

A POLICY RESPONSE TO ISLAMIC STATE EXTREMIST FIGHTER BATTLEFIELD MIGRATION

Robert J. Bunker
Alma Keshavarz

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 tasking—would further benefit US policy responses as well as the activities of counterforeign terrorist fighter programs.

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