How to Stop Jihadist Foreign Fighters

DANIEL BYMAN

JIHADIST FOREIGN FIGHTERS HAVE PROVEN to be deadly terrorists and dangerous insurgents. Foreign fighters have been at the core of most of the major jihadist terrorist plots in the West in the last 25 years, including the 1998 al Qaeda attacks on two U.S. embassies in Africa that left 224 people dead, the 2004 Madrid transportation bombings that killed 191 people, the 2005 London transportation bombings where 52 innocents died, the 2015 Islamic State attacks in Paris that killed 130 people, and, of course, September 11, where almost 3,000 people perished. Yet this list of terrorist attacks obscures the even more dangerous roles that foreign fighters play. Foreign fighters incubate new insurgent groups, make existing civil wars bloodier, and facilitate the spread of civil wars to neighboring countries. Hundreds of thousands of people have died in these conflicts.[1]

[1]This article draws on my book, *Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). For excellent works on the foreign fighter problem, see Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35 (Winter 2010/2011): 53–94; 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 (February 2013): 1–15; Abdallah Anas, *Weladt "Al Afghan Al Arab": Sirt Abdallah Anas bayn Massoud wa Abdallah Azzam* [The birth of the Afghan Arabs: The life of Abdallah Anas between Masoud and Abdallah Azzam] (London: Dar Al Saqi, 2002); Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts, & Bleedout: Al-Qa'ida's Road in Iraq and Out of Iraq* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, July 2008); Kristin N. Bakke, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of

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Although some jihads, like Afghanistan before September 11, produced massive terrorist attacks from foreign fighter returnees, many other jihads did not. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, U.S. and European government officials and respected outside terrorism experts warned that Iraq would prove to be even worse than Afghanistan, generating "ferocious blowback."[2] Yet the conflict produced few, if any, terrorist attacks in the West.[3] In addition, even conflicts like the Syrian civil war, which saw massive foreign fighter flows and produced significant international terrorism in France and Belgium in 2015 and 2016, had an uneven impact. In Europe, attacks dipped considerably in the later years of the conflict despite many dire predictions. The picture in the United States is even more positive. In the post-September 11 era, the United States has seen *zero* successful foreign fighter-linked attacks on U.S. soil.

Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security* 38 (Spring 2014): 150–187; Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees* (New York: Soufan Center, October 2017); Reinier Bergema and Peter Wijninga, "Coming Home: Explaining the Variance in Jihadi Foreign Fighter Returnees across Western Europe," *Jihadology* (blog), 15 February 2018, accessed at https://jihadology.net/2018/02/15/guest-post-coming-home-explaining-the-variance-in-jihadi-foreign-fighter-returnees-across-western-europe/, 6 June 2021; Alex Braithwaite and Tiffany S. Chu, "Civil Conflicts Abroad, Foreign Fighters, and Terrorism at Home," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62 (September 2018): 1–25; Rukmini Callimachi, "The ISIS Files," *New York Times*, 4 April 2018; Tiffany S. Chu and Alex Braithwaite, "The Impact of Foreign Fighters on Civil Conflict Outcomes," *Research & Politics* (July–September 2017): 1–7; R. Kim Cragin, "The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 33 (August 2017): 292–312; Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, April 2016); Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters, *Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilizations (1980–2015)* (The Hague: International Center for Counter-Terrorism, October 2015); Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015); Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares, eds., *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat: From 9/11 to Osama bin Laden's Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 192–223; Michael Jensen, Patrick James, and Herbert Tinsley, *Overview: Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF)* (College Park, MD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2016); David Malet, "The European Experience with Foreign Fighters and Returnees," in Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, eds., *Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them?* (Brussels: Egmont—The Royal Institute for International Relations, 2018), 6–18; David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq* (Washington, DC: Program on Extremism, George Washington University, February 2018), 5–6; and Bibi Van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann, eds., *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies* (The Hague: International Center for Counter-Terrorism, April 2016).

[2]Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds, "Blowback Revisited," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (November/December 2005): 2–6.

[3]Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Ansar al-Fatah and the 'Iraqi' Networks in France," in Hoffman and Reinares, *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat*, 353–374.

What explains this variation? Much of the answer comes from recognizing the importance of counterterrorism in mitigating what would otherwise be a dangerous threat from foreign fighters. A review of the historical record indicates that the foreign fighter problem has proven particularly amenable to policy intervention, with both the United States and Europe seeing a dramatic decrease in the number of attacks from foreign fighters even as jihadist terrorism overall has remained a problem. No single counterterrorism instrument has produced success. Rather, counterterrorism works best when it attacks the entire production cycle of foreign fighters. This ranges from trying to prevent recruitment, to disrupting travel by tightening borders, to tracking and striking fighters and groups in the war zone, and to arresting or deradicalizing those who make it back to prevent the cycle from starting again.

This article describes how different counterterrorism efforts can combine to make the threat of foreign fighters less dangerous to the United States and its allies. The first section of this article briefly describes the foreign fighter threat. The second section explains how well-crafted counterterrorism can disrupt jihadist efforts at each stage of the foreign fighter production cycle. In section three, I present recommendations for improving counterterrorism.

THE JIHADIST THREAT AND THE ROLE OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Defining a foreign fighter can be tricky. The scholar David Malet, in his excellent overview of a range of (mostly nonjihadist) conflicts involving foreign fighters, defines foreign fighters as "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts."[4] The United Nations takes a different angle, focusing on "individuals who travel to a State other than their own State of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict."[5] Other experts use the term "travelers" to note that many who go abroad do not fight but participate in other ways, ranging from computer programmers who create social

[4]David Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 9.

[5]See United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178, "Addressing the Growing Issue of Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 24 September 2014, accessed at https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/news/document/sres2178-2014-addressing-the-growing-issue-of-foreign-terrorist-fighters/, 6 June 2021.

media sites to women who want to raise their children in what they see as a true Islamic society.[6]

I draw on these sources and use a broad definition: *individuals who travel to a state other than their own to join an illicit group and perpetrate or assist in terrorist attacks or armed conflict*. This would include not only an individual who went to Syria to blow himself up on behalf of the Islamic State or who returns home to wreak havoc, but also someone who provided training, designed a website, or otherwise assisted a terrorist or militant group. I seek to exclude those who travel primarily for financial reasons (mercenaries) or do so primarily at the behest of a foreign government, such as the Shiite Muslim fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan whom Iran has organized and deployed to fight in Syria.[7]

The modern foreign fighter movement began with the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and subsequent jihads have seen considerable flows, summarized in Table 1.[8]

Although the numbers fluctuate, the long-term trend line is disturbing. Only a few dozen foreign fighters traveled to Afghanistan to fight during the first few years of the anti-Soviet struggle. Forty years later, more than 40,000 fighters went to Syria.[9]

Historically, foreign fighters were an important source of the jihadist movement's strength and were at the core of al Qaeda and the Islamic State.[10] My own work and that of other scholars suggests several dangers that foreign fighters pose:

- *Lethality*. One leading study done before the Syrian civil war found that terrorist plots involving foreign fighter veterans were roughly 50

[6]Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*, 5–6.

[7]The definition of "foreign" is also contested. The individuals involved would reject this label, arguing that they are Muslims fighting with fellow Muslims. Only Western attempts to divide Muslims by artificial national identities represent the "foreign" aspect in their eyes. Diasporas are another issue. If a Somali who lived in the United Kingdom returned home to fight, is he "foreign"? Making this more complex, what about his son, who is raised in Britain, barely speaks a word of Somali, and yet identifies with his father's homeland? Some groups also recruit heavily from migrant or refugee communities in the immediate neighborhood. Does a Kenyan of Somali ethnicity count as "foreign" if he crosses the border to fight with al Shabaab in Somalia? Although I usually exclude this last category, as it vastly expands the number of foreign fighters while moving away from the core issue that makes the phenomenon most interesting, in general, this article adopts a broad definition of "foreign," at times encompassing neighboring communities and diasporas as well as fighters from more distant lands.

[8]Thomas Hegghammer, "Foreign Fighter Observation Set 1.0," accessed at https://hegghammer.com/resources/, 10 January 2020.

[9]Richard Barrett et al., *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York: Soufan Group, 2015).

[10]William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015); and R. Kim Cragin, "Early History of Al-Qa'ida," *The Historical Journal* 51 (December 2008): 1047–1067.

TABLE 1
Foreign Fighter Flows before the Syrian Jihad

Destination	*Number of Foreign Fighters (1979–2010)*
Afghanistan	4,000–5,000
Bosnia	>300
Chechnya	~200
Somalia	>450
Yemen	50
Iraq	>600
Unattributable	>6,000

Notes: Data on foreign fighters are often bad or misleading, and these numbers should be seen as suggestive, not definitive. Many governments ignored this problem and did not gather information about their citizens who traveled abroad to fight. Governments' definitions of "fighting" also vary, as some focus on those who engage in war abroad versus those who simply train, travel abroad to provide medical services, or just live in the land controlled by a jihadist group (see Bibi Van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann, eds., *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies* [The Hague: International Center for Counter-Terrorism, April 2016]). Some governments, usually authoritarian ones, inflate the numbers to gain international support or to justify harsh security measures. Often statistics include both those who tried to go abroad but were arrested and those who successfully made their journeys (a problem that plagues many official U.S. statements).

percent more likely to succeed than those without returning fighters and that when the attack succeeded, on average, the fatalities were twice as high.[11]

- *Atrocities.* Foreign fighters often make war harsher. They are more likely than other fighters to commit atrocities because of their zealotry, their fear of disobeying the harsh discipline of a jihadist group, and their lack of local connections that might otherwise restrain them or give them a protector should they want to disobey the group. In contrast, local groups have personal relations with members of rival communities or at least fear revenge against their own people. In addition, foreign fighters will likely oppose any peace deal fiercely, using terrorism against all sides to disrupt it.[12]
- *Incubators.* Individuals inspired by a conflict and hardened by war often go on to another war zone, starting a group there or changing the nature of existing ones to make them more radical. The scholar Thomas Hegghammer finds that veterans of Afghanistan jihad in particular proved prolific, creating new groups or otherwise playing important roles in subsequent conflicts in Algeria, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, and other countries.[13]

[11]Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," 11.
[12]Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22 (Fall 1997): 5–53.
[13]Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 53–94.

- *Expanded wars.* By credo and by background, foreign fighters reject borders. In their eyes, they defend the global Muslim community, not the artificial lines on a map that define states' boundaries. To them, injustices against Muslims in a neighboring state deserve attention as do injustices in their current base. In addition, because foreign fighters leverage transnational travel and logistics networks to get to the war zone, they can easily bring fighters and weapons out of the war zone and into new lands as well as into it. Accordingly, foreign fighters in Chechnya expanded the war to Dagestan; in Iraq, they spread it to Syria; from Afghanistan, they spread it to Pakistan; and so on. Such moves led to new supporters and bases, but also created new enemies and introduced tensions with more nationalistic fighters.[14]
- *Recruitment and travel facilitation.* Timothy Holman conveys the wide range of roles that former foreign fighters, as well as jihadist nongovernmental organizations and social media platforms, can play as facilitators.[15] They help new fighters leave their country of origin, find and facilitate transit into the war zone, assure groups that they are not spies, and otherwise assist new recruits by helping them enter broader networks that enable them to join the jihad. Terrorism analyst Clinton Watts estimates that between 60 and 80 percent of the foreign fighters who ended up in Iraq were recruited by former foreign fighters.[16]

Without policy interference, there are several reasons to think that foreign fighter flows might increase for future jihads. The facilitation network effects for a future jihad will be large given the significant number of alumni from the Syrian conflict. Technology can also assist foreign fighters. The Islamic State impressively used social media to help radicalize, recruit, and facilitate foreign fighter flows on a mass scale, and increased "many to many" communication will further enable this.[17]

Yet for all these dangers, the terrorism threat to the United States and Europe from foreign fighters has declined substantially. Pre-Syria work

[14]Bakke, "Help Wanted?"
[15]Timothy Holman, "'Gonna Get Myself Connected': The Role of Facilitation in Foreign Fighter Mobilizations," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (2016), accessed at http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/497, 6 June 2021.
[16]Clinton Watts, "Foreign Fighters: How Are They Being Recruited? Two Imperfect Recruitment Models," *Small Wars Journal*, 22 June 2008, accessed at https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/foreign-fighters-how-are-they-being-recruited, 6 June 2021.
[17]J. M. Berger, "Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State's Recruitment Strategy," *CTC Sentinel* 8 (October 2015): 19–23.

by Hegghammer found that an estimated 1 in 9 foreign fighters became involved in terrorism (a very high ratio). Hegghammer and another leading scholar, Petter Nesser, revised their work to reflect later trends and suggest that currently 1 in 360 returned Islamic State foreign fighters is involved in terrorism—not a tiny number given the large overall numbers of returnees, but a far lower ratio than many feared and a fraction of the original.[18] In Europe at the time of September 11, foreign fighters represented around 80 percent of the terrorism danger, with those who trained in Afghanistan proving a particular risk, but over time, this fell to around 20 percent, even as large foreign fighter flows continued. Even France, the Western country that suffered the worst foreign fighter attack linked to the Syria conflict, found that only 3 percent of French returnees planned or committed an attack between 2013 and 2016.[19] Throughout Europe, "homegrown violent extremists" have far outpaced foreign fighters returnees in terms of terrorist activities.[20] In the United States, there were zero successful terrorist attacks involving foreign fighters since September 11 through the end of 2020.

DISRUPTING THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PRODUCTION PROCESS

To understand how foreign fighters can be both highly lethal yet far less deadly than anticipated, it is important to recognize that the transition from becoming a foreign fighter to returning as a hardened terrorist is not instant and involves several stages. Figure 1 illustrates a four-part circular process of becoming a foreign fighter: (1) the initial stage of radicalization; (2) travel to a war zone; (3) fighting or supporting activity there; and (4) eventual return to plot a terrorist attack. Conceptualizing the foreign fighter production process in this way illustrates how a range of U.S. and allied policies since September 11 have, together, reduced the danger foreign fighters pose.

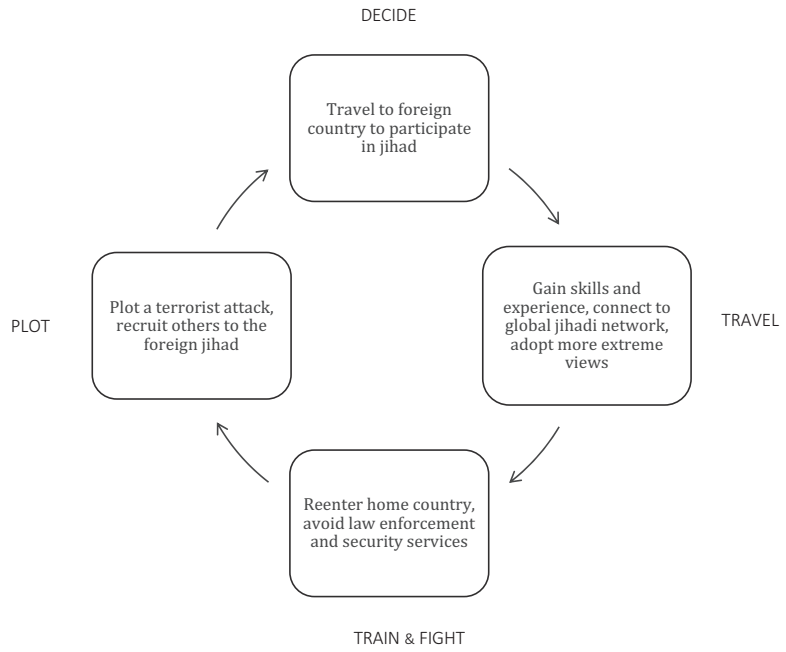
Each of the four stages offers a different set of opportunities for disruption. Counterterrorism officials can take some steps before potential fighters even leave their countries, such as stopping transit to and from a war zone. States can hinder foreign fighters in the war zone with military

[18]Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015), accessed at http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440/html, 6 June 2021.

[19]Canelle Beuze, *Attentats, Tentatives et Projects d'Attentats en Relation avec le Context Syro-Irakien dans les Pays Occidentaux* (Paris: Center for the Analysis of Terrorism, March 2017), 8.

[20]Kim Cragin, "Addressing the Threat of Homegrown Violent Extremists Sympathetic to the Islamic State," *Lawfare* (blog), 7 July 2019, accessed at https://www.lawfareblog.com/addressing-threat-homegrown-violent-extremists-sympathetic-islamic-state, 6 June 2021.

FIGURE 1
The Foreign Fighter Production Cycle



force, covert action, and foreign policy that tries to reduce the violence and the jihadist role in it. Finally, officials can arrest returning fighters bent on terrorism or persuade returnees to turn away from terrorist activity. At almost every stage, intelligence collection and sharing are vital. Together, these steps can profoundly reduce the threat foreign fighters pose.

These arguments draw on my study of the major jihads involving foreign fighters from the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan to the latest conflict involving the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Some of the evidence draws on captured terrorist group documents and public statements of members of the Islamic State. Much of the information also comes from interviews with an array of counterterrorism officials in the United States, the Middle East, and Europe.[21]

Stage I: Disrupting the Radicalization and Decision-Making Stage

Disrupting foreign fighters before they ever become foreign fighters is ideal but often difficult. The large number of actual and would-be foreign fighters is one indicator of the failure to diminish the appeal of jihadist

[21]See Byman, *Road Warriors*, for more details.

ideas in the post-September 11 era. However, the United States and its allies have had more success in using security forces to hinder those who plan to fight but have not yet departed and in diminishing (though hardly ending) jihadist terrorist use of the internet.

Counternarratives and their limits. No single factor explains why someone radicalizes and becomes a foreign fighter. Some are idealists, while others are motivated by a sense of adventure. Many al Qaeda recruits from Europe were relatively well educated and idealistic, while Islamic State recruits often had brushes (or worse) with law enforcement. In Europe in particular, poor integration of Muslim minority communities made radicalization more likely, and many recruits had ties to ostensibly peaceful but radical organizations like al Muhajiroun.[22]

Often individuals leave home with no intention of returning to commit terrorism, but rather are enthralled with the conflict overseas. Omar Hammami, an American who became a fighter and propagandist for al Shabaab, went to Somalia because he was attracted to its promise of Islamic rule.[23] However, some among those individuals are redirected when abroad. Mohammad Atta, the September 11 plot leader, and several other key September 11 figures initially sought to go to fight in Chechnya but were convinced to lead a terrorist attack on the United States instead while in Afghanistan.[24]

In theory, counternarratives can offer an important tactic to diminish the group's appeal to potential recruits and contest the group's online messaging. In addition, counternarratives can foster community support for government efforts. Western countries have found that communities, and particularly families, often assist in discouraging potential recruits from traveling to fight but will flag suspected radicals to authorities only if they trust the government.[25] In addition, if communities see volunteers as deluded or worse, the stature that foreign fighters seek would diminish, reducing the allure of becoming a foreign jihadi in the first place.

In practice, however, limitations inherent in government hinder the quantity and quality of the resulting counternarrative. Government social

[22]Michael Kenney, *The Islamic State in Britain: Radicalization and Resilience in an Activist Network* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[23]Abu Mansuur al-Amriiki, *The Story of an American Jihaadi: Part One* (self-published, May 2012), accessed at www.scribd.com/doc/93732117/The-Story-of-an-American-Jihaadi, 6 June 2021.
[24]National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004), chap. 5.
[25]See Ahmad Mansour, "Mum, I'm Fighting for Allah Now," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 6 February 2014, accessed at https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mum-im-fighting-allah-now, 6 June 2021.

media efforts are often slow at responding and limited in number, in contrast to the thousands of accounts that groups like the Islamic State used at its peak. One French official admitted to me, "We are not good at this."[26] The U.S. State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (replaced in 2016 by the Global Engagement Center) seeks to undermine terrorist propaganda and has produced tens of thousands of online "engagements" in multiple languages. However, it has few employees and a small budget. As a result, it could not compete with the thousands of Islamic State accounts churning out propaganda 24 hours each day. Further, governments struggle to put out compelling content with the right message, while also being appropriate for all audiences; the content is often derided as amateurish. Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, who headed U.S. efforts until 2015, admitted that the U.S. government lacks a counternarrative. "What we have is half a message: 'Don't do this.' But we lack the 'do this instead,'" he explained.[27] Part of the difficulty stems from the lowest common denominator effect that occurs when different bureaucracies and countries work together to find a single message that satisfies everyone. Perhaps most important, government messages are simply uncool to a disaffected 25-year-old looking for adventure.[28]

Unsuccessful attempts at counternarratives cause more harm than good. Harmful counternarratives may obviously target a specific community, suggesting that the government associates all community members with terrorism. For example, the British government's efforts to win over British Muslims since September 11 have often backfired, angering the community and convincing Muslims that law enforcement singles them out.[29]

Effective use of security forces. To disrupt would-be foreign fighters, security services must be focused on the problem. Once this focus is achieved, and given appropriate resources, a competent service can greatly diminish the danger.

Before September 11, future key figures like senior al Qaeda operative Ali Mohamed and leading ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki could train in Afghanistan and return to their home or other countries with ease, as could

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[26]Interview with French government official, May 2014.

[27]Eric Geller, "Why ISIS is Winning the Online Propaganda War," *The Daily Dot*, 29 March 2016, accessed at https://www.dailydot.com/debug/isis-terrorism-social-media-internet-countering-violent-extremism/, 6 June 2021.

[28]J.M. Berger, *Making CVE Work: A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2016).

[29]Lorenzo Vidino, *Countering Radicalization in America: Lessons from Europe* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 9.

minor players, like a group of Yemeni Americans from a suburb of Buffalo, New York.[30] U.S. and allied intelligence did not know most of these individuals, and they and other residents went back and forth to Afghanistan for training or to war zones from Arab states. Osama Bin Laden, as well as key leaders of jihads in Bosnia and Chechnya, such as Abu Abdel Aziz Barbaros and Ibn al-Khattab, traveled abroad to fight first in Afghanistan and then in other countries, and the Saudi government did not recognize them as a threat for years. Indeed, the Saudi regime initially lauded their activities.[31] Only states that viewed the foreign fighter danger as high, which were usually states with a long history of jihadist radicalism at home, like Egypt or Algeria, focused on the problem.

In the United States, intelligence collection and dissemination on foreign fighters faced many challenges in the pre-September 11 era. At home, key information on suspects was not shared because of bureaucratic rivalries, incompetence, and the lack of focus of some senior government leaders.[32] Sharing information with foreign countries proved a greater challenge, as many domestic intelligence services lacked long-standing partners overseas and a culture of international action and coordination. Perhaps most important, no one put the pieces together. The Algerian service might know of an Algerian who traveled to Bosnia to fight, Saudi Arabia might know of its own citizens, while the United States might focus on a few individuals with known links to al Qaeda. However, states shared information at best on an ad hoc basis, and, as a result, much of what was known did not translate into effective policy.

Many of the key ideologues for jihad in the Muslim world resided in Europe, where free speech and even overall policy protected them. Abu Qatada, a leading ideologue who was based in London in the 1990s and fought in the Afghan jihad, proving an inspirational figure, was eventually linked to numerous foreign fighters and terrorists. In his journal and preaching, he would even highlight the actions of obscure jihadists in the Middle East, including the trial of a young Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian who would later become the leader of the Iraqi jihad.[33] Qatada sent money to various jihadists around the world who helped

[30]Dine Temple-Raston, "Enemy Within? Not Quite," *Washington Post*, 9 September 2007.
[31]Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy* 13 (Winter 2006): 39–60.
[32]The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, chap. 8.
[33]See the testimony of Saif al-Adel in Fu'ad Husayn, "Al-Zarqawi: The Second Generation of Al-Qa'ida," 10 June 2006, accessed at http://atc2005.blogspot.com/2006/06/al-zarqawi-second-generation-of-al.html, 6 June 2021.

build networks in Europe and the Middle East. Jordan sentenced him in absentia for his involvement in the bombings at the American School and Jerusalem hotel in Amman, and a Spanish court named him as one of the British contacts for a Spanish cell involved in the September 11 attacks. The Spanish judge in the trial referred to Qatada as "the spiritual leader of mojahedins across Europe."[34] British law gave his preaching considerable latitude, and British policy in the 1990s preferred him to operate openly, so authorities could monitor him.[35]

In the post-September 11 era, many states—some suddenly fearful of the threat, others eager to appease a vengeful America—aggressively looked for and disrupted radical networks on their own soil while working with the United States to help put the pieces together to disrupt al Qaeda globally. Shortly after September 11, the United States was working with over 100 countries on counterterrorism.[36] The resulting disruption to al Qaeda and other groups was tremendous. The recruitment and logistics networks the groups enjoyed came under siege, while those who fought or traveled abroad became prime suspects.[37] The jihadi strategist Abu Musab al-Suri lamented that the September 11 attacks cast "jihadists into a fiery furnace. … A hellfire which consumed most of their leaders, fighters, and bases."[38] Today, security services play an important role throughout the world. The National Counterterrorism Center and various intelligence agencies seek to gain information on all foreign fighters going to Syria and other jihadist hotspots, not just Americans, in order to coordinate a global response.[39] This may involve confiscating passports, instructing internet companies to remove websites that provide travel guidance, and detaining or imprisoning recruiters linked to terrorist groups.

Many recruits originate from a few flashpoint cities, enabling a concentration of resources. Half of Germany's recruits for Syria came from just 11 cities.[40] Narrowing the target set further, many emerged from a small number of mosques in these cities. As Watts points out, "The

[34]Giles Tremlett, "Islamist Cell Linked to UK Militants," *The Guardian*, 19 November 2001.
[35]Robert S. Leiken, *Europe's Angry Muslims* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[36]Martin Rudner, "Hunters and Gatherers: The Intelligence Coalition against Islamic Terrorism," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 17, no. 2 (2004): 193–230.
[37]Daniel Byman, "Measuring the War on Terrorism: A First Appraisal," *Current History* 102 (2003); and John Roth, Douglas Greenburg, and Serena Wille, *Monograph on Terrorist Financing: Staff Report to the Commission* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004), 17.
[38]Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, The Islamic States, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 155.
[39]Aaron Y. Zelin and Jonathan Prohov, "How Western Non-EU States Are Responding to Foreign Fighters," in Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, and Christophe Paulussen, eds., *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond* (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), 428.

call for jihad may be global, but the recruitment is extremely *local*."[41] Focusing efforts on key nodes offers security services a more effective and efficient means to target recruits, while also avoiding angering the community as a whole.

As with all counterterrorism instruments, balance is key. Coercive measures can also create "suspect communities" where radicalization is more likely and where community members are less likely to work with the police and government in general.[42]

Fighting internet radicalization. Stopping radicalization can also involve reducing terrorist content on the internet or making it harder to access radical content. All jihadist groups used the technology of their times, and today the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and other groups use a range of internet platforms to recruit, fundraise, and otherwise operate. Although government countermessaging via social media has been done poorly, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites slowly but steadily became more aggressive in disrupting the Islamic State attempts to use their platforms, greatly reducing the group's online presence.[43]

Sometimes more destructive measures may offer a more effective approach to reducing a group's online presence. By taking territory from the Islamic State, the group struggled to maintain media centers and otherwise keep its communications infrastructure. As a result, the quantity and quality of its propaganda fell. Governments can also directly attack the group online through denial of service attacks or by infiltrating and monitoring. The head of the Government Communications Headquarters, the British equivalent of the National Security Agency, revealed that his agency had gone after Islamic State propaganda, so that the group "found it almost impossible to spread their hate online, to use their normal channels to spread their rhetoric, or trust their publications."[44]

Information gleaned from social media plays an important role in helping security services stop potential fighters at the decision stage.

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[40]Paul Cruickshank, "A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Alain Grignard, Brussels Federal Police," *CTC Sentinel* 8 (August 2015): 7–10, at 8.

[41]Clinton Watts, "Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan: What Foreign Fighter Data Reveals about the Future of Terrorism," *Small Wars Journal*, 17 April 2008, accessed at https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/beyond-iraq-and-afghanistan, 6 June 2021; italics in the original.

[42]Floris Vermeulen, "Suspect Communities—Targeting Violent Extremism at the Local Level: Policies of Engagement in Amsterdam, Berlin, and London," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 2 (2014): 286–306.

[43]Brian Fishman, "Crossroads: Counter-terrorism and the Internet," *Texas National Security Review* 2 (February 2019). https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/1942.

[44]"UK Carries Out Cyber-Attack on Islamic State," BBC News, 12 April 2018.

Potential fighters often post information about their plans, bragging to friends or otherwise revealing information. In fact, a 2018 University of Maryland report found that terrorists who abstained from social media were more likely to succeed than those who used it.[45]

Stage II: The Travel Stage

If a would-be volunteer cannot be dissuaded or caught before leaving, he can still be caught before he gets to the war zone or when traveling back home after fighting. Terrorist groups recognize the importance of travel. Al Qaeda had a "passport office" and trained operatives in forging documents, identifying corrupt border officials, and otherwise developing broad networks to send operatives to and from war zones.[46] The Islamic State, for its part, issued regular guidance on how recruits might travel to the so-called caliphate.[47]

Before September 11, travel, both to and from the war zone, was relatively easy. No U.S. government agency systematically analyzed terrorist travel, "thus missing critical opportunities to disrupt their plans," in the words of the September 11 Commission staff.[48] In fact, future al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri even traveled to the United States to raise money before September 11. Most U.S. allies, if anything, paid even less attention. Some countries like Saudi Arabia were even complicit, encouraging volunteers to fight to please important domestic voices or at least hoping to get troublemakers out of their own countries to somewhere, anywhere, else.[49]

The transit route to the Islamic State's base in Syria via Turkey illustrates the danger of easy travel. For several years after the conflict broke out in 2011, the Turkish government knowingly turned a blind eye as volunteers flew or drove into Turkey and crossed the border into Syria to fight.[50] Once Turkey began to crack down, changing its policies in 2015 and militarily removing the Islamic State along the border, reaching

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[45]Michael Jensen, Patrick James, Gary LaFree, Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein, and Elizabeth Yates, *The Use of Social Media by United States Extremists* (College Park, MD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, July 2018).

[46]The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 69.

[47]Task Force on Combating Terrorism and Foreign Fighter Travel, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* (Washington, DC: Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, October 2015), 17–18.

[48]See Thomas R. Eldridge et al., *9/11 and Terrorist Travel: Staff Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United* States (Washington, DC: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004), 150–161.

[49]For a review of the 9/11 plot and U.S. counterterrorism in that era, see The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*.

Syria became far harder.[51] The foreign fighter stream slowed to a trickle, becoming more like Chechnya, where jihadists had to traverse carefully guarded borders, and the Islamic State began encouraging would-be volunteers to wreak havoc at home instead.

After September 11, the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and other agencies began to focus on disrupting travel.[52] Deploying more border security personnel, improving training and procedures for detecting fraudulent passports, and better sharing of information on suspected travelers made a marked difference in the ability of potential fighters to reach war zones or return undetected.[53] Strong relations with countries that serve as important transit routes, such as Turkey, have been vital for stopping foreign fighters.

Effective intelligence gathering can detect and disrupt those who plan to travel.[54] A Canadian intelligence report found that individuals who traveled often maxed out their credit cards, sold their belongings, improved their fitness, and otherwise revealed clues as they tried to be financially and physically ready for the fight. What they sold varied, ranging from cars for an older person or a video game console for someone younger. Travel preparation often involved what the Canadian service labeled "leakage," with knowledge of the forthcoming travel dribbling out and friends and family becoming aware.[55] If intelligence can work with communities and learn about leakage, dangerous travel can be better prevented.

Stage III: Training and Fighting in the War Zone

Some fighters will not be dissuaded or detected before leaving their homes and will successfully evade travel restrictions, arriving safely in the war zone and into the arms of a jihadist group. In such war zones, jihadis meet one another, learn new skills, and disseminate propaganda to convince the next wave of recruits to join. Amer Azizi, who orchestrated

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[50]Emrullah Uslu, "Jihadist Highway to Jihadist Haven: Turkey's Jihadi Policies and Western Security," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 9 (2016): 781–802.

[51]Tim Arango, "Turkey Moves to Clamp Down on Border, Long a Revolving Door," *New York Times*, 22 December 2015.

[52]See Eldridge et al., *9/11 and Terrorist Travel*, 150–161.

[53]Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*, 71–72.

[54]Task Force on Combating Terrorism and Foreign Fighter Travel, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel.*

[55]*Mobilization to Violence (Terrorism) Research*, (Ottawa: Canadian Security and Intelligence Service, 2018), accessed at https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/csis-scrs/documents/publications/IMV_-_Terrorism-Research-Key-findings-eng.pdf, 6 June 2021.

the 2004 Madrid bombings, trained and networked with other jihadis also in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[56]

Before September 11, terrorists in these war zones seemed out of reach of American or allied influence. Many of the groups were known at best superficially; the training camps were intelligence black holes, with little understanding of who was there, what they learned, and what, if anything, these individuals intended to do upon return. Indeed, counterterrorism officials in the pre-September 11 era constantly lamented that as long as al Qaeda enjoyed a haven in Afghanistan, its leadership could freely arm, train, organize, and build a mini-army. The group could plot attack after attack and only needed to evade U.S. counterterrorism once to succeed in striking terror.[57]

In the post-September 11 era, with the danger of the Afghanistan sanctuary seared into the American consciousness, the United States has prioritized preventing terrorist havens, with many having gone from being sanctuaries to danger zones for foreign fighters. The United States overthrew the Taliban in Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks and worked with governments in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to decrease al Qaeda's operational freedom. The invasion of Iraq after 2003 and the collapse of the Iraqi regime helped create a sanctuary for jihadis, but after 2006, an effective U.S.-led counterinsurgency campaign drove jihadis into hiding. The Barack Obama administration hesitated to become embroiled in the Syrian civil war after 2011, but as the Islamic State emerged and developed a sanctuary there, the United States belatedly deployed troops, supported local forces, and launched airstrikes, eventually pushing back the group. Even President Donald Trump, who broke with many traditional U.S. foreign policies, issued a National Security Strategy document that had a call to "Eliminate Terrorist Safe Havens."[58] Although experts rightly note that the line between battlefield success and preventing external terrorist attacks is not direct, there is a relationship.[59] As Watts pointed out, "Despite all their macho bravado, no foreign fighter wants to join a fight where al-Qaeda is getting its ass kicked."[60]

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[56]Fernando Reinares, *Al-Qaeda's Revenge: The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[57]Daniel Byman, *The Five Front War: The Better Way to Fight Global Jihad* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

[58]*National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), 13, accessed at https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf, 6 June 2021.

[59]Nicholas Rasmussen, "Director Rasmussen Opening Remarks," (CNAS Keynote Policy Address, Center for a New American Security, Washington, DC, 3 May 2017, accessed at https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/CNASopeningremarks.pdf, 6 June 2021.

Short of outright invasion, the United States also uses drone and other airstrikes as well as raids by special operations forces to limit terrorist safe havens. In Pakistan's tribal areas, Somalia, and Libya, the United States struck al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and associated jihadist groups repeatedly, driving these groups further underground and impeding their operations.[61] Omar Hammami joked that drones in Somalia are "racist" because they only attack white people (that is, non-native Somalis), indicating how these campaigns focus on foreign fighters and those tied to groups that employ them.[62]

Many of those killed are cannon fodder (and at times innocents), but causalities also include dozens of these organizations' senior leaders and top figures whom groups cannot easily replace. Both Amer Azizi, the Madrid bombing mastermind, and Rashid Rauf, one of the al Qaeda architects behind the 7 July, 2005, bombings in London and other attacks, were killed by drone strikes.[63] Before his death, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, a senior leader of al Qaeda who was himself killed in 2011 by a drone strike in Waziristan, warned that the death of experienced leaders leads to "the rise of lower leaders who are not as experienced as the former leaders and... the repeat of mistakes." The constant churn of leaders creates organizational chaos. Likewise, terrorist organizations suffer when they lose skilled operatives, such as passport forgers, bomb makers, recruiters, and fundraisers. Drone strikes have also undercut terrorists' ability to communicate with far-flung followers and train new recruits. A tip sheet found among jihadists in Mali advised militants to maintain "complete silence of all wireless contacts" and avoid "gathering in open areas." Incommunicado leaders, however, cannot give orders, and training on a large scale is nearly impossible when a drone strike could wipe out an entire group of new recruits. Drones and associated surveillance turn terrorist command and its training structure into a liability, forcing the group to choose between having no leaders or risking dead leaders.[64] Groups like al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula have moved

[60]Clinton Watts, "Hammami Thinks the Grass Might be Greener in Syria," *Selected Wisdom*, 15 January 2013.
[61]Patrick B. Johnston and Anoop K. Sarbahi, "The Impact of US Drone Strikes on Terrorism in Pakistan," *International Studies Quarterly* 60 (June 2016): 203–219.
[62]al-Amriiki, *The Story of an American Jihaadi*.
[63]Reinares, *Al-Qaeda's Revenge*.
[64]For quotes and a broader description of how drones work for counterterrorism, see Daniel L. Byman, "Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington's Weapon of Choice," Brookings Institution, 17 June 2013, accessed at https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-drones-work-the-case-for-washingtons-weapon-of-choice/, 6 June 2021.

away from working with foreigners, in part because of the risk of attracting American drones against their own operatives and against any locals who might otherwise work with them.[65]

In addition to drones and other standoff attacks, the United States, France, and other countries use local militaries as proxies to attack terrorists in their safe havens. For the United States, working by, with, and through allies is a way to avoid large-scale deployments.[66] Local forces know the conditions, geographic area, leadership, and population in ways that foreign forces do not. Local forces also have more of a stake in the outcome as it is their homeland. In Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and other countries, the United States has worked with local militias as well as government forces against jihadists. The French have used similar policies in Mali.

As its experiences in Iraq and Syria suggest, however, the United States often wastes years of effort and billions of dollars on incompetent and venal allies.[67] Part of the problem is that the United States often starts with damaged goods. Countries facing a major terrorism problem or insurgency often suffer from problems that allow violence to flourish, and the resulting violence can exacerbate these problems.[68] Societal divisions are a particular problem. Weak national identity in Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and other countries pushed populations to instead identify with tribes, sects, or other smaller sub-national identities. Citizens only wanted to fight for their own communities and distrusted others, while the national army was viewed as a tool of the dominant community rather than an impartial force. Some of the Iraqi army forces fighting to retake Mosul, for example, hung Shia religious imagery from their vehicles, hardly a reassuring sight to the mostly Sunni inhabitants of Mosul.[69] Rampant corruption at all levels also hinders efforts to work with partners in the developing world. For instance, the Iraqi army had tens of thousands of "ghost soldiers," phantom troops who only existed on paper so their superiors could collect additional salaries.[70]

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[65]Erlend Ofte Arntsen, "Yemen's Al-Qaida: Entered Agreement with Tribal Leaders Not to Attack the West," *VG*, 16 April 2017.
[66]Leigh Neville, *Special Forces in the War on Terror* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2015).
[67]See Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) for more on problems with training foreign partners.
[68]Nicholas Sambanis, "What Is a Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (December 2004): 814–858.
[69]Tamer El-Ghobashy and Ben Kesling, "Iraqi Troops Fly Shiite Flags, Stoking Tensions," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 October 2016.
[70]Susannah George, "Officials Have Cast the Iraqi Military's Victory Over Islamic State Extremists in Ramadi as Proof that Coalition Training Efforts Have Paid Off and the Country's Troops Have Improved since Their Catastrophic Collapse in 2014," Associated Press, 21 January 2016.

Further, rulers often lack legitimacy among rival communities and, at times, even among their own. With the exception of Tunisia, all of the governments in the Middle East lack democratic legitimacy, and some fail to provide even the most basic of services; for many Iraqis in Mosul, Islamic State rule was an improvement over that of the Iraqi government in terms of service provision.[71] In Somalia, al Shabaab often gained support because it was less corrupt than the nominal government in Mogadishu and provided a modicum of law and order. Exacerbating this problem, the lack of unity and weak governmental legitimacy often leads rulers to politicize their militaries. Fearing a coup, they put loyalists in senior positions. By placing loyalty over competence, the rank-and-file soldiers are even less likely to fight, as they believe their officers do not deserve their loyalty.[72] This incompetence feeds into the societal divisions, as citizens who may have relied on the military view it as incapable of protecting the community and instead turn to militias, further feeding into societal divisions.

War zones abroad also present an opportunity for intelligence collection. A fighter's presence in the war zone now might lead to his discovery, information about training camps, command locations, and the identification of comrades back at home. Governments regularly intercept communications to and from suspected fighters and leaders, revealing broader networks, including individuals who previously may have gone unnoticed in their home countries. The fighters' love affair with social media makes their security even more precarious, as government monitoring of "friends" and "followers" reveals entire networks and aspirational fighters. As one security expert noted, "A lot of their members are just teenagers, and teenagers have bad impulse control."[73]

If military force successfully removes a group, the state must improve governance to prevent the jihadis' return. Bosnia did not become a jihadist sanctuary after the 1995 war ended in part because the Bosnian government became strong enough to expel most of the remaining jihadis. In contrast, although the U.S.-led campaign helped drive al

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[71]See Callimachi, "The ISIS Files."

[72]James T. Quinlivan, "Coup Proofing: Its Practices and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24 (Fall 1999): 131–165.

[73]Austin Bodetti, "Fatal Attraction: ISIS Just Can't Resist Social Media," *The Daily Beast*, 11 April 2017, accessed at https://www.thedailybeast.com/fatal-attraction-isis-just-cant-resist-social-media, 6 June 2021; and Priyanka Boghani, "How People Are Using Technology against ISIS," *Frontline*, 14 July 2015, accessed at https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/how-people-are-using-technology-against-isis/, 6 June 2021.

Qaeda in Iraq to the brink of defeat in 2010, the Iraqi government's corruption, its discrimination against Sunni groups, and other problems allowed jihadists to regain their footing.[74]

Stage IV: The Return Stage

Some volunteers not only make it to the war zone and survive the fighting but also return home successfully. Once at home, it is critical to arrest returnees or use rehabilitation programs to turn them away from future violence and jihad. Without such programs, returnees can leverage their skills and networks to launch deadly attacks. In addition, they are effective recruiters and can launch the next wave of fighters or support local terrorist cells.

Acting as a conductor of global liaison services around the world represents a key role for U.S. intelligence. As the United States learns the identities of those who travel and those who seek to return, it can coordinate efforts to stop them. U.S. intelligence agencies share names, biometrics, and other basic information with state and local partners and with foreign countries.[75] The countries in question often do not cooperate well with each other, but the United States assists with overall coordination, facilitating the eventual success of such efforts.

Once fighters return home, security services in countries with large numbers of fighters identify which ones deserve the most attention and which are less dangerous. Those deemed dangerous should be arrested and prosecuted, as has happened with the overwhelming majority of U.S. returnees.[76] More dangerous returnees may include individuals who have been on security services' radar for many years or individuals with known connections to jihadi leaders. These returnees may require constant surveillance, ranging from traditional wiretapping or tailing to social media infiltration.[77] The state must know of the returnees' whereabouts, activities, and connections to ensure that he or she will not plot an attack at home. Communities play an especially strong role at this stage, as the state must rely on them to report suspicious actions.

Even though a relatively small number of returning foreign fighters may launch attacks, tracking suspects is exceptionally resource intensive, particularly if it involves full-time surveillance. The Australian security

[74]McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*.
[75]Rasmussen, "Director Rasmussen Opening Remarks."
[76]Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*.
[77]Robin Wright, "Despite Trump's Guantanamo Threats, Americans Who Joined ISIS Are Quietly Returning Home," *The New Yorker*, 11 June 2019.

services estimated that to monitor just one returning jihadist around the clock cost 8 million Australian dollars (US $7.4 million) per year.[78]

Ultimately, incarceration is necessary for more dangerous jihadis, but if it is applied too broadly, it can backfire. Many foreign fighters simply fade away, but if they have no way to put the past behind them, then they become professional jihadis.[79]

Responding to the high volume of foreign fighter flows to and from Syria, a number of European countries also initiated disengagement and deradicalization programs.[80] In Denmark, for example, officials carefully evaluate returnees for risk. Those who are considered traumatized are sometimes recruited as informants, and in general, officials push for returnees to enroll in school or seek employment and to otherwise remove them from a dangerous milieu. Danish observers fear that relying exclusively on security services might strengthen "the victim discourse" within the Muslim community and thereby exacerbate the social conditions that can lead some individuals to participate in jihad.[81]

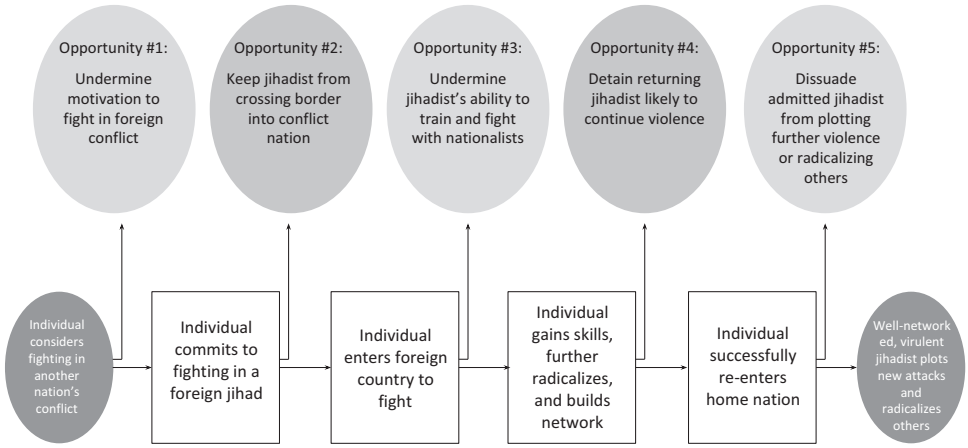
Unlike the other stages in the foreign fighter cycle, the return stage entails the greatest number of competing agendas, requiring a state to adopt an array of policy options. For a successful policy in the return stage, a state must follow through on the public expectation to prevent any and all terrorist attacks; engage communities but not inflame or exacerbate community tensions; determine a realistic allocation of resources that allows for a sustainable and long-term policy; offer an exit ramp for those jihadis that become disillusioned with the conflict and seek to reintegrate peacefully; protect civil liberties; and maintain a cohesive society overall. All this must be done, moreover, on a reasonable budget. Achieving some of these goals at the expense of others would be self-defeating. A smorgasbord of incarceration, rehabilitation programs, and surveillance based on the risk assessment of each returnee is complex but necessary.

The policy responses for each stage of the foreign fighter production cycle are illustrated below. As Figure 2 shows, governments have many opportunities to disrupt, dissuade, or otherwise hinder foreign fighters, greatly reducing the overall number of attacks.

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[78]Cameron Stewart, "Jihadist Watch to Cost $8 m a Suspect," *The Australian*, 8 August 2014.
[79]David Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 454–473.
[80]"Toulouse: Les Deux Apprentis Jihadistes Retracent Leur Périple en Garde à Vue," *Le Parisien*, 29 January 2014.
[81]Interview with Floris Vermuelen, July 2014; interview with Danish official, May 2014.

FIGURE 2
Model of Foreign Fighter Radicalization and Opportunities for Disruption



THINKING BEYOND THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PRODUCTION PROCESS

Even though terrorist attacks are rare, and the foregoing measures make them rarer still, they remain possible as long as terrorists continue to target the United States and its allies. From a resource point of view, the United States and its allies must determine the acceptable threat level given the inevitability of a future attack.

A culture of resilience would help.[82] Despite the relatively low number of deaths on U.S. soil since September 11, and roughly comparable figures in Europe for the pre- and post-September 11 periods, public fear of terrorism remains high. Highlighting counterterrorism successes, including the more effective efforts against foreign fighters, and emphasizing the low risk most Westerners have of dying from terrorism, would hinder groups like the Islamic State from using terrorist attacks to instill fear in its enemies.

Political leaders' rhetoric after an attack must try to ensure community support and rally people together—a seemingly obvious point that seems increasingly elusive in the United States and many European countries. With emotions running high, leaders should not conflate Muslims and terrorists, enact draconian surveillance measures or travel restrictions, or

[82]John E. Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

otherwise worsen interreligious relations and exacerbate fear. Such measures may help politicians, but they also help the terrorists. These measures give terrorists evidence to back up the narrative that the United States and its allies are hostile to Muslims and discourage the vast majority of Muslims, who would otherwise loathe the group, from working against it (because doing so means working with what they see as a hostile government). Unfortunately, such a recommendation is the one least likely to be heeded in the aftermath of a terrorist attack.

In the end, some attacks are inevitable. Stopping foreign fighters does not mean stopping terrorism. Indeed, success often leads the danger to morph. As Europe improved its disruption of foreign fighter travel and recruitment after the 2015 Paris attacks, some would-be fighters launched attacks on their own or after being in online contact with the Islamic State rather than becoming foreign fighters.[83]

The long-term hope is that transnational jihadism, like international anarchism and communism before it, will burn itself out or at least move from center stage to a sideshow.[84] The movement is highly divided, and its local and regional concerns have in the past and may again overwhelm its global ambitions. In addition, when in power, its successes are limited, with the movement unable to sustain a state. When the movement might decline is not clear: no one predicted in 1985 that the global jihadist movement would take off, and no one predicted that communism would collapse in a few years. For now, governments must assume that the movement will endure, try to counter it, and limit the damage foreign fighters and the terrorists they inspire can do. This will mean managing the fallout of conflicts like Syria and trying to prevent the next civil war that will launch the next wave of foreign fighters.

[83]Robin Simcox, "When Terrorists Stay Home: The Evolving Threat to Europe from Frustrated Travelers," *CTC Sentinel* 12 (July 2019): 46–50.
[84]Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).