The Diaspora* Blog*, August 20, 2014, <https://blog.diasporafoundation.org/4-islamic-state-fighters-on-diaspora>.

132. Rita Katz, “The Islamic State Has a New Target: Twitter, and Its San Francisco Employees,” *Washington Post*, September 18, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/09/18/the-islamic-state-has-a-new-target-twitter-and-its-san-francisco-employees/>.

organizers created their own Android application, called “The Dawn of Glad Tidings,” that allowed users to collect extremist tweets in one place.¹³³

Facing Reality

The reality on the ground, however, can be disappointing for some. Many foreigners who traveled to Syria or Iraq and joined hard-line groups have become disillusioned with the experience—unhappy with their individual role, the enemy, and the quality of life. Unmet expectations are not uncommon, and some fighters have already returned home. According to the Danish Security Service (PET), some foreigners even returned home after just a few days.¹³⁴

Fuelling disillusionment is the frequent scenario where fighters—having traveled with hopes of battling the regime of Bashar al-Assad—instead fight other rebel and extremist factions.¹³⁵ A British citizen who traveled to Syria “pumped up with the propaganda” told a researcher at ICSR in London that the situation on the ground had changed: “Now it’s just Muslims fighting Muslims. We didn’t come here for this.”¹³⁶ The phenomenon is not new—one Jabhat al-Nusra coordinator claimed in February 2014 that “hundreds, if not more than two thousand, went back to their home countries.”¹³⁷

Further, the quality of life in Syria or Iraq is almost certainly worse than what most foreign fighters were led to expect by

133. J. M. Berger, “How ISIS Games Twitter,” *Atlantic*, June 16, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=%2AMideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=2014_The%20Middle%20East%20Daily_6.17.14.

134. Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*.

135. Erika Solomon and Sam Jones, “Disillusioned Foreign Fighters Abandon Rebel Ranks in Syria,” *Financial Times*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/a26ffc5c-adfc-11e3-bc07-00144feab7de.html#axzz3EoBoUFUY>.

136. Shiraz Maher and Peter Neumann, “Boris Johnson’s Proposal for British Fighters in Syria and Iraq is Dangerous and Counterproductive,” *Independent*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/boris-johnsons-proposal-for-british-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-is-dangerous-and-counterproductive-9692303.html>.

137. Solomon and Jones, “Disillusioned Foreign Fighters Abandon Rebel Ranks in Syria.”

recruiters, and may be worse than what they left back home. According to Hilal Khashan, a political science professor at the American University of Beirut, “After spending time fighting for Daesh [Islamic State] in Iraq and Syria, they came to a conclusion that no matter how bad in their opinion life was in the West, it still remains much better [than] what they are currently encountering.”¹³⁸

Regardless of how long they stay in the region, foreign fighters who travel to Syria and Iraq gain valuable battle experience and training. In many cases, their radicalized ideals are reinforced by extremist groups, which also transfer new values to them. With this experience and potentially increased level of radicalization, foreign fighters could return to their countries of origin and carry out or plan attacks. Fighters in Syria and Iraq have threatened their countries of origin directly,¹³⁹ though it can be difficult to separate threatening extremist rhetoric and serious plans for action.

But the same disillusionment that sends foreign fighters back to their home countries as an increased threat also presents an exploitable weakness. In his testimony to the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats, expert Thomas Joscelyn pointed out that “disillusioned foreign fighters can be a good source of intelligence concerning which jihadists are the most capable and committed.”¹⁴⁰ Attempting to capitalize on the potential for disillusionment, the U.S. Department of State created a video that seeks to dissuade aspiring fighters before they go.¹⁴¹

138. Quoted in Paul Crompton, “Fed-up Foreign ISIS Fighters ‘Likely to Struggle’ When Returning Home,” *Al Arabiya*, September 13, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2014/09/13/Fed-up-foreign-ISIS-fighters-likely-to-struggle-when-returning-home.html>.

139. Al-Hayat Media Center, “Flames of War,” video, 55:14, 2014, http://www.live-leak.com/view?i=22f_1411220248.

140. Thomas Joscelyn, “Islamist Foreign Fighters Returning Home and the Threat to Europe,” *Long War Journal*, September 19, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/09/islamist_foreign_fig.php.

141. “Welcome to the “Islamic State” Land (ISIS/ISIL),” YouTube video, 1:09, posted by “ThinkAgain TurnAway,” August 22, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmdEFvsYoE>.

Implications

Despite dramatic extremist rhetoric—the threat to “paint the White House black,” for example¹⁴²—it is difficult to discern what threats real and what are for show. Many groups, and the Islamic State in particular, rely on propaganda to induce fear. The infamous passport burning video,¹⁴³ while made to communicate a specific message about the invalidity of borders and secular states’ sovereignty, illustrates a point made by Thomas Hegghammer in early 2013: “Most foreign fighters do not ‘come home to roost.’”¹⁴⁴ Rather, fighters engage in their jihad away from home with no designs to return. While no hard figures about this trend are yet available, anecdotal accounts of men and women making *hijrah* (or permanent migration) to the Islamic State with the intention of establishing families and lives there are on the rise.¹⁴⁵

At the same time, as the number of transnational fighters increases, so does the number of those attempting to return to their home nation. If the flow of foreign fighters to extremist groups in the Iraq and Syria battle space continues unabated, a return attack on fighters’ home nations grows more likely.

This trend draws attention to national intelligence agencies’ inability to accurately track all individuals suspected of traveling to Syria and Iraq to fight. The directors of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center—the agencies tasked with tracking the movement of Americans to foreign battlefields—acknowledged the challenges that they

142. “Exclusive: Islamic State Member Warns of NYC Attack In VICE News Interview,” YouTube Video, 8:09, posted by “VICE News,” September 25, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8TLu514EgU&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

143. Al Furqan Media, “Mu’asisat Al Furqan Taqdim ‘Huwa Samaakum Al Muslimin’ Al Dawla Al Islamiyya Fi Al Iraq Wa as Sham” [Al Furqan Media presents ‘He Named You Muslims’ the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham”], video, 12:31, “April 13, 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/04/13/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-the-muslims-he-hears-you/>.

144. Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 15, doi:10.1017/S0003055412000615.

145. Mironaova and Whitt, “Glimpse into the Mind,” 5; Roberts, “Life of a Jihadi Wife.”

face in this process. In the words of FBI director James Comey, there are “thousands of ways to get from the United States to Syria and there are tens of thousands of Americans who travel for legitimate purposes every single day . . . Once in Syria, it’s very difficult to discern what happens there.”¹⁴⁶ For the thousands of fighters who enter Syria and Iraq from European countries, the threat of a return attack extends to other nations that participate in the visa waiver program, including the United States. European Union officials have also voiced their concern about potential return attacks on European soil, which they have called nearly “inevitable.”¹⁴⁷

In fact, one such attack has already taken place. On May 24, 2014, a lone French gunman named Mehdi Nemmouche allegedly killed four people in the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium.¹⁴⁸ Nemmouche reportedly spent a year fighting in Syria before returning to Germany in March 2014.¹⁴⁹ His car was found to contain an AK-47, a handgun, and a makeshift Islamic State flag.¹⁵⁰ At least one other possible attack has been averted, moreover. In January 2014 Greek border police arrested Ibrahim Boudina, a Frenchman who had fought for Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Syria for over a year. He had a USB drive with bomb-making instructions in his possession; a handgun and homemade explosives were found in an apartment complex in Cannes where Boudina had been hiding.¹⁵¹

146. House Committee on Homeland Security, “FBI, DHS, NCTC Heads Agree: ISIS Recruitment and Radicalization of Americans Dangerous and Difficult to Track,” press release, September 17, 2014, <http://homeland.house.gov/press-release/fbi-dhs-nctc-heads-agree-isis-recruitment-and-radicalization-americans-dangerous-and>.

147. Ian Traynor, “Major Terrorist Attack Is ‘inevitable’ as Isis Fighters Return, Say EU Officials,” *Guardian*, September 25, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/25/major-terrorist-attack-inevitable-isis-eu>.

148. Frances Robinson, “French Suspect in Brussels Jewish Museum Killings Charged,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/french-suspect-in-brussels-jewish-museum-killings-charged-1406725425>.

149. Evan Kohlmann and Laith Alkhouri, “Profiles of Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *CTCSentinel* 7, no. 9 (September 2014): 4, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss91.pdf>.

150. *Ibid.*

151. *Ibid.*, 5.

Foreign fighters represent a core capability for the Islamic State and other extremist groups. Highly motivated and numerous, foreign fighters offer a ready-made international network that could be activated for attacks. Even if fighters do not return to their homelands to carry out attacks, they are willing messengers who encourage others to join them by appearing in recruitment and propaganda videos.

But inherent in their status as foreigners is an exploitable weakness. Restricting the flow of these aspiring jihadists to foreign battlefields could weaken the extremist groups that are so dependent on them for personnel replenishment. For now though, impeding the movement of these fighters remains very difficult.

Responses

The growth of the foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq presents a dynamic threat to the United States, the West in general, and various countries around the world. In response to this threat, members of the international community have sought to block the movement of foreign fighters and counter the ideology pulling them overseas.

The United States pursues a very strong program of engagement and information sharing with dozens of international partners. Among other efforts, it has appointed a senior adviser for “partner engagement on Syria foreign fighters,” requested DHS assistance with porous borders and the movement of foreign fighters, shared information on foreign fighter trends gathered by the U.S. intelligence community, implemented anti-recruitment messaging through the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications of the U.S. State Department, engaged in best-practice exchanges with Europe on laws and tools for investigation and prosecution through the Justice Department, and entered into international information-sharing agreements focused on identifying “terrorist travel activity” through the FBI.¹⁵²

152. White House, “Comprehensive U.S. Government Approach to Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Syria and the Broader Region,” press release, September 24, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/fact-sheet-comprehensive-us-government-approach-foreign-terrorist-fighte>. ISIL—Islamic State of

These international efforts to counter violent extremist ideology and the flow of foreign fighters were highlighted in President Obama's September 24, 2014, speech to the UN General Assembly. President Obama called on the world in general and Muslim communities in particular to "explicitly, forcefully, and consistently reject the ideology of organizations like al Qaeda and ISIL [and] to stop the flow of fighters into and out of the region," at the same time noting that more than 40 countries were joining the coalition to confront the Islamic State.¹⁵³

Broad measures already in place to thwart the flow of foreign fighters include United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178, passed on September 24, 2014, which requires member states to "prevent and suppress the recruiting, organizing, transporting, or equipping of individuals" who seek to participate in jihadist movements and terrorist activities in foreign countries.¹⁵⁴ This legally binding resolution specifically targets fighters with aspirations of traveling and conducting terrorist operations in conflict zones, such as Syria and Iraq.

In attempts to reduce the effectiveness of extremist recruiting through social media, international companies—including Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook—move quickly to remove graphic videos and individual accounts linked to suspected terrorist groups. In late September, Twitter removed over 400 Islamic State–linked accounts in one day.¹⁵⁵ Individual users of social media are also acting to counter recruitment efforts. Hashtag campaigns, both serious and satirical, have included trending topics like #NotInMyName and #MuslimApologies. Such campaigns have raised awareness about jihadists' use of Twitter, though they have also spurred charges of Islamopho-

Iraq and the Levant—is another name for ISIS—Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

153. Barack H. Obama, "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly," White House, September 24, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-United-Nations-General-Assembly>.

154. Ed Pilkington, "UN Unanimously Passes Resolution to Combat 'Foreign Terrorist Fighters,'" *Guardian*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/un-security-council-resolution-terror-threat-obama>.

155. J. M. Berger, Twitter post, September 29, 2014, 8:20 pm, <https://twitter.com/intelwire/status/516789689106579457>.

bia.¹⁵⁶ Certainly the actions of Twitter alone, without direct Western government intervention, will not eliminate extremist use of social media entirely, and many jihadists claim it is an endless game of whack-a-mole.¹⁵⁷ At the same time, continued deliberate, targeted action from social media companies has been shown to slow and limit the propagation of extremist ideology.¹⁵⁸

Reinforcing these international efforts are national measures to inhibit aspiring fighters from traveling abroad. In early September 2014, UK Prime Minister David Cameron gave British law enforcement the power to seize the passports of suspected Islamist militants seeking passage to conflict zones in the Middle East.¹⁵⁹ In Southeast Asia—home to numerous violent extremist groups such as Jemaah Islamiya and the Abu Sayyaf Group—Singapore’s Internal Security Act specifically targets nationals who travel to fight in conflict zones. The act enables Singapore to issue both detention orders and restriction orders to ban known and potentially threatening individuals, respectively, from leaving the country.¹⁶⁰ Saudi Arabia, possessing a 500-mile border with Iraq and home to a large number of foreign fighters already in Syria, took the important and rare step of issuing a royal decree on February 3, 2014, banning the travel of its citizens to fight in Syria or anywhere abroad. Violations of

156. Hannah Gais, “Fight Against Islamic State Group Hits Twitter and Social Media,” *US News and World Report*, October 3, 2014, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/world-report/2014/10/03/fight-against-islamic-state-group-hits-twitter-and-social-media>.

157. Ben Makuch, “Banning Islamic State Jihadists from Twitter Is Like Playing Whack-a-Mole,” *Motherboard-VICE*, August 21, 2014, http://motherboard.vice.com/en_uk/read/isis-twitter-whack-a-mole.

158. J. M. Berger, “Resistible Force Meets Movable Object,” *Intel Wire*, October 2, 2014, <http://news.intelwire.com/2014/10/resistible-force-meets-movable-object.html>.

159. William James and Kylie McClellan, “Britain Unveils Powers to Strip Suspected Islamist Fighters of Passports,” Reuters, September 1, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/09/01/uk-syria-crisis-britain-idUKKBNoGW1Z920140901>.

160. Government of Singapore, Internal Security Act, <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p?page=0;query=DocId%3A%225ba26ddb-fd4c-4e2e-8071-478c08941758%22%20Status%3Ainforce%20Depth%3A0;rec=0>.

the law carry punishment of up to 20 years in prison.¹⁶¹

Leading Islamic clergy have also advised against joining extremist groups and traveling to Syria and Iraq. In June 2012, Sheikh Ali al-Hikmi of the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars, Saudi Arabia's highest religious authority, issued a fatwa prohibiting any acts of jihad in Syria.¹⁶² To further undermine the efforts of jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, the council later issued a statement denouncing terrorism as "contrary to the purposes of the great religion of Islam" and calling it "nothing more than corruption and criminality rejected by Islamic shari'a law and common sense."¹⁶³ The National Imams Consultative Forum of Australia also echoed this sentiment, issuing a statement advising Australians not to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight, but instead to provide humanitarian support for the Syrian people through legal and acceptable channels.¹⁶⁴

Law enforcement at the national level has also been extremely active in disrupting channels of support to fighters hoping to move to the battlefield. French law enforcement arrested five people on suspicion of recruiting young women to join Islamist groups in Syria in September 2014.¹⁶⁵ Police in Bangladesh arrested Samiun Rahman, a young Muslim from London, who ran recruitment operations in Bangladesh for both the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra.¹⁶⁶ And in September 2014, Australian

161. Angus McDowall, "Saudi Arabia to Jail Citizens Who Fight Abroad," Reuters, February 3, 2014, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/02/03/saudi-law-syria-assad-idINDEEA120A620140203>.

162. "Saudi Religious Authority Forbids 'Jihad' in Syria," *Al-Akhbar*, June 7, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/8198>.

163. Ian Black, "Saudi Clerics Declare Isis Terrorism a 'Heinous Crime' under Sharia Law," *Guardian*, September 17, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/17/saudi-clerics-fatwa-declares-terrorism-heinous-crime-sharia-law>.

164. Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Imams Accept Syrian War Risk Is a Reality," *Herald Sun*, March 19, 2014, <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/imams-accept-syrian-war-risk-is-a-reality/story-fnioffsx-1226859520193?nk=cf9cd2846b4948ca373c9ae3b67de3f9>.

165. Hannah Strange, "France Arrests Five People for Allegedly Recruiting Young Women for Jihad in Syria," *VICE News*, September 17, 2014, <https://news.vice.com/article/france-arrests-five-people-for-allegedly-recruiting-young-women-for-jihad-in-syria>.

166. Shiv Malik, Aisha Gani, and Saad Hammadi, "Briton Arrested in Bangladesh

authorities raided homes in Sydney and Brisbane, thwarting a planned terrorist attack by Islamic State sympathizers to perform “public killings,” detaining 15 people.¹⁶⁷

With no slowdown in sight for foreign fighters seeking to join violent extremist groups in Syria, Iraq, and across the MENA region, adaptive multinational efforts to prevent this flow remain a top priority. Should the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra encourage some of these foreign fighters to return home and engage in violent acts, the battle will open up a new and unwelcome front in counterterrorism.

SAFE HAVENS

Today, U.S. military officials identify more terrorist and insurgent sanctuaries in the MENA region than at any time since the attacks of September 11, 2001.¹⁶⁸ These safe havens offer a range of benefits: refuge from government forces; space to train fighters and launch operations; and opportunities to raise revenue, build coalitions, threaten adversaries, and—especially in the case of the Islamic State—control territory where the group can govern and claim legitimacy. Painful experience with groups like AQAP in Yemen has shown that these terrorist safe havens are very difficult to eliminate and can pose a direct threat to the United States and other nations.

Safe havens occur in countries where the established government is unwilling or unable to confront terrorist organizations on their territory, and where these organizations sometimes provide services not offered by corrupt, weak, or inept rulers. In nations experiencing severe internal strife, such as Yemen or Afghanistan, government authority does not extend to all regions, and these conditions offer room for violent extremists to operate.

‘Confessed to Recruiting’ for Isis,” *Guardian*, September 29, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/briton-arrested-bangladesh-recruiting-islamic-state>.

167. “Australia Police Raids Foil ‘Beheading Plot,’” *Al Jazeera*, September 18, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2014/09/australia-makes-raids-foil-violent-acts-201491834852407966.html>.

168. Interview with senior U.S. Defense Department official, April 29, 2014, Washington, D.C.

Some states are devoid of any government capacity or presence, a situation that further enables the free movement of violent extremists. Somalia since 1991 and today's Libya are stark examples. Insurgent, terrorist, and criminal groups operate from these areas, threaten vulnerable populations, and plot attacks against their neighbors and more distant targets.

Al Qaeda and other violent extremists continue to operate in safe havens in Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, Mali, the Philippines, Pakistan, and elsewhere. All these areas remain of great concern, but it is the sprawling, two-state safe haven dominated by the Islamic State that causes such apprehension today.

The Islamic State's capture and control of key areas and resources across large parts of Syria and Iraq affords them a highly prized operational base in the heart of the Middle East. By early fall 2014, the Islamic State controlled key supply routes, cities, and border crossings that connect territory from the northern Syrian city of Raqqa east through Deir ez-Zor, across to Iraq's northern city of Mosul, and southward along the Tigris River.

Though not all the area between these points are directly in Islamic State hands, tightly networked control of important nodes enables the group to regulate travel, trade, communication, and populations. This capacity offers the Islamic State the advantage of either permitting or impeding most activities, thus extending its influence between and beyond areas where the group is physically present. This situation will continue to favor the Islamic State until coalition forces can reduce or eliminate the sanctuary.

An All-Too-Familiar Problem

Ungoverned territory and safe havens have long been features of many states with large landmasses, rugged and remote terrain, and an inability or unwillingness to extend authority to all corners of their nation. Indeed, some officials have even welcomed violent extremists into their country for political and ideological purposes, enabling them to openly establish a base of operations.

Osama bin Laden enjoyed a safe haven in Sudan from 1991 to 1996; he was welcomed as a guest of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir and the hard-line Islamist ideologue Hassan Abdallah al-Turabi.¹⁶⁹ Taking advantage of his personal wealth and heroic status, bin Laden used his new base in Sudan to network with other violent extremists and plan strikes against the United States. Both Saudi Arabia and the United States (along with Egypt) pressured Sudan into ejecting bin Laden in 1996.¹⁷⁰

Afghanistan and Pakistan served as al Qaeda's next sanctuary, and the site where the group trained for and executed major terror attacks. These included the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania;¹⁷¹ the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Yemen; and most notably, the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States. Bin Laden remained in Afghanistan until mid-December 2001, at which point he fled U.S. forces for sanctuary in Pakistan.¹⁷²

The Afghanistan-Pakistan region quickly became the archetype for a lethal terrorist safe haven where an accommodating government allowed its remote territory to serve as a base of extremist operations. It merits noting that Faisal Shahzad was trained in Pakistan by the Tehrik i Taliban Pakistan before attempting to set off a car bomb in New York's Times Square in 2010.

Despite (or, perhaps, partly as a result of) NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya, the North African country has evolved into a safe haven for a range of Islamist groups and militias. Initially

169. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (9/11 Report)* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004), 57, <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/index.htm>.

170. "Timeline: Life of Osama Bin Laden," Reuters, May 2, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/02/us-binladen-events-idUSTRE7411F920110502>.

171. Early planning stages for the East Africa embassy bombings also took place in Sudan.

172. John Kerry, *Tora Bora Revisited: How We Failed to Get Bin Laden and Why It Matters Today*, report to members of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, John Kerry, Chairman, 111th Congress (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2009), 2, <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007384189>.

hailed as a success,¹⁷³ the NATO air campaign created a new security and power void that rival militias quickly filled. Spurred on by intractable political disputes, many militias have gained strength over time; estimates put the number of militias operating in Libya in the low hundreds.¹⁷⁴ These non-state groups pursue nationalist, sectarian, and tribal goals while engaging in various criminal activities, including extortion, smuggling, and kidnapping.¹⁷⁵ The safe haven and deteriorating security situation in Libya offer important lessons for future action in Iraq and Syria—suggesting that the U.S.-led coalition should be an enduring one, and that it should seek political inclusion, economic development, and militia demobilization.

Yemen, a focal point in the United States' ongoing counterterrorism campaign, exemplifies how a terrorist group can manipulate terrain, political strife, and a host of other domestic issues to carve out a safe haven, in spite of a central government's opposition. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, since 2009 a sworn affiliate of the al Qaeda organization, has taken advantage of a nation riven by years of insurrection, sectarianism, and tribal animosities to fashion space for sophisticated operations against the United States and the Yemeni government. Pitched antigovernment violence in Yemen between January and September 2011 further destabilized the country and strengthened AQAP.¹⁷⁶

173. Ivo H. Daalder and James G. Stavridis, "NATO's Victory in Libya: The Right Way to Run an Intervention," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (March/April 2012): 2–7, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137073/ivo-h-daalder-and-james-g-stavridis/natos-victory-in-libya>.

174. Christopher S. Chivvis and Jeffrey Martini, *Libya After Qaddafi: Lessons and Implications for the Future* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Security Research, 2014), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR500/RR577/RAND_RR577.pdf.

Estimates for the number of militias operating in Libya range from the low hundreds across the entire country, to hundreds operating in single cities. The variation arises from different definitions of 'militias' and 'armed groups.'

175. Mieczyslaw P. Boduszynski and Kristin Fabbe, "What Libya's Militia Problem Means for the Middle East, and the U.S.," *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0923-boduszynski-libya-lessons-20140924-story.html>.

176. "Arab Uprising Country by Country: Yemen (Yemen Timeline)," BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-12482293>.

The terrorist activity that AQAP planned and executed from the Yemen sanctuary is notable for its sophistication and ambition. It includes the nearly successful December 25, 2009, attack against the Northwest Airlines flight over Detroit, Michigan, and the October 2010 and May 2012 attempts to destroy U.S.-bound aircraft.

Across the Gulf of Aden from Yemen lies Somalia, one of the most persistent and emblematic terrorist safe havens on the globe. The nation has experienced nothing short of anarchy since President Siad Barre was toppled in 1991. Fighting in 2006 between the fundamentalist Islamic Courts Union (at the time considered “the most powerful force in Somalia”¹⁷⁷) and a feeble Transitional Federal Government backed by U.S.-supported Ethiopian forces gave rise in 2007–2008 to a splinter group called al-Shabaab.¹⁷⁸ Al-Shabaab established a formal, if fitful, relationship with the al Qaeda network in February 2012.¹⁷⁹

From its founding through today, al-Shabaab has perpetrated acts of extreme violence against civilians and local and regional government forces inside lawless Somalia. From 2007 to 2012, al-Shabaab killed more than 1,600 people and wounded more than 2,100 through nearly 500 separate terrorist attacks.¹⁸⁰ Al-Shabaab’s two most notable attacks were executed in Uganda and Kenya. A July 2010 bombing in Kampala—one of the countries with forces taking part in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)—killed 74 people.¹⁸¹ An attack on the Westgate

177. United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia, “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1676 (2006),” United Nations, 2006, 39, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913.

178. Ken Menkhaus, “Al-Shabaab’s Capabilities Post-Westgate,” *CTC Sentinel*, 7, no. 2 (February 2014): 4.

179. U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, “Al-Shabaab Group Profile,” http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_shabaab.html.

180. Erin Miller, “Al-Shabaab Attack on Westgate Mall in Kenya,” START Background Report, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, September 2013, http://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/STARTBackgroundReport_alShabaabKenya_Sept2013.pdf.

181. Max Fisher, “Why al-Shabaab Would Attack in Uganda,” *Atlantic*, July 12, 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/07/why-al-shabaab->

Mall in Nairobi—planned and launched from the Somali safe haven—killed 67 people between September 21 and 24, 2013.¹⁸² Al-Shabaab indicated that the latter attack was revenge for the actions of Kenya’s armed forces inside Somalia.¹⁸³

Terrorist safe havens look different in various contexts and therefore require tailored responses. In general, however, they require the constant threat of lethal force, blockage of funding, and control over the flow of foreign fighters. Without these, safe havens have proven to be a national and international security threat that remain very difficult to manage.

Recent Actions against Safe Havens

Safe havens are a cornerstone of terrorist capability and durability. The United States targets them and those who use them with a combination of direct action by Special Operations Forces (SOF), manned and unmanned aircraft, missiles, CFT measures, nation building, and other forms of technical support.

Strikes by drones—armed, pilotless aircraft—are probably the best-known manifestation of “kinetic” counterterrorism activity in safe havens. Drones are exceptionally important for striking terrorist targets deep in sanctuaries, where using SOF teams is too risky, or in situations where a foreign government is unable or unwilling to pursue and confront violent extremists.

U.S. drone strikes have made some progress against AQAP in Yemen. Cooperation with the government of President Abdurrahman Mansour Hadi and with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh has been key to this relative success. Yet despite approximately 115 drone strikes (killing upwards of 670 militants),¹⁸⁴ AQAP was still considered the most significant threat to the U.S. homeland by the Office of the Director of National In-

would-attack-in-uganda/59551/.

182. New York City Police Department, “Analysis of al-Shabaab’s Attack at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya,” November 1, 2013, 3, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/190795929/NYPD-Westgate-Report>.

183. *Ibid.*, 13.

184. Bill Roggio, “US Drone Strike Kills 3 AQAP Fighters in Central Yemen,” *Long War Journal*, August 9, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/08/us_drone_strike_kill_30.php.

telligence as of January 2014.¹⁸⁵ An indispensable part of U.S. counterterrorism strategy in recent years, drone strikes as a counterterrorism measure have inherent limitations, including intelligence challenges and frequent public outrage over questions of state sovereignty and civilian deaths. Even so, the Obama administration looks to efforts in Yemen as a partial model for host-nation cooperation as U.S. and partner forces attack the Islamic State in its Iraq-Syria safe haven.¹⁸⁶

U.S. SOF engages militants operating out of safe havens in the Horn of Africa. In September 2009, helicopter-borne SOF pursued and killed Saleh Ali Nabhan.¹⁸⁷ Nabhan was wanted for his role in the 1998 al Qaeda attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In September of 2014, the U.S. dealt a serious blow to al-Shabaab after a drone missile struck and killed the group's leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane, along with other senior members of the group, inside of Somalia.¹⁸⁸

Targeted actions to diminish safe havens include, importantly, nonmilitary forms of assistance. Safe havens rely on ungoverned territory in nations with porous land, sea, and air borders, and fester in the absence of good governance and economic opportunity. Violent extremists occupying safe havens also depend on financial resources to sustain their activity. Impeding the movement of individuals and resources while helping to rebuild economies is a vital means of reducing terrorist sanctuaries.

185. "Transcript: Senate Intelligence Hearing on National Security Threats," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/transcript-senate-intelligence-hearing-on-national-security-threats/2014/01/29/b5915184-8912-11e3-833c-33098f9e5267_story.html; "Drone Wars Yemen: Analysis," New America Foundation International Security Program, http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/yemen/analysis?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=%2ASituation%20Report&utm_campaign=SitRep_0801.

186. Barack H. Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Situation in Iraq" White House, June 19, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/19/remarks-president-situation-iraq>.

187. "Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity," *CTC Sentinel*, 2, no. 10 (October 2009): 20, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CTCSentinel-Vol2Iss10-Art8.pdf>.

188. Jon Lee Anderson, "Killing Godone, Chasing ISIS," *New Yorker*, September 6, 2014.

The U.S. State Department's Regional Strategic Initiative (RSI) pursues efforts "in a regional context with the goal of shrinking the space in which terrorists operate."¹⁸⁹ This includes East Africa, Central Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean, Africa's Sahel region, and in Middle Eastern nations such as Iraq. The RSI program offers border security workshops¹⁹⁰ and conducts anti-kidnapping for ransom (KFR) workshops¹⁹¹ as part of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) in Africa.¹⁹² These efforts are designed to better protect the local partners as well as reduce the chances that their territory will be used to launch attacks on other nations, including the United States.

A lack of economic opportunity in both urban and rural areas of developing countries provides opportunities for terrorist groups to recruit and radicalize individuals. Where a government is unable or unwilling to generate economic activity or provide services for citizens, especially young men, these forces are able to offer both licit and illicit opportunities, for example participation in trafficking or KFR operations.¹⁹³

Afghanistan represents a case in which effective counterinsurgency strategies have reduced the threat posed by extremist groups, and it may offer some instructive lessons for combating the hybrid insurgent-terrorist groups in the MENA region. Large areas in Afghanistan are outside of government control, and violent extremists hold sway over segments of the population. Groups such as the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Net-

189. U.S. Department of State, "Bureau of Counterterrorism, Regional Strategic Initiative," <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/programs/index.htm#RSI>.

190. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Terrorist Safe Haven," in *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, April 2014, 8, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224828.htm>.

191. U.S. Department of State, *Annual Report on Assistance Related to International Terrorism: Fiscal Year 2013*, February 11, 2014, 1, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/rpt/221544.htm>.

192. TSCTP partner nations include Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. See Trans-Sahara Counter-Terror Partnership, <http://www.foreignassistance.gov/web/OU.aspx?OUID=373>.

193. Interview with "Abu Khalid," illicit businessman and trader, January 14, 2014, Turkey. The subject exposed drug trafficking by extremists in Syria, particularly from the city of Al Bab.

work (a group associated with the Taliban) target vulnerable, often unemployed young men in an effort to weaken the regime in Kabul and retain control over parts of the country and lucrative trading routes. These insurgent, terrorist, and criminal groups are there to offer options—reinforced with threats—to vulnerable populations, whether they are unemployed lumbermen in the Korengal Valley or drought-stricken farmers in Helmand Province.¹⁹⁴

Over the course of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Provincial Reconstruction Teams combined military and civilian programs to provide international aid to citizens across the country.¹⁹⁵ An important component of the teams is the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which provides economic and community development, good governance programming, and monitored U.S. reconstruction efforts in areas that might otherwise become a part of a terrorist or insurgent safe haven.¹⁹⁶

The centrality of development to these approaches cannot be overstated. David Kilcullen, one of the world's leading authorities on counterinsurgency, argues for strategies that include economic development as a tool to “extend government control over the population and the environment while marginalizing the enemy in a physical and political sense.”¹⁹⁷ Shrinking the space available to violent extremists reduces opportunities for revenue generation, recruitment, training, and operations against counterterrorism forces and civilians.

194. Afghanistan's 2014 United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) ranks the destitute nation 169 out of 187 countries, with 2013 annual per capita income registering a meager US\$700. This rugged, inaccessible country is 78 percent rural, putting major stretches of its territory out of the reach of government security, health, education, and economic services. The similarly poor economic and social circumstances in Syria and Iraq have facilitated the recruitment of young men into extremist factions.

195. United States Agency for International Development, “Provincial Reconstruction Teams,” October, 27, 2014, <http://www.usaid.gov/provincial-reconstruction-teams>.

196. Ibid.

197. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 106.

The Islamic State Sanctuary

Beginning in March 2011 with the “Day of Dignity” protests, the conflict in Syria rapidly engulfed the nation and by August 2014 had claimed roughly 200,000 lives.¹⁹⁸ More than 1,000 militias and opposition groups battle one another as well as Syrian government forces, Shi’ite militias, and Lebanon’s Hezbollah.¹⁹⁹ As a result of this turmoil and violence, vast areas of Syria have fallen outside of the Assad regime’s direct or indirect control. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated in mid-July 2014 that the Islamic State controlled 35 percent of Syrian territory.²⁰⁰ However, it is clear that some of this space remains contested by a combination of Syrian government forces and antiregime opposition forces that have regularly battled with the Islamic State.

Partly due to an ethnically exclusive Iraqi government under former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and a near-constant political stalemate, the Islamic State was able to expand its large safe haven from Syria into Iraq. In the first half of 2014, the Islamic State forces stepped up attacks against Iraqi military forces. On January 3, 2014, they captured the Iraqi city of Fallujah on their way to taking much of Sunni-dominated western Iraq.²⁰¹ On June 10, the Islamic State captured Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city. U.S. airstrikes in August combined with increased support to Kurdish Pesh Merga forces rolled back some Islamic State gains,²⁰² but as of October 2014, Islamic State-controlled areas

198. Megan Price, Anita Gohdes, and Patrick Ball, “Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic,” Human Rights Data Analysis Group, August 2014, 1, <https://hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/HRDAG-SY-UpdatedReportAug2014.pdf>.

199. “Syria Crisis: Guide to Armed and Political Opposition,” BBC News, December 13, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>.

200. Jennifer Cafarella, “ISIS Connects Strongholds in Deir Ez-Zour and Ar-Raqqa,” *Institute for the Study of War Updates (blog)*, July 19, 2014, <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/07/isis-connects-strongholds-in-deir-ez.html>.

201. Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda force captures Fallujah amid Rise in Violence in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, January 3, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/al-qaeda-force-captures-fallujah-amid-rise-in-violence-in-iraq/2014/01/03/8abaeb2a-74aa-11e3-8def-a33011492df2_story.html.

202. “Back to Iraq,” *Economist*, August 16, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21612229-combining-military-force-political-brinkmanship-america-making-some-headway-back>.

stretched from its Syrian headquarters in Raqqa well into Iraq's Anbar Province—and beyond.

Islamic State control of key Syrian and Iraqi cities represents a calculated plan to link cities, rivers, and border crossings to enable training, resupply, population management, revenue generation, and the movement of fighters. Importantly, it also offers the Islamic State the ability to highlight their control and governance of a re-established caliphate. The Islamic State reinforces its claim of a caliphate by refusing to acknowledge international borders—a refusal that is itself a threat to neighboring states.

During 2014, the safe haven that the Islamic State controls has expanded from secluded training grounds in rural settings to include major urban centers. Indeed, the Islamic State safe haven provides the most recognizable example of a mixture of urban and rural holdings. The fusion of these two environments gives the group greater flexibility to train and equip fighters for different circumstances and employ more versatile weaponry, and it improves the group's recruiting pitch to foreign fighters by offering them not just combat, but an opportunity to defend and nurture the only territory truly governed Islamically. Controlling both urban and rural areas also widens funding opportunities. Urban areas offer opportunities for taxation, extortion, and control of local economies, while rural areas enable exploitation of resources such as oil and agricultural products.

As of late September 2014, just prior to coalition air strikes that targeted oil refineries controlled by the Islamic State, the group reportedly held 10 refineries across Syria and Iraq, which produced a combined 80,000 barrels of oil per day to be sold on the black market for millions of dollars.²⁰³ As noted earlier in this chapter, controlling and selling oil plays a significant role in the Islamic State's ability to sustain its operations.

As the Islamic State gained control of Iraqi and Syrian territory in 2013 and 2014, it effectively assumed responsibility for

203. Daragahi and Solomon, "Fuelling Isis Inc."

The figure of 80,000 combined barrels of oil reflects a reported 50,000 barrels a day from Syria and 30,000 from Iraq.

governance functions such as waste management and tax collection.²⁰⁴ The precarious nature of Islamic State governance—dependent on many uncertain factors (e.g., reliable revenues to pay tribal and sectarian partners) along with discipline across a large organization—remains a potentially exploitable weakness.²⁰⁵ This possible opening for forces seeking to dismantle and destroy the Islamic State is discussed above, in the section that discusses CFT strategies.

The Implications of and Possible Remedies for the Islamic State Safe Haven

Across Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, the Philippines, and other conflict areas, terrorist safe havens offer exceptional advantages to violent extremists. Rural and urban sanctuaries fester in the midst of conflict and where governments are too weak or too inept to provide citizens with services and economic opportunity. Terrorists plan, train, and operate from these areas with few reliable measures to interdict their activities. Even with concerted outside military, economic, and other forms of assistance, sovereign countries may be ineffective in reclaiming their territory, and safe havens remain a tremendous problem.

The Islamic State safe haven in Syria and Iraq—possessed of tens of thousands of foreign fighters, skilled bomb makers, attack plotters, weapons, money, and passports from visa waiver countries—represents a very serious threat to the integrity of Syria and Iraq, to nearby states, and to those beyond. As the safe haven has expanded throughout 2014, more young men have been brought into the ranks of Islamic State fighters. And as the declared Islamic caliphate solidifies, it stimulates and motivates thousands more to travel to the region and defend sacred territory. Those same fighters may possibly be deployed against local, regional, and more distant targets at the direction of the Islamic State's leadership.

204. Jenna Lefler, "Life under ISIS in Mosul," Institute for the Study of War, July 28, 2014, <http://iswiraq.blogspot.com/2014/07/life-under-isis-in-mosul.html>.

205. Keith Johnson, "The Islamic State Is the Newest Petrostate," *Foreign Policy*, July 28, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/07/28/baghdadis_hillbills_isis_iraq_syria_oil_terrorism_islamic_state.

As discussed earlier, the presence of European foreign fighters in the conflict poses a serious threat to Western security. The proximity of the Islamic State's safe haven to Europe presents an especially serious problem for that continent and for the United States. At least 3,000 European fighters engaged in Syria and Iraq are only a short distance from home.²⁰⁶ With several European nations now actively supporting efforts to weaken and destroy the Islamic State, there is a heightened possibility that some fighters will return home and engage in violence. And of the 38 countries participating in the Department of State's visa waiver program, 30 are European. This ability to board a plane from one of those 30 nations to the United States without a personal interview at a local U.S. embassy reduces opportunities for detecting threatening travelers.²⁰⁷

The return of radicalized, trained, and highly motivated foreign fighters is also a potential threat to dozens of other nations that have seen their citizens rush to the battle in Syria. Indonesia is believed to have between 50 and 100 fighters in Syria,²⁰⁸ with many supporting the Islamic State.²⁰⁹ With a recent history of terrorist violence by groups such as Jemaah Islamiya, there is fear in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines that these fighters may return to rejuvenate Jemaah Islamiya, initiate their own terrorist group, and incite violence.

The central location of the Islamic State sanctuary—close to several energy-rich nations, vulnerable populations, plentiful weapons and finances, and U.S. and Western facilities—pres-

206. Sources estimate 3,000 to well over 4,000 European foreign fighters are currently in Iraq and Syria. See "It Ain't Half Hot Here, Mum," *Economist*; and "Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria: Where Do They Come From?" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 2, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/infographics/infographics/26584940.html>.

207. U.S. Department of State, "Visa Waiver Program Participant Country List," <http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/visit/visa-waiver-program.html>.

208. Sidney Jones, "Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict," IPAC Report 6, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, January 30, 2014, 1–12.

209. "Indonesia Fears Terror Backlash as Jihadist Fighters Head to Syria, Iraq," Agence-France Presse, June 20, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1536804/indonesia-fears-terror-backlash-jihadist-fighters-head-syria-iraq>.

ents many potential targets for the group. With Lebanon already experiencing high levels of violence associated with the Syrian civil war—for which Lebanese Hezbollah bears some responsibility—the Islamic State’s redoubt suggests greater violence and instability for Lebanon in the months and years ahead.

Jordan and Turkey border Syria and have reason to be concerned. Both states are U.S. allies, and attacks on them could push the United States into a wider commitment of military forces and other resources in the Middle East, despite the Obama administration’s desire to avoid broader involvement. A further complication is the perception that U.S. actions against the Sunni extremist Islamic State are supporting the goals of Shi’ite Iran and Syria—a perception that may further sharpen the region’s sectarian divide and hobble the counterterrorism coalition.

The centrality of Iraq to the global energy supply is yet another reason why a well-armed group occupying large parts of that turbulent nation, as well as its neighbor Syria, is of serious concern. At the beginning of 2013, Iraq boasted the world’s fifth-largest crude oil reserves while ranking second in OPEC production at slightly more than 3 million barrels per day.²¹⁰ In early 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra reportedly received close to US\$1.8 million per month from the Syrian regime to guarantee the continuation of oil production from oil fields controlled by the group.²¹¹ While the control of some Iraqi and Syrian oil exports by extremist groups in the region constitutes a small amount of the countries’ total output, the concern is Iraq’s longer-term integrity and whether the nation can increase production in parallel to projected growth in worldwide consumer demand.²¹²

210. U.S. Department of Energy Information Administration, “Iraq Country Overview and Analysis Brief,” April 2013, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=iz>.

211. Operatives from the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda’s Branch in Syria, Together with Other Rebel Organizations, Have Taken over the Large Oil Field in Deir Ez-Zor,” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, March 12, 2013, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20599>.

212. Keith Johnson, “ISIS and the Long-Term Threat to Iraqi Oil,” *Foreign Policy*, June 17, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/06/17/isis_and_the_long_term_threat_to_iraqi_oil.

Failing to do so could lead to higher prices and economic shocks.

There is little doubt that the Islamic State safe haven facilitates an active and building threat to regional stability, and that it offers opportunities to strike beyond the confines of Iraq and Syria—into Europe, Southeast Asia, and North America. This sanctuary offers financial resources as well as space to network, train, and deploy fighters from around the world; launch attacks; recuperate after battle; claim legitimacy; and threaten adversaries.

From this safe haven, the Islamic State threatened the integrity of Iraq and threatens the United States back to battle in the region—a remarkable development by any measure. Though the center of gravity for this threat is the Islamic State safe haven, it is evident that other sanctuaries in the region could rise to the level of Syria and Iraq. Given the ongoing, unsettled regional landscape, new safe havens could easily emerge, and existing terrorist sanctuaries could be expanded.

U.S. policy should focus on continued work with coalition partners to shrink the safe haven through a combination of cutting Islamic State resource extraction and closing borders to foreign fighters and black-market oil trafficking. Additionally, the United States should help counter the Islamic State's claims of legitimacy by supporting credible Muslim voices, should strike Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra forces, and should stress the importance of progress on political reform in Iraq in an effort to separate extremist groups from Sunni communities sympathetic to its message of empowerment and revenge. Building and leading a coalition to "degrade and destroy" violent extremists in MENA safe havens demands all of these measures and more that will inevitably arise as the political and security landscape continues to change.

CONCLUSION

More than 15 years after the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, countering terrorists such as al Qaeda, insurgencies such as the Islamic State and the Taliban, and a range of

other violent extremists has yielded victories and setbacks. Adaptations and initiative by the adversary almost always outpace countermeasures, a disadvantage unlikely to end given states' slow and reactive nature.

With their large safe haven, robust funding schemes, and dependable supply of fighters from more than one-third of the world's countries, violent extremists in Syria and Iraq pose serious counterterrorism challenges. The threat from these extremists appears on many fronts: al Qaeda fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, identified as the Khorasan Group, are also present in Syria to plot attacks, while the local Syrian al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, has continued with its violent advance, to include taking over a Golan Heights border crossing with Israel.

When the United States and its partners began to respond in full to the Islamic State's rapid moves across Iraq in the summer of 2014, the group was steps ahead, pursuing a violent and successful agenda. After it captured large areas of Syria and Iraq and declared a caliphate, the West and its local allies scrambled to catch up.

The Islamic State's seasoned leadership and disciplined structure position it well to remain the center of gravity in Syria and Iraq. The group planned ahead and built a portfolio of renewable, diverse income sources that will lend it durability and insulation in the months and years ahead. A broad safe haven and the service provision the group conducts within it afford the Islamic State the legitimacy it claims in the caliphate declaration—while also allowing plenty of space to plan and execute operations. The high numbers of foreign fighters rushing to join the local fight are yet another potential tool against far-flung enemies now engaged in battle against the Islamic State. With a sophisticated social media capability to advertise and facilitate its goals and actions, the former al Qaeda affiliate appears to be at the vanguard of the global jihadi movement.

In each of these Islamic State advantages, however, can be found a weakness. As political change slowly moves forward in

Iraq, certain Sunni enablers and allies of the Islamic State could fall off or even turn against the group. Air strikes and other measures targeting the heart of the group's sources of funds—oil extraction, refining, and black market sales—have taken a serious toll. A drop in revenues and fewer allies will shrink the safe haven in which the Islamic State operates. It will also affect the insurgency's ability to support foreign fighters, a development that could come about in parallel with measures to keep the fighters home and to make crossing the Turkish border more difficult when they do manage to travel.

Counterterrorism forces have never witnessed such a significant challenge before, and success will demand no letup in commitment, creativity, and speed—for on the other side of the chessboard are organizations with equal drive to prevail. Opportunities for disruption and dismantlement may be short-lived, but they must be pursued.