DISRUPTING THE FOREIGN FIGHTER FLOW

By Michael P. Noonan

On the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan U.S. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have confronted third-party national combatants. Widely known as "foreign fighters"
these individuals have gained deadly skills, combat experience, and global connections that can be exported and exploited to devastating effect in other locations. Whether one believes that the extremism of Al Qaeda and affiliated movements is an existential threat to the United States or that such threats pose more of a nuisance to international security, the fact is that foreign fighters motivated by such causes do pose risks not only to U.S. service members deployed to combat zones, but also to geostrategically important governments in North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia, not to mention potential targets in the United States, Europe, and other locations.
Therefore, disrupting the flow of foreign fighters is an important undertaking. But how does one do so?

THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PHENOMENON AT A GLANCE The foreign fighter phenomenon has grown since the call to jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.
Following that conflict foreign fighters migrated to such places as the Balkans and Chechnya, Dagestan, and Tajikistan in the former Soviet Union. But this is not a new problem.
Foreign fighter belligerents on both "sides of the hill"
were a marked feature of the 1930's Spanish Civil War.
Furthermore, the incidence of such fighters has been fairly widespread throughout history. As David Malet, a recognized expert on the phenomenon, has noted, "Among the 331 civil conflicts [occurring between] 1815 [and] 2005, at least 67 of them featured the presence of foreign fighters."[1]

Still, the emergence of Al Qaeda directly from the experience of 1980s Afghanistan, portends ominous possibilities from this latest cohort of global foreign fighters. According to Clint Watts, a former Army officer and FBI special agent with expertise on foreign fighters, "[l]eft unchecked, the Second Foreign Fighter Glut will produce the next generation of terrorist organizations and attacks much as the First Foreign Fighter Glut fueled [Al Qaeda]."[2] While they might not be as numerous as those that participated in the 1980s jihad, which was in many cases sanctioned by regional governments, "they have learned skills that far outweigh those of the original Jihadis.
Their understanding and employment of urban tactics, weaponry and advanced technology make them far more lethal than their predecessors."[3] In Iraq, for instance, while such fighters have accounted for less than 5 percent of insurgents they were estimated at producing over 90 percent of high lethality attacks.[4]

But what-if anything-is new about this latest wave of foreign fighter activity? Malet suggests that, "[i]n modern history, transnational insurgencies have been based on various ties of ethno-nationalism and ideology, but contemporary foreign fighters in conflicts around the globe now all share the same religious identity."[5] This does not mean that Islam itself is the cause of this phenomenon, rather "the cause appears to be partly the result of a period effect, the coincidence of increasingly globalized communications and transportation technology with a particular identity community whose members have transnational identities that are currently particularly salient."[6] Perceived threats to such identity communities, thus, foster and propel defensive mobilization by motivated individuals. To Malet, such defensive mobilization is the key to recruitment across cases, ideologies, and religious networks.[7]

DISRUPTING THE FOREIGN FIGHTER FLOW

Clint Watts asserts that the foreign fighter pipeline has three phases: (1) source country/flashpoint, (2) safe havens and the transit network, and (3) target locations.[8] Others suggest that a fourth phase, outflow destinations, is important as well.[9] Each of these phases is examined below. It is important to remember that at least since the original anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan there has been a large chicken-and-egg effect and overlap between and amongst these phases. The complexity of the issue, however, suggests that one cannot deal singly with any particular phase. A combined approach working within and across phases appears to be the only realistic way to minimize the problem in the short- to mid-term. Full eradication of the phenomenon seems unrealistic.

Source Country/Flashpoint. Foreign fighters like most other combatants must be recruited. While self-selection and varying degrees of intrinsic motivation are important, extrinsic factors also appear to be crucial. Watts argues that "social-familial-religious" networks fuel such recruitment with the assistance and influence of former foreign fighters.[10] Defensive mobilization recruitment themes similar to former President George W. Bush's statement to "fight them over there so we don't have to fight them here" are employed.[11] Autocatalytic recruitment from, say, the internet appears to be rare. Cities and neighborhood kinship and cultural nodes are important. For instance, according to the "Sinjar files"-the most complete personnel files on the foreign fighter inflow into Iraq captured near that northwestern Iraqi city-the top five foreign fighter producing cities for that cohort of individuals per capita were: Darnah, Libya; Mecca, Saudi Arabia; Jawf, Saudi Arabia; Dayr al zur, Syria; and Sanaa, Yemen, respectively.[12]

In the long run this phase is probably the most important one but suppressing the flashpoints is also fraught with difficulties. As the terrorism scholar Jarrett Brachman has noted,

> ... over the last eight years al Qaeda has undergone a
> metamorphosis. It has transformed from a global
> terrorist group into a global terrorist movement, one
> with its own founding fathers, well-codified doctrine,
> substantial and accessible corpus of literature, and
> deep bench of young, bright, and ambitious commanders.
> Attacks still matter to them, but in an era of increased
> counter-terrorism pressure, al Qaeda is beginning to
> realize that it is a lot more effective at being a
> movement, an ideology, even a worldview. It is starting
> to see that terrorism is only one of many tools in its
> arsenal and that changing minds matters more than
> changing policies.[13]

Pivoting popular narratives away from Al Qaeda and other extremists, as the past decade-plus has shown, however, is difficult. As the late French counterinsurgency practitioner and theorist David Galula said, "[t]he insurgent, having no responsibility, is free to use every trick; if necessary, he can lie, cheat, exaggerate. He is not obliged to prove; he is judged by what he promises, not by what he does. Consequently, propaganda is a powerful weapon for him."[14] Within the U.S. government bureaucratic layers and seams inhibit the effective coordination to counter such narratives even before getting to work by, with, and through the numerous governments whose populations are subject to the messages of the global movement. And even when working with these governments, the embassy teams tend to focus more on bilateral relations rather than on stemming the outflow of extremist foreign fighters who operate sometimes thousands of miles away from their day-to-day realities.[15] It is important to

increase the flow of counter-narratives to messages of Muslim oppression or victimization, but this is often difficult given the reasons stated above.

Additionally, while host nation governments today do a much better job of tracking individuals who have left to become foreign fighters, those fighters who do not achieve martyrdom pose risks to their home countries and to others abroad.

Safe Havens and the Transit Network. Unless such fighters go to fight in a neighboring country, much depends on getting foreign fighters to training sites and to target destinations intact and undetected. (Unfortunately, thanks to the internet, training sanctuaries for some skills may not be as critical as they once were.) In addition, it is necessary to establish logistical hubs not only for the transit and training of fighters, but also locations to conduct a wide array of financial activities-ranging from the illicit (such as product piracy, smuggling, money laundering, etc.) to the more commonplace (access to banking, legitimate businesses, etc.)-which are necessary to fund current and future operations.

Prior to September 11, 2001 national governments (e.g., the Sudan and Afghanistan) were more willing to offer sanctuary to groups such as Al Qaeda, but the U.S. reaction to the attacks on New York and Washington, DC, in Afghanistan and other locations has diminished such flagrant support. Today, such groups seek out the freedom of action offered by geopolitical "dead spaces,"[16] like areas of the Sahel, Somalia, and Yemen.[17] Punitive strikes may be taken against targets using such dead space-see for example the alleged U.S. raid near Deir Ezzor, Syria in 2008, [18] the Israeli Air Force attack on a supply convoy in Sudan in spring 2009,[19] and the recent U.S. strike to kill Saleh ali Saleh Nabhan in Somalia[20]-but political sensitivities and the resources required to undertake these special missions can impose costs. In addition, some experts claim that international cooperation in the fight on terrorists is enhanced when the United States respects sovereignty.[21]

Such cooperation may be necessary in order to restrict the free movement of foreign fighters. For instance, law enforcement and intelligence organizations need to collaborate more in sharing information. They should also keep tabs on those with whom such individuals are interacting. In addition, such cooperation might assist in making it more expensive or more difficult for obvious foreign fighter candidates to travel to known transshipment points. But such cooperation will not always be possible. A local government, if one exists, may be unable or unwilling to cooperate. Under such circumstances, punitive or information gathering raids, as described earlier, may be undertaken or more creative approaches such as "false flag"
operations to complicate the smuggling of fighters into and out of target areas. These operations might also demoralize and dissuade such fighters from following through with going to, or recruiting others to, fight.[22]

Target Locations. By the time foreign fighters arrive at target locations they are mainly the problem of the host nation security forces or are, like in Afghanistan and Iraq, also the problem of external armed forces. As stated earlier, such fighters, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, have deployed tactics, techniques, and procedures of great skill and oftentimes of greater lethality than those previously used on scene-e.g., the diffusion of innovative uses of person-borne, vehicle-borne, or static emplaced improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Furthermore, as the "McChrystal Assessment" on Afghanistan states, "[f]oreign fighters provide materiel, expertise, and ideological commitment."[23] Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, among others, showed what such materiel assistance, expertise, and ideological commitment could accomplish by bringing Iraq to the precipice of civil war in 2006 by employing a strategy pitting Sunni Arabs vs. Shi`i Arabs vs. Kurds.

Vast amounts of information and specialized capabilities are necessary to counteract such networks. You need human networks to go after foreign fighter and insurgent networks, but all insurgencies are sui generis. Population-centric counterinsurgency or foreign internal defense approaches may work in certain environments, but not in other locations where the physical or human terrain may favor other methods of force and resource employment. Foreign fighters themselves must also operate in these varied terrains. Not all environs will be hospitable. As the Anbar Awakening showed, such foreign fighters may operate more effectively when divorced from the local populace who, in any event, may tire of such visitors and their behavior.[24]

Aside from those who stay on the battlefield or move to other destinations, some foreign fighters in the target locations will be killed-and many request to be suicide bombers[25]-while others are captured. Of those captured, some are returned to their source countries for imprisonment or for attempts at reintegration into society. Such reintegration seems to work in certain cases, but not in others. As of the spring of 2009, for instance, a Pentagon report found that there was roughly a 14 percent recidivism rate among those prisoners transferred from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba to other locations.[26] If-and it may be a big if-this other 86 percent of individuals holds across other samples and such individuals become solid citizens and do not incite others to go off and fight then that would be a great success. But as was stated earlier, former foreign fighters, even if not actively engaged in fighting themselves, appear to be important cogs in recruiting others to fight-either by word or by past example. Of course, those who had unpleasant experiences while off fighting might be useful in dissuading others from following their paths, too.

Outflow Destinations. Those foreign fighter veterans who are not killed or captured at target locations generally may
either: (1) return to their source country, (2) go to a safe haven, or (3) go to a current or future conflict zone. Since the first foreign fighter glut of the 1980s and 1990s, this situation has spawned something akin to a deadly version of the "show that never ends."[27] Examining the so-called "Arab Afghans," who fought the Soviets in the 1980s, the terrorism scholar Mohammed Hafez suggests that that conflict produced six types of veterans: reintegrationists (those who went home again and reintegrated into their original societies), government assets (e.g., Arab Afghan Yemenis who fought against southern Yemenis during the civil war following Yemen's reunification), facilitators, social revolutionaries (e.g., Egyptians and Algerians who fought against their governments upon return from Afghanistan in the 1990s), global jihadists, and unaffiliated terrorists (e.g., Ramzi Yusef).[28] Some will continue due to their religious or ideological beliefs while others are attracted to the lifestyle-a powerful argument. As the military historian, and retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, Robert Mackey has stated about a different historical context, "the guerrilla fighters of Arkansas and Missouri during the [American] Civil War formed the cadres of the Old West criminal gangs-Cole Younger, Jesse James. They were people who did not fit back into their societies; they couldn't go home again."[29]

Whether individuals are motivated by religion, ideology, or lifestyle, the Islamist strategic studies scholar Barak Mendelsohn has offered a simple, yet important distinction between different groups of foreign fighters: those that are experienced and those that are not. According to Mendelsohn, the experienced cadres deserve more attention because of their leadership abilities, their technical, tactical, and strategic knowledge that they can transmit through training and advising, and their connections.[30] While the less experienced might be capable of causing large-scale carnage, particularly in spectacular suicide attacks, the experienced cadres are the planners and instigators.

To counter such individuals it is, therefore, important to plan for and deal with foreign fighter outflows, especially the cadres leaving from Iraq and Afghanistan. To Mackey the key to such planning is to consider what happens 5, 10, or

15 years from now and develop a series of "indications and warnings." In particular, the United States should: (1) stringently look at where money goes and where it moves ("funding, financing, travel and movement"), (2) focus on the law enforcement angle and on coalition partner capacity- building, (3) acknowledge that once fighters start leaving a country such as Iraq it is critical to know where they are going, and (4) focus on conflict abatement. [31] Wars allow foreign fighters the opportunity to fight, provide them with expertise and the repetition of practice, and serve as the training ground for the next fight. Lastly, as Mendelsohn has suggested, we need to identify the connections to local groups from source or future target countries where outflow may become a lot more relevant.[32]

Beyond these steps, Mackey suggests that we need to establish an international fusion center overseas that would aggregate intelligence and share it cross-nationally. This would allow us to track outflow and leverage comparative advantages in human intelligence capabilities. And while he noted that the Foreign Fighter Task Force is doing a great job, it is focused on U.S. Central Command area of responsibility. That task force model needs to be copied and applied elsewhere and given an international role. In other words, "[w]e need to modify our organization bureaucratically to meet the threat and not necessarily try to force the threat into our bureaucratic model," argued Mackey.[33]

From a different-but largely complementary-angle, Dan Green, a former Provincial Reconstruction Team member in Afghanistan and Naval Reservist tribal engagement officer in Iraq, has suggested the need to build U.S. personnel capacity. Michael Doran, a Middle East scholar and former National Security Council, Department of Defense, and Department of State official, has argued that the United States must build a political warfare capability. To Green, building personnel capacity is essential in developing bases of knowledge, expertise, familiarity, and the relationships needed to operate in the locales where foreign fighters originate, transit, and fight. Unfortunately, bureaucratic structures impede such deep specialization and inhibit precisely the development of the skills required for the political warfare capabilities suggested by Doran. According to Doran, we have some great programs in place, but that they are all ad hoc. What is needed is: (1) greater flexibility in moving between war zones and non-war zones,

(2) better local intelligence and the ability to put the right answer (often non-military) on target, (3) better understanding of cultural contexts, (4) legislative relief to create constructive linkages between things like intelligence collection and development assistance under a new organization, and (5) increasing relationship linkages by developing educational institutions such as the George C.
Marshall European Center for Security Studies-but from a "whole of government" perspective-for Africa and Central Commands.[34] Such capabilities-when combined with those offered by Mackey and Mendelsohn-would offer robust, yet scalable measures for dealing with issues across and within the four foreign fighter phases.

CONCLUSION
Today the United States focuses largely on what to do in Afghanistan and in neighboring Pakistan. Still, some reports suggest that the drone strikes against Al Qaeda in Pakistan have produced an outflow of foreign fighters to Yemen and Somalia.[35] Meanwhile the situation in Iraq remains improved from the dark days of 2004-2007, yet still tenuous.
But there are other reports claiming that Al Qaeda has reinforced their leadership to refocus and direct the fight in Iraq by sending Sheikh Issa al-Masri to Syria.[36] Strategically, these developments lumped together suggest three things: (1) the foreign fighter problem and the "Al Qaeda movement," however

defined, are not going away, (2) such fighters are intent on keeping the United States widely engaged across theaters of operations, and (3) the movement to Yemen and Somalia, aside from their geopolitical dead space benefits, are in close striking distance of the heart of the Arabian peninsula and Egypt.

Financial reality and limited diplomatic, development, and defense capabilities already stretched thin by eight years of war suggest further difficulties in dealing with foreign fighters. Realistically this means that the United States must leverage its friendships and acquaintances to work by, with, and through others and employ indirect strategy. As the late French Army General Andre Beaufre stated in his magisterial An Introduction to Strategy

> Though its outward manifestations are of a specialized
> and frequently disconcerting nature, indirect strategy
> is no specialized form of strategy divorced from direct
> strategy. The key to it, as with all strategy, is
> freedom of action; it is only the method by which this
> freedom is obtained which is different. It must be
> obtained by initiative combined with security and it is
> different because the area of freedom of action (and
> therefore the limits of security) depends upon what is
> done outside, not inside, the area at issue. This is its
> special feature and it is this which gives it its
> indirect character.[37]

In other words, while foreign fighters are by no means chiefly responsible for all of the problems in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan, working against them successfully will help to reduce violence in the war zones.
Combined with effective actions on the ground, an indirect strategy that husbands and appropriately distributes resources across borders to limit recruitment, transit, and logistics for these international killers is essential to success.

Notes
[1] http://davidmalet.com/The_Foreign_Fighter_Project.php.
See also his "Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts," Ph.D. dissertation, The George Washington University, 2009.

[2] Clint Watts, "Countering Terrorism from the Second Foreign Fighter Glut," Small Wars Journal, 2009. Accessible
at:
http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/247-watts.pdf.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Figures cited by David Malet during panel one of the FPRI "The Foreign Fighter Problem" conference. Available at:
http://www.fpri.org/multimedia/20090714.foreignfighterphenomenon.html.

[5] David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions," Orbis (Winter 2010): forthcoming.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Clint Watts, "Countering Terrorism from the Second Foreign Fighter Glut," Small Wars Journal, 2009. Accessible
at: http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/247-
watts.pdf.

[9] See discussions from the "Disrupting the Foreign Fighter Flow" panel at:
http://www.fpri.org/multimedia/20090715.disruptingforeignfighters.html.

[10] Watts, Countering Terrorism from the Second Foreign Fighter Glut.

[11] See, for instance, Clint Watts statements on "The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon - Overview" panel.

[12] Clinton Watts, "Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan: What Foreign Fighter Data Reveals About the Future of Terrorism,"
Small Wars Journal, 2008. Accessible at:
http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/49-
watts.pdf.

[13] Jarrett Brachman, "The Next Osama," Foreign Policy.com, September 10, 2009. Available at:
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/10/the_next_osama.

[14] David Galula, foreword by John A. Nagl, Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice (Westport,
CT: Praeger Security International, 2006; 1964), p. 9.

[15] See comments by Michael Doran on the "Disrupting the Foreign Fighter Flow" panel.

[16] In American military parlance "dead space" is defined
as: "An area within the maximum effective range of a weapon, radar, or observer which cannot be covered by fire or observation from a particular position because of intervening obstacles, the nature of the ground, the characteristics of the trajectory, or the limitations of the pointing capabilities of the weapon." Taken from:
http://dictionary.babylon.com/Dead_Space/. Geopolitical dead space here refers to geographical areas where issues of sovereignty or the lack of concrete or discernable governance, in whole or part, create obstacles to control of the space and where the human and physical terrain or other issues (such as moral, legal, diplomatic, military, and so
on) create difficulties for outside powers to intervene.

[17] For more on the "power of statelessness" see Jakub Grygiel, "The Power of Statelessness," Policy Review (April & May 2009), pp. 39-50.

[18] Borzou Daragahi, "8 reportedly killed in U.S. raid inside Syria," Los Angeles Times, October 27, 2008.

[19] Michael R. Gordon and Jeffrey Gettleman, "U.S.
Officials Say Israel Struck in Sudan," New York Times, March 26, 2009.

[20] Jeffrey Gettleman and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Kills Top Qaeda Militant in Southern Somalia," New York Times, September 14, 2009.

[21] See, for instance, the comments made by Barak Mendelsohn on the "Disrupting the Foreign Fighter Flow"
panel and also his Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[22] See the "Disrupting the Foreign Fighter Flow" panel discussion.

[23] Available at:
http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf?hpid=t
opnews%29. See page 2-5.

[24] See the comments by Erin M. Simpson on "The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon - Overview" panel and Barak Mendelsohn on the "Disrupting the Foreign Fighter Flow" panel.

[25] See, for instance, Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, Al- Qa`ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records (West Point, NY: Project Harmony, Combating Terrorism Center, December 2007), p. 19. Available at:
http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/CTCForeignFighter.19.Dec
07.pdf.

[26] Elizabeth Bumiller, "Later Terror Link Cited for 1 in 7 Freed Detainees," New York Times, May 20, 2009. Available
at:
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/21/us/politics/21gitmo.html.

[27] The "show that never ends" are lyrics from Emerson, Lake & Palmer's song "Karn Evil 9." Viewable at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUclxp7FxHI.

[28] Mohammed M. Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans," Studies in Conflict & Terrorism (Volume 32, Issue 2, 2009), pp. 73-94.

[29] Comment made during the "Disrupting the Foreign Fighter Flow" panel.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Comments made during the "Disrupting the Foreign Fighter Flow" panel. Barak Mendelsohn, for his part, offered five other salient questions that might be addressed as part of, or in addition to, the indications and warnings process:
(1) how many foreign fighters are there?, (2) what are the foreign fighters arenas other than Iraq and Afghanistan?,
(3) how are they divided between different jihad arenas?,
(4) is there a central mechanism that helps disperse jihadis amongst arenas or is it a matter of opportunity?, and (5) what are the main roles of the foreign fighters? Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Comment made during the "Disrupting the Foreign Fighter Flow" panel.

[34] Ibid.

[35] See, for example, Jeremy Page and Rehmat Mehsud, "Pakistan Army Closes In On Taleban Leader Baitullah Mehsud," London Times, June 20, 2009.

[36] Bill Roggio, "Senior al Qaeda leader leaves Pakistan, directs Iraq operations from Syria," Long War Journal, August 21, 2009. Available at:
http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/08/senior_al_qaeda_lead_5.php.

[37] General D'Armee Andre Beaufre, trans. by Major-General R.H. Barry CB CBE, An Introduction to Strategy (London:
Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 128.