

Assessing the Threat of Jihadists Returning From Syria

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We have been closely following the events in Syria since the demonstrations in spring 2011 that led to the civil war. Over the years, we've discussed the beginnings of foreign intervention in 2011 to its becoming a widespread phenomenon. We've also tracked the spread of jihadist groups in Syria over the past three years to the present point where the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant has rebelled against al Qaeda and formed a second pole of jihadism.

All this is to say that we watch Syria carefully and we read a lot of reporting from various sources about the many facets of the civil war raging there and the implications for the region. One of the narratives regarding the fighting in Syria that has become very pronounced in recent weeks is the threat foreign jihadists currently fighting in Syria will pose when they return home. There has been some very good, detailed reporting and analysis on this topic, but there has also been quite a bit of hype accompanying it. By some accounts, the foreign fighters in Syria pose a threat akin to the fictional zombie apocalypse.

Certainly, foreign fighters in Syria who survive the conflict and either stay in the country or return to their countries of origin will pose a lingering threat. But I believe several factors exist that will mitigate that threat, helping ensure it remains modest.

History of Foreign Jihadists

First, it is important to remember that the return of foreign fighters from war zones is not a new phenomenon. Thousands of Muslim men received training at camps in Pakistan following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and thousands more received training at camps in Afghanistan between the Soviet withdrawal and the U.S. invasion in 2001. While nobody, including the groups employing the fighters, has accurate numbers, it is believed that at least 20,000 foreign fighters cycled through Afghanistan between 1979 and 2001, although it is unlikely that there were more than 3,000 to 4,000 in the theater at a given time. Al Qaeda emerged from among

these fighters, and the current al Qaeda leadership, including Ayman al-Zawahiri and Nasir al-Wahayshi, had their roots in the jihadist struggle in Afghanistan. Many foreign jihadists remained in Afghanistan until they were either killed or driven out by U.S. and Afghan national forces in 2001.

Other foreign jihadists migrated to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to fight following the U.S. invasion, although this flow was reduced dramatically following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Iraq, the ancient seat of the Abbasid Caliphate, was seen as being at the heart of the Islamic world, rather than a backwater like Afghanistan. It was also easier to get to Iraq than Afghanistan. Because of these factors, Iraq supplanted Afghanistan as the most popular destination for foreign fighters, and thousands of jihadists flocked to Iraq. Most of these fighters were from the Middle East, but there were also a number of jihadists from Europe and the United States. The U.S. Army reported that more than 1,000 foreign fighters were captured or killed in Iraq in 2006 alone.

There were also significant numbers of foreign jihadists involved in the first Chechen War (1994-1996) and in Bosnia (1992-1995) but these numbers were far lower than those in Afghanistan or Iraq. Like Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, Muslim fighters traveled to Chechnya and Bosnia to fight a defensive jihad to protect fellow Muslims rather than traveling there to attempt to establish (or re-establish) an Islamic state like we saw in post-U.S. invasion Afghanistan and Iraq. Smaller numbers of foreign jihadists have also fought in Somalia, Libya, Mali and elsewhere.

Yet despite the tens of thousands of jihadists who have fought in these various conflicts since the 1970s, only a very small percentage have returned to their countries of origin to conduct terrorist attacks. One important reason for this is ideology. While many Muslims feel compelled to travel to places like Syria to fight, many of those who do so are not jihadists. Furthermore, there are also differences among those who hold jihadist beliefs. For example, even among the jihadists there are many who believe it is religiously permissible to travel to a place such as Syria or Iraq to fight for Muslims who are being oppressed or attacked (defensive jihad), or who they see as being locked in an internal sectarian fight in Syria, but who do not believe it is permissible to conduct terrorist attacks against civilians outside of such theaters of war. Such people have no qualms about killing armed combatants in a war zone, but they believe that Islam clearly prohibits attacks against noncombatants.

Jihadist infighting in Syria has also proved to be a significant ideological arrestor. First, the more divided the jihadists are, the less attention they have to give to areas beyond Syria and to pool their resources for strikes farther abroad. Second, some foreigners who have traveled to Syria have left after becoming disillusioned by internal ideological squabbling and backbiting. The bloody infighting has also increased the number of jihadist deaths, since foreign fighters are often fighting against the regime, Syrian jihadists, Kurds and other non-jihadist Syrian rebels. Many Syrian rebel groups have come to view foreign fighters as a potential threat, and the days of the "five-star jihad" are now over.

Training and Capability

While many foreign jihadists who have traveled to various theaters to fight are provided with some rudimentary training, it is very important to remember that the training they receive is normally restricted to the skills needed by a guerrilla fighter in a war zone. These include things such as physical fitness, some hand-to-hand combat and the use of small arms, such as assault rifles, hand grenades and pistols. Very few of these jihadists are ever provided advanced training in the types of skills required to successfully conduct a major terrorist attack in a hostile environment, or what we refer to as terrorism tradecraft. These skills include such things as obtaining fraudulent travel documents, clandestine communications, weapons procurement, bombmaking, surveillance, etc.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and even the al Qaeda core have encouraged would-be grassroots jihadist terrorists to conduct simple attacks that are within their capabilities: In other words, to fight like they have trained and to conduct attacks that do not require advanced terrorism tradecraft. But despite this encouragement, very few grassroots jihadists follow this advice. Even among the very few who have undertaken such attacks, most have sought to conduct spectacular attacks that are beyond their capability, and are frequently caught in sting operations as they seek outside assistance with weapons procurement or bombmaking.

I anticipated back in 2010 that we were going to see a shift in jihadist tactics away from sophisticated bomb plots and toward simple armed assaults that most jihadists are capable of conducting without outside assistance. I based this assessment on the widely hyped success of the Fort Hood shootings, the ease of conducting such attacks and the exhortations of jihadist groups to emulate Maj. Nidal Hassan. **But I was wrong. The shift has never materialized. For every successful simple attack such as Fort Hood, or last year's Boston Marathon bombing, there are many complex plots that are either botched by those planning them or thwarted by the authorities when the wannabe terrorists stumble into law enforcement stings.** This could still change, but to date, the desire to conduct spectacular attacks has served to blunt the threat posed by simple attacks.

Awareness

Perhaps the most powerful of the factors that will help mitigate the impact of the threat posed by jihadists returning from Syria is awareness. The fact that I am writing this is proof of that awareness, and this awareness is greater than ever before. When I traveled to Yemen with a colleague from the FBI to investigate the December 1992 attack against U.S. Air Force personnel in Aden and the January 1993 rocket attack against the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa, our initial working theory was that Libyan operatives or surrogates had conducted the attacks. It was only after we investigated the attacks that we determined the perpetrators were jihadists who had been trained in Afghanistan and who had returned to Yemen. That is when we first began to realize that returning jihadists posed a threat outside Afghanistan.

Shortly after I returned from Yemen, I was sent to New York to assist with the investigation of the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Within days of that bombing, the outstanding

investigative efforts of my forensic colleagues determined that the truck had been rented by a group of jihadists with links to Afghanistan. Sadly, the core group behind the bombing had been investigated by the FBI, which determined it did not pose a threat despite the fact that a member of the group had assassinated Meir Kahane in midtown Manhattan in November 1990. But that case, along with the related 1993 New York landmark bomb plot case, helped raise awareness of jihadists as a transnational threat to the West.

That threat became acutely obvious on 9/11, and was re-emphasized by the attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. Today, there is not one security or intelligence service in the world that is not intensely aware of the potential threat posed by jihadists returning home from fighting in Syria.

Things have changed dramatically since the 1980s and early 90s, and massive international efforts are underway to identify and monitor foreign fighters in Syria due to the potential threat they pose.

In the 1980s and 1990s, when returning jihadists were largely ignored, Sgt. Ali Mohamed — who was convicted for being involved in the 1998 East Africa embassy bombing plot — told his U.S. Army supervisors that he went to Afghanistan to fight while on vacation. Incredibly, Mohamed was still permitted to retain his job. Things have changed dramatically since that time, and massive international efforts are currently underway to identify and monitor foreign fighters in Syria due to the potential threat they pose.

In some countries, these returning fighters are questioned and released. In others, they are monitored. And in some countries, like Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Jordan — where it is now illegal to fight in Syria — returning jihadists face jail time. It is far easier to travel to Syria from those three countries than it is to return to them from Syria. Other jihadists who train with organizations that have been designated international terrorist groups can also face prosecution in their home countries on charges of providing material support for a terrorist group. Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, have begun to revoke the citizenship of their citizens who travel to Syria to fight.

And the awareness of the potential threat is not just confined to the government. Muslim communities have also become very aware of this potential threat over the past few decades. In many cases, we have seen families approaching governments to tell them of children who have left home without permission to fight in jihadist theaters. In other cases, family calls to law enforcement agencies have resulted in young men being arrested before they could leave the country to travel to Syria and to the identification and arrest of people recruiting fighters. This community awareness can also place ideological pressure on returning jihadists to help prevent them from conducting attacks against innocent people in the countries where they reside.

Jihadists returning from Syria will pose a threat for the foreseeable future, but due to the factors we've discussed, that threat will remain chronic and low-level. It is something that should be of concern, but not a cause for panic.