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A POLICY RESPONSE TO ISLAMIC STATE EXTREMIST FIGHTER BATTLEFIELD MIGRATION

Robert J. Bunker
Alma Keshavarz

U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE



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**A POLICY RESPONSE TO ISLAMIC
STATE EXTREMIST FIGHTER
BATTLEFIELD MIGRATION**

Robert J. Bunker and Alma Keshavarz

August 2020

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FOREWORD

The subject of Islamic State extremist fighters returning to Western countries or laterally transferring to other global insurgent battlefields has increasingly come into international security and US defense policy discussions. Concerns from such discussions are derived from the territorial demise of the caliphate in December 2017 and the potentially large numbers of extremist fighters and their family members estimated to still reside in Islamic State enclaves in Syria and Iraq. Veteran fighters migrating back to their countries of origin in the West to engage in terrorist actions or to support insurgent operations in Africa or Central and Southeast Asia present a new phase in one component of the ongoing war with radical Sunni Islamist extremism.

This monograph by Dr. Robert J. Bunker and Dr. Alma Keshavarz examines the important subject of extremist fighter migration by first providing an overview of the Islamic State's pedigree along with its precaliphate and transcaliphate territorial strategies, postcaliphate strategic potential, and demographic information. These discussions are followed by problem identification related to returning extremist fighters, inflows into Syria and Iraq, outflows to the United States and new battlefields overseas, and the special case of women and children.

The final component of the monograph provides a suite of counterbattlefield migration policy response options for United States Central Command to consider. Countermigration policies—focusing on the extremist fighters themselves and organizational components of the Islamic State—are then introduced and discussed. Finally, the need for these policy

responses to deconflict with greater US foreign policy imperatives in Syria and Iraq is emphasized, along with four Joint Force-focused recommendations.

This work provides grounded policies with which to combat the contemporary challenge of extremist fighter migration and highlights the ongoing relevance of Strategic Studies Institute publications to the changing twenty-first-century security environment that we, as citizens of our nation and representatives of our nation's Army, are facing.

Carol V. Evans

DR. CAROL V. EVANS
Director
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SUMMARY

June 2014 to December 2017 represented the high tide of radical Islamist (Salafi-jihadist) territorial control under the authority of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Primarily battle-hardened, many fighters remain situated within the various enclaves still controlled by that hybrid terrorist-insurgent entity. This monograph analyzes and provides policy response options for US national security and Army planners concerning the potential for postterritorial caliphate battlefield migration by this still-sizable contingent of Islamic State foreign fighters. The monograph achieves these ends by

1. discussing Islamic State territorial eras and demographics;
2. offering an overview of the initial inflows of these fighters into the territorial caliphate, outflows to the United States, and lateral transfers to new battlefields, as well as mentioning special issues related to Islamic State women and children;
3. highlighting and analyzing the four strategic options available to the Islamic State in its postterritorial caliphate phase; and
4. offering senior US policy makers and planners options for counterbattlefield migration policy responses.

Islamic State strategic options encompass

1. reestablishing the caliphate;
2. accepting loss of territorial control and going to ground;
3. launching a new wave of jihad against the West (and Russia); and

4. creating microcaliphates for global insurgency purposes, which is the most viable long-term approach for the group.

In turn, planning options are presented which pertain to response policies focused on extremists and the Islamic State as an organization and embedded within the context of higher-level US foreign policies toward Syria and Iraq. Additionally, recommendations for counterforeign terrorist fighter programs and the Joint Force are provided.

We should be cognizant—from a methodological perspective—that one of the ongoing issues plaguing analysis of the potential for lateral battlefield transfer by Islamic State foreign fighters—including their opening up of new battlefields in Europe and, to a far lesser extent, the United States—is the discrepancies, gaps, and inconsistencies inherent in data and estimates on the actual number of foreign fighters, both in the past and the present. To help alleviate part of this uncertainty, the monograph develops a qualitative schema to place the foreign fighter threat into context. This schema incorporates extremist type, commitment, and location conditionals to assign a threat ranking to foreign fighters and their families. Although this schema is an imperfect solution, the robust future development of such a continuum of threats—though outside the scope of this research—would further benefit US policy responses as well as the activities of counterforeign terrorist fighter programs.

A POLICY RESPONSE TO ISLAMIC STATE EXTREMIST FIGHTER BATTLEFIELD MIGRATION

INTRODUCTION

The demise of the core territorial Islamic State, the caliphate established in late June 2014 that eventually consisted of individual provinces spanning over 17,000 square miles across Syria and Iraq with nearly 8 million people under its mandate, is considered a positive achievement in contemporary international relations.¹ This radical Islamist Sunni protostate, the extremist origins of which trace back to its al-Qaeda linkages in 1999 as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in Afghanistan, openly advocated torture, slavery, sectarian cleansing, and a host of other activities held anathema to liberal-democratic values. Ultimately, the territorial victory over the Islamic State was secured by an uneasy alliance of competing state and nonstate entities which could, at the very least, agree that the caliphate represented an existential threat to their collective regional interests.²

1. "Sunni Rebels Declare New 'Islamic Caliphate,'" Al Jazeera, June 30, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/isil-declares-new-islamic-caliphate-201462917326669749.html>; and Paul D. Shinkman, "ISIS by the Numbers in 2017," *US News & World Report*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-12-27/isis-by-the-numbers-in-2017>.

2. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Foreword: The Islamic State's Growth and Misrule, and the Future of Violent Non-State Actors," in *Global Radical Islamist Insurgency: Al Qaeda and Islamic State Networks Focus: A Small Wars Journal Anthology*, ed. Dave Dilegge and Robert J. Bunker (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2016), 2: xxviii-xxix.

The second-order effects related to the decline and eventual fall of the caliphate at the hands of so many competing – and, at times, openly belligerent – entities focus on the migration potential of foreign fighters – typically male, but in some instances, female – and familial extremists out of Syria and Iraq. Such potential stems from Islamic State extremists either migrating from the core Islamic State battlefield to another one in a different part of the world or returning to their country of origin to open it up as a new front as part of the global radical Islamist insurgency.³ This global insurgency is based in radical Sunni Islam (Salafi jihadism) and has its origins in Osama bin Laden’s declaration of jihad against the United States and Saudi Arabia in 1996, followed by the paradigm-shifting attack on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon in 2001.⁴ Since the emergence of the Islamic State and the development of a schism between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the second al-Baghdadi) of the Islamic State and Ayman al-Zawahiri of al-Qaeda struggled over the

3. This issue is recognized within the US Army War College (USAWC) KSIL as “3.b.6 Assess options for preventing extremists from leaving one battlefield in one part of the world to join another in a different part of the world. (Extremist migration).” Charles A. Carlton, ed., *Key Strategic Issues List (KSIL) 2018–2020* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, USAWC Press, 2018), 16.

4. For the original declaration in Arabic and an English translation, see Al-Qaeda, “Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites,” reference no. AFGP-2002-003676, n.d., <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/declaration-of-jihad-against-the-americans-occupying-the-land-of-the-two-holiest-sites-original-language-2/>.

establishment of the caliphate—this insurgency has morphed into a dual organizational threat.⁵

Within this global insurgency context, the immediate imperative for US national security and Army planners vis-à-vis a postterritorial caliphate is to address the battlefield migration potential of a sizable contingent of battle-hardened Islamic State foreign fighters situated within various remaining enclaves in Syria and Iraq.⁶ Derived from the Army's *Key Strategic Issues List* (KSIL) and seeking recommendations for counterextremist migration policy to be applied against these foreign fighters and their familial relations, the following research approach will be

5. For basic time frames, see Zack Beauchamp, "The Syrian War: A History," Vox, September 21, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/cards/syrian-refugees-war-assad/isis-founded>. For a more in-depth analysis, see Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2015); and Ali Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017). The global disposition of the major al-Qaeda and Islamic State enclaves and their affiliated groups can be viewed in Figure 2, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Violent Activity, 2016–2018," in Seth G. Jones, *America's Counterterrorism Gamble* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], July 26, 2018), 4. For a perspective on the competing al-Qaeda and Islamic State strategic approaches, see table 13, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Strategic Approaches," in Robert J. Bunker and Pamela Ligouri Bunker, *Radical Islamist English-Language Online Magazines: Research Guide, Strategic Insights, and Policy Response* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, USAWC Press, 2018), 130–31.

6. Bethan McKernan, "Up to 30,000 ISIS Fighters Remain in Iraq and Syria, Says UN," *Independent*, August 15, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-fighters-iraq-syria-un-report-jihadis-raqqa-iraq-a8492736.html>.

undertaken to identify these recommendations.⁷ First, we provide an overview of the past Islamic State territorial strategies and identify present and future strategic options for this severely battered but not-yet-defeated entity, as well as supply basic demographic information. Second, we identify problems related to: (1) inflows into and outflows out of Syria and Iraq; and (2) women and children in the caliphate, with émigré number estimates given where applicable. Third, we survey the postcaliphate geopolitical situation vis-à-vis how it will influence the Islamic State's present strategic options and discuss the most likely courses of action (COAs). Finally, we recommend a suite of battlefield migration policy options to better contain the Islamic State threat within Syria and Iraq and prohibit foreign fighter veterans from traveling to new global battlefields or back to their host countries to engage in potential terrorist actions. These policy options benefit from multiple counterforeign terrorist fighter (counter-FTF) programs and Joint

7. Carlton, *Key Strategic Issues List*. Although not stated explicitly in the KSIL, Islamic State fighters migrating back to the United States or Europe would technically be joining another battlefield. Such a perspective is in line with official Islamic State communiqués provided in the Rumiyah online magazine series and by the Amaq News Agency in the Islamic State's social media. Although Rumiyah ceased publication in November 2017 with the loss of Islamic State sanctuaries in Syria, the Amaq News Agency was still releasing short videos and issuing statements as of August 2018. See, for example, Thomas Joscelyn, "Islamic State Video Purportedly Shows Youths Responsible for Attacks in Chechnya," FDD's Long War Journal, August 21, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/08/islamic-state-video-purportedly-shows-youths-responsible-for-attacks-in-chechnya.php>.

Force recommendations related to the global radical Islamist threat.

ISLAMIC STATE TERRITORIAL ERAS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The origins of the Islamic State trace back through a lineage of groups initially entwined with the street philosophy and activities of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the ruthless Jordanian firebrand known for his sectarian attacks inflicted upon Shia populations and his videotaped and widely publicized beheading of American contractor Nicholas Berg in May 2004.⁸ Under Zarqawi's leadership, the organization was known as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad from 1999 through 2004 while in Afghanistan and, later, al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers (more popularly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq) from 2004 into 2006, after he redeployed it to that field of battle. The Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen is also noted as having existed for a brief period as part of this lineage.⁹ After Zarqawi's death in June 2006, the new al-Qaeda in Iraq leader, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, pledged allegiance to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (the first al-Baghdadi), the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), resulting in al-Qaeda

8. For an early history and psychological insights related to Zarqawi, see Jason M. Breslow, "Nada Bakos: How Zarqawi Went from 'Thug' to ISIS Founder," PBS, May 17, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/nada-bakos-how-zarqawi-went-from-thug-to-isis-founder/>.

9. See Aaron Y. Zelin, *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*, Research Notes no. 20 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2014), 1. This group has alternatively been called "Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen fi al-Iraq" (Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq). See Mahan Abedin, "Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq: Fact or Fiction?," *Terrorism Focus* 3, no. 12 (March 28, 2006).

in Iraq becoming ISI's affiliate.¹⁰ During this period, the ISI focused its territorial expansion within Al Anbar Province, Iraq. In reaction to the ISI's extreme policies, its forces were defeated by tribal and community elements in the fall of 2006 through the summer of 2007; this event later came to be known as the "Anbar Awakening."¹¹ The ISI, still entrenched in enclaves within the western regions of the country, then went through a period of crisis and rebuilding. With the death of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (the first al-Baghdadi) in April 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the second al-Baghdadi) became the new leader of the organization a month later.¹²

With about 80 percent of ISI leadership either killed or captured by mid-2010, the second al-Baghdadi brought many formerly imprisoned Iraqi intelligence and military officers into the leadership of the organization to help replenish its ranks.¹³ With the

10. Zelin, "The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda," 1-4.

11. Gary W. Montgomery and Timothy S. McWilliams, ed., *Al-Anbar Awakening* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2009), 2:13.

12. Anthony Shadid, "Iraqi Insurgent Group Names New Leaders," *New York Times*, May 16, 2015, https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/iraqi-insurgent-group-names-new-leaders/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0.

13. "US Says 80% of al-Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Removed," BBC News, June 4, 2010, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10243585>; and Liz Sly, "The Hidden Hand behind the Islamic State Militants? Saddam Hussein's," *Washington Post*, April 4, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html; and Isabel Coles and Ned Parker, "How Saddam's Men Help Islamic State Rule," Reuters, December 11, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/>.

advent of the Syrian civil war in early 2011, the ISI sent many extremist fighters into Syria by August of that year to exploit the increasing absence of central authority. From late 2010 into early 2013, the ISI was able to restructure and reconstitute itself into its contemporary Islamic State form, and this was further facilitated by the final US troop withdrawals in late 2011.¹⁴ Although the Syrian civil war initially precipitated the influx of foreign fighters into the region with the intent to aid those affected by the Assad regime, between 2013 and 2014 a large group of these foreign fighters migrated into Syria and Iraq to fight for the Islamic State. From April 2013 on, with increasing Islamic State victories and the group further dissociating itself from al-Qaeda, three Islamic State territorial eras have been identified, along with an emergent one.

14. Security debates exist related to the US troop withdrawal and the ensuing Shia-dominated Iraqi government policies of Nuri al-Maliki that estranged the Sunni populace in the central and western regions of the country. See Alice Fordham, "Fact Check: Did Obama Withdraw from Iraq Too Soon, Allowing ISIS to Grow?," NPR, December 19, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/19/459850716/fact-check-did-obama-withdraw-from-iraq-too-soon-allowing-isis-to-grow>.

Table 1. Islamic State territorial strategies

PHASE	STRATEGY	TIME PERIOD	EXAMPLES
1. Precaliphate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial territorial acquisition • Terrorism • Insurgency • <i>Hijrah</i> (emigration) to Syria 	April 2013 to May 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large foreign fighter influx into Syria (2013–14) • Growing Islamic State enclaves in Syria and Iraq • <i>Early Black Flags</i>/related e-books
2. Caliphate (Rise and Expansion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Baqiya wa tatamaddad</i> (remaining and expanding)¹⁵ • <i>Hijrah</i> (emigration) to Syria and Iraq • <i>Ghanimah</i> (war booty) to expand 	June 2014 to July 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated calls for foreign fighters to travel to the caliphate (actual fighter migration out in 2015–16) • Capture of Mosul; caliphate declared • Dabiq online magazine
3. Caliphate (Decline and Fall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Jihad fard ‘ayn</i> (defensive holy war) in Iraq and Syria • Jihad (holy war) against “the Romans” • <i>Hijrah</i> (emigration) to the Philippines/other areas 	August 2016 to November 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign fighter migration in/out frozen • Loss of Mosul and Al-Raqqah; territorial demise • Rumiayah online magazine
4. Postcaliphate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terrorism and insurgency via remnant enclaves • Jihad (holy war) against “the Romans” • New <i>Wilayat</i> (provinces)/microcaliphate creation 	December 2017 to present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign fighter battlefield migration potential unknown • <i>Bay’ah</i> (oath of allegiance) to leaders of groups still exist • No digital magazines or e-books/localized narratives

Precaliphate

This era spanned roughly April 2013 through May 2014, just before the founding of the caliphate. The Islamic State capitalized on the political chaos

15. See Cameron Glenn et al., “Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State,” updated October 28, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>. See also International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 16, 2019).

of the Syrian civil war—including material support from foreign patrons seeking to overthrow the Assad regime—as well as weak state capacity in Iraq, magnified by sectarian political infighting. This territorial acquisition phase was derived from a combination of insurgency supported by acts of terrorism in which parallel governance—and, later, political and religious primacy—was established in a patchwork of Islamic State enclaves that, over time, began to merge toward one another. The Islamic State began to stress emigration by means of social media and videos, coupled with early e-books such as the *Shuhada* and the *Black Flags* series and the initial *IS News* and *IS Reports*.

By the beginning of 2013, global country estimates indicated a steady stream of fighters was flowing into the Syrian-Iraqi conflict zone.¹⁶ Characteristically, large numbers of foreign fighters arrived principally in Syria and were trained and outfitted to engage in operations there, or they laterally migrated into Iraq to support the enlargement of Islamic State enclaves in that country. A 2013 International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation report estimated that between 2011 and early 2013, Europeans represented about “7–11 percent of the total foreign fighter population of between 2,000 and 5,500 persons.”¹⁷ The latter half of 2013, however, drew in larger numbers of fighters,

16. The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York: The Soufan Group, December 2015).

17. Edwin Bakker and Mark Singleton, “Foreign Fighters in the Syria and Iraq Conflict: Statistics and Characteristics of a Rapidly Growing Phenomenon,” in *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, ed. Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, and Christoph Paulussen (New York: Springer, February 2016), 14.

particularly from Europe. A 2014 Brookings report by Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro indicates “this period witnessed the fastest mobilization of foreign fighters in the history of the modern jihadist movement.”¹⁸ The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation report further estimated that by mid-December 2013, “there were up to 11,000 fighters from more than 70 countries that had joined the struggle in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad.”¹⁹

Toward the latter end of this period, as the enclaves began to merge into a territorial entity, families began to join the men who had gone before. Available information on foreign fighters from Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands is illustrative in this regard. Antwerp and Brussels were known to have “clusters of likeminded militants” who were “drawn into the orbit of radical preachers who encouraged and facilitated their travel to fight jihad early on in the Syrian civil war.”²⁰ Moreover, Belgium had a large population of North African Arab Muslims, an easily targeted demographic for Islamic State recruitment. As in Belgium, a large number of women are said to have left the Netherlands for Syria and Iraq in 2013 and 2014 when the group called on women to “join

18. Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, *Be Afraid, Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Policy Paper no. 34 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, November 2014).

19. Bakker and Singleton, “Foreign Fighters,” 14.

20. Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attacks,” *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 6 (June 2016): 7.

their husbands who had traveled there.”²¹ Most Dutch émigrés are recorded to have returned before 2014, the majority of them being women. Further, some Dutch women who traveled abroad became pregnant, “making it difficult to verify how many children [had been] born in the conflict area,” particularly during this early period.²²

Caliphate (Rise and Expansion)

From June 2014 through July 2016, the newly established caliphate was in its ascendancy. The territorial strategy expressed by the Islamic State during this era was derived from *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding) and supported by the taking of *ghanimah* (war booty)—literally billions of dollars’ worth of military equipment—to provide the Islamic State with a conventional ground combat capability. This rapid territorial expansion was witnessed following the capture of large Iraqi military stockpiles in cities such as Mosul (June 2014) and Ramadi (May 2015). The stockpiles provided the Islamic State with about three to four Iraqi Army divisions’ worth of equipment and materiel, which allowed the group’s extremist fighters to overrun defending Iraqi governmental and Syrian regime forces in outposts, towns, and cities throughout the

21. Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, “From the Kingdom to the Caliphate and Back,” in *Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them? Assessing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands*, ed. Renard and Coolsaet, Egmont Paper 101 (Brussels: Egmont Institute, February 2018), 5.

22. General Intelligence and Security Service, *Jihadist Women, a Threat Not to Be Underestimated* (The Hague: General Intelligence and Security Service, November 2017), 6–7.

region and add their captured military equipment to the group's growing military arsenal.²³

The initial Islamic State online magazine Dabiq and supporting social media further promoted emigration to the lands of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, particularly by those Muslims living in the West. Fighters and their families continued to arrive. A 2018 Combating Terrorism Center report analyzed documents retrieved from Islamic State-held territory and reported "1,100 women [had] registered in a guesthouse logbook operated by [the Islamic State] (assumed to be between 2014 and 2016)."²⁴ The average age of female travelers was 29; 77 percent were married (compared to 30 percent of men), and 10

23. The initial estimate of three divisions' worth of materiel is attributed to Anthony H. Cordesman, CSIS, in a 2014 *Wall Street Journal* interview. See Matt Bradley, "Insurgents in Iraq Seizing Advanced Weaponry," *Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/insurgents-in-iraq-seizing-advanced-weaponry-1404684313>, quoted in Jeremy Bender, "As ISIS Routs the Iraqi Army, Here's a Look at What the Jihadists Have in Their Arsenal," *Business Insider*, July 8, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/isis-military-equipment-breakdown-2014-7>. This estimate was increased to possibly four divisions worth of materiel the following year. See Chris Lo, "Friendly Fire: Accounting for the Stolen Arsenal of ISIS," *Army Technology*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.army-technology.com/features/featurefriendly-fire-accounting-for-the-stolen-arsenal-of-isis-4789324/>.

24. Daniel Milton and Brian Dodwell, "Jihadi Brides? Examining a Female Guesthouse Registry from the Islamic State's Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 5 (2018). See also Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London, July 2018), <https://icsr.info/2018/07/23/from-daesh-to-diaspora-tracing-the-women-and-minors-of-islamic-state/>.

percent were single (compared to 61 percent of men).²⁵ Islamic State propaganda appealed to both genders by offering a life of financial stability, health care and education, community support, independence, and adventure. Although a significantly large number of women have traveled voluntarily, some were “likely coerced and, in some cases, forced to travel.”²⁶ Women who were actively involved often recruited other women, spread Islamic State propaganda, and fundraised for the group.

Until 2015, experts believed more than 200 young women and teenage girls had traveled to join the Islamic State from Europe. The majority were from France (60), followed by the United Kingdom (50), Germany (40), Belgium (35), and Austria (14).²⁷ An International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) report from 2016 indicated that 17 percent of “the total European contingent” were female foreign fighters.²⁸ European women traveling to the conflict zone often married an Islamic State member online before their arrival; others were married just as they arrived. Women were also believed to be indoctrinating their children with jihadist ideology.²⁹

Émigrés came from other parts of the world, including parts of Asia and even North America, although in smaller numbers. Such foreign fighter travel continued through most of 2014, but reversed itself in 2015, decreasing steadily through 2016.

25. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora'*, 23–24.

26. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora'*, 26.

27. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora'*, 26.

28. Tanya Mehra, *Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses* (The Hague: ICCT, December 2016), 11.

29. Renard and Coolsaet, “From the Kingdom to the Caliphate,” 22.

This reversal resulted from a secondary outflow of migration from the caliphate stemming from the primitive living conditions that existed there and the increasing US and allied air strikes taking place at that time. Many foreign fighters returned to their countries of origin beginning in 2015, with the highest numbers returning in mid-2015. Some returned “disillusioned and frustrated with their situation”; others returned because of “calls by family and friends.”³⁰

The 2018 annual Department of State country reports on terrorism referred to Turkey as a “source and transit country for FTFs seeking to join [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)] and other terrorist groups fighting in Syria and Iraq.”³¹ Because many foreign fighters used Turkey as the gateway to the conflict zone, Turkey “established risk analysis units at airports and border crossing points and had a comprehensive no-entry list in place.”³² This perspective on Turkey interdicting Islamic State foreign fighter inflows and outflows, though, can be contrasted to earlier—and still legitimate—allegations that it allowed Islamic State fighters into Syria in 2015 to fight the Kurds and use Turkish regions as logistics bases.³³ Still, since mid-2015, the number of individuals from the United States traveling to or attempting to travel to the conflict zone declined, which officials believe resulted from “Turkey’s increased border security, deterrence from arrests in the United States, ISIS’s encouragement that

30. Daniel H. Heinke and Jan Raudszus, “Germany’s Returning Foreign Fighters and What to Do about Them,” in Renard and Coolsaet, *Returnees*, 44.

31. Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, October 2019).

32. Mehra, *Foreign Terrorist Fighters*, 6.

33. See Daniel Byman, “How States Exploit Jihadist Foreign Fighters,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 12 (2018): 4–5.

supporters commit attacks at home, and the group's ongoing battlefield losses."³⁴ Still, these numbers were never above the low hundreds.

Caliphate (Decline and Fall)

The territorial ISIS promoted itself as engaging in a defensive holy war on all fronts from August 2016 through November 2017. A major loss to the caliphate was the conquest of Mosul in June 2017 by a US-backed coalition of Iraqi governmental units, Kurds, and Shia fighters.³⁵ This conquest was followed by increasing manpower, materiel, and geographic losses by the Islamic State, culminating in its last strongholds and capital being overwhelmed over the ensuing months. As the Islamic State lost territory, Iraqi and Kurdish forces in the country captured a large number of its women and minors. By September 2017, approximately 1,400 women and children of "presumed [Islamic State] fighters were held in a camp south of Mosul, according to media reports relying on sources in Iraqi intelligence"; this figure included European nationals.³⁶

The number of jihadists attracted to the Islamic State was also in significant decline. In 2017, the US

34. Countering Violent Extremism Task Force, "Reference Aid: US Foreign Fighters," September 2017, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Foreign%20Fighters_CVE%20Task%20Force_Final.pdf.

35. Isabel Coles and Stephen Kalin, "Iraqi PM Declares Victory over Islamic State in Mosul," Reuters, July 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul/iraqi-pm-declares-victory-over-islamic-state-in-mosul-idUSKBN19V105>.

36. *EU Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL), European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2018* (The Hague: EUROPOL, 2018), 36.

intelligence community indicated “the number of foreign fighters crossing the border from Turkey fell from 2,000 each month [in 2015] to about 50 in September 2016.”³⁷ Turkey seemingly did its part to prevent the further flow of migration into Syria and Iraq and stop foreign fighters attempting to return to their countries of origin. Because the Islamic State faced a series of defeats in Iraq and Syria, the number of foreign fighter returnees was also low in 2017.³⁸ For example, when returnees began to be recorded in Belgium between 2013 and 2015, the numbers indicated the flow of returnees had slowed in 2016 and 2017, when only a few families with children returned.³⁹

The International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL) established a database that continues to keep track of foreign fighter travelers and that has further facilitated states’ efforts to prevent the fighters’ migration from the Islamic State. This database comprises 7,500 records. The number of names and countries of origin in the database continued to rise well into 2017.⁴⁰ Law enforcement agencies in numerous countries have in large part cooperated to contain the threat of foreign fighter returnees via UN

37. Alastair Reed, Johanna Pohl, and Marjolein Jegerings, *The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon* (The Hague: ICCT, June 2017), 4. See also Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters*, 10.

38. EUROPOL, *TE-SAT 2018*, 6.

39. Renard and Coolsaet, “From the Kingdom to the Caliphate,” 21.

40. Renard and Coolsaet, “From the Kingdom to the Caliphate,” 21. See also “INTERPOL Joins Global Coalition to Counter ISIL,” INTERPOL, July 22, 2016, <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2016/INTERPOL-joins-Global-Coalition-to-Counter-ISIL>.

and other internationally sponsored programs. Many states, such as Austria, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, have enacted new laws that prevent foreign fighters from returning by revoking their citizenship, and in a host of other states, returnees from Syria and Iraq are subject to severe criminal penalties.⁴¹

As the caliphate was in its twilight during this era, jihad (holy war) against the unbelievers in the West was increasingly being advocated in its new online magazine Rumiyah. Rumiyah replaced Dabiq (the namesake town of which had been lost) and introduced its Just Terror Tactics series, similar to the Open Source Jihad series in Inspire, the earlier al-Qaeda online magazine. The concept of *hijrah* (emigration) also was broadened in Islamic State propaganda to include the encouragement of relocation to new provinces, such as in the Philippines. Notably, foreign fighter and family inflows and outflows related to Syria and Iraq during the latter part of this era dropped to a trickle as the access points became less permeable. Turkey reportedly deported 3,500 individuals suspected of being foreign fighters in July 2016 and denied entry to another 2,200 over the course of 18 months.⁴² At the same time, the tendency of extremist fighters to stand their ground and die in the defense of the caliphate during this period rather than withdraw from the

41. Human Rights Watch, “‘Foreign Terrorist Fighter’ Laws: Human Rights Rollbacks under UN Security Council Resolution 2178” (white paper, Human Rights Watch, December 2016), 14.

42. Mehra, *Foreign Terrorist Fighters*, 6.

battle or to their home countries also limited battlefield migration levels.⁴³

Postcaliphate

Following the fall of Al-Raqqah in December 2017 and Syria in October and the Iraqi declaration of victory over the Islamic State two months later was a period of strategic and territorial uncertainty for the remnants of the caliphate.⁴⁴ Potential exists for the Islamic State to revert back to its precaliphate condition of the 2013 era in which its remaining fighters (and their families) simply went underground in Syria and Iraq and reverted back to terrorism and insurgency operations.⁴⁵

Another potential is for lateral battlefield migrations to take place either nearby—to reinforce Islamic State groups in Libya, the Sinai Peninsula, or Saudi Arabia—or farther afield in such locales as East Africa, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or the East Indies, where microcaliphates are attempting to emerge.

The third potential, and the greatest concern for the United States and its Western allies, is those extremist fighters originating from the West will migrate back home and take the jihad philosophy to heart by

43. Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *The Challenge of Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives* (New York: Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, March 2018), 3.

44. Maher Chmaytelli and Ahmed Aboulenein, “Iraq Declares Final Victory over Islamic State,” Reuters, December 9, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/iraq-declares-final-victory-over-islamic-state-idUSKBN1E30B9>.

45. For thoughts on this option, see Thomas R. McCabe, “The Islamic State after the Caliphate—Can IS Go Underground?,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 4 (August 2017): 95–101.

standing up operational cells and conducting increased attacks against the countries' civilian populations. Such attacks could take place independently of, or in tandem with, Islamic State lone-wolf attacks. Quite possibly, all three postcaliphate strategic reorientations will initially exist simultaneously. The potential viability of some of these strategic approaches will be dependent on the extremist fighter and familial demographics and the contemporary postcaliphate geopolitical situation in which the Islamic State has now found itself.

Although a fourth potential, Islamic State and al-Qaeda rapprochement, has been discussed in some international security circles, this possibility is not viewed as viable at present. Although affiliate group defection has continued from time to time, the two organizations' ideological perspectives on relations with Shia populations, practices such as beheadings, leadership bound by feudal-like alliance structures down to their chieftains and war leaders, and other issues have increasingly differed. A rapprochement could theoretically take place if the top Islamic State or al-Qaeda leadership were eliminated. In such an instance, all the *bay'ahs* (alliances) holding the organization together would be nullified because they exist at an individual fealty (vassal to lord) level.⁴⁶

The Islamic State has largely been pushed out of large expanses of Syria and Iraq, but, at the same time,

46. For differing perspectives on Islamic State and al-Qaeda relations, see Scott Stewart, "Can the Islamic State and al Qaeda Find Common Ground?," Stratfor Worldview, March 9, 2017, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/can-islamic-state-and-al-qaeda-find-common-ground>; and Bruce Hoffman, "The Coming ISIS-al Qaeda Merger," *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-29/coming-isis-al-qaeda-merger>.

pockets of fighters remain in the two countries, as does the threat of returning foreign fighters. According to the UN's July 2018 report on the Islamic State, the current total number of Islamic State membership in Syria and Iraq is estimated to be between 20,000 and 30,000.⁴⁷ The Department of Defense has not commented on the accuracy of these new numbers, nor has any official provided further estimates. A lot of uncertainty exists, leaving no way to validate the accuracy of these numbers, so they should be considered only generalizations related to present Islamic State fighter strength.

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

To better understand the concerns related to extremist fighter migration coming out of Syria and Iraq, this section provides an overview of the initial inflows of these fighters into the territorial caliphate, outflows to the United States, and lateral transfers to new battlefields, and highlights special issues related to Islamic State women and children. Domestic concerns focusing on Islamic State fighters migrating back to the United States are minimal, with the real concern being that of lateral battlefield transfers to

47. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities*, S/2018/705 (New York: UN Security Council, July 2018), 3, https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2018/705&referer=/english/&Lang=E.

Islamic State provinces as well as very real returning fighter terrorism-based threats to our European allies.⁴⁸

Inflows (Émigrés) to Syria and Iraq

Estimates of the total number of foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria and Iraq since the start of the conflict mostly range between 27,000 and 31,000; other estimates go as high as 40,000.⁴⁹ An International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation report from July 2018 used a dataset from April 2013 and June 2018 from official government sources and figures on foreign fighters, and, in cases where such data was not available, the authors used academic, institutional publications and media reports.⁵⁰ The authors estimate that, over the 5-year period, a total of 41,490 foreign fighters emigrated to the caliphate from 80 different countries. Figure 1 shows estimates of the foreign fighter breakdown by region.⁵¹

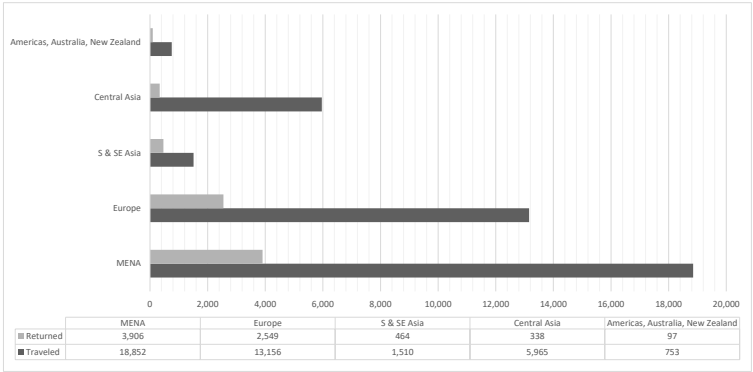
48. Even though this threat to the US homeland — along with foreign national-derived terrorist threats — is relatively minor, it is still considered significant enough that various barrier-to-entry programs have gone into effect. See, for instance, Exec. Order No. 13,769, 82 Fed. Reg. 8977 (Jan. 27, 2017).

49. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq* (Washington, DC: Program on Extremism, February 2018), 5. See also Zack Fellman et al., *Fallout: The Future of Foreign Fighters* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2017), 6.

50. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora'*, 11.

51. All data are estimates derived from Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora'*, 14–15.

Figure 1. Foreign fighters by region, 2013–18



Most foreign fighter travel occurred through Turkey because of its border with Syria and “visa-free travel agreements with more than 69 governments, which limit the requirement for traveler screening.” In addition, “no visas are required for most EU citizens, some of whom are also able to travel on identity cards.”⁵² Other Europeans traveled through the Balkan states, the Caucasus, and then Iran, Russia, or Georgia into Turkey.⁵³ Turkey recorded 53,781 individuals “who were feared to [have attempted] to join the fight in Syria and Iraq” from information provided from 146 states.⁵⁴ Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco are noteworthy because of high numbers of

52. *Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror*, 114th Cong. (2015) (statement of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center).

53. *Countering Violent Islamist Extremism* (statement of Rasmussen).

54. Mustafa Gurbuz, “The Many Complications of Returning Islamic State Fighters,” March 19, 2018, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-many-complications-of-returning-islamic-state-fighters/.

failed attempts by citizens seeking to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Tunisian authorities stopped over 12,000 individuals and placed a further 4,605 Tunisians on the country's watch list. More than 7,000 Saudi Arabians and nearly 3,000 Moroccan citizens were stopped by Turkish security elements.⁵⁵ Thus, although the number of foreign fighters who traveled to the territorial caliphate is significant, the actual numbers could have been even larger.

Outflows (Returnees) to the United States

The number of foreign fighters emigrating to Syria and Iraq from the United States and their potential return are a direct national security concern. Unlike many other countries, the United States has had a relatively low level of Islamic State radicalization and recruitment of its citizens for emigration purposes into the caliphate. Between 5,000 and 7,000 individuals are said to have traveled to Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2016 from Europe alone, mostly from France, Belgium, Germany, and the United Kingdom.⁵⁶ The number of Europeans actually fighting in the conflict zone by late 2017 was estimated to be around 2,500.⁵⁷

The estimated number of foreign fighter-related émigrés from the United States, which is quite low in comparison, ranges from 250 to 300.⁵⁸ According to the Countering Violent Extremism Task Force, "approximately three dozen Americans have died after

55. Gurbuz, "Returning Islamic State Fighters."

56. Fellman et al., *Fallout: The Future of Foreign Fighters*; and Brian Michael Jenkins, "Foreword," in Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., *Travelers*, x.

57. EUROPOL, *TE-SAT 2018*, 26.

58. Jenkins, "Foreword," x.

traveling to partake in this conflict.”⁵⁹ Of the returnees to the United States, some have been arrested and prosecuted, but the status of others remains unknown. The average age of individuals leaving the United States for foreign jihadist fighting purposes was 27. Of the estimated 250–300 such travelers, 86 percent were adult males. Thus far, “44 percent are still at large or their status is publicly unavailable, 19 percent were apprehended in the US or overseas, 34 percent died overseas, and 5 percent returned to the US without facing charges.”⁶⁰ The states with the highest numbers of émigrés were Minnesota, Virginia, and Ohio.⁶¹ See table 2 for a breakdown of North American Islamic State foreign fighter estimates by country (United States and Canada).⁶²

Table 2. North American Islamic State foreign fighter estimates, 2014–17

COUNTRY	TRAVELED	RETURNED / %
United States	272	40/14.71%
Canada	90	17/18.89%
TOTALS	362	57/15.74%

Even if some of the estimated 110–32 Islamic State foreign fighters from the United States who are unaccounted for return home without being apprehended, their intent to engage in terrorist actions is not a certainty. According to a 2017 RAND study, returnees can be categorized into the following

59. Countering Violent Extremism Task Force, “Reference Aid.”

60. Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., *Travelers*, 16.

61. Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., *Travelers*, 5.

62. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’*, 21.

three subgroups: disillusioned, disengaged but not disillusioned, and operational.⁶³

The disillusioned subgroup traveled to the conflict zone in search of “utopia, adventure, and a pure expression of religious identity, but they found something far different.”⁶⁴ This subgroup experienced harsh living conditions with very little food and money, psychological pressure from witnessing the trauma of the conflict, and a general lack of respect from locals. When this subgroup returned to its country of origin, potentially “these individuals [could] mentor other radicalized youth.”⁶⁵

The second subgroup is not as disillusioned as the first; rather, it returned primarily for familial reasons. Although these individuals have grown weary of war and its deprivations, they are “still committed to jihadism.”⁶⁶

The operational subgroup are individuals who want to create their own network of jihadists by recruiting new members to conduct attacks in their home countries to open up new Islamic State battlefields. As indicated by the RAND report, “these individuals are the most dangerous and deadly.”⁶⁷ So when Islamic State foreign fighters return to the United States, the skill sets they possess translate into potentially more lethal attacks. Counterintuitively, however, such returnee foreign fighters being

63. *The Terrorist Diaspora: After the Fall of the Caliphate*, 115th Cong. (2017) (statement of Colin P. Clarke, adjunct senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation).

64. *Terrorist Diaspora*, 5.

65. *Terrorist Diaspora*, 5.

66. *Terrorist Diaspora*, 5.

67. *Terrorist Diaspora*, 5.

involved in a plot or attack also lowers the plot or attack's chances for success:

The presence of a returnee decreases the likelihood that an executed plot will cause mass casualties [based on 1990–2017 data]. . . . Plots carried out with American returnees from Islamist insurgencies abroad also decrease the likelihood that a plot will come to fruition. The presence of a known foreign fighter increases the likelihood of detection and disruption by law enforcement officials.⁶⁸

Given the low numbers of potential Islamic State fighters returning to the United States, that only a percentage of them would be operational, and that they would be monitored by law enforcement, the threat potential for extremist fighter migration is relatively low for the United States. To date, extremist fighter migration is still only a hypothetical threat because no Islamic State returnees have been involved in any such attacks. The closest such an attack has come to taking place was in April 2015 when Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud—an operative of the Al-Nusrah Front to Protect the Levant linked to al-Qaeda who had been sent back to the United States—was arrested while in the planning stages of an attack that was to take place in Texas.⁶⁹ Because of the low numbers

68. Christopher J. Wright, "Sometimes They Come Back: Responding to American Foreign Fighter Returnees and Other Elusive Threats," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 12, no. 1 (April 23, 2018): 1.

69. Jeff Seldin, "Study Finds Minimal Short-Term Threat from US Foreign Fighters," VOA News, February 6, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/george-washington-university-study-on-us-travelers/4240809.html>; and Andrew Welsh Huggins, "Man Apologizes, Sentenced to 22 Years for US Terrorism Plot," *Seattle Times*, January 21, 2018, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/ohio-man-accused-of-plotting-us-attacks-to-be-sentenced/>.

and close monitoring by law enforcement, concerns over an Islamic State terrorist diaspora engaging in attacks domestically are overstated, unlike the threat facing Europe. But if such a veteran Islamic State fighter or a group of fighters could make it back into the United States without being detected, their combat skills would mean they would be able to engage in a terrorist attack far deadlier than that of homegrown extremists who had never traveled overseas to fight for the caliphate. Such returning foreign fighters have explosive and firearm skill sets, as opposed to local extremists who have been exposed to the Islamic State Just Terror Tactics presented in Rumiyah online magazine and who focus more on knife and vehicular attacks.⁷⁰

Outflows (Laterals) to New Battlefields

Although we know the Islamic State strategically seeks to send forces into its immediate and more distant provinces representative of microcaliphate territories, our actual understanding of this dynamic is limited:

While we know that [the Islamic State] has established a presence in Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Egypt, [and] perhaps elsewhere, such as the Philippines, we have only fragmentary information on whether these forces are being reinforced by fighters from Syria and Iraq . . . This is in part because the internal operations and decision-making processes of [the Islamic State] remain opaque,

70. For a discussion of these tactics and attacks linked to them, see Robert J. Bunker and Pamela Ligouri Bunker, *The Islamic State English-Language Online Magazine Rumiyah (Rome): Research Guide, Narrative & Threat Analysis and US Policy Response* (Reston, VA: The Terrorism Research Center, August 2019).

and the status of its leadership and remaining fighters is largely unknown.⁷¹

Still, specific instances of these fighters having engaged in lateral battlefield migration—from Syria, Iraq, and other regions—have been reported:

The [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)] core continues to facilitate the relocation of some of its key operatives to Afghanistan. One Member State reports that foreign terrorist fighters who are nationals of Algeria, France, the Russian Federation, Tunisia and Central Asian States have recently arrived in Afghanistan, and that Abu Qutaiba, the ISIL leader in Salah al-Din Province of Iraq, has reportedly relocated to Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan.⁷²

These strategic shifts had been duly communicated to ISIS-affiliated terrorists and supporters in the region. In recent weeks, online Daesh sympathizers have begun popularizing the terms *Wilayah al-Filibin* and *Wilayah Asia Timur* (Malay: East Asia Province) using them interchangeably. . . . As a result, new groups have formed with the idea that they would have to accommodate foreign fighters into their ranks.⁷³

71. Lorne L. Dawson, *The Demise of the Islamic State and the Fate of Its Western Foreign Fighters: Six Things to Consider* (The Hague: ICCT, June 2018), 2–3.

72. UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 16 July 2018 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” UN Digital Library, July 16, 2018, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3813209?ln=en>.

73. Jasmin Singh and Muhammad Haziq Jani, “ISIS in East Asia: Strategic Shifts and Security Implications,” RSIS Commentary no. 090, May 11, 2017, (italics in original), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/CO17090.pdf>.

By November 2017, after the loss of 95 percent of its caliphate, ISIS still had more than three dozen wilayats, or provinces, on three continents. Some were small. Some were dormant. But all have been deadly. Many fighters fleeing the caliphate were opting to travel to established branches or wilayats in third-countries rather than returning to countries of origin.⁷⁴

It is reported that some foreign fighters who leave Sirte [Libya], on the one hand are heading south to possibly join the group Boko Haram and, on the other hand some are going west to Tunisia.⁷⁵

One of the *wilayat* mentioned above and other regions, “including Libya, the Sinai Peninsula, Afghanistan, Yemen, the Philippines and several regions across Africa,” have the potential to become the new Islamic State headquarters.⁷⁶ If such a contingency were allowed to happen, the Islamic State or a newly updated form of the group would be able to begin to reconstitute itself in a new safe haven for the next phase of the ongoing radical Islamist global insurgency.

Even with the many unknowns related to extremist fighter migration from Syria and Iraq to lateral battlefields, we can accurately state this phenomenon presently represents a far greater level of concern to the global security interests of the United States and

74. “ISIS after the Caliphate,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, updated January 8, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-after-the-caliphate-0>.

75. Claudio Bertolotti, “Islamic State’s Foreign Fighters: There and Back,” *Osservatorio Strategico* 19, no. 1 (2017): 55.

76. Colin P. Clarke, “Where Will ISIS Seek to Establish Its Next Safe Haven?,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/where-will-isis-seek-to-establish-its-next-safe-haven-542967>.

the US Army than Islamic State fighters returning directly to our homeland.⁷⁷ On one hand, we have less than 150 individuals from this threat group who are unaccounted for and who could potentially reenter the United States, with no acts of domestic terrorism by such fighters having been documented in the past. On the other hand, we have thousands of foreign fighters who may potentially seek to bolster Islamic State enclaves throughout various regions of the globe. Although many of these fighters may seek to fight until the end in Syria and Iraq, and others have attempted or will attempt to migrate back to various European and Middle Eastern and North African countries not yet engulfed in Islamic State insurgencies, a substantial portion of these individuals will likely seek to engage in lateral battlefield transfers. The establishment of new Islamic State provinces and the reinforcement of older ones with fresh fighters migrating into them would result in more acts of terrorism as well, enabling the groundwork for new insurgencies to form. New insurgencies would represent a direct threat to US interests and would perhaps require boots on the ground, as has taken place in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and other locales.

The Special Case of Women and Children

About 14 percent of the foreign fighters and family members – 38 individuals – who traveled to Syria and Iraq from the United States were adult females, a small percentage of the estimated 4,761 women who reside

77. For an overview of initial American citizen involvement with the Islamic State, see Robert Pape et al., *The American Face of ISIS: Analysis of ISIS-Related Terrorism in the US, March 2014 – August 2016* (Canberra, Australia: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 2, 2017).

in the caliphate.⁷⁸ Based on overall statistics related to women and girls joining the Islamic State, many of them were led to believe the caliphate would give their lives meaning; others joined for pure excitement. Teenage girls left in hopes of “marrying a ‘warrior.’”⁷⁹ Upon arrival, both single and married women were sent to stay at a “women’s house” until they were married or the husband they traveled with “passed his interrogation and completed his training.”⁸⁰ The age range for women and girls was typically between 16 and 24, but girls as young as 13 were found to be seeking to travel to Islamic State-held areas in Syria after radicalization.⁸¹ Women also traveled to Syria and Iraq to join their husbands “or were motivated by revenge for loss of their husbands or relatives.”⁸² As the conflict progressed and the Islamic State’s propaganda machine strengthened, women and girls “left their homes to marry jihadists, mostly foreign fighters who they had found on the Internet, after being convinced of the need to support the fighters and bear their children to create conditions for the growth and normal functioning of the new proclaimed caliphate, as well as to contribute in women’s traditional roles in

78. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’*, 14, 20.

79. Marije Meines et al., *RAN Manual: Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families* (Amsterdam: Radicalisation Awareness Network Centre of Excellence, July 2017), 21.

80. General Intelligence and Security Service, *Jihadist Women*, 6.

81. Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, “The Western Muhajirat of ISIS,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (April 2015): 499.

82. Peresin and Cervone, “The Western Muhajirat of ISIS,” 499.

jihad, like cooking or being nurses for soldiers.”⁸³ But living conditions were bleak, and, once the women had arrived, leaving was difficult.

Roughly 4 percent of the US émigrés to the caliphate—12 individuals—were identified as minors.⁸⁴ This percentage does not include any new children born in Syria or Iraq to fighter and women émigrés from the United States. Still, these numbers pale in comparison to the 4,640 minors estimated to reside in the caliphate.⁸⁵ The five categories of children residing in the caliphate are

1. those born to foreign fighters;
2. those born to local fighters;
3. those who had been abandoned and found their way into ISIS-controlled orphanages;
4. those coercively taken from their parents; and
5. those who voluntarily joined the Islamic State.⁸⁶

Depending on their location, one can estimate to which category children likely belong. For instance, “the children in training camps tend to be those who have been taken from families or found in orphanages,” and children in Islamic State-controlled schools “tend to be those whose families volunteered them.”⁸⁷ Emigré minors from the United States would likely be part of the first category. As part of the grooming process, Islamic State fighters have

83. Peresin and Cervone, “The Western Muhajirat of ISIS,” 499.

84. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’*, 20.

85. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’*, 14.

86. Mia Bloom, “Cubs of the Caliphate: The Children of ISIS,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 21, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-07-21/cubs-caliphate>.

87. Bloom, “Cubs of the Caliphate.”

encouraged impressionable children to attend public executions. Islamic State propaganda videos have often shown children “pushing through the rows of adults to reach a prime viewing position.”⁸⁸ Such indoctrinated youth become “cubs” and “pearls” of the caliphate.

To be considered a cub of the caliphate, male minors are subjected to training and conditioning by Islamic State standards. At least 2,000 young males are believed to have “undergone military training,” which included “military and combat skills . . . [and] weapons and explosives training . . . and which culminated in the execution of prisoners.”⁸⁹ Physical and psychological conditioning is the Islamic State’s way of normalizing violence and killings. These cubs are groomed to be the future of the Islamic State. This process of socialization is said to be composed of a six-stage process: seduction, schooling, selection, subjugation, specialization, and stationing.⁹⁰ Currently, children of Islamic State fighters are predominantly living in Syrian encampments, either orphaned or with their mothers, and are still being indoctrinated in Islamic State ideology. Girls, known as “pearls,” can marry at age nine under Islamic State law. Girls are brought up to understand Islamic State ideology, “building the Ummah, producing men, and sending them out to the fierceness of battle.”⁹¹ Although neither noncombatant

88. Bloom, “Cubs of the Caliphate.”

89. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’*, 34.

90. John Horgan et al., “From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 7 (2017): 11–12.

91. Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State* (London: Quilliam, March 2016), 45. See also Islamic State, “To Our Sisters: A Jihad without Fighting,” Dabiq, September 9, 2015.

Islamic State women nor children generally pose a direct homeland threat to the United States, they can be viewed in many instances as auxiliaries to Islamic State fighters, especially the cubs of the caliphate, who represent protofighters and are of concern from a lateral battlefield transfer perspective. The ability of cubs to slip through security checkpoints easily as part of refugee groups is a significant concern. Indeed, techniques of faking one's death on social media accounts and losing passports and then claiming to be someone else are common ploys.⁹²

ISLAMIC STATE STRATEGIC OPTIONS

The Islamic State has four strategic options it could presently be pursuing, the last of which represents the most viable long-term strategic future for the group.⁹³ The Islamic State has reverted to the previous version of itself – the ISI writ large as a global insurgency – by developing smaller groups or microcaliphates within fertile regions characterized by porous borders, lack of political capacity, and high levels of governmental corruption. The group's strategic options are explored next.

92. See Anne Speckhard, Adrian Shajkovci, and Ahmet S. Yala, "Following a Military Defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq: What Happens Next after the Military Victory and the Return of Foreign Fighters," *Journal of Terrorism Research* 8, no. 1 (February 2017): 81–89.

93. Additional outcomes and options exist; these outcomes and options are the more probable ones and the most relevant to the issue of extremist fighter migration. See Andrew Byers, "Postscript: Islamic State Futures," in *Hammer of the Caliphate: The Territorial Demise of the Islamic State: A Small Wars Journal Anthology*, ed. Dave Dilegge and Robert J. Bunker (Bloomington, IN: XLIBRIS, April 9, 2018), 443–457.

Strategic Option 1

Reestablish the Caliphate: As with any group after it suffers major losses, the Islamic State still seeks to regain power, which may prove to be an insurmountable task. The group has lost a majority of the finances it used to sustain itself, including revenue from oil fields and taxes, and presently cannot expect any windfalls from war booty. But the Islamic State has been able to hang on “in part because of conflicting priorities among the many local and foreign troops fighting in Syria, which includes Iranian forces patrolling parts of the Syrian Desert and in areas where Russia has conducted airstrikes.”⁹⁴ Nonetheless, US and coalition forces have successfully pushed Islamic State fighters out of both Syria and Iraq, and the fighters who remain are not strong enough to reestablish the caliphate. In May 2018 alone, the United States “conducted 225 air strikes on Islamic State positions—three times as many as in March,” targeting specific positions where pockets of fighters were located.⁹⁵ Given that multiple states are inside the conflict zone and air strikes persist, the Islamic State territorially reconstituting itself would be nearly impossible.

Strategic Option 2

Accept Loss of Territory and Go to Ground: The Islamic State has not conceded defeat with the loss of the caliphate. Maintaining attacks in Iraq and Syria

94. Sune Engel Rasmussen et al., “ISIS Remnants Fight On, Despite US Campaign,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-remnants-fight-on-despite-u-s-campaign-1531147121>.

95. Rasmussen et al., “ISIS Remnants Fight On.”

is enough for the group to signal that it is still functioning—albeit as a wounded political-religious entity. The Islamic State’s smaller groups operating across the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia are enough to convince the international community the group has not necessarily lost territorial influence or control in various regions. Furthermore, the Islamic State’s online propaganda outlet, the Amaq News Agency, continues to operate out of eastern Syria, although in a weakened capacity.⁹⁶ Additionally, the Islamic State may still have hidden weapons and other munitions in Syria and Iraq that US and coalition forces have not yet unearthed. In Iraq, the Islamic State maintains a presence through sleeper cells, with fighters hiding in the desert regions of Al Anbar; the Ghadaf Valley; and al-Hussainiyah, west of Ar Rutbah.⁹⁷ Down to only 2 percent of its former lands in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State has increased hit-and-run attacks and suicide bombings as it has shifted to a postterritorial reality. Currently, too many armed units—backed by devastating airpower and precision-strike resources—have been deployed by too many foes in these areas of operations for Islamic State formations to hold ground effectively.

Strategic Option 3

Jihad against the West (and Russia): This strategic option could be considered by returnees or individuals radicalized at home who have the desire to launch attacks from within the Western country in which they reside. Individuals who have fought on the Syrian-Iraqi battlefield and have managed to return home

96. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 5.

97. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 7.

successfully without arrest are capable of launching internal attacks. For example, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the alleged leader of the November 2015 Paris attacks, returned from a visit to Syria and recruited a network of radicalized individuals in support of this operation.⁹⁸ Fighters already in Syria and Iraq from Western countries are also able to recruit and guide others online to “commit attacks in Western countries without even returning home.”⁹⁹ As such, multiple homegrown attacks across Europe and even the United States have been conducted by individuals who have been radicalized online without having ever visited the conflict zone. Maintaining the Islamic State’s propaganda at some level is necessary to continue the proselytization of sympathizers abroad who may eventually launch attacks from their home countries. Providing homegrown extremists with veteran leadership via foreign fighter repatriation represents a dangerous combination.

Strategic Option 4

Create Microcaliphates (Global Insurgency): The Islamic State appears to be gravitating toward this strategic option. This option promotes the creation of regional microcaliphates within a global insurgency strategy. Such microcaliphates are bound together by allegiances between feudal war leaders. The organization now represents a shifting hierarchical and network-based entity with mixtures of directives (direct control) and influence activities (indirect control). This global Islamic State strategic approach subsumes strategic option 2 (localized insurgency

98. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 7.

99. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 7.

focused within Syria and Iraq) and draws upon strategic option 3 (jihad in the form of terrorism directed against the West) as a supporting substrategy. The Islamic State has developed a substantial network of affiliate groups outside of Syria and Iraq in parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, and Afghanistan. This branching out suggests the Islamic State has fully readjusted its strategy from territorial state expansion and is reverting to its roots as an insurgency, though now fully on a macro level. This shift in strategic focus is more in line with ongoing al-Qaeda strategies. This shift in strategy will likely make al-Qaeda's strategic efforts redundant and may bring the two groups closer to one another—though this is unlikely, given the animosity between their respective leaderships.

The Islamic State's weekly newsletter, *Al-Naba*, "hinted at a major change of strategy in a series of articles published between September and October 2017 on the topic of dealing with the US air campaign," and in an October 12, 2017 issue, the group suggested it "had again been forced to switch to insurgency tactics like in the spring of 2008," referring to the ISI.¹⁰⁰ Hit-and-run attacks predominantly in Iraq and increased suicide attacks in Syria are indicative of this reversion.¹⁰¹ Next is an overview of the geographic

100. Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 11 (December 2017): 5–6.

101. Hassan, "Insurgents Again," 6.

disposition of these regional microcaliphates and their estimated strength (see table 3).¹⁰²

Table 3. Islamic State global disposition of fighters

Regional Group	State(s)	Fighters (Estimated)
Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); Postterritorial Caliphate	Syria, Iraq	20,000–30,000 (Both; July 2018) 15,500–17,100 (Iraq; February 2018) 13,100–14,500 (Syria; February 2018)
Islamic State in Sinai; Formerly Ansar Beit al-Maqdis	Sinai region of Egypt	1,000–1,500 (August 2018)
Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP); Boko Haram components	Nigeria (Lake Chad area), Chad, Niger, Cameroon	3,500 (April 2018)
Islamic State in the Greater Sahara	Mali–Niger Border Region	400 (July 2018)
Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in Libya	Libya	3,000–4,000 (July 2018 est.)
Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan (IS-K)	Areas of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan	1,000–2,000 (Afghanistan; December 2017)
Islamic State in the Philippines (IS-P); Abu Sayyaf components	Philippines	200 (April 2018 est.)

102. Although other, lesser Islamic State regional groups exist—such as those found in East Africa, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, and Indonesia—they are viewed as not being of sufficient strength to be able to presently engage in insurgency operations. Since this research has been conducted, some new works related to Islamic State foreign fighters and their estimated numbers have appeared. These works include Daniel Byman, *Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019); Sam Mullins, *Jihadist Infiltration of Migrant Flows to Europe: Perpetrators, Modus Operandi and Policy Implications* (New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2019); and Elena Pokalova, *Returning Islamist Foreign Fighters: Threats and Challenges to the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Regional Data

Middle East: Iraq, Syria, and Egypt

Since 2014, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve has worked in conjunction with coalition partners to fight the Islamic State threat in Syria and Iraq. For the second quarter of 2018, the goal of the Operation Inherent Resolve campaign was to “prevent ISIS from being able to hold key terrain and influence major population centers, field forces that can challenge the [Iraqi Security Forces] and coalition, build external support networks, or expand influence through information operations.”¹⁰³

According to the August 2018 lead inspector general report on Operation Inherent Resolve, violence in Iraq declined in all but three provinces: Kirkuk, Diyala, and Salah ad Din, all of which experienced increased attacks along the “green line” that runs along territory claimed by both the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government.¹⁰⁴ Reports from the UN estimate the number of Islamic State fighters to be between 20,000 and 30,000, split almost evenly between Iraq and Syria. The August 2018 lead inspector general report agreed, estimating between 15,500 and 17,100 Islamic State fighters remain in Iraq.¹⁰⁵ The Department of Defense also estimated between 13,100 and 14,500 Islamic State fighters are in Syria, of which 4,000 to 6,000 remain in the US

103. Glenn A. Fine, *Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress: Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines: April 1, 2018 – June 30, 2018* (Washington, DC: Office of Inspector General, DoD, August 6, 2018), 18.

104. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 3.

105. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 3.

military's areas of operation in northeastern Syria.¹⁰⁶ But US operations against the Islamic State were put on hold following the killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, on January 2, 2020. Efforts transitioned to force protection in anticipation of Iranian retaliation. Since the defeat of the physical caliphate, the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the naming of new leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, the Islamic State's capabilities have not been significantly degraded.¹⁰⁷

In Egypt, the Islamic State in Sinai was previously known as "Ansar Beit al-Maqdis," which began as an insurgent group in early 2011 during the Arab Spring, shortly after Hosni Mubarak's overthrow.¹⁰⁸ In November 2014, the group changed its name to Islamic State in Sinai when its leader's pledge to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was accepted within three days. The group has launched a series of attacks in the region, "most notably claiming credit for the October 2015 downing of Russian Metrojet Flight 9268, which killed all 224 passengers and crew members."¹⁰⁹ The Islamic State in Sinai is estimated to have 1,000 to 1,500 fighters.¹¹⁰

106. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 42.

107. Glenn A. Fine, *Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress: Operation Inherent Resolve: October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019* (Washington, DC: Office of Inspector General, DoD, January 31, 2020).

108. Jason Warner and Charlotte Hulme, "The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells across the Continent," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 7 (August 2018): 23.

109. Warner and Hulme, "The Islamic State in Africa," 23.

110. Warner and Hulme, "The Islamic State in Africa," 23.

Africa

Data on Islamic State fighters in Africa is limited. Though not overtly engaged militarily in Africa, the United States is directly working with partner nations to prevent the Islamic State and other jihadist cells from forming, as well as pushing against cells currently in operation with ongoing drone and other surgical strikes.¹¹¹ In June 2018, Brett McGurk, former special presidential envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, said the United States and African partner states will work as a “coalition to close facilitation networks and transit routes running through Libya, Sudan, and the Maghreb.”¹¹² McGurk noted Islamic State affiliates had “sprung from groups previously affiliated with al-Qaeda, and other similar extremist organizations.”¹¹³ Although the United States is working indirectly, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper has already cut over 1,000 personnel from United

111. Special Forces teams have been deployed, and the United States is in the process of building a drone base in Nigeria. See Eric Schmitt, “A Shadowy War’s Newest Front: A Drone Base Rising from Saharan Dust,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/22/us/politics/drone-base-niger.html>.

112. Brett McGurk, “Remarks at the Political Director’s Meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS” (speech, Political Director’s Meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Skhirat, Morocco, June 26, 2018), <https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-the-political-directors-meeting-of-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-2/>.

113. McGurk, “Remarks at the Political Director’s Meeting.”

States Africa Command posts, leaving about 6,000 troops and civilians in Niger, Somalia, and Djibouti.¹¹⁴

The most notable group affiliated with the Islamic State is Boko Haram. In March 2015, Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, which acknowledged the pledge a few days later. This new group became known as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which operates in the Chad Basin region. But tensions flared between the two groups by August 2016 over ISWAP's leadership.¹¹⁵ Shekau was replaced with Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of Muhammed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram. Barnawi is the current leader of ISWAP, and Boko Haram officially rebranded as ISWAP during the transition.¹¹⁶ In April 2018, the DoD estimated ISWAP consisted of about 3,500 fighters, and the group is believed to be the largest affiliate in terms of fighters and territory, operating in the Lake Chad region of Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.¹¹⁷

The Islamic State Algeria Province started strongly but quickly collapsed. The group was formed in September 2014 by Abdelmalek Gouri, a former high-ranking al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib member. The Islamic State Algeria Province became known

114. Michael M. Phillips, "US Weighs Troop Cuts in Africa, Leaving Allies to Confront Growing Militant Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-weighs-troop-cuts-in-africa-leaving-allies-to-confront-growing-militant-threat-11584291493>.

115. Warner and Hulme, "The Islamic State in Africa," 22.

116. Warner and Hulme, "The Islamic State in Africa," 22.

117. Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, R43612 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, September 25, 2018), 18, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43612.pdf>; and McGurk, "Remarks at the Political Director's Meeting."

internationally after it kidnapped and beheaded French hiker Hervé Gourdel as retribution for French air strikes in Iraq.¹¹⁸ But Gouri had been killed by the end of 2015, and the majority of the group's members were soon either arrested or killed.¹¹⁹ The Islamic State Algeria Province was successful in recruiting al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib members and has launched attacks in Jijel, Constantine, Tiaret, and the outskirts of Algiers, Skikda, and Annaba. But the group is no longer believed to be much of a threat, with strength estimates of less than 25 fighters.¹²⁰

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, led by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, formed in May 2015. Sahraoui was a senior al-Qaeda affiliate leader, but his pledge to the Islamic State was not acknowledged until October 2016. The group operates on the border between Mali and Niger and is known primarily for its October 2017 attack in Tongo Tongo that claimed the lives of four US servicemembers and five Nigerians. As of July 2018, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara was estimated to have a little over 400 fighters.¹²¹

Libya continues to struggle with the remnants of the Islamic State. Islamic State cells first emerged in Darnah in April 2014 “when a band of just 300 fighters—many of whom had returned from fighting in Syria—returned to Libya and allied with members

118. Warner and Hulme, “The Islamic State in Africa,” 22.

119. International Crisis Group, *How the Islamic State Rose, Fell, and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb*, Middle East and North Africa Report no. 178 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 24, 2017), 22.

120. Warner and Hulme, “The Islamic State in Africa,” 22.

121. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 24.

of pre-existing jihadi groups.”¹²² The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in Libya was officially recognized in November 2014, and three branches were established in the Libyan regions Cyrenaica, Fezzan, and Tripolitania, with a total of about 500 fighters.¹²³ By June 2015, the group had lost Darnah to al-Qaeda affiliates, but the group subsequently gained the city of Sirte. In mid-2016, the CIA estimated the Libya branch had between 5,000 and 8,000 fighters.¹²⁴ Currently, the Islamic State has somewhat of a presence in Libya, “abetted by the fluid security situation, some tribal support and coordination with other terrorist groups when expedient.”¹²⁵ Specifically, cells are controlled around “Tripoli, Misrata and Sabratah in the west, with a substantial presence in southern Libya around Ghat and Al Uwainat, and Ajdabiya and Darnah in the east.”¹²⁶ The group is still able to launch attacks from the country with asymmetric tactics and the use of improvised explosive devices. Present estimates range between 3,000 and 4,000 fighters across Libya, with the group’s central command located in the

122. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 23–24. See also Hasan Morajea and Erin Cunningham, “Libyan Gains May Offer ISIS a Base for New Attacks,” *Washington Post*, June 6, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-libyas-civil-war-the-islamic-state-shows-itself-as-the-main-threat/2015/06/06/65766592-0879-11e5-951e-8e15090d64ae_story.html.

123. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 23–24.

124. Julian Hattem, “CIA: Undaunted ISIS is Expanding, Focused on Attacking West,” *Hill*, June 16, 2016, <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/283763-cia-says-undaunted-isis-is-expanding-focused-on-attacking-west>.

125. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 7.

126. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 7.

“triangle between Bani Walid, southern Sirte and Jufrah district.”¹²⁷

Afghanistan

The Islamic State established a group in Khorasan Province, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (IS-K), which covers parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Formally established on January 10, 2015, IS-K became the target of the Afghan Taliban as a competing jihadist group. Experts credit the group’s development to defections from smaller groups across Afghanistan and Pakistan. The group’s numbers increased as fighters fled Syria and Iraq and some Afghan Taliban defectors joined. In addition, some fighters from other militant groups, such as Pakistan’s al-Qaeda-aligned Tehreek-e-Khilafat and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, also joined.

The Islamic State enhanced its propaganda efforts in Khorasan Province, particularly from Kabul to Jalalabad and Peshawar. Afghanistan’s Nangarhar Province had the greatest number of battles between IS-K and the Afghan Taliban. The group claimed multiple districts in which it had forced the Taliban to retreat. The Islamic State affiliate has largely been an intrusion and has impeded the Taliban’s effort to attack US and Afghan forces. These actions have represented a double-edged sword for the United States because the Taliban represents a direct threat to governance in Afghanistan, and the Islamic State is a greater global concern. Current estimates indicate between 1,000 and 2,000 Islamic State fighters are in Afghanistan and are continuing campaigns to further expand into the northeastern part of the country, where the group is

127. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Second Report*, 10.

currently active in the Jowzjan and Sar-e Pul Provinces and Kandahar.¹²⁸ The fighter estimates for IS-K are rather small compared to estimates of the Islamic State's presence in Syria and Iraq, but IS-K is a prime example of the Islamic State successfully carrying out attacks and preserving its brand.

Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has no official Islamic State branch or province, but multiple attacks have occurred across the region since 2014, most notably the 2017 Marawi siege (also known as the Battle of Marawi) in the Philippines. A 2017 Combating Terrorism Center report stated Islamic State attacks in the region occurred "primarily in Malaysia (41%), Indonesia (36%), the Philippines (17%), and Singapore (6%)," with the majority of attacks occurring in the Philippines (50 percent) and Indonesia (45 percent).¹²⁹

The most recognizable Islamic State affiliate in the region is the Islamic State in the Philippines (IS-P), established in July 2014. Officials from the Department of Defense, however, believe the IS-P is weak because of its poor command and control and a lack of funding from ISIS, which has been unable to support the group since October 2017.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, the Marawi siege left a significant number of individuals displaced, and sympathizers could potentially develop sleeper cells.

128. Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and US Policy*, RL 30588 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2017), 20.

129. Marielle Ness, "Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity outside the Group's Defined Wilayat (Southeast Asia)," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 6 (June/July 2017): 2-3.

130. Ness, "Beyond the Caliphate," 14.

United States Indo-Pacific Command officials estimate the IS-P's total force strength is approximately 200 fighters from different radical Islamist factions.¹³¹

Analysis

Although some extremist fighters have managed to return to their countries of origin, others will remain, which is likely because of their inability to flee Syria or Iraq. A third category is the lateral transfer of foreign fighters to other battlefields; however, no hard data exists concerning such transfers. The overall concern is returnees have some combat experience, which they may use to commit acts of terrorism if they reach home. Returnees who serve as influencers can recruit others to launch attacks at home and radicalize more potential members. For instance, nine EU states reported a total of 205 foiled, failed, and completed terrorist attacks in 2017.¹³² The United Kingdom experienced the highest number of incidents—either foiled, failed, or completed—at 107, followed by 54 in France, 16 in Spain, and 14 in Italy.¹³³ Although jihadi-based attacks only represented a fraction of these incidents, these types of attacks more than doubled from 2016 to 2017, and they tended to have more media impact.

The number of women and children returnees is even more difficult to estimate, especially because of the uncertainty of the nationality of children born in the conflict zone. Many children were also exposed to extreme violence and may even have been involved in the fighting as cubs of the caliphate, making them

131. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 108.

132. EUROPOL, *TE-SAT 2018*, 9.

133. EUROPOL, *TE-SAT 2018*, 9.

more dangerous. The involvement of children further complicates the manner in which states will process their returnees, or whether states will even consider taking the returnees back.

Multiple countries have prevented foreign fighters from returning home, limiting the spread of fighters and the establishment of cells. For example, Morocco has well-guarded borders—particularly in the Western Sahara—and has deployed military and law enforcement since 2014 to locations the country believes could potentially be vulnerable.¹³⁴ Algeria has also been successful staying ahead of the Islamic State threat with the use of military and other security enforcements, including cybersecurity. In other countries, US and coalition forces help by providing continued air strikes or by assisting a state's forces. According to the latest numbers released by the US military under Operation Inherent Resolve, the coalition has conducted 24,566 air strikes across the conflict zone to degrade the Islamic State and flush out remaining fighters.¹³⁵

Other forms of assistance include designating groups as foreign terrorist organizations, which helps other countries target the Islamic State. The IS-P has been unable to regain strength since 2017.¹³⁶ In February 2018, the US Department of State designated the IS-P as a foreign terrorist organization, followed by a US Department of the Treasury sanction against an IS-P financier in April 2018. Moreover, the United

134. International Crisis Group, *How the Islamic State Rose*, 24.

135. Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Muhammad Al-'Ubaydi, "Burying the Lede: The Islamic State Downsizes?," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (website), July 20, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/burying-lede-islamic-state-downsizes/>.

136. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 46.

States' overseas contingency operation, known as Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines, supports the Armed Forces of the Philippines in fighting Islamic State sympathizers and the IS-P in the country. Since September 2017, Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines has been supporting "the Philippine government and military in their efforts to isolate, degrade, and defeat ISIS affiliates and other terrorist organizations in the Philippines."¹³⁷

In certain parts of Africa and the Middle East, the Islamic State is maintaining its operational tempo; this return to insurgency tactics is a viable means of establishing smaller groups in vulnerable areas. See table 4 for continued attacks by the Islamic State as of July 2018.¹³⁸

137. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 102.

138. All country information in table 4 is from "Crisis Watch: July 2018," International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/july-2018>. A note on Boko Haram: Whether the attacks were perpetrated by the pro-Barnawi faction (ISWAP) or the pro-Shekau faction, which continues to support Islamic State Central, is uncertain.

Table 4. Continued attacks by Islamic State as of July 2018

Country	Situation as of July 2018
Libya	The Islamic State and other armed groups continue attacks on civilians, especially in southern Libya. The Islamic State weekly newspaper, <i>Al-Naba</i> , reported on July 6, 2018, the Islamic State captured two air force officers in the Fezzan region. On July 7, 2018, at a Tazirbu water plant, suspected militants killed two workers and kidnapped two others. Islamic State affiliates killed two policemen in Al 'Uqaylah on July 24, 2018.
Egypt	Islamic State attacks continue in the Sinai Peninsula, even as two Islamic State commanders reportedly surrendered to security forces in Rafah in early July 2018. On July 3, 2018, the military stated three suspected Islamic State militants had been killed in North Sinai. On July 11, 2018, forces killed 11 Islamic State militants during a raid in Al 'Arish and 13 others on July 24, 2018.
Chad	Boko Haram militants attacked a village near the Niger border on July 19, 2018, killing 18 and kidnapping 10 women.
Niger	Suspected Boko Haram militants continue attacks in the Diffa region in the southeast. The militants attacked a military position on July 1, 2018, in Bla Brin village in the Lake Chad area, killing six soldiers. Militants attacked another military post in Baroua village on July 19–20, 2018, near the Nigerian border.
Nigeria	Islamic State West Africa Province Boko Haram continued attacks on military and civilians in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. In Borno, militants ambushed an army convoy near Bama on July 13, 2018. Militants killed six traders at Mussini village on July 17, 2018; at least 27 near Gajibo village on July 18, 2018; at least 7 in a suicide attack at a Konduga mosque on July 23, 2018; and at least 13 in an attack on military in Jakana on July 26, 2018. In Yobe, militants attacked a military base in Jilli on July 14, 2018. In Adamawa, militants killed five civilians in Luru on July 10, 2018.
Iraq	Islamic State attacks continue in Kirkuk, Diyala, and Salah ad Din Provinces.
Syria	Islamic State militants continue to carry out suicide bombings. Multiple suicide bombings were reported on July 25, 2018, in government-held As-Suwayda city and against progovernment forces and civilians in nearby villages, killing at least 200.

The future migration potential of fighters is difficult to assess. Estimates could include fighters, family members of deceased fighters, or sympathizers who have little to no combat experience.¹³⁹ According to the 2018 lead inspector general report, the Islamic State “has not yet identified as an insurgency but rather continued to see itself as a state with a standing army.”¹⁴⁰ The Islamic State is conserving forces “for an insurgency that the Department of Defense predicted would stretch across the desert in eastern Syria and western Iraq, terrain that is well suited as a base for guerilla warfare.”¹⁴¹ The group will have to “rely on rural and desert insurgency in addition to urban warfare to recruit members and ‘lay the groundwork for a comeback.’”¹⁴² As of mid-2018, the Islamic State has control of little territory in Syria; that which the group does control is concentrated in “eastern Syria, the Middle Euphrates River Valley, and rural areas of southern Hasakah Province, as well as a third pocket in the Yarmuk Basin in Dar’a Province south of Damascus.”¹⁴³ As General Joseph F. Dunford stated in October 2017, the Islamic State is trying to “leverage local insurgencies now to rebrand themselves” and to maintain relevance.¹⁴⁴ The Islamic State is achieving this effect in places like Libya, Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula,

139. Jeff Seldin, “Far from Dead: Tens of Thousands of IS Fighters Linger in Iraq, Syria.” VOA News, August 13, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/far-from-dead-tens-of-thousands-of-is-fighters-linger-in-iraq-syria/4527452.html>.

140. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 46.

141. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 46.

142. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 46.

143. Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 45–46.

144. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., “CHOD Conference Press Briefing” (speech, Chiefs of Defense Conference, Fort Belvoir, VA, October 24, 2017).

and other parts of Africa. Migration patterns are indicative of Islamic State fighters dispersing to areas in which they can operate more freely, but the patterns do not indicate a large number of fighters has flowed out of Iraq and Syria.¹⁴⁵

COUNTERBATTLEFIELD MIGRATION POLICY RESPONSE

Battlefield migration response policies necessitate that the foreign fighter threat be placed in context. The datasets highlighted in the demographic overview have a great degree of uncertainty because of the use of different methodologies and both official and unofficial statements. For instance, in 2015, the then-director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Nicholas Rasmussen, stated “more than 20,000 foreign fighters” have traveled to Syria “from over 90 different countries,” and “at least 3,400 of these fighters are from Western countries.”¹⁴⁶ In June 2016, then-director of the CIA John Brennan told the Senate Intelligence Committee in a rare public hearing the total Islamic State fighting force was between 18,000 and 22,000, which is lower than it was in 2015, when it had as many as 33,000.¹⁴⁷ The estimate of confirmed Islamic State deaths further complicates the interpretation of the available data. In July 2017, then-commander of United States Special Operations Command General

145. Dunford, “CHOD Conference Press Briefing.”

146. *Countering Violent Islamist Extremism* (statement of Rasmussen).

147. Patricia Zengerle and Jonathan Landay, “CIA Director Says Islamic State Still Serious Threat,” Reuters, June 16, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-fighters/cia-director-says-islamic-state-still-serious-threat-idUSKCN0Z21ST>.

Raymond Thomas stated at a security forum, in reference to the US and coalition forces, “we have killed in conservative estimates 60,000 to 70,000 of [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s] followers.”¹⁴⁸ Assuming the estimate is accurate and includes kills that have occurred since the establishment of the caliphate in 2014, the number of total Islamic State fighters is potentially higher than the numbers that have been reported because the CIA indicated up to 22,000 fighters had left by June 2016. July and August 2018 reports by the UN and the lead inspector general, respectively, claim the number of Islamic State fighters has remained somewhat similar to the numbers presented in previous reports – which presumably also include foreign fighters.

Some of the specific issues related to the discrepancies, gaps, and inconsistencies inherent in these datasets and estimates are the following.

- The July 2017 figure of 60,000–70,000 Islamic State fighters killed is potentially more than twice the total estimated Islamic State fighting force at its 2015 height of 33,000.¹⁴⁹
- The Islamic State had lost 98 percent of the territorial caliphate by the spring of 2018, but is estimated to have 20,000–30,000 (possibly even 31,100) members, which is roughly 60 percent

148. Raymond A. Thomas, “SOCOM: Policing the World,” Aspen Security Forum 2017, July 21, 2017, transcript, https://aspensecurityforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/SOCOM_Policing-the-World.pdf.

149. Thomas, “SOCOM: Policing the World”; and Zengerle and Landay, “CIA Director Says.”

to 94 percent of the estimated 2015 force during its height.¹⁵⁰

- Foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) estimated to have traveled to the caliphate range from 27,000–31,000, and possibly up to 41,490.¹⁵¹ Even when the estimated 7,366 fighters and familial members who have returned to their countries of origin are factored in, 19,646 to 34,136 of the estimated 2015 force equivalence of 33,000 are foreign fighters.¹⁵² These figures suggest between 0 and 13,354 Islamic State fighters come from Syria and Iraq, though the numbers do not factor in post-2015 Islamic State fighter attrition rates vis-à-vis later inflows. The zero amount is of course an impossibility, showing the wide inconsistencies in the estimates that exist when checked against one another in an attempt to understand the larger extremist fighter dynamics taking place.
- No reliable data or estimates exist of the numbers of Islamic State fighters recruited internally from Syria and Iraq.
- No reliable data or estimates exist of lateral battlefield migration by Islamic State extremist fighters from the Syrian-Iraqi battlefield.

150. Islamic State membership in this estimate is only partially fighter-based—the percentages of fighters and nonfighters are not specified. Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters*, 2; UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 16 July 2018”; Fine, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, 3, 9; and Zengerle and Landay, “CIA Director Says.”

151. The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters*, 3; and Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’*, 14.

152. Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’*, 15; and Zengerle and Landay, “CIA Director Says.”

These issues suggest policy responses related to counterbattlefield migration are presently decoupled from many of the extremist fighter demographic estimates. Although certain datasets and estimates may be accurate, the ones that are accurate and the ones that are not are unknown.

The Extremist Fighter Threat in Context

Three conditionals exist that allow us to better place the extremist fighter and familial-member threat in the context of core US security interests. These conditionals are the type of extremists of concern, their commitment to the cause of the Islamic State, and their geographical location. These conditionals and the severity of the threat—indicated using a color system in which red means “dangerous,” yellow means “increased warning,” and green means “baseline concern”—are representative of the underlying potential for violent extremist action to take place.¹⁵³ The conditionals and severities are as follows.

153. Issues of nonviolent extremism are also of great importance, but they remain subordinate to concerns related to violent extremism. Still, issues of nonviolent extremism are being increasingly addressed and even viewed in some instances as precursors to violent extremism. For background on initial perceptions related to nonviolent extremism thinking and public policy focused on radical Islamists in the United Kingdom, see Theresa May, *Counter-Extremism Strategy*, Command Paper 9148 (London: Home Office, October 2015); and Theresa May, *Forward, Together: The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2017* (London: The Conservative and Unionist Party, 2017), quoted in Daniel Kirkpatrick, “Why Criminalising Non-violent Extremism Won’t Prevent Terrorism,” *The Conversation*, June 13, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/why-criminalising-non-violent-extremism-wont-prevent-terrorism-78973>.

- *Extremist Type*: Islamic State personnel residing in Syria and Iraq can be categorized primarily within three categories: fighters (who are primarily adult males), cubs, and wives and other women who are of childbearing age. Fighters are considered dangerous (red), cubs exist at the warning level (yellow), and wives are considered benign (green) from a violent extremist perspective. As a note, not all adult males are fighters. The Islamic State—like any large terrorist or insurgent organization—requires administrative personnel to properly function. Fighters engage in violent extremism while these other personnel—including most fighter wives—facilitate violent extremism, rather than actually engaging in it. These support personnel and leaders, however, cannot be considered as solely engaging in nonviolent extremism because they are accomplices to and managers of violent extremism. A description of the personnel’s characteristics with caveats can be viewed in table 5.¹⁵⁴ The conclusions shown in the table are from a combat and violence perspective. Exceptions exist where women are armed or engage in suicide bombings because approximately one in nine women who migrated to join the caliphate may be classified as Islamic State fighters. But, more often, women engage in propaganda, recruitment, indoctrination, and materiel-support activities.
- *Commitment*: Extremist fighters and their family members over time have varying levels of commitment to the Islamic State cause. The most severe level, red, is reserved for those who are

154. Adapted from Meines et al., *RAN Manual*, 6.

considered operational in nature. These personnel actively engage in terrorist and insurgent activities, which makes them the most dangerous in their commitment levels. The yellow level in the commitment scale is composed of individuals who have disengaged from jihad and become inactive. Within this zone are foreign fighters who have returned home to seek better living conditions for themselves and their families after having been subjected to the deprivations of living in Syria and Iraq.¹⁵⁵ These extremists continue to support Islamic State tenants and represent potential sleeper units if allowed to migrate back to the West. So, these extremists are still of concern because they remain radicalized and may at some point reengage in Islamic State activities. The green level of commitment pertains to extremists who have become disillusioned with or even remorseful about the ideologies and policies of the Islamic State and have begun the process of, or are at least receptive to, deradicalization. These individuals have essentially sidelined themselves from the war the Islamic State is waging, and, for this reason, are considered at the baseline concern level or potentially lower. These personnel may even prove to be useful tools in the deradicalization of others.

- *Location:* Extremist fighters remaining within the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields represent the present baseline for US and Western allied security interests and are considered a lesser threat to the US homeland. The fighters and their families who have laterally shifted battlefields – as

155. Meines et al., *RAN Manual*, 7.

long as they do not enter American, European, and other Western homelands – are categorized at a warning level of concern. Finally, fighters and their affiliates who have returned to the United States or other Western country of origin or who have infiltrated these countries exist at the most dangerous threat level because, at a minimum, terrorist attack potential now exists.

Synthesizing these three factors—extremist type, commitment, and location—provides a continuum of threats, from the severe (red) to the baseline warning (green), with a sequence of blended combinations residing in the middle of this continuum (see table 6).

Table 5. Foreign fighter and familial extremists

Fighters (Primarily Males)	Cubs (Young Males)	Wives (Females)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High risk of combat experience and skills • Often involved in and exposed to war atrocities • Variety of roles within the terrorist-held territories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intense ideological indoctrination through education and socialization • Recruited for combat and other violent activities from age nine • Severely traumatized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family role and mother to future soldiers • Driven by sense of empowerment and their role in building the caliphate • Involved in the recruitment and indoctrination of children and others
Combatants	Quasicombatants	Noncombatants
Red (dangerous)	Yellow (warning)	Green (concern)

Though outside the scope of this research, the middle-range, blended combinations—such as cubs (yellow), operational (red), lateral battlefields (yellow)—may provide modeling preference utility

for global counter-FTF activities related to recent UN Security Council resolution 2395 (2017) and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe reverse-flow focuses.¹⁵⁶

Table 6. Foreign fighter and familial extremist threat continuum

Fighters (red)	Wives (green)
Operational (red)	Disillusioned (green)
US-Western battlefields (red)	Iraq-Syria battlefields (green)
Severe threat	Baseline threat

156. The programs focused on foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) build upon UN Security Council resolution 2178 (2014), which criminalizes FTF-related activities in all states acceding to the resolution. Rex Tillerson, “On the Adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2396 on Foreign Terrorist Fighters” (speech, US Department of State, Washington, DC, December 21, 2017); Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “2018 OSCE-Wide Counter-Terrorism Conference: The Reverse Flow of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs): Challenges for OSCE Area and Beyond” (white paper, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, May 10–11, 2018); and Matteo Pugliese, “The OSCE Counter-Terrorism Conference: The Reverse Flow of Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” June 12, 2018, <https://eeradicalization.com/the-osce-counter-terrorism-conference-the-reverse-flow-of-foreign-terrorist-fighters/>. For background, see “Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” UN, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/foreign-terrorist-fighters/>; UN Security Council, Resolution 2395, Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts – CTED Mandate Renewal, S/RES/2395 (December 21, 2017), <https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2395%20%282017%29>; and UN Security Council, Resolution 2396, Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts – Foreign Terrorist Fighters, S/RES/2396 (December 21, 2017), [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396(2017)).

Policy Response

Derived from the above threat context, the counterextremist migration policy response should first and foremost focus on the male fighters, and then be scalable enough to also include their cubs, and then their wives. Early pubescent females—pearls—have no combat training regime equivalent to the cubs of the caliphate. At best, pearls undergo Islamic State indoctrination and, over time, have had increasing commitment levels. This relative lack of commitment means pearls should be considered less of a threat than wives (who generally function as noncombatants/support personnel) and placed with very young (pre-cub) males, (pre-pearl) females, and infants, all of whom exist in a protected category under international law.

Though conditional variations will of course exist, such as operational (red) cubs (yellow) being considered more dangerous than disillusioned (green) fighters (red), these classifications are not necessarily a priori in nature, nor can they be easily determined from observation alone.

Additionally, in formulating counterextremist migration policies, two levels of targeting should be undertaken: one applied toward the extremists themselves and the other applied against the Islamic State organization's command and control and network influence capabilities. As a component of these policies, their potential for second-order effects needs to be considered. The policy responses proposed need to be weighed against the broader context of US foreign policies focused on Syria and Iraq and UN programs meant to globally address contemporary FTF flows, as well as recommendations related to more

strategically focused US Joint Force considerations. The countermigration policies proposed as well as their broader US and UN policy interfaces and impacts are reviewed next.

Extremist-Focused Response Policies

These response policies should be considered additive in nature. The policies are intended to complement each other, with each policy meant to facilitate the elimination of a threat component of the demographic set of extremist fighters and their families. In a sense, the policies follow a “render safe” approach to mitigating the foreign fighter threat by using elimination, containment, and related end states to ensure Islamic State personnel remain in the Syrian and Iraqi theater of conflict—or, if they eventually are able to migrate, have been deradicalized before they do so. These policy responses are as follows.

- **Target and Kill in Place:** This response is the currently preferred Western policy and is specifically focused on foreign fighters who are active combatants. Armed cubs and wives (as well as single females) who possess deadly force capabilities are also legitimate targets within these rules-of-engagement protocols. Attacks using precision-airdropped munitions, missile strikes, and artillery fires are dominant means of attack, but close-combat operations can and

do take place.¹⁵⁷ Well over 20,000 close-combat attacks (defined as strikes and engagements) have taken place in Syria and Iraq over the last few years as Western coalition forces have targeted and destroyed Islamic State forces.¹⁵⁸ *Second-order effects*: Fighters killed in battle achieve martyrdom within the radical Islamist mythos, and are thus considered by Allah as worthy of the highest blessings of paradise. Although small numbers of martyrs created within a radical Islamist organization provide morale benefits, large-scale fighter elimination likely has the opposite effect. The danger of this form of targeting is the collateral damage stemming from indiscriminate attacks and resulting in the injury and deaths of innocent bystanders. Though one enemy may be killed, many other new enemies are potentially created from the families of those mistakenly targeted.

- **Capture of Surrendering Personnel and Hors de Combat**: Islamic State personnel who have surrendered to US and coalition forces or who have been captured after being rendered incapable of armed resistance (*hors de combat*) are representative of another policy

157. As mentioned earlier, an even more precise targeting schema has been adopted by the French government. See Tamer El-Ghobashy, Maria Abi-Habib, and Benoit Faucon, "France's Special Forces Hunt French Militants Fighting for Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/frances-special-forces-hunt-french-militants-fighting-for-islamic-state-1496090116>.

158. An analysis of these attacks during a three-month period at the end of 2017—October through December—can be found in Matt Begert, "CENTCOM Targeting of the Islamic State," in *Hammer of the Caliphate*, xxvii–xxxii.

approach. A recent report from July 2018 states US-allied Syrian Democratic Forces have detained almost 600 FTFs.¹⁵⁹ Jihadi wives and cubs are also frequently captured in both Syria and Iraq. *Second-order effects*: Unlike the closure brought about by killing Islamic State fighters, this policy approach is viewed as transitory in nature—such captured enemy combatants cannot remain prisoners indefinitely. Indeed, a Guantánamo Bay-type detention facility, where terrorist detainees are held in an ongoing state of legal limbo, would not be politically feasible for the United States to establish in Syria or Iraq—nor should it be considered. Imprisonment is a waypoint to trial and sentencing, which results in acquittal, prison sentencing, execution, or repatriation into the hands of security and police services in the individual’s country of origin. Many of these Islamic State detainees have been deprived of their citizenship and rendered stateless and are thus banned from being repatriated to their countries of origin or to the countries in which they had been residing.

- **Deradicalize Fighters and Their Families:** Foreign Islamic State members who have been

159. These fighters are from over 40 countries, with about 40 fighters from Russia and about a dozen from Germany and France. Ryan Browne, “US-Backed Syrians Holding Nearly 600 Foreign Fighters,” CNN, July 18, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/18/politics/syrian-allies-foreign-terrorists/index.html>. Total Islamic State fighter detainees may be as high as 1,000 in Syria and 10,000 in Iraq. See UN Security Council, *Seventh Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat*, S/2018/770 (New York: UN Security Council, August 16, 2018), 3.

detained after being captured or sentenced and imprisoned represent fixed audiences that can be targeted for deradicalization. Different deradicalization protocols and approaches will be required for interfacing with fighters, their wives, and their cubs. Consideration should also be given to focusing psychological operations on remaining Islamic State field force remnants—similarly representing fixed audiences because they reside in geographically limited enclaves—to begin the deradicalization process or induce them to surrender. Besides neutralizing the threat of extremists engaging in violence, some former Islamic State personnel who are more secular in their ideological leanings, such as former Saddam Hussein regime officers, may be induced to become collaborators against their former comrades-in-arms by means of payments or other inducements. The deradicalization of fully indoctrinated Salafi-jihadists—Islamic State true believers and apocalyptic cultists—is a long and involved process and may not be achievable in many instances. For example, deprogrammers who are deradicalizing Salafi-jihadists cannot exist too far down the radicalization continuum from where these individuals reside; otherwise, the deprogrammers will have no ideological or religious legitimacy in the eyes of their subjects. *Second-order effects:* Implementing this strategy has pitfalls related to Islamic cultural sensitivity issues, the matter of who would implement the strategy in various regions of Syria and Iraq, and different interpretations of traditional Sunni behaviors and perspectives and their degree of extremism.

- **Physically Inhibit the Movement of Remaining Forces:** Islamic State personnel still in the field should be isolated and channeled into increasingly smaller geographic areas. The intent is to create rings of containment around the personnel—initially by means of US and allied fires and encircling coalition forces—so they are unable to escape the remaining enclaves within which they are operating. This strategy also serves to fix the personnel in time and space, which further allows them to either be targeted and killed in place or captured and detained. Containment rings established farther outside of the enclaves in which the Islamic State members are trapped are used as security checkpoints for identification purposes so fleeing members can be arrested. Technology is quickly advancing to the point where automated facial-recognition systems can be loaded with Islamic State social media imagery (pictures and videos) to create datasets that may allow for Islamic State personnel identification at checkpoints. Nevertheless, for the time being, security checkpoints should be supported by biometric and facial recognition technologies to facilitate the capture of better-known Islamic State members. Inhibiting Islamic State financial support and moneymaking opportunities would also further serve to curtail the migration of extremist fighters. *Second-order effects:* Few downsides exist to following this policy; however, the appropriate Islamic State personnel countermove would be to fall back, go to ground by breaking into smaller and smaller groupings, and merge into local refugee flows or find refuge in safe

houses. At this point, the Islamic State fighter threat begins to become more of a law enforcement matter.¹⁶⁰ Unfortunately, such a physical cordon creates black-market opportunities for human traffickers. Safe passage into Turkey has been quoted as costing \$20,000–30,000 for senior Islamic State operatives. Also, one trafficker boasted he had smuggled 50 Syrian and foreign Islamic State fighters, often dressed like women to bypass border patrols, into Turkey.¹⁶¹

- **Psychologically Deter Outflow from Syria and Iraq:** In addition to creating physical impediments to Islamic State personnel movement within Syria and Iraq, the psychological component of the extremists seeking to leave the territorial ruins of the caliphate—either laterally to another battlefield or to their countries of origin—should be targeted. This strategy would require psychological operations to create a deterrent to travel in the minds of Islamic State members by convincing them conditions in locations they seek to migrate to are even more inhospitable than their present circumstances. But, from an implementation perspective, so many countries of origin exist that focusing this message at specific nationals would be difficult, as would getting the message to them in the first place. For this reason, the message should

160. Greg Myre, “Where Did the IS Fighters Go?,” NPR, January 1, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/01/01/574967338/where-did-the-islamic-state-fighters-go>.

161. Eric Schmitt, “Thousands of ISIS Fighters Flee in Syria, Many to Fight Another Day,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/world/middleeast/isis-syria-al-qaeda.html>.

be tailored to nationals whose countries of origin are in North America, Europe, and other Western regions. *Second-order effects*: Amateurish attempts at such focused propaganda could have the opposite effect, or, if the program is successful, could drive more extremists into Syrian regions controlled by the Assad regime where more Islamic State safe havens exist.

Organization-Focused Response Policies

In addition to the policies discussed above, the larger Islamic State organization should be targeted with countermigration policies involving direct and indirect control functions. (A debate existed at one point on the centralized versus decentralized organizational components of al-Qaeda, with Bruce Hoffman advocating the importance of al-Qaeda Central and Marc Sageman advocating a leaderless and networked perspective.)¹⁶² The countermigration policies would focus on the following.

- **Disrupting Hierarchical Command and Control:** The Islamic State command-and-control element is centralized and traditional in nature, like a hierarchical, industrial-age

162. See Elaine Sciolino and Eric Schmitt, "A Not Very Private Feud over Terrorism," *New York Times*, June 8, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/weekinreview/08sciolino.html>. Both perspectives are accurate, with one form of organizational structure dominating during some time frames and in some locales and the other form dominating during and in others.

organization.¹⁶³ This structure was particularly evident after the caliphate was established in mid-2014, with its headquarters in Al-Raqqah, Syria. This Islamic State direct-control capability—while a legacy—still functions to some extent, even with the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and while other senior leadership remain at large. Targeting and disrupting this command-and-control capability is required to help degrade the organization's ability to order extremist fighter lateral battlefield migration from Syria-Iraq to other regions. *Second-order effects*: Further Islamic State devolution into a more networked entity is the expected result of this policy. Although this policy would not end Islamic State terrorist and insurgency threats in various regions of the world, it would eliminate the group's capacity to reconstitute a territorial caliphate and direct centralized attacks as a projection of power to other regions of the globe, as al-Qaeda undertook in the 9/11 attack upon the United States via its safe haven in Afghanistan, then under Taliban rule.

- **Disrupting Network Influence:** The other component of Islamic State command and control is network-based and indicative of flatter twenty-first-century organizations that have increased information flows and quicker reaction and decision cycles than traditional entities.

163. Examples of the centralized organizational plan can be seen in the Islamic State primary documents analyzed in Christoph Reuter, "Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State," Spiegel International, April 18, 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html>.

Instead of direct-control oversight of the tasking of Islamic State personnel, this component is related to influencing network and individual nodal behaviors. Islamic State networks reside on numerous social media platforms and applications, so achieving influence capability is required across numerous cyberspace venues to reach extended elements of the Islamic State collective.¹⁶⁴ Engagement in this domain would require a cross-platform and cross-application social media counternarrative campaign. This campaign—conducted in multiple languages, with an emphasis on English, French, and German—would be directed at Islamic State attempts to influence members of its affinity grouping in Syria and Iraq to engage in lateral emigration across globally dispersed battlefields or jihad within Western states. Technologies that may be used for such a campaign include specialized software offering an “online persona management service,” with which one US servicemember could control up to 10 online social media identities on the Web.¹⁶⁵ *Second-order effects*: This policy would further serve to devolve the Islamic State—specifically its cyber caliphate component—into numerous weak and fragmented voices, instead of allowing it to

164. For instance, a network view of the Islamic State Facebook collective can be found in Gregory Waters and Robert Postings, *Spiders of the Caliphate: Mapping the Islamic State's Global Support Network on Facebook* (New York: Counter Extremism Project, May 2018).

165. See Nick Fielding and Ian Cobain, “Revealed: US Spy Operation That Manipulates Social Media,” *Guardian*, March 17, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/mar/17/us-spy-operation-social-networks>.

be unified by means of more encompassing narratives. One way to potentially achieve such an end state would be to flood the multiple social media venues used by the Islamic State network with competing and contradictory messages. For example, advanced generative bots that can write 20,000 lines of online text a second would be ideal for such a mission.¹⁶⁶

Higher-Level US Foreign Policies toward Syria and Iraq

The proposed countermigration policies directed at Islamic State members — fighters, cubs, and wives — cannot be conducted within a foreign policy void vis-à-vis US security interests in Syria and Iraq. The policies must be deconflicted with, and would ideally complement and support, US policies directed toward the present geopolitical realities of those states. The proposed foreign policy guidance is as follows.

- **Continued Limited Cooperation with Authoritarian Regimes:** One of the coordination issues related to countermigration policies in Syria and Iraq is competing — and even hostile — entities, such as the various foreign state and nonstate coalitions, each of which has a certain percentage of the extremist fighter and familial demographic set residing within its operational areas of control. Given that Islamic State narratives and actions have elevated the group to the unenviable position of being the enemy of all — even to its former allies al-Qaeda

166. See Douglas Haven, “The World’s Most Prolific Writer is a Chinese Algorithm,” BBC News, August 29, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20180829-the-worlds-most-prolific-writer-is-a-chinese-algorithm>.

and affiliates of al-Qaeda—some form of ongoing deconfliction and limited targeting cooperation with “the enemies of our enemies” to further ensure extremist fighters cannot migrate out of the region and ultimately can either be eliminated or captured in theater should be sustained. (The “enemy of all” statement may be contested in that Islamic State funding—at least in the past—is alleged to have come from donors in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and, in many instances, Turkey has engaged in questionable policies toward the Islamic State.)¹⁶⁷ The fact that, as these cooperative activities are taking place, each individual entity and coalition is jockeying to maximize its own relative position against each other should not be forgotten. Also, ethically and legally, the United States cannot engage in any form of cooperative efforts, even limited ones, with authoritarian regimes if, by doing so, war crimes or other atrocities may result.

- **Containment of Iranian and Russian Influence in Syria:** Such containment would look to balance against both Iran and Russia, while ensuring the Islamic State threat is still firmly addressed. This policy would include “detering Iranian forces and militias from pushing close

167. See, for instance, Martin Williams, “FactCheck Q&A: Is Saudi Arabia Funding ISIS?,” 4 News, June 7, 2017, <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-qa-is-saudi-arabia-funding-isis>; “Fighting, While Funding, Extremists,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-qatar-isis-terrorism.html>; and Ahmet S. Yayla and Colin P. Clarke, “Response: Turkey’s Double ISIS Standard,” *Foreign Policy*, April 12, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/12/turkeys-double-isis-standard/>.

to the Israeli border, disrupting Iranian lines of communication through Syria, preventing substantial military escalation between Israel and Iran, and weakening Shia proxy forces,” as well as “detering further Russian expansion in the Middle East from Syrian territory and raising the costs—including political costs—of Russian operations in Syria.”¹⁶⁸ At the same time, this approach recognizes the requirement to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State or the rise of another jihadist group such as al-Qaeda or its affiliate, the Al-Nusrah Front.¹⁶⁹ The current perception is the Syrian civil war has de facto been won by the Assad regime because it has not been defeated. The regime is now in the process of regaining many of its former territories following the resumption of its despotic, dynastic rule, which is grudgingly preferred—by the United States and its coalition—to Islamic State suzerainty. Although liberal-democratic control of all Syrian territories is ideal, this end state is not presently achievable with Russian forces on the ground protecting their client state.

- **Mitigation of the Effects of Iraqi Fragmentation:** The state of Iraq is increasingly devolving into three sectarian zones, with the Shia population clustered from the center toward the east, the Sunni population clustered from the center toward the west, and the Kurds concentrated within the northwestern region. This devolution has been exacerbated by Shia domination of the political process for the

168. Seth G. Jones, *Developing a Containment Strategy in Syria* (Washington, DC: CSIS, May 2018).

169. Jones, *Developing a Containment Strategy*.

branch's own self-interests, Kurdish empowerment due to increasing autonomy related to the group's militarization and territorial gains, and Sunni population linkages to the Islamic State—especially via former personnel of the Assad regime. State fragmentation in Iraq would create new institutional voids in the state within which the Islamic State could begin to reconstitute itself. Although the United States should attempt to shape the Iraqi political landscape, it only has a limited capacity and will to do so. Prudence suggests the United States should continue to back the Kurds via the presently existing patron-client relationship while attempting to interface with and cultivate the support of the nonradicalized Sunni populations. Attempting to influence the Shia populations has been and will continue to be difficult, even more so now that Iranian influence is extremely well entrenched. Whether pressing the Iraqi Shia leadership to offer concrete political and economic goods to address Sunni concerns and feelings of governmental alienation can at this point be realistically achieved is unknown. If the fragmentation of Iraq should someday come to pass, the Islamic State should not be allowed to fill the security voids in the geographic seams between the three competing sectarian elements of that nation.

Counter-Foreign Terrorist Fighter Programs

The UN counter-FTF programs seek to stop the flow of FTFs into states—typically at states' borders (though also via international aviation

security-screening standards). The US Army War College KSIL tasking focuses primarily on stopping the outflow of Islamic State extremist fighters (and their cubs and wives) from Syria and Iraq.¹⁷⁰ The counter-FTF programs and the KSIL tasking can and should be thought of as front- and back-end policy approaches to an important international security concern. Extremist countermigration policy coordination and deconfliction issues related to the FTF programs are as follows.

- **Countermigration Policy Interfaces and Overlaps:** Policy and implementation seams and overlaps will exist between the proposed front-end policies and the preexisting back-end programs that are geographic in nature (those taking place in Syria and Iraq vis-à-vis a multitude of internally focused initiatives) and that differ in terms of the national authorities and regional coalitions participating in them. The front-end policies are military-focused ones set in foreign operational environments. The back-end programs are security services and law enforcement ones set in domestic environments. Liaison will thus be required between United States Central Command and the appropriate UN bodies—composed of various directorates, working groups, and teams in coordination with the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, which is composed of 38 international

170. The 2014 counter-FTF implementation plan includes FTFs from the Islamic State, the Al-Nusrah Front, and other al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. Given the far larger numbers of Islamic State FTFs (and their familial dependents), the KSIL tasking has an increased focus on the members of this terrorist organization, though the tasking could also be applicable to the Al-Nusrah Front and other al-Qaeda affiliates.

entities — to ensure these efforts work in concert with one another.¹⁷¹ Specific functional areas of countermigration policy related to coordination and deconfliction include deradicalizing, physically inhibiting travel, targeting Islamic State financial support and moneymaking opportunities, psychologically deterring migration, reintegrating into society captured personnel who have been released or who have served their prison sentences (especially if they are stateless), and disrupting direct (hierarchical) and indirect (network) organizational control.¹⁷²

Joint Force Recommendations

The US Joint Force has four specific recommendations related to extremist fighter migration and the inherent threat potential that results from such migration. These recommendations are based on both higher-level, strategic, and complementary considerations. The recommendations are as follows.

- **Review and Validate Datasets and Estimates:**
The discrepancies, gaps, and inconsistencies

171. See “The Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF),” UN Victims of Terrorism Support Portal, <https://www.un.org/victimsofterrorism/en/about/ctitf>.

172. For thoughts on Islamic State financial trajectories, see Patrick B. Johnston and Colin P. Clarke, “Can the Islamic State Survive Financially?,” *Lawfare*, May 14, 2017, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/can-islamic-state-survive-financially>. One component of Islamic State financial targeting is now being coordinated by means of the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center. See US Department of the Treasury, “US and Saudi Arabia to Co-Chair New Terrorist Financing Targeting Center,” May 21, 2017, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0092.aspx>.

encountered when researching the Islamic State and foreign extremist fighters are causing immense levels of confusion. Individual datasets and estimate information appear valid; however, when they are cross-checked, the integrity of the numbers quickly becomes dubious because of contradictions and discrepancies between them. Information voids exist with no reliable numbers or estimates available related to Islamic State fighters recruited in Syria and Iraq or lateral battlefield migration out of the former lands of the caliphate. A comprehensive review of the datasets and estimates related to Islamic State foreign and extremist fighters is recommended—as well as the filling in of information voids—so baseline numbers can be generated and validated in support of Joint Force activities to avoid wasting resources in unproductive areas.

- **Islamic State Expansion into New Provinces:** The demise of the territorial caliphate has resulted in multiple strategic options—or countermoves—being available to the Islamic State. The group foresaw the need for such strategic countermoves once it entered the caliphate's decline-and-fall era by August 2016, if not prior. The new dominant strategy the group is following is that of microcaliphate creation as a component of a greater global insurgency. Islamic State COAs related to the development and expansion of the new provinces—representative of these microcaliphates—should be analyzed by the Joint Force. Such analysis would include future lateral battlefield migration options once the new provinces and the most likely COAs

had been established. These activities should be studied in depth by means of gaming, simulation, and strategic red teaming efforts.

- **The Demise of the Territorial Caliphate:** Al-Qaeda, just like the Islamic State, is being subjected to the second- and third-order effects resulting from the demise of the territorial caliphate. New pressures on al-Qaeda will present themselves, as will new opportunities for the group. One line of thought is al-Qaeda and its affiliates have greatly benefited from the military attention of the United States and its allies on the Islamic State. As an outcome, al-Qaeda has replenished its ranks, with some 32,200 to 44,200 extremist fighters now globally deployed—a larger estimated force than that presently possessed by the Islamic State. Indeed, according to Bruce Hoffman, “ISIS can no longer compete with al-Qaeda in terms of influence, reach, manpower, or cohesion.”¹⁷³ On the other hand, the Islamic State has now become a direct global-insurgency competitor to al-Qaeda in its new strategic manifestation. These circumstances beg the questions: Over time, will the Islamic State take over more and more of the radical Islamist (Sunni) global insurgent market from al-Qaeda? Will al-Qaeda be able to dominate this niche area successfully? Or will some sort of equilibrium be reached, with a dual organizational insurgency ensuing? The Joint Force should also engage in al-Qaeda postcaliphate COA analysis by means of gaming, simulation, and strategic red teaming efforts.

173. Bruce Hoffman, “Al-Qaeda’s Resurrection,” March 6, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>.

- **Update the Unified Command Plan (UCP):** The UCP is “a classified executive branch document prepared by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and reviewed and updated every two years that assigns missions; planning, training, and operational responsibilities; and geographic areas of responsibilities to [combatant commands].”¹⁷⁴ The components of the UCP that strategically coordinate counter-Islamic State and counter-al-Qaeda efforts across the geographic and functional combatant commands should be updated now that a postterritorial caliphate exists.¹⁷⁵ The update would benefit from the three Joint Force recommendations previously discussed. Further, all-of-government counterterrorism considerations must be better aligned with the UCP, the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States, and the subordinate National Strategy for Counterterrorism released in October 2018.¹⁷⁶ Of concern is the radical Islamist threat has morphed over the course of roughly two decades from a singular al-Qaeda global

174. Andrew Feickert, *The Unified Command Plan and Combatant Commands: Background and Issues for Congress*, R 42077 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 17, 2012). See also “Unified Commands, CENTCOM & Components,” United States Central Command, <http://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/COMPONENT-COMMANDS/>.

175. Feickert, *Unified Command Plan*; and “Unified Commands, CENTCOM & Components.”

176. See Donald J. Trump, *A New National Security Strategy for a New Era* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017); and Donald J. Trump, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2018).

organizational threat into a contemporary, dual, al-Qaeda and Islamic State global organizational threat. Although describing this situation as “one Hydra head getting hacked off and two growing in its place” may be premature, victory over the radical Islamist threat remains virtually elusive. This problem should at least cause some strategic reflection—and, possibly, reevaluation—on the part of the United States, given that it, now 19 years beyond 9/11, is \$2.8 trillion deeper in national debt as a result of its response to the attacks.¹⁷⁷

177. Aaron Mehta, “Here’s How Much the US Has Spent Fighting Terrorism Since 9/11,” *Defense News*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2018/05/16/heres-how-much-the-us-has-spent-fighting-terrorism-since-911/>.

A POLICY RESPONSE TO ISLAMIC STATE EXTREMIST FIGHTER BATTLEFIELD MIGRATION

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