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*United States Marine Corps
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Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**The Danger of Ignoring Emerging Threats: How to Combat Syria's Foreign Fighter
Transnational Threat**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**Major Claudia E.P. Crossland
United States Army**

AY 14-15

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Date: 30 April 2015

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Executive Summary

Title: The Danger of Ignoring Emerging Threats: How to Combat Syria's Foreign Fighter Transnational Threat

Author: Major Claudia Crossland, United States Army

Thesis: To oppose the foreign fighter threat, the United States should lead the establishment of a permanent law enforcement foreign fighter task force. The task force would serve as a key component to support existing goals to defeat violent extremism, while supporting objectives outlined in the 2015 National Security Strategy.

Discussion: The Western foreign fighter threat is not new. Since 2001, this threat to US national security has ebbed and flowed, as it has for numerous countries worldwide. Examples of foreign fighter plots against the United States and other Western targets include the shoe bomber in 2001, the 2004 Madrid train bombing, the London Underground bombing in 2005, and the 2009 underwear bomber. These are the kinds of radicalized foreign fighters, with the willingness and skills to carry out individually inspired attacks, which Western authorities must contain and prevent from returning to their home countries. Most observers consider foreign fighters primarily as a threat to their home countries to which they return after gaining extensive combat experience. Applying systems theory to the problem, however, reveals that the ability to recruit foreign fighters forms the Clausewitzian center of gravity for violent extremist organizations. Therefore, the best way to defeat these violent extremists is to disrupt the foreign fighter system upon which they are so dependent. The foreign fighter task force would combine law enforcement, intelligence, and military components, with law enforcement taking the lead. The mission for the center would be to coordinate multinational efforts to gain a better understanding of the foreign fighter system and to ultimately defeat that system. The task force has the potential to provide coordinated assistance in numerous areas, to include the restriction of external funding and essential logistical support that help to sustain the foreign fighters system and their objectives. US SOF and the US intelligence community have extensive experience operating together as task forces in support of multinational operations, including in Afghanistan and Iraq, and know how to best establish and organize such a task force. Key objectives of the task force would include unifying information operations, building partner security force capacity, providing actionable intelligence, increasing law enforcement agency coordination, and educating and reintegrating would-be and known foreign fighters into their home countries.

Conclusion: The threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters to the United States and its partners can be defeated, but only through the task force's enduring and coordinated multinational effort. The task force would allow for a whole of government multinational approach to degrade foreign fighter flow, and contribute greatly to the defeat of DAISH. The greatest metrics for success of the task force would include the preservation of sovereign borders near terrorist areas of operation, as well as the containment and degradation of terrorist organizations and insurgencies dependent on foreign fighter support.

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Preface

I decided to conduct this research on the emerging foreign fighter threat following my previous assignment at the United States Army Special Operations Command. I was fortunate to serve as a J3 in the Levant region from late 2012 to early 2013 where my unit closely monitored the increasing turmoil threatening Syria and the surrounding region. Amongst the many dangers my unit tracked was the unprecedented flow of foreign fighters from all over Africa and especially from Europe and even the United States. During key leader engagements with senior counterterrorism interagency leaders, my commander always drove home the significance of the rising foreign fighter threat to US national security. Although acknowledged, his appeals seemed to matter little until June 2014 when DAISH shocked the world with its takeover of major Iraqi cities and its declaration of an Islamic State, events made possible by the unrestricted flow of foreign fighters. It is my hope that this paper will serve to further enlighten the interagency community.

I would like to acknowledge retired Lieutenant General James Dubik, PhD, from the Institute for the Study of War, who took the time out of his busy schedule to discuss my thesis proposal. It was LTG (R) Dubik who inspired me to write about the need for a permanent foreign fighter center. I would also like to thank those who reviewed my paper and guided me through the process, in particular Professor Doug Streusand; Mr. Ken Cassine, the FBI Chairman; and LTC Carl Morris, the Special Operations Chairman. Most importantly, I must thank my silent and always professional warrior, Harper, without whom this research would never have been put to paper. He was always willing to hear my ideas and never afraid to tell me what was good and what was just plain wrong. Thank you, Harper!

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Introduction

The Syrian Uprising has resulted in more than one hundred thousand civilian deaths and nine million displaced persons since March 2011.¹ These figures are shocking enough, but their destabilizing regional effects are further exacerbated by the arrival of more than twenty thousand radicalized foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq.² In September 2014, President Barack Obama warned the United Nations Security Council of the global threat posed by these foreign terrorist fighters, recognizing that “as we’ve already seen in several cases, they may try to return to their home countries to carry out deadly attacks.”³ It takes only one terrorist to cause tremendous havoc and to compromise US national security; therefore, mitigation is critical. To oppose the foreign fighter threat, the United States should lead the establishment of a permanent law enforcement foreign fighter task force. The task force would serve as a key component to support existing goals to defeat violent extremism, while supporting objectives outlined in the 2015 National Security Strategy.

The Western foreign fighter threat is not new. Since 2001, this threat to US national security has ebbed and flowed, as it has for numerous countries worldwide. Examples of foreign fighter plots against the United States and other Western targets include the shoe bomber in 2001, the 2004 Madrid train bombing, the London Underground bombing in 2005, and the 2009 underwear bomber. In 2014, a man from Florida launched a suicide attack in Syria, and it was a British man who savagely beheaded two American journalists in retaliation for American airstrikes in Iraq. These are the kinds of radicalized foreign fighters, with the willingness and skills to carry out individually inspired attacks, which Western authorities must contain or prevent from returning to their home countries. Retired Lieutenant General James Dubik, the former I Corps commander who oversaw the training of Iraqi security forces from 2007-2008,

describes the foreign fighter problem as “an enduring threat that operates in a space between war and crime,” and therefore, “it requires an understanding of a larger strategy to deal with al-Qa’ida and its offshoots.”⁴ Most observers consider foreign fighters primarily as a threat to their home countries to which they return after gaining extensive combat experience. Applying systems theory to the problem, however, reveals that the ability to recruit foreign fighters forms the Clausewitzian center of gravity for violent extremist organizations. Therefore, the best way to defeat these violent extremists is to disrupt the foreign fighter system upon which they are so dependent.

No single country has the scope of understanding or the organizational capacity to counter the threat on its own. Even the United States lacks the vast resources required to address this transnational problem. Therefore, the solution to the foreign fighter threat requires a unity of effort amongst the United States and its partner nations. Unity of effort requires the sharing of a mutual understanding of the situation.⁵ Through unity of effort, such as in the form of a task force, partner nations can synchronize information in order to have strategic effects against known threats. Task forces are traditionally established to provide a coordinated operational framework for sharing and reporting information, for taking action on specific interests, and to integrate civil and military components.

The US National Security Strategy (NSS) of February 2015 states that America’s leadership in the international community “will remain essential to disrupting the unprecedented flow of foreign terrorist fighters to and from conflict zones.”⁶ However, Washington continues to consider options on how to best counter the threat, including how to handle the return of fighters with US passports. The NSS goes on to state that the United States will act lawfully and that “outside of areas of active hostilities, we endeavor to detain, interrogate, and prosecute

terrorists through law enforcement.”⁷ To meet these objectives, the United States should commit to a long term strategy that includes the establishment of a foreign fighter task force with law enforcement leading the effort.

The goal of the task force would be to disrupt the foreign fighter system in order to ultimately defeat DAISH. Member nations would come from NATO, the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia, and other areas seeking to eradicate the destabilizing transnational threats resulting from foreign terrorist fighters. The multinational task force would connect expertise from organizations such as the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); intelligence agencies; border, immigration and customs agencies; special operations forces; and other interagency partners.

An objective of the NSS includes, “leading over 60 partners in a global campaign to degrade and ultimately defeat [DAISH] in Iraq and Syria, including by working to disrupt the flow of foreign fighters to those countries, while keeping pressure on al-Qa’ida.”⁸ Because violent extremists have a unique set of metrics for battlefield success, and a unique concept of victory, the United States and partner nations must have an offensive campaign that is also unique to meet the threat. For the enemy, victory is determined by the reestablishment of the caliphate. The fundamental difference compared to how nation-states measure success stems from the Westphalian national security model, whereby sovereign nation-states provide professional standing military forces and law enforcement services for their citizens to maintain constitutional order. Non-state actors, who do not recognize sovereignty or the concept of nation-states, do not follow the Westphalian model.⁹ Therefore, while this national security model works for conventional warfare, it does not apply easily when combating irregular or non-state actors such as the Sunni extremists known by the Arabic acronym DAISH, also referred to

as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) by the US government. A solution such as the foreign fighter task force, would more effectively incorporate current law enforcement practices, while allowing for flexibility and variations on how best to address the fundamental ideological difference, the difference between obeying the law of man versus the law of God (Allah).

As Syria and Iraq became safe havens for foreign terrorist fighters, Washington's reluctance to commit US forces to Syria stagnated the development of any long term strategy to counter the emerging regional threat. Washington initially chose to oppose the Syrian government through the United Nations and through international partners. However, due to the blocking of resolutions by member nations such as Russia and China, the United Nations has not made progress towards stopping the tragic war or its catastrophic international effects. Perhaps the greatest victory for the international community and the Syrian people was the Syrian regime's compliance in allowing Russia to remove its chemical weapons through UN Resolution 2118.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the foreign fighter threat continued to grow. The United States instituted a strict no boots on the ground policy for Syria that prohibited any US military presence, including low visibility special operations such as operational preparation of the environment (OPE) or advance force operations (AFO) prior to any operations. By June 2014, the bloodshed in Syria had officially spilled over into neighboring Iraq where DAISH made fierce progress seizing control of major cities including Mosul. The Department of Defense and Washington, lacking a strategy and tangible situational awareness due to the no boots on the ground policy, found themselves scrambling to implement plans to protect US regional security interests.

The Syrian Uprising and the Rise of the Islamic State

The ongoing Syrian Uprising began in the spring of 2011 with the peaceful wave of protests known as the Arab Spring. In Syria, the protests quickly turned violent as President Bashar al-Assad's government and military forces attacked the protesters and soon began to target Syria's majority Sunni population. The rapid import of foreign fighters into Syria helped fuel the opposition's struggle against al-Assad and his regime. Similar to Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria became a safe haven for violent extremists, including al-Qa'ida and especially DAISH who has its roots in al-Qa'ida in Iraq.¹¹ By June 2014, the war had spread into neighboring Iraq with DAISH declaring itself the Islamic State. It took control of major cities and threatened to topple Baghdad's weakened government. After a three and a half year absence, the US military found itself back on Iraqi soil defending the people and their fragile government from DAISH elements.

The threat DAISH presents to the global community has grown with its self-proclamation as the Islamic State, and its blatant disregard for and violations of international borders and state sovereignty. DAISH has legitimized itself to the radical Islamic community by accomplishing what al-Qa'ida's core considered a long term goal: DAISH proclaimed the reestablishment of the caliphate. It seized swaths of oil rich territory larger than Great Britain that stretches from Syria to Iraq, and is controlled under strict Islamic law. The IS looks very much like a quasi-state, becoming the richest non-state threat group in modern history, and has even surpassed al-Qa'ida's growth.¹² The draw for impassioned extremists to travel to the region and join the so-called IS has become increasingly attractive. As a result, the flow of foreign fighters to the region has continued at a staggering rate. The more than 20,000 foreign fighters who have already flocked to Syria and Iraq has exceeded the number of jihadists who traveled to

Afghanistan to fight against the Soviets in the 1980s, making Syria and Iraq the largest foreign fighter destination in history.¹³ Therefore, the defeat of DAISH is in the interest of all states who intend to preserve their sovereignty against violent extremism. In order to protect states against the increasing threat, terrorist organizations such as DAISH must be dealt a severe blow, to include blocking the flow of foreign fighters in and out of Syria and Iraq.

Center of Gravity Analysis

The following center of gravity analysis demonstrates the importance of creating a coordinated effort to destroy the foreign fighter network as a key component of the overarching strategy to ultimately destroy violent extremism. The center of gravity at the strategic level often includes leaders and the population. For the terrorist organizations operating out of Syria and Iraq, the center of gravity is their followers, such as the members of DAISH. The followers are the recruited foreign fighters who make the journey to Syria and Iraq to join the jihad and promote their form of radical ideology. As insurgents, these organizations require a constant flow of manpower to fight for and hold territory, and to provide the resources and skills to deliver essential services to the local populations. In the case of DAISH, territory is required to maintain legitimacy for its self-proclaimed Islamic State. In order to make the terrorist organizations' center of gravity irrelevant, the critical capabilities, critical requirements, and critical vulnerabilities must also be addressed.¹⁴

The violent extremist organizations depend on the ability to recruit foreign fighters. A critical capability of the terror organizations in Syria and Iraq is the process to recruit radicalized foreign fighters so that they can be trained and indoctrinated into their respective causes. A critical requirement to sustain the expanding foreign fighter base is the recruitment tools, such as

social media sites used to lure would-be fighters to Syria and Iraq. Another critical requirement is the ability to cross international borders into Syria and Iraq, not only for personnel but for logistical support and funding. These open borders are also required for DAISH's own logistical support and external funding for both military operations and essential services to the population.

A critical vulnerability of the terror organizations is their dependence on foreign personnel strength. Foreign fighters assist in holding territory, as well as resourcing and sustaining its population. In the case of DAISH, it is necessary that it continues to secure the territory and population it has seized in order for the radicalized Muslim world to consider its declaration of an Islamic State credible. For radicalized Islamists, the existence of the Islamic State provides legitimacy for its ideology which DAISH has been spreading by assisting cells in places such as Libya, in Egypt's Sinai, Lebanon, and Nigeria. In order to strip these terrorist organizations of their center of gravity, the foreign fighter, the system of recruiting and sustaining the foreign fighters must be defeated. A task force would unify the global efforts to defeat the foreign fighter threat. The task force would disrupt these critical capabilities and requirements, by exploiting the vulnerabilities by tracking known or would-be fighters, gathering information, understanding the network, countermessaging, and stopping the flow of foreign fighters.

The Foreign Fighter System

In addition to understanding the center of gravity, it is important to assess the foreign fighter system in order to further demonstrate how the task force would best be applied to degrade and ultimately defeat the system. Figure 1 below illustrates the foreign fighter system, specifically for Syria, and where the task force's resources would be directly applied. According

to system's theory, a closed reinforcing loop demonstrates the elements that support a system, with plus signs signifying sustaining elements to the system and negative signs as opposing elements to the system.¹⁵

The figure shows how the foreign fighter system for Syria consists of a reinforcing loop with interdependent elements that are necessary for the system to continue to operate. These elements include the radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters, the ease of travel and lax border controls for the foreign fighters to enter Syria, the well-recognized violent extremist movement that relies on terrorist tactics, and the perception by radical Islamists that DAISH's so-called Islamic State is in fact a legitimate state. Together, these reinforcing elements sustain the foreign fighter system, with additional enabling elements such as external funding and logistical support. The foreign fighter task force would apply opposing pressure to the reinforcing elements by targeting the foreign fighters traveling to Syria, the fighters already in Syria, and those departing Syria. By disturbing just one element in the reinforcing loop, the system would no longer function. For example, the task force would utilize countermessaging to discredit the perception that the Islamic State is a legitimate state. Without the perception of legitimacy, other positive elements such as the external financing and logistical support will decrease and eventually become opposing elements.

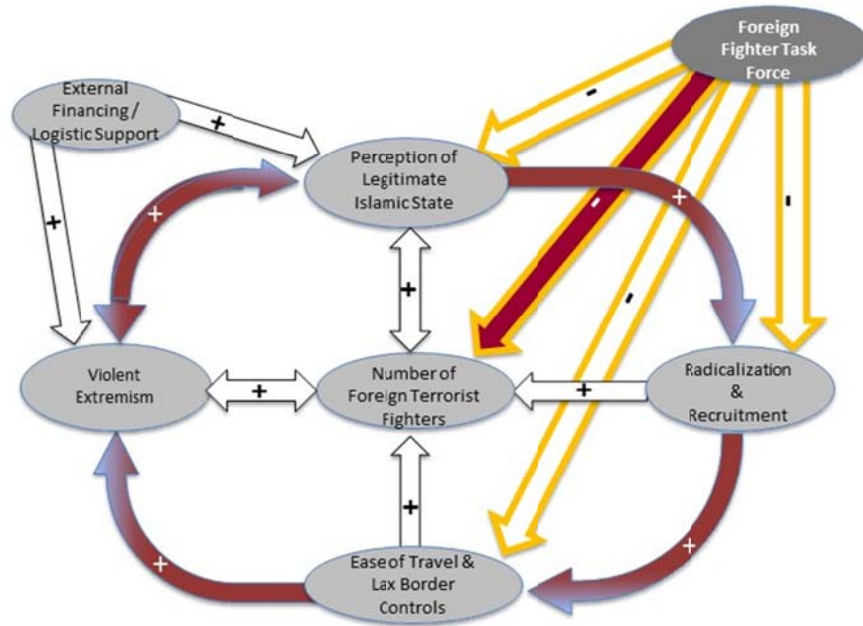


Figure 1

Syria's foreign fighter system, with red arrows depicting a closed reinforcing loop and the elements that directly support or oppose the system. The plus signs signify sustaining elements to the system. Negative signs are the opposing elements to the system.

The Western Foreign Fighter Threat

Foreign fighters are usually young radicalized Muslim men and even women, in search of adventure and purpose. Often recruited through sophisticated social media tools, some volunteers travel to fight against Assad's regime, while others want to provide humanitarian assistance. Many more have joined since the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State. Their motivation is not necessarily anti-Western. However, the chaotic civil war on the ground can make it nearly impossible to determine whether one is joining a terrorist organization or not. As a result, many of the foreign volunteers have found themselves unwittingly joining the ranks of DAISH or al-Qa'ida affiliated groups. By late 2013, the rivalry between Sunni and Shiite Muslims took on a new radical fervor as prominent religious leaders from throughout the Middle East called for Sunnis to join the fight against Assad and his Shiite allies, further prompting the flow of foreign fighter to the region.¹⁶

The confusion on the battlefield extended to the United States and its partners as well. Most Western nations have had little diplomatic relations with the Assad regime, and there exists no well organized opposition group with whom these partner nations could cooperate against Assad. The lines between the DAISH anti-Assad opposition and the moderate anti-Assad opposition have been so blurred that the United States and other Western countries have struggled to determine if there is a non-extremist opposition group to support. As a result, Western nations have remained cautious and have not provided ample military support to any moderate opposition forces. This further explains the United States' reluctance to become directly involved in Syria, especially for denying boots on the ground.

The Western foreign fighter threat emanating out of the conflict in Syria and Iraq differs from past wars because of the unprecedented number of volunteers joining the jihadi cause. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, which serves as an external advisor to the United Nations, reports that foreign fighters have flocked to Syria from all corners of the world, as illustrated in Figure 2 below. At least 4,500 have traveled from Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.¹⁷ Just over 100 of these jihadists are from the United States. During the 2003 to 2011 US conflict in Iraq, and the 2001 to 2015 conflict in Afghanistan, the number of Western foreign fighters supporting the insurgent extremists has been statistically insignificant.

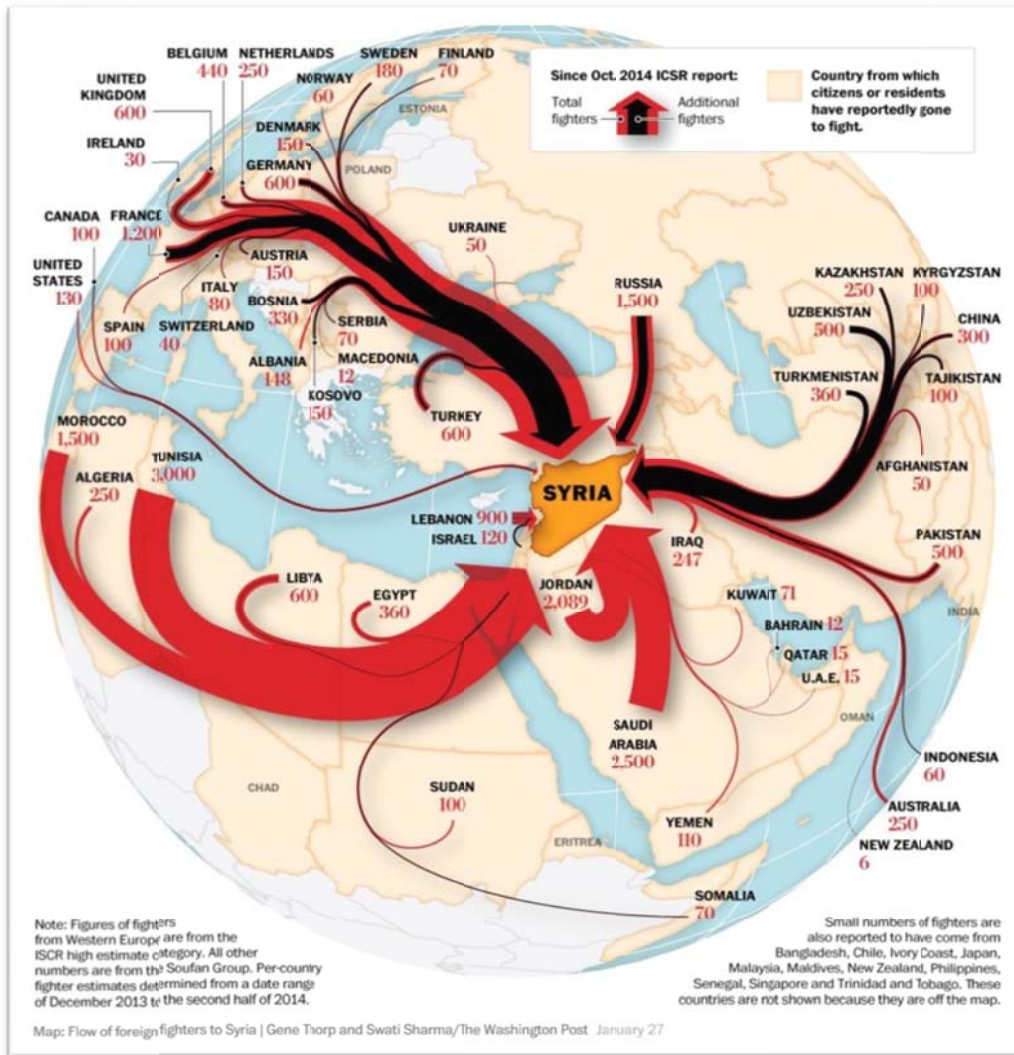


Figure 2

This map illustrates the worldwide foreign fighter flow into Syria.¹⁸

Many argue that the foreign fighter threat is exaggerated. Daniel Byman, of Georgetown University, and Jeremy Shapiro, of the Brookings Institution, contend that “the vast majority of Western Muslims who set out to fight in the Middle East today will not come back as terrorists.”¹⁹ Many will be killed in combat and some 20 percent will choose to avoid arrest by not returning home. Some will become disillusioned by their experiences and put the violence

behind them. Other foreign fighters will be caught by authorities before they are able to launch any planned attacks.²⁰

Byman and Shapiro argue that groups such as DAISH have no plans to attack Western targets. Their focus remains localized against Shiites because, while al-Qa'ida's strategy includes attacking the far enemy, the West, DAISH has remained focused on controlling localized territory. However, DAISH has made it clear that it does intend to target all kafirs, or unbelievers of Allah. In their magazine *Dabiq*, "A Call to Hijrah" tells all Muslims to join the fight "because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. The earth is Allah's."²¹ In February 2015, regional partners Jordan and Egypt, both who fear the development of domestic Islamist insurgencies, found themselves launching strikes against DAISH targets in response to attacks against their citizens. Egypt's airstrike, for example, was in Libya where a local DAISH branch beheaded up to a dozen Egyptian Christians.²² Therefore, DAISH does aspire to continue to expand its territory, or caliphate, and to do so will threaten the sovereignty of regional partner nations.

The foreign fighter threat also remains from other radical organizations such as the Khorasan Group, an al-Qa'ida affiliate which US intelligence believes is planning direct attacks in the United States.²³ Also of concern is the ongoing military strikes against DAISH targets being conducted by the United States and its coalition partners. Now that the United States is a direct player on the battlefield, it can be expected that DAISH's localized focus will expand beyond that of Shiite targets. As retribution for Western intervention, and as DAISH's territorial interests expand, they can be expected to increasingly plot against Western interests. Aaron Y. Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, argues that military attacks such as that recently conducted by Egypt, are used as "red meat for their base of supporters."²⁴ The so-called

Islamic State uses foreign interventions to legitimize it “as proof that God is on their side, that even as all these forces are arrayed against us, we are ‘remaining and expanding,’ as their saying goes.”²⁵

Despite Byman and Shapiro’s argument that the foreign fighter threat is overblown, they do admit “it is telling that in the last two years alone, European security officials have disrupted at least five terrorist plots with possible links to the Syrian foreign fighters, in locales ranging from Kosovo to the United Kingdom.”²⁶ Byman and Shapiro acknowledge that attacks launched by returned jihadists often achieve their goal and are deadlier than attacks carried out by homegrown terrorists lacking foreign combat experience.²⁷ Meanwhile, Europe is still coming to terms with the recent attacks in Paris, which took the lives of 12 victims. Comparatively, this small attack serves to demonstrate that an act of terror the magnitude of 9/11, which killed nearly 3,000, is not required to cause a serious disturbance in the daily lives of millions.

Turkey: The Foreign Fighter Gateway

Syria’s convenient location makes it an attractive destination for the Western foreign fighter. Unlike the rugged mountains which isolate Afghanistan, one can drive or take the train to Syria from Europe, or fly into Turkey where no visa is required for European Union and US citizens. The Republic of Turkey shares a porous 822 km border with Syria,²⁸ and until the summer of 2014, Turkey’s lack of anti-terrorist laws and policy allowed known al-Qa’ida militants to transit freely through its territory. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has estimated that more than 6,000 foreign fighters have crossed the border from Turkey into Syria since 2011, while US intelligence services estimate thousands more.²⁹

Western foreign fighters avoid Jordan's strictly secured border with Syria. Crossing into Syria via Lebanon risks apprehension by Hezbollah or Syrian government authorities.³⁰ Therefore, despite Ankara's attempts to increase security measures, Turkey's southern border with Syria remains the preferred port of entry for foreign fighters. The relative safe route, affordable cost, and open borders, has enabled more European foreign fighters to travel to Syria than any other jihadi destination in the last 20 years combined.³¹

As a staunch opponent of Syria's Bashar al Assad regime, Ankara argued there was little threat by the foreign fighters so long as the militants continued to travel onwards to other locations such as Syria. Also, Turkey's primary border concern remains focused on opposing Syrian Kurdish attempts to gain autonomy. This largely explains why Turkey ignored pressure from its NATO allies to stop the flow of known or would-be fighters, as well as to close supply and weapons routes. Turkey hopes for Assad's eventual collapse and remained complacent until DAISH's gains in Iraq, coupled with a rise in extremism within its own borders, became a direct threat to Turkey.³²

Since late 2014, Turkey has started to better enforce its border, but has a long way to go before it makes significant progress towards curbing the foreign fighter flow. Turkey's foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu argues that Turkey has "taken extraordinary measures to prevent foreign fighters crossing at the border and will continue to take extra measures."³³ However, the January 2015 Paris terror attacks serve as an example of Turkey's failure to properly secure its borders when the common-law wife of one of the attackers slipped through Turkey's border into Syria the same day her partner murdered five people and held several shoppers at a kosher grocery store hostage. When Çavuşoğlu announced that she had crossed into Syria, Syria's foreign ministry accused Turkey of allowing terrorists to freely cross the border.³⁴ In another

example, despite the efforts to impede the travel of three teenage British girls to Syria in February 2015, the young would-be jihadi brides managed to evade authorities. Blame cannot be placed on Turkey alone, but rather to all nations involved who lack the resources to quickly and effectively report, track, and stop the travel of their citizens to join terrorist groups like DAISH.

German authorities estimate that 550 Germans have joined extremist groups in Syria. According to Hans-Georg Maassen, the head of Germany's domestic intelligence agency, more than 90 percent of the foreign fighters traveling to Syria do so via Turkey. Turkey's Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, counters that Turkey has in fact restricted the flow of extremists across its borders by issuing entry bans against 7,000 and sending back 1,500 to 2,000 would-be extremists to their home countries.³⁵ For Ankara, the risks of fueling Syria's civil war with manpower and resources has come at a high cost. Turkey now suffers the burden of more than one million Syrian refugees, costing it more than three billion dollars since the beginning of the Syria's civil war. Meanwhile, the increased violence along the Turkish border has cost it billions more in lost business and trade with Syria and Iraq.³⁶

Turkey has evolved into a more willing member of the coalition against DAISH. The creation of a law enforcement foreign fighter task force would provide Turkey with the support and resources required to combat the increased threats emanating out of Syria and Iraq. Ankara now requests support from its NATO allies, asking them to share more details about their own citizens who are known extremists or foreign fighters so that Turkey may be better positioned to prevent or track their entry into Syria.³⁷ Such a request sounds simple, but challenges include the willingness of partner nations to provide personal information about their citizens to other countries. A task force would provide a forum to work through such issues on a case-by-case

basis, especially when dealing with the sensitivities involved in tracking under aged would-be brides for DAISH, who likely presented no prior dangers to society.³⁸

The Need for a Law Enforcement Foreign Fighter Task Force

The foreign fighter task force would be centrally located, such as on the soil of a NATO member nation, and remain a permanent organization until the violent extremist threat is defeated. The foreign terrorist fighter threat is a law enforcement problem that requires a whole of government solution. The US Department of Defense (DoD) is currently responsible for leading the global offensive against foreign terrorist fighters. However, for a long term operation outside of the declared theater of active armed combat, DoD should transfer this responsibility to the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security. These organizations exist to protect and preserve American security, thwart terrorism, and manage and secure US borders.

Although countering the threat requires significant application of military capabilities, especially from Special Operations Forces (SOF), no US military unit has the capacity to tackle such a transnational threat for a prolonged period of time. DoD has been successful in leading the fight against the foreign fighter threat. Given DoD's ample resources to project power, it was the right organization to stand up the initial effort. As the threat continues to grow, now is the time to transition responsibility to the law enforcement community while still utilizing SOF for specific direct action missions, low visibility operations, as well as partner security force training and advising.

Dr. Robert Spulak, of the Strategic Studies Department at Sandia National Laboratories, writes in a report on special operations theory that “the fundamental purpose of the military is to wage and win the nation’s wars.”³⁹ He explains that “fighting terrorism as an international

criminal activity includes law enforcement, diplomacy, international cooperation and foreign assistance, and SOF can contribute to most of these in operations other than war.”⁴⁰ SOF should be utilized to meet strategic objectives, such as the prevention of catastrophic terrorist attacks, by creating and sustaining the strategic initiative against specific terrorist threats. According to Dr. Spulak, this includes destroying “the terrorist enemies’ capability to conduct large-scale terrorism.”⁴¹ Therefore, the US military and SOF in particular, would remain a critical component to the task force.

Elements of the Law Enforcement Foreign Fighter Task Force

The foreign fighter task force would combine law enforcement, intelligence, and military components, with law enforcement taking the lead. The mission for the task force would be to coordinate multinational efforts to gain a better understanding of the foreign fighter system and to ultimately defeat that system. The United Nations has served as a forum for partner nations to discuss the emerging foreign fighter threats. Partner nations should prompt the United Nations to further address the foreign fighter threat by mandating the formation of the task force. This would grant the task force international legitimacy and encourage individual nations to approve their internal authorities and permissions for their participation. The task force has the potential to provide coordinated assistance in numerous areas, to include the restriction of external funding that helps finance the travel of foreign fighters. US SOF and the US intelligence community have extensive experience operating together as task forces in support of multinational operations, including in Afghanistan and Iraq, and know how to best establish and organize such a task force. Key objectives of the task force would include unifying information operations, building partner security force capacity, providing actionable intelligence, increasing law

enforcement agency coordination, and educating and reintegrating would-be and known foreign fighters into their home countries. Discussion on the manning or funding resourcing for the task force is beyond the scope of this research. The following sections explain how these objectives will be achieved.

Information Operations

As discussed during the center of gravity analysis, a critical requirement for the sustainment of the expanding foreign fighter base is the recruitment tools, such as social media sites, used to lure would-be fighters to Syria and Iraq. The jihadists understand how to target different international cultures and the importance of flashy and modern multimedia tools, including video games, to attract young followers. They have a strategy with a clear and unwavering narrative that maintains Allah at the center of their plight as the only sovereign. They profess that those who dare to oppose Allah are infidels and must be killed. This is a dangerous message that resonates with the thousands of radicalized Muslims who have become foreign fighters. Meanwhile, the United States does not have an enduring strategy to oppose this transnational threat. A long term strategy must aim to delegitimize the religiously based ideology of the enemy.

The foreign fighter task force would unify information operations against extremist ideology, and therefore make obsolete the enemy's critical requirement and dependence on social media for recruitment. By maintaining a strategic narrative that is morally based, as defined in the US National Security Strategy, partner nations would work towards delegitimizing the violent ideology. There are countless countermessaging efforts employed by the United States and partner nations, such as that being conducted by the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications at the US Department of State. The Center aims to unify

existing US interagency efforts by coordinating the countermessaging against al-Qa'ida aligned extremist groups, including DAISH, in order to effectively oppose their radical narratives.⁴² The center employs analysts who are “fluent in Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi and Somali to counter terrorist propaganda and misinformation about the United States on the Internet in real time.” They can also “post messages on English-language websites that jihadists use to recruit, raise money and promote their cause.”⁴³ The intended result is to make recruiting tools, especially social media, a source of discouragement for potential recruits who may contemplate joining a jihadist organization. Many of the 60 partner nations mentioned in the National Security Strategy are attempting to implement countermessaging strategies. In order to combine effectively these efforts, the task force would synchronize countermessaging at the multinational level. With a unified countermessaging narrative, the task force would contribute to reducing the number of recruits becoming radicalized. The positive result would include far less foreign fighters joining DAISH and other extremist organizations, and a reduced terrorist threat to the United States and its partners.

Assisting Partner Security Forces

As previously discussed, the military should no longer be responsible for leading the international offensive against the foreign fighter threat. Instead, the US military should support the task force by continuing to focus on the training and advising of partner security forces in order to target and execute synchronized actions against known objectives. The US military has the capacity and experience from the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq to partner with those security forces that require counterterrorism assistance. SOF, in particular, should be

entrusted to conduct low visibility operations to gain a better understanding of the human domain on the ground, and to conduct direct action missions in both Syria and Iraq.

On September 18, 2014, the Senate approved President Barack Obama's request for funds to train and equip moderate Syrian opposition forces to combat DAISH.⁴⁴ President Obama made his initial request in June 2014 in reaction to DAISH's military gains in Iraq. This was a significant step for the President who previously stood against United States intervention. His request was to "train and equip vetted elements of the Syrian armed opposition to help defend the Syrian people, stabilize areas under opposition control, facilitate the provision of essential services, counter terrorist threats and promote conditions for a negotiated settlement."⁴⁵ The training of these opposition forces should be conducted by US SOF. Under the authority of Section 1206 and Section 1208 of the National Defense Authorization Act, US Special Operations Forces (SOF) can assist foreign militaries to build their capacity to more effectively execute counterterrorism (CT) operations.⁴⁶ These programs utilize small SOF elements, and thus maintain a minimal footprint on the ground. The training of partner forces is a common task for SOF. They train and equip host nation forces in order to enable those nations to fight their own battles. Establishing such programs in Turkey would emphasize the application of the find-fix-finish-exploit-analyze-disseminate (F3EAD) targeting model.

Through the unity of organization, the application of F3EAD would provide targetable intelligence that could be effectively disseminated or shared, allowing member nations to track, take action, and destroy known threats.⁴⁷ F3EAD emphasizes the importance of capturing rather than killing the enemy in order to gain valuable leads and intelligence.

Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate

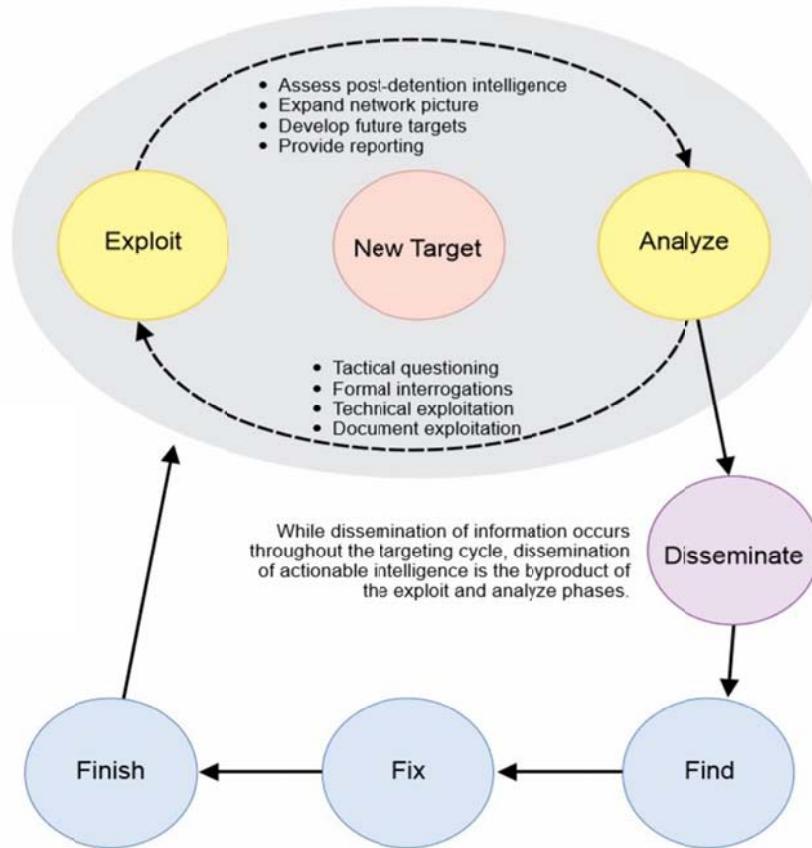


Figure 3

The F3EAD cycle as frequently practiced by US special operations, law enforcement, and the intelligence community.⁴⁸

As demonstrated in the figure above, the F3EAD process is a continuous cycle. New information opens doors into how the network functions, allowing additional links or associates to be exploited. In an article about the application of F3EAD, the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Michael Flynn, explains how “target exploitation and document exploitation are important law enforcement–type activities critical to F3EA[D].”⁴⁹ This is because “documents and pocket litter, as well as information found on computers and cell phones, can provide clues that analysts need to evaluate enemy organizations, capabilities, and intentions.”⁵⁰ Through the Section 1206 and 1208 authorities, US SOF should work with

partners to train on the effective application of F3EAD, resulting in a bigger picture understanding of the foreign fighter system.

Many senior government leaders in Washington interpreted the no boots on the ground policy to mean that absolutely no military related actions should be taken in Syria. However, there are military options that would provide a negligible and low risk presence while providing invaluable intelligence in conjunction with other agencies. Such options include low visibility operations, such as OPE and AFO which are utilized to understand intelligence and source networks, and to establish infrastructure to support future operations. Due to the lack of human intelligence sources, the US government does not have a contiguous understanding of the situation on the ground. The use of SOF would provide an instrumental and low risk option for minimal boots on the ground for reliable situational awareness.⁵¹

Actionable Intelligence

The participation of intelligence agencies would be critical in the collection, analysis, and sharing of actionable intelligence to partners. There is a precedent for the United States and partner nations working together in military and intelligence fusion cells, centers, and task forces. Many of the necessary multinational relationships already exist, though the procedures and protocols for sharing sensitive and timely information in an international setting would take time to operationalize. The intelligence sharing piece of any task force would present challenges, but it should not be a deterrent for establishing a coordinated effort against a mutual threat.

Valuable intelligence would be collected through a variety of sources, from the application of the F3EAD model, border patrols, and police forces at the local community level.

However, local level organizations often lack interoperable lines of communication for timely action to be taken at the multinational level, such as in the case of the three British girls who evaded authorities as they traveled to Syria. The task force would fill this gap and provide synchronized compilation and analysis of the otherwise overwhelming nuggets of information related to foreign fighter flow, allowing member nations to take pointed action to further deter the foreign fighter threat.

Law Enforcement Agencies

Law enforcement personnel would make up the bulk of the foreign fighter task force. Currently, law enforcement agencies are able to gather information on foreign fighters, but their greatest challenge remains the timely analysis of the data in order to effectively exploit or react.⁵² The task force's member nations would provide the dedicated manpower and resources needed to facilitate the F3EAD targeting model. As a cooperative organization, the task force would receive, analyze, and disseminate the necessary information. For example, the task force could issue travel alerts on known or would-be militants to the appropriate agency, whether intelligence, local law enforcement, customs, or border patrols. Such a system would greatly assist countries such as Turkey, whom could then better manage the flow of fighters by stopping or detaining them at their borders.

Additional agencies such as the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) would also play a key role in ensuring foreign security forces are adequately trained and interoperable in order to monitor and track the cross-border movements of known or would-be foreign fighters. The task force would disrupt the flow by shutting down their transit routes. This would be accomplished by instituting restrictions on porous border ports of entry such as tracking those

who pass through, and applying and enforcing travel restrictions, such as for Western foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq. Border security forces would receive timely information about known or would-be fighters so that they can prohibit their movements further.

Education and Reintegration of Foreign Fighters

Many Western countries are creating reeducation programs to discourage possible volunteers from joining extremist groups and to reintegrate those fighters who do return to their home countries. The simplest way to prevent the foreign fighter threat is to stop would be recruits from joining the jihad in the first place. For example, a government program in Denmark finds new recruits before they leave their home. Denmark sends a representative to informally sit down with them, their family members, and community leaders in order to persuade, not coerce, would-be militants against joining the jihad. Danish officials recognize the importance of the immediate family and the local Muslim community and therefore emphasize the local community's role and responsibility as part of the solution.⁵³ In Great Britain, Prime Minister David Cameron has pushed for a new anti-terrorist law that includes stripping British citizens of their passports to discourage would-be fighters from joining the jihad and to discourage known foreign fighters from returning.⁵⁴ Each program is unique to its host country, and many remain the source of heated domestic debates.

In the United States, the debate continues on how to handle homegrown foreign fighters. A tactic to discourage recruits to enlist in the first place is to publicize that jihadists will be monitored and possibly jailed for becoming members of terrorist organizations. Such tactics require the support of local Muslim communities in order to prevent young Muslims from feeling alienated or targeted. Reintegration programs would also be beneficial because they prevent alienation and instead bring fighters back to a supporting community. As combat veterans, it can

be expected that some returning fighters will require counseling and additional treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder. Treatment will be essential to prevent additional violent behavior. As Byman and Shapiro point out, balance will be needed to assess how to handle individuals because “if fear of prosecution prevents former fighters from seeking counseling and treatment, they will be less able to reintegrate into civilian life and leave their violent pasts behind.”⁵⁵ Such programs would be resource intensive and expensive, and will require the vital support of local Muslim communities. But they will be worth the cost of preventing a potentially devastating act of terror. Ultimately, it is up to individual families to influence their own children and to discourage them from becoming radicalized.

The effectiveness and level of success for the various education and reintegration programs would be measurable with time. For instance, the United States is starting a pilot program to bring together leaders from major US cities in order to assist them to reach out to those who may be vulnerable to violent extremist messages, radicalization, and recruitment.⁵⁶ The lessons learned from each program would be archived and utilized by task force members seeking to reintegrate their citizens returning from jihadist warzones. Through the feedback given by members, the task force would provide metrics for success, and assist partners in creating programs suitable for their individual foreign fighter threats.

Expected Results

Through the cooperation of partner nations, the task force would safeguard US national security interests by preserving international borders and the sovereignty of those nations threatened by the transnational foreign fighter threat. Washington would also demonstrate to its partners that it remains committed to their security by initiating and leading this multinational effort. The task force would establish a whole of government approach to degrade foreign

fighter flow, and contribute greatly to the ultimate defeat of DAISH and other violent extremist organizations. The key objectives of this law enforcement led task force would include unifying information operations, building partner security force capacity, providing actionable intelligence, increasing law enforcement agency coordination, and educating and reintegrating would-be and known foreign fighters into their home countries, as illustrated in Figure 4 below.

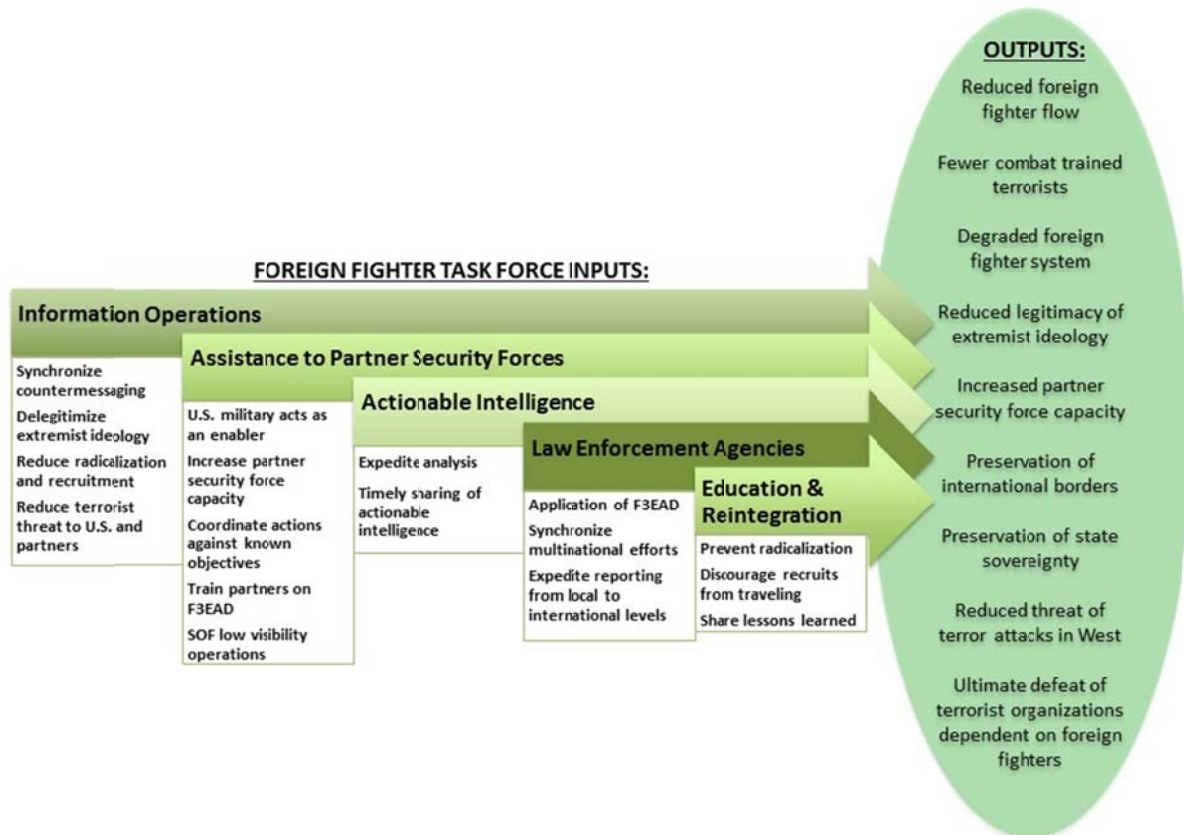


Figure 4
The Foreign Fighter Task Force Inputs and Outputs.

The greatest metrics for success of the task force would include a reduction in the number of fighters on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, the long-term preservation of sovereign borders near terrorist areas of operation, as well as the containment and degradation of terrorist organizations and insurgencies dependent on foreign fighter support. Every member nation

would benefit from their cooperation with the foreign fighter task force. The multinational approach would provide a whole of government strategic response against the transnational threat by constantly assessing and targeting the flow of foreign fighters, and contributing to an increased understanding of terrorist network operations.

The foreign fighter task force's ultimate success depends upon the willingness of its member nations to act on the intelligence, recommendations, and guidance it provides. As a permanent task force, partner nations would continue to prevent and contain the rise of emerging threats. The task force would serve to defeat the flow of jihadist to any destination, including to Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and especially to the West. A steady flow of personnel and supplies would be eliminated, weakening DAISH and any other violent extremist organization relying on manpower, international lines of communication, and sustainment. The task force would also create challenges for new terrorist safe havens to be established.⁵⁷ The threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters to the United States and its partners can be defeated, but only through the task force's enduring and coordinated multinational effort.

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