Fallout
THE FUTURE OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

by Zack Fellman
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About

Foreign Fighters

Foreign volunteers intensify the conflicts to which they travel, and can destabilize the countries to which they travel next. To protect the international community against this foreign fighter fallout, the Transnational Threats Project (TNT) has launched a multi-year study to examine the threat. The study combines insights from TNT’s on-the-ground field interviews with cutting edge research to illuminate this global phenomenon.
FOREIGN FIGHTER FALLOUT
THEIR STRATEGIC IMPACT

Successful military campaigns and coordinated, international counterterrorism pressure are constricting Islamic State finances and disrupting territorial control. The Islamic State’s legitimacy, derived largely from successfully “governing” and extracting resources from territory, is likely to continue to diminish unless the group adopts new behaviors. The Islamic State’s rapidly shifting fortunes demonstrate to other militant groups that maintaining a state is far more difficult than operating as a decentralized terror organization.

From a U.S. perspective, the most significant potential behavioral shift is the Islamic State’s use of remaining safe havens to operationalize an unprecedented number of foreign fighters. These fighters, along with their new militant bona fides, could establish new affiliates, aggravate existing local socioeconomic grievances, or facilitate attacks in countries where the United States has strategic interests.

The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon
The migration of foreign fighters precipitated by the waning Islamic State will not be the first time the world has had to deal with foreign fighters leaving one conflict zone to potentially foment another. After September 11, 2001, al Qaeda’s “brand recognition” helped fighters at least par-
entially co-opt local movements in the Arabian Peninsula, Horn of Africa, Northern Africa, and Southeast Asia. Attacks perpetrated by these local affiliates have killed thousands. Some, like al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, remain active and intent on perpetrating external operations.¹

In 2011, CSIS’s Transnational Threats Project and Homeland Security & Counterterrorism Program examined key factors in the rise of al Qaeda affiliates. The case studies revealed only a small minority of the affiliates deemed “ideological resonance” or “common interests with al Qaeda Core” as leading them to align themselves with al Qaeda.² Instead, the most common reasons for an affiliate’s rise were some combination of charismatic, experienced leadership; disaffected local populations; and personal patronage links to the organization’s central leadership. Though al Qaeda had a codified ideology, understanding where the group’s networks exploited simmering local discontent better explained where al Qaeda affiliates grew.

The Islamic State may follow a similar pattern to that of al Qaeda. Former Central Intelligence Agency analysts Phil Mudd and Andrew Liepman observed that “the youth joining the Islamic State today, including many of the thousands who streamed into Syria, have little understanding of, or commitment to, the ideology for which they are signing up.”³ It is possible that most would-be fighters join because of their friends and family rather than fervent belief in the ideology of the Islamic State. Terrorism scholar Daniel Byman noted that although highly ideological, the Islamic State itself also


often subordinated its ideology to its strategic goals, and that the group’s obfuscated ideology made it more resilient.  

Recent studies have instead focused on instrumental “pathways” approaches to understand patterns among how militants traveled to Iraq and Syria. These studies yield two common phenomena among the migrants—ones that echo factors similar to rising al Qaeda affiliates after September 11, 2001.

The first similar factor is that fighters often received assistance from a preexisting network of “transnational activists,” facilitators, or friends who had already made the trip. Because of those connections, they often exhibit path dependency with fighters seeking to join the groups since their friends did. As an example, a group of high schoolers in Lunel, France, began traveling to Syria in October 2013. While the first cohort moved toward Syria, a friend remaining in Lunel contacted French fighters already in Azaz, Syria, to arrange for safe passage. After one member of the Lunel group switched allegiance from Jaish Mohamed to the Islamic State, subsequent travelers from the Lunel group joined Islamic State—likely due to the presence of their friends. In all, 20 individuals from the Lunel group used the same facilitation and mobilization pathway to travel to Syria.  

The second similar factor, as terrorism scholar Thomas Hegghammer notes, may be that host-nation governments are often unwilling or unable to stop foreign fighters from traveling in the first place. Due largely to U.S. pressure and international efforts like UN Security Council Resolution 2178, some nations have limited travel to Iraq and Syria. In response to these measures, Islamic State leaders encouraged those willing but unable to travel to conduct attacks where they could. While based in Syria in November 2016, French militant Rachid Kassim told Jihadology’s (a militancy monitoring website) Amarnath Amarasingam that “at the beginning, the caliphate called for hijra [travel to the Islamic State] . . . now, it is best to launch attacks in dar al kufr [land of the unbelievers]. Because hijra is very difficult now.”

In May 2016, Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani called for attacks in Europe and the United States saying “The smallest action you do in their heartland is better and more enduring to us than what you would if you were with us. If one of you hoped to reach the Islamic State, we wish we were in your place to punish the Crusaders day and night.”

In addition to people “mobilizing in place,” foreign fighters are beginning to return. Thus far, approximately 20 to 30 percent of foreign fighters have left Iraq and Syria; between 1990 and 2010,
An eventual fall of Islamic State strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa will likely dislodge even more foreign fighters and foment greater movement—be it a return to one's home country or travel to a new front.

The numbers of returning fighters may increase dramatically in the near future. As of Spring 2017, foreign militants remaining in Iraq and Syria are defending against anti-Islamic State campaigns, making them less willing or able to leave.\(^\text{13}\)

However, an eventual fall of Islamic State strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa will likely dislodge even more foreign fighters and foment greater movement—be it a return to one's home country or travel to a new front. Concurrently, as the Islamic State loses territory, the group may carry out more spectacular terrorist operations abroad to signal continued relevance and power.\(^\text{14}\)

Owing to geographic isolation, improvements in transportation security, and increasing fusion of law enforcement and intelligence efforts, the United States will likely remain a much harder target for migrating fighters to strike. Although such attacks cannot be ruled out in the future, they are more likely to be "episodic tragedies, not national security catastrophes."\(^\text{15}\)

The United States is more insulated from migrating fighters than our treaty allies or competitors.

The task of the U.S. national security community should thus be to:

1. **Reverse-engineer mobilization pathways to understand who may return and how;**
2. **Identify where fighters may go next, with an eye to populations with grievances migrating fighters could exploit;**
3. **Limit the damage migrating fighters pose to areas of U.S. strategic interest by simultaneously targeting militant networks and assisting host nations addressing local grievances.**

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WHO ARE THE RETURNING FIGHTERS?

Migrants leaving Iraq and Syria stand to bring their credibility, skills, and networks to bear in new areas. These migrants should be thought of as “militant entrepreneurs” capable of aggravating simmering social discontent or conducting attacks themselves.16 These entrepreneurs will likely leverage the same social, diaspora, and patronage networks to shift to new areas as they did to get to Syria.17

This generation of migrating fighters is almost certainly more dangerous than those that preceded it, given that foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria are much more likely to face direct combat and serve in leadership roles. In November 2016, a West Point Counterterrorism Center study found that 9 percent of documented returning fighters held leadership positions in the groups that they left.18 The West Point authors note that this number is incredibly high, especially given the fact that foreign fighters often faced language barriers, had limited operational experience prior to traveling, and were less familiar with group ideology. Those not serving in a leadership capacity were also more likely to face direct combat—with 80 percent of those surveyed served as foot soldiers and...
only 12 percent serving in noncombat “auxiliary capacities.”

However, being closer to the front lines also means foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria face much higher mortality rates than previous foreign fighter waves, especially the “Afghan Arabs.” Another limiting factor is that more active security services also mean fighters are more likely to be arrested upon arrival or shortly thereafter. In West Point’s study, nearly 90 percent of the fighters tracked were put in jail.

Although attrition and arrest will mitigate the effect of potential migration, the scale of today’s foreign fighter problem is extraordinary—and prison is not a panacea. Approximately 40,000 individuals from over 120 countries have traveled to Iraq and Syria. If imprisoned upon their return, fighters often face light sentencing guidelines and can use their short time to recruit new members or even direct attacks. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the Islamic State’s decline in Iraq and Syria will likely precipitate an unprecedented migration of foreign fighters—fighters who are not only more dangerous, but will spread to a wider swath of countries than ever before.

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Europe
Europe is perhaps the most vulnerable area for foreign fighter fallout. Between 2011 and 2016, between 5,000 and 7,000 Europeans went to fight in Iraq and Syria. Fighters returning to Europe find the persecution and economic isolation of Muslims worse than when they left—trends that demographic shifts will likely exacerbate.

Negative public discourse about Islam’s role in European countries may have influenced Muslims’ desire to leave for Iraq and Syria. Recent work by analysts Chris Meserole and Will McCants to identify commonalities among individuals who traveled to Iraq and Syria revealed that the strongest correlation had to do with whether a fighter’s country of origin was Francophone. The authors posit “Francophone” may be a proxy for negative public discourse about the legality of Muslim dress in French-speaking nations. Immediately prior to the Syrian civil war, several European societies had intense debates about the legality of wearing Muslim garb like the hijab and burqa in public spaces, with France banning full-face veils in 2010 and Belgium following suit in July 2011. The debate appears to have immediately preceded a wave of young Muslims leaving France for Iraq and Syria, especially in the wake of

Europe’s changing demography will likely exacerbate the existing social and economic isolation felt by some European Muslims. Meserole and McCants note French sociologist Agnès de Féo’s 2015 statement that “those who have left to go and fight in Syria say that this law is one of things that encouraged them. They saw it as a law against Islam. It had the effect of sending a message that Islam was not welcome in France.” Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have all applied bans on full-face veils. Though not directly correlated, an increase in hate crimes against migrants and refugees may also lead European Muslims to question their ability to assimilate into European societies.

As European militaries began to assist U.S. military strikes and limit their citizens’ ability to travel to Iraq and Syria, Europe has become a more desirable target for returning fighters (recall Rachid Kassim’s preference for conducting attacks in dar ul kufr). Some foreign fighters have already carried out attacks in Europe. In November 2015 and March 2016, a cell of Belgian and French fighters conducted complex attacks in Paris and Brussels that left 160 dead. The Islamic State allegedly planned the attacks for a year, with facilitators casing potential targets and bringing fighters back to Belgium and France through pre-scouted routes.

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27 Meserole, “Radicalization, Laïcité, and the Islamic Veil.”
28 Ben McPartland, “Burqa Ban Five Years on—‘We Created a Monster,’” The Local, October 12, 2015, http://www.thelocal.fr/20151012/france-burqa-ban-five-years-on-we-create-a-monster.
31 Amarasingam, “An Interview with Rachid Kassim, Jihadi Orchestrating Attacks in France.”
Ten of the 24 attackers had either visited or tried to enter Syria, and most were close friends.\(^\text{32}\) As the cell staged for the attack, they frequently communicated with Islamic State planners in Syria from whom they received operational instructions and money transfers.\(^\text{33}\) After the attack, the command node in Belgium worked with planners in Syria to refine the cell’s explosives, and then used those devices at the Brussels airport in March 2016.\(^\text{34}\) Before the attacks, more than half the perpetrators were known to law enforcement, though often as much because of their criminal activities as their terrorist connections.\(^\text{35}\) Through these criminal networks, the perpetrators procured forged passports that helped them infiltrate the refugee flow to Europe even though they were on watch lists. Once they arrived, they tapped into their criminal networks to acquire arms and explosives.\(^\text{36}\)

Criminal backgrounds do not make the France and Belgium attackers unique. Between 50 and 60 percent of individuals traveling to Iraq and Syria have had criminal records prior to departure.\(^\text{37}\) These criminal backgrounds may correlate to another key factor to mobilization found in the Meserole and McCants’ study: youth unemployment, which is already high among European Muslims.\(^\text{38}\)

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\(^{38}\) McCants et al., “The French Connection.”
According to Hegghammer, the young Muslim population in Europe is already beset by “mediocre” social mobility and “documented anti-Muslim discrimination in the labor market.”  

Young Muslims have proportionally higher unemployment rates than their non-Muslim counterparts. In Molenbeek and Schaerbeek, the two Belgian neighborhoods that have produced many of Europe’s foreign fighters, youth unemployment is markedly higher than Brussels, which has a lower percentage of families from immigrant backgrounds. On the fringes of society to begin with, criminals have access to facilitation networks and capital and may be attracted by a “core counter-cultural message of redemption through strength, power, and violence.”

Europe’s changing demography will likely exacerbate the existing social and economic isolation felt by some European Muslims. In absolute numbers, immigration and higher birthrates will expand the Muslim population from 25 million to 37 million by 2030. In relative numbers, European Muslims will grow from 3.8 to 7 percent of the total population in Northern Europe, 6 to 8.6 percent in Western Europe, and from 6.9 to 8.8 percent in Southern Europe. This Muslim population will be more male-dominated and younger than the surrounding non-Muslim European population as well.

As presaged by the Paris and Brussels attacks, Europe’s volatile mix of militant entrepreneurs and growing number of potential recruits may prove incredibly dangerous. Writing for the West Point Counterterrorism Center, Jean-Charles Brisard and Kévin Jackson summarize the foreign fighter threat to Europe:

_The number of veterans from the Syrian battlefields being deployed to Europe and the apparent continued survival of senior francophone figures at the apex of the Islamic State’s external operations wing suggest that despite military efforts to deprive the Islamic State of territorial control in Iraq and Syria, the group will continue to be a threat to France, Belgium, and other European countries for some time to come._
Russia

Russian-speaking fighters comprise approximately 15 percent of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. From the former Soviet bloc countries, an estimated 900 Dagestanis, 500 Chechens, and 500 Uzbeks have already traveled to Iraq and Syria. Estimates for Russian citizens range up to 3,400. Russian is the third most commonly spoken language inside Islamic State’s territory; Raqqa is home to an entire Russian-speaking neighborhood.

Many fighters from the North Caucasus traveled to and from Syria in the early years of the civil war viewing it as a duty to fight the Assad regime. As the conflict continued, a wave of ethnic Chechens, themselves the children of Chechens granted asylum in Western Europe in previous decades, traveled to Syria as well. Recalling Hegghammer’s second common factor among foreigners traveling to Syria, Russophone migrants went because they could. Moreover, it is likely that Russophones were encouraged to go. A source inside Russia’s security services relayed to the International Crisis Group:

“We opened borders, helped them all out and closed the border behind them by criminalising this type of fighting. If they want to return now, we are waiting for them at the borders. Everyone’s happy: they are dying on the path of Allah [PBUH], and we have no terrorist acts here and are now bombing them in Latakia and Idlib. State policy has to be pragmatic; this was very effective.”

This FSB-facilitated “green corridor” was open between 2011 and 2014, likely part of a security sweep in advance of the 2014 Olympics. Fighters who could not travel directly to theater instead visited relatives in Azerbaijan or completed the hajj in Saudi Arabia before moving from those countries on to the battle space. A further wave of migration from the North Caucasus to Syria and Iraq occurred as family members, particularly the wives and small children of militants, moved to reunite their families.

These Russophone fighters have had an outsized influence on militant organizations in Iraq and Syria. On average, Russian-speaking fighters have a higher level of education than other foreign fighters or locals, making them more suitable for leadership roles as bomb makers, tacticians, and

50 Aron, “The Coming of the Russian Jihad, Part II.”
51 “Жители Чечни Сообщают Об Отъезде На Войну В Сирию Участников Хаджа И Членов Семей Комбатантов” [Residents of Chechnya Report Hajj Participants and Families of Militants Leaving to Join the War in Syria].
52 Ibid.
field commanders. This influence may be especially strong in the Islamic State, as some Russian-speaking fighters’ prior military experience and training allowed them to take positions in the group’s leadership. Both Omar Shishani, the Islamic State’s late emir of war, and Gulmurod Khalimov, the former head of Tajikistan’s OMON (special police), underwent extensive military training from the United States.

To prevent these experienced fighters from migrating to Russia, Moscow adopted a series of harsh laws. In 2016 Russia passed the so-called “Yarovaya Law,” which increased state surveillance capability and raised the maximum sentences for “extremism,” encouragement of mass disturbances, and failing to warn authorities of potential terrorist attacks. Although the Russian criminal code theoretically prohibits the punishment of individuals who voluntarily cease militant activity, the high burden of proof virtually guarantees that all returnees are subject to prosecution.

With the barrier to entry higher forwould-be attackers, Russophone fighters may be more likely to migrate to new regions. In June 2016, a group of Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Russian citizens crossed into Turkey and launched a complex attack inside Istanbul’s Ataturk Airport that killed more than 40 people.

However, as Russia has raised the barrier to entry, its foreign policy may have also raised fighters’ desire to strike Russian interests. The Islamic State or aligned individuals demonstrated their ability to plan and perpetrate attacks inside Russia. Late 2015 and early 2016 saw at least three Islamic State-affiliated attacks, ranging from shelling to a suicide bomb. In November 2016, according to Russian security officials, the FSB also arrested 10 individuals planning on carrying out

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57 Gall and de Waal, Chechnya.
attacks in Moscow and St. Petersburg with improvised explosive devices.\textsuperscript{60}

Russian Muslims face social and economic pressures akin to those in Europe, especially in the North Caucasus, where low-level conflict persists.\textsuperscript{61} In Dagestan, the \textit{prof uchet} (prevention list) mandates that individuals suspected of “radicalizing” provide biometric information to police, who allegedly arbitrarily detain, physically abuse, and constantly monitor them. Roughly 3 percent of Dagestan’s population of 3 million are on the list, with more being added at a rate that strains the local police force’s ability to keep pace.\textsuperscript{62}

In Chechnya, local government officials are closing or infiltrating mosques suspected of radicalizing individuals. However, most mobilization likely occurs through youth organizations and peer groups.\textsuperscript{63} Akin to similar moves in Europe, local officials are also attempting to regulate Islamic dress. In March 2011, Chechen authorities dictated that local \textit{imams} prevent women from wearing \textit{hijabs} and men from maintaining mustache-free beards, often the sign of \textit{Salafism}.\textsuperscript{64}

Economically, many Russophone Muslim youth are unemployed. The youth unemployment rates in predominantly Muslim Chechnya (55 percent), Dagestan (40 percent), and Ingushetia (70 percent) are notably higher than the Russian average of 10 percent.\textsuperscript{65} Recalling that high rates of youth unemployment strongly correlate with militancy in European Muslims, youth unemployment among Russian-speaking Muslims bears watching.


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.


Demographic trends will likely exacerbate Muslim youth unemployment, too. Higher birthrates in the North Caucasus will lower the its median age, which is already much lower than the rest of Russia’s: Chechnya (25.5), Dagestan (29.5), Ingushetia (27.7), and Russia (38.8).66

As a result, Russia’s Muslims may face a “youth bulge” that often strongly correlates with elevated levels of conflict.67 Russia will have to cope with a growing number of economically disadvantaged Muslim youth looking for purpose and money. Foreign fighters migrating to Russia may be able to offer them both.

Southeast Asia

Approximately 800 to 1,000 Southeast Asians have traveled to Iraq and Syria.68 There, many have joined the Islamic State’s Indonesian and Malay brigade, Katibah Nusantara, and regularly participate in fighting.69 The group was formed in Hasaka, Syria, and is led by an Indonesian named Bahrumsyah, himself appointed by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.70 Other notable leaders are Indonesian Bahrun Naim and Malaysian Muhammad Wanny, who use havens inside Syria to inspire local


Though the reliance on individual leadership has made the terror group vulnerable, consistent local grievances guarantee at least some level of insurgent activity. The number of potential recruits, therefore, will not likely diminish in coming years.

In June 2016, the Islamic State released a propaganda video in four languages—Arabic, Indonesian, Malay, and Tagalog—recruiting locals to launch attacks in the Philippines. Less than a month later the Islamic State directed an attack on a bar in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and inspired another against a police station in Central Java, Indonesia. The cell that conducted the bar attack likely received instructions from Wanndy.

Although Southeast Asian security services have interdicted many migrating fighters, the services are not keen to release data on the number of individuals either considered radicalized or currently under surveillance. Thus, the spillover from Iraq and Syria into the region is difficult to measure.

What is known is that although many of the groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have aligned with the Islamic State, they are often not aligned with one another. Southeast Asian security expert Shashi Jayakumar speculates that consolidated leadership could lead the Islamic State to declare a *wilaya* (state), perhaps in the “triangle comprised of Mindanao, the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, and Malaysian and Indonesian territory on Borneo.” Jayakumar notes this area is relatively remote and could lie beyond the reach of each nation’s security services.

In at least one instance, the Islamic State has directed local affiliates to investigate shoring up support within the triangle. In January 2017, Insilon Hapilon, leader of a major Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) faction, was wounded by Philippine military airstrikes while attempting to move his group to a potentially secure location in Lanao del Sur province. Three months prior, Hapilon’s ASG faction

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75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 30.
cooperated with two other Philippine terror groups to plan and carry out a bombing in a Davao market that killed 15 and injured 70. As it does in other areas, the Islamic State may have encouraged the cooperation as a prerequisite to receiving financial support.

However, Katibah Nusantara has recently come under fire in Iraq and Syria. Russian and Syrian regime airstrikes have likely led many of the group's fighters to take refuge in Mosul, Iraq. The result of future operations in Iraq may push foreign fighter migration to Southeast Asia. Among those traveling may be a large contingent of non-Southeast Asians. Due to generous "visa on arrival" policies, many fighters facing deportation are allegedly requesting to be deported to Southeast Asia.

Historically, al Qaeda affiliates succeeded in Southeast Asia when charismatic, Afghanistan-experienced leaders successfully consolidated control of proto-insurgencies and marshaled them into terror campaigns. Though the reliance on individual leadership has made the terror group vulnerable, consistent local grievances guarantee at least some level of insurgent activity. The number of potential recruits, therefore, will not likely diminish in coming years.

Perhaps for this reason, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte made a statement in January 2017 urging members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) not to "provide sanctuary to the terrorists in your areas." The Moro, or Filipino Muslim, population has long agitated for autonomous or independent control of historically Muslim land in the Southern Philippines.

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77 Ibid.
81 Fellman, “Abu Sayyaf.”
Foreign fighters cascade from one conflict to the next. Since September 11, 2001, the United States has confronted the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, the Philippines, Yemen, Libya, and Syria—to name a few. As those who fought in Iraq and Syria move on to new conflicts, that list of countries may grow.

Over the last 16 years, the United States military and intelligence communities have honed and deployed a ruthlessly efficient counter-network capability to remove key individuals from the field.

Long hallmarks of U.S. counterterrorism, counter-network operations, and kinetic strikes are politically appealing because they are measurable, visible, and capitalize on sophisticated intelligence and precision strike capabilities.

However, trends among foreign fighters may blunt the United States’ comparative advantage in killing key terrorism leaders. First, the fighting in Iraq and Syria has further democratized the foreign fighter movement and made for an ever-replenishing list of high-value targets. Second, foreign fighters (and terrorists in general) may be moving from active armed conflict areas to urban centers. The first factor threatens to exhaust U.S. counterterrorism capabilities and the
second threatens to decrease its overall significance.

If the United States intends to play an enduring and central role in reducing the impact of foreign fighters, it should endeavor to pay greater attention to the less quantifiable, “squishier,” goals of sharing and integrating information, as well as building resiliency among countries that face the threat.

In performing the type of predictive “heat mapping” analysis to suggest where fighters are likely to migrate, this report risks being tactically tautological: criminality and terrorism occur where there are criminals and terrorists. The value may instead be found in suggesting where migrating foreign fighters might create venues for future geopolitical competition or challenges to U.S. influence. By anticipating these potential challenges, the United States can help allied states build capacity to disaggregate militant entrepreneurs from vulnerable populations, and channel competitors’ concern over foreign fighters in a productive, mutually beneficial manner.

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