Foreign Fighter Interdiction: Stability Operations as Countermeasures

by Major M. Daniel Kolva, U.S. Forces- Iraq

April 1, 2011

Executive Summary

Foreign fighters fuel the world's conflicts. They make conflicts more costly for host nations and peacekeepers. These extremists come from all over the world and believe they need to fight for their ideological survival. The best way to combat the use of foreign fighters is to stop them as close to the source as possible. This can be difficult, especially if the U.S. is lacking diplomatic, informational, military, and economic relations with the source country. The U.S. government, especially military and political agencies, needs to be aware of the foreign fighter phenomenon and plan for it when developing new contingency and campaign plans as well as further developing bilateral and regional relationships in foreign fighter source and transit countries.

This paper will discuss and highlight, from the national security perspective, the potential military actions for interdicting foreign fighters. The foreign fighter problem set, terminology, and life cycle are defined and discussed. Foreign fighters in current conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan/Pakistan, and Somalia are discussed as well. Finally, potential solutions are introduced as well as actions the U.S. military can take to stem the flow of foreign fighters within stability operations framework.

"Transnational criminal threats and illicit trafficking networks continue to expand dramatically in size, scope, and influence—posing significant national security challenges for the United States and our partner countries." (Obama 2010)

Defining the Problem

The use and existence of foreign fighters is not a new concept. These transnational insurgents are commonplace. In fact, they seem to play a very important role in today's conflicts. A large number of suicide bombers are not from the country in which they commit themselves to martyrdom. Those who do not commit suicide and fight within an insurgency can be called upon in future insurgencies due to their success or experience. Therefore a population exists that can be called upon or recruited for current and future insurgencies. These foreign fighters are dangerous because they can be very successful. "Transnational recruits are responsible for higher levels of violence than are local insurgents, and insurgencies that manage to recruit foreign fighters are disproportionately successful as compared to other rebel groups". (Malet 2010) They can prolong a conflict and make it very costly for coalition and international peacekeepers.

Defining Foreign Fighters

The idea of traveling to foreign lands to fight and possibly die for a cause is nothing new. Recent history shows that at least twenty percent of civil wars fought within the last 200 years used non-indigenous fighters. "Among the 331 civil conflicts [occurring between] 1815 [and] 2005, at least 67 of them featured the presence of foreign fighters." (Malet 2010) The numerous terms used to describe this group; foreign fighters, transnational insurgents, combatants on foreign soil and non-indigenous fighters, all have similar implications. These are people fighting for a cause. They are not part of a government sanctioned militia nor do they represent a sovereign state.

Today, a majority of foreign fighters are motivated by ideology, specifically Islamic extremism; although this has not always been the case. The potential fighter needs to be convinced that his way of life is threatened. "Ironically, as U.S. forces engaged with transnational insurgents in Iraq to 'fight them over there so we don't have to fight them at home,' their opponents offered precisely the same argument." (Malet 2010) In this case, the Western influence threatens the Islamic extremist way of life as potential recruits understand. By preventing these fighters from entering the battlefield in the first place, peacekeeping can be made less violent and less costly for the host and partner nations.

While coalition forces have successfully killed or captured many foreign fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan, there needs to be a better way to counter these transnational insurgents at their point of origin and prevent their recruitment in the first place. These fighters seem to pick up momentum as they approach target locations. Preventative action at the source would be the best way to prevent this momentum. The phases which bring foreign fighter into the battle are as follows (Watts 2009):

1) Recruitment at source country or flashpoint city
2) Training and movement via safe havens and transit networks
3) Engagement at target locations

Killing or capturing these fighters in phase two or three mentioned above demonstrates success in a number of ways; collaboration, information and intelligence sharing between multiple agencies and often countries, and cooperation between law enforcement and military authorities participating in the peacekeeping mission. Degrading or stopping these fighters in

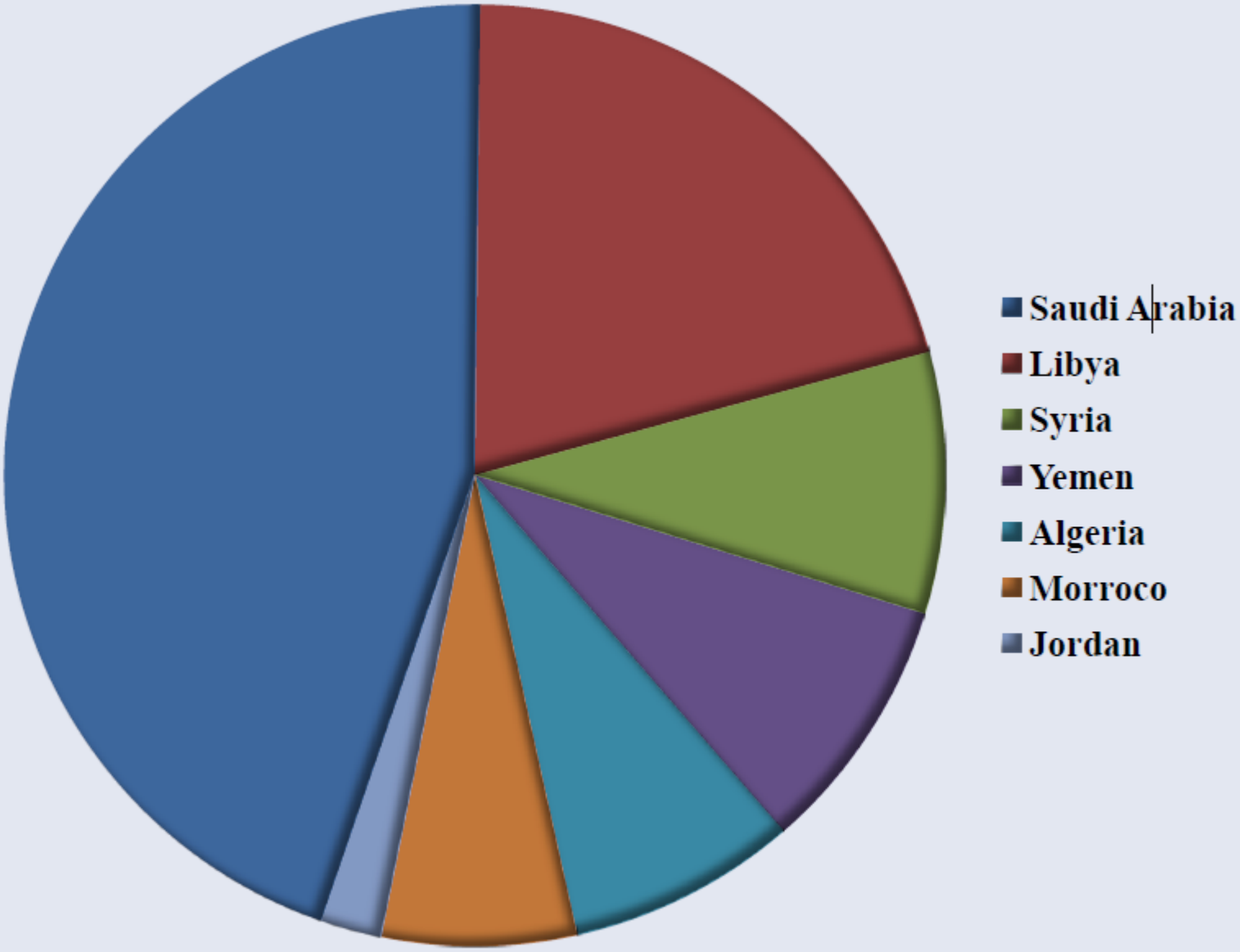


Figure 1: Foreign Fighters in Iraq (Felter and Fishman 2007)

the first phase would reduce the costly requirements in phases two and three.

Foreign Fighters in Current Conflicts

Iraq

Even though U.S. Forces in Iraq are beginning to draw down, remaining forces are no less a viable target for violent extremist organizations. Sniper fire, improvised explosion devices (IED), and suicide attacks still occur, targeting both US and Iraqi forces. The Sinjar Records, documents seized by coalition forces, demonstrate how these attacks are often conducted by foreign fighters. "The Sinjar Records exemplify al-Qaeda's fundamental strategic challenge in Iraq: melding the ideological demands of its global constituency with the practical concerns of relatively secular Iraqis." (Felter and Fishman 2007) The fighting in Iraq was and is inspired by a common ideology amongst Islamic extremists. Figure 1 above shows the percentage from each country of the 595 records analyzed by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Although this is just a sample of the foreign fighters who entered Iraq, one should acknowledge the potential recruiting grounds within these Islamic countries.

In addition to the foreign fighters entering Iraq, there lies the potential for Iraqi fighters to conduct operations outside of Iraq. During the Christmas season, attacks against Christians occurred in Muslim majority countries, including an attack in Egypt. "Egypt's Interior Ministry said it believes the attack was carried out by a suicide bomber, and that 'foreign elements undertook planning and execution.'" (Roggio, Suspected suicide bomber kills 21 in attack on Egyptian church 2011) The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which is an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) claimed responsibility for the 21 people killed outside a church in Alexandria, Egypt. Even if ISI falsely claimed this attack, this attack demonstrates the ideological symmetry pertaining to Islamic extremism vice an Islamic penchant for nationalism.

Recently, support for foreign fighters in Iraq seems to have waned. The combination of coalition success in Iraq and the drawdown of U.S. Forces may have discouraged extremist from focusing on Iraq. In January 2010, "Iraqi and U.S. forces killed Abu Khalaf, al Qaeda in Iraq's most senior foreign fighter facilitator. Based out of Syria, Khalaf reorganized al Qaeda's network after it was severely disrupted by Iraqi and US forces during extensive operations in 2007 and 2008." (Roggio 2010) Foreign fighter facilitation networks that bring fighters into Iraq most likely still exist, however not at such a large scale as indicated by the Sinjar Records from 2007. This disruption of foreign fighter flow came after five years of killing and capturing transnational insurgents and the well known "surge" of U.S. troops in Iraq.

Afghanistan and Pakistan

The foreign fighter flow in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region seems to flow strongly both in and out of the region. Similar to Iraq, the fighters in both Afghanistan and Pakistan appear to be ideologically motivated. In numerous cases, killed and captured fighters have been identified as foreign nationals. Many of these "fighters are from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and various Arab nations." (Roggio 2010) According to recent reporting, in an operation in Pakistan, "four 'foreigners,' a term used to describe Arab al Qaeda or Central Asian terrorists, (were) reported to have been killed, the Pakistani official (Pakistani intelligence) said." (Roggio 2011) Reports such as these demonstrate the common ideological thread binding the insurgents fighting coalition forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It should also be acknowledged, however that foreign fighters do not solely originate from Islamic countries. Western countries contribute a share of foreign fighters as well. The Afghanistan-Pakistan region seems to be a revolving door for extremists, as potential fighters report to the region not only to fight, but to train for operations outside the region.

> "Since September 8, 2010, a total of 16 Germans and two Britons have been reported killed in Predator strikes in the Mir Ali area. The Europeans were members of the Islamic Jihad Group, an al Qaeda affiliate based in the Mir Ali area. The IJU members are believed to be involved in a recently discovered al Qaeda plot that targeted several major European cities and was modeled after the terror assault on the Indian city of Mumbai in 2008." (Roggio, US Predators kill 4 'foreigners' in North Waziristan strike 2011).

This demonstrates how ideology bonds these fighters and unites them in fighting for a cause inside and outside the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. As technology has made the world smaller via the World Wide Web, travel and international commerce, al Qaeda and numerous other like minded groups are able to spread ideas, quickly travel to regions in conflict, and access funds required for conducting training and operations. Western countries are not outside extremist's sphere of influence. In fact, one could argue that Western countries on the cutting edge of technology could actually be further exposed to extremist's ideology.

To further illustrate the transnational aspects of foreign fighter coordination across borders, the al-Qaeda offshoot in Northern

Africa recently transferred hostages from Niger to Mali and now out of Mali while attempting to influence France. "The seven hostages - five French nationals, a Togolese and a Madagascan - were seized from Niger's uranium mining town of Arlit in September and later taken across the border into Mali. Their abduction was claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), whose leader warned France to pull its troops out of Afghanistan if it wants to see the safe return of five French hostages." (Agence France-Presse 2011) The ideological bond between the extremists in Northern Africa and the extremists in Afghanistan seem to facilitate the extremists working together in attempting to influence the West. Security forces in source countries such as Algeria and Mali are engaging AQIM and are partners with the U.S. in efforts against terrorism. (U.S. State Department 2010) (U.S. State Department 2011) The U.S. stopped all non-humanitarian projects in Niger due to non-democratic actions in 2009. (U.S. State Department 2010)

Somalia

Foreign fighters involved in the 20 plus years of conflict in Somalia are varying in degrees of what constitutes "foreign." These degrees include "Somalis who were born across the borders in neighboring countries; Somalis who were born in Somalia or whose parents were born in Somalia but have grown up in the diaspora and now carry foreign passports; and foreigners who have no Somali ethnic connection." (Shinn 2010) While all foreign fighters in Somalia may be ideologically united, the numbers of those with both ideological and ethnic ties seem to be greater. "The number of persons who have joined al-Shabaab (Violent Extremist Organization in Somalia) and have no Somali ethnic links is probably between 200 and 300. A larger number of ethnic Somalis, perhaps as many as 1,000, from the diaspora and neighboring countries have also joined al-Shabaab." (Shinn 2010) While these foreigners have varying degrees as to how close they are to Somalia, they also have varying degrees as to how ideology motivates them. It seems the closer a foreign fighter is to ethnic Somalia, the closer the national or tribal ties may be, whereas the further the fighter is from Somali ties, the greater the dependence on ideological ties. The delta between ethnic Somalis and ideological foreign fighters could be exploited by peacekeepers.

Predominantly Muslim countries are the source for some of these foreign fighters, demonstrating an ideological motivation amongst the fighters. When identifying the non-Somalis, "most come from the Swahili coast of Kenya (Christian) and Tanzania (Muslim), Pakistan (Muslim), Bangladesh (Muslim), India (Hindu), Afghanistan (Muslim), Yemen (Muslim), Sudan (Muslim), Uganda (Christian) and Saudi Arabia (Muslim)." (Shinn 2010) (CIA 2011) This is not to say that predominantly Muslim countries encourage its citizens to contribute to Somalia's and the world's conflicts involving Islamic extremism. According to recent trends in Somalia, however they are more susceptible to extremist ideology when these extremists use a distorted version of the country's dominate religion. Extremists can and will target minority Muslim populations as well, such as countries mentioned above and Western populations with small Muslim communities who may feel disenfranchised from the majority.

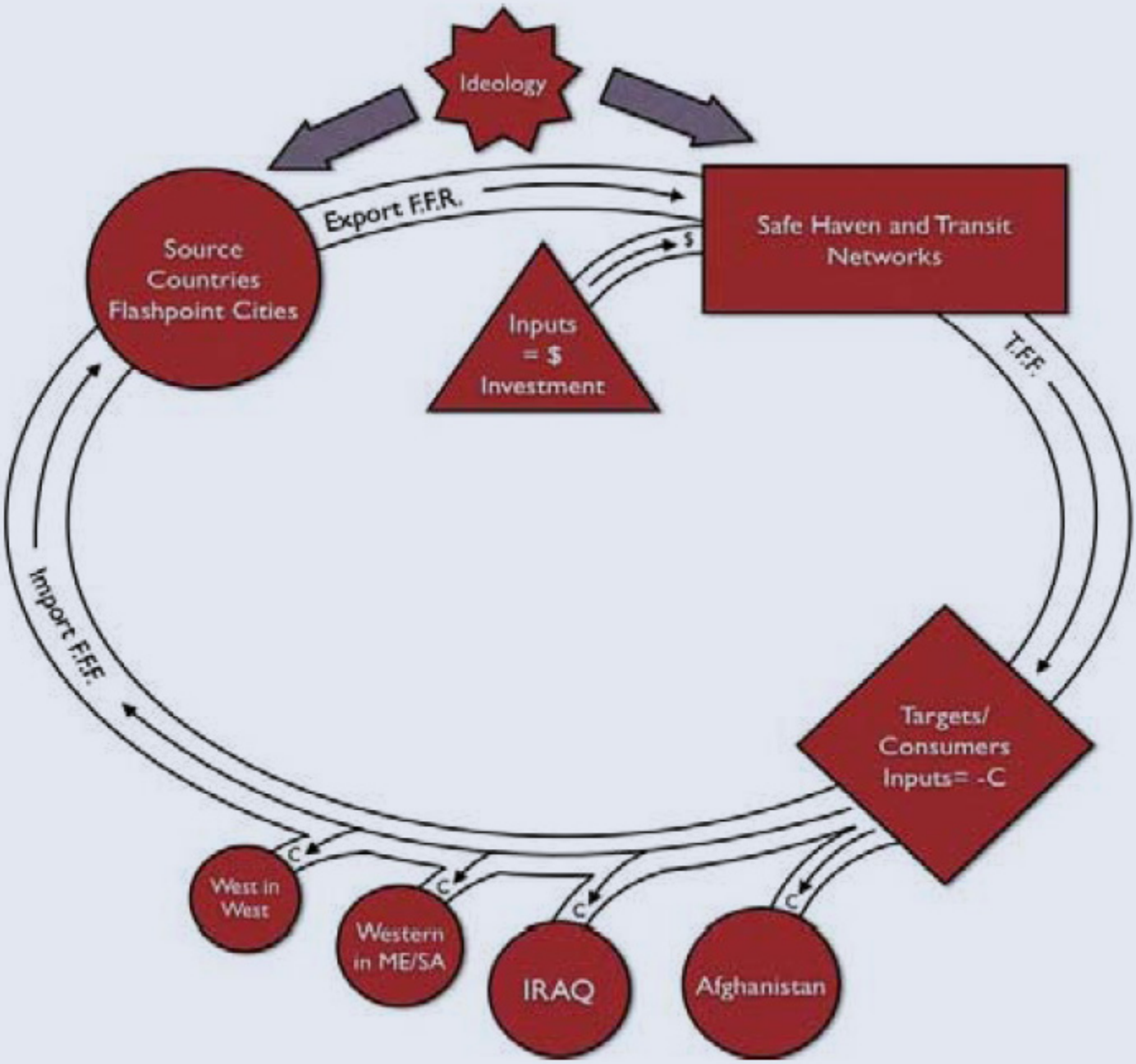
New leaders in al Shabaab, mostly from outside Somalia, demonstrated a capability to conduct missions outside Somalia "and recently carried out a double suicide attack in Kampala, the capital of Uganda" during the World Cup. (Roggio 2010) Somalia has posed a leadership opportunity for experienced fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan. "The foreign commanders have trained in al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan, and many have entered Somalia over the past year to assume top leadership roles in Shabaab." (Roggio 2010) Once again, predominately Muslim countries are the source of these aspiring leaders. "The al Qaeda commanders come from Kenya (Christian), Saudi Arabia (Muslim), Pakistan (Muslim), Sudan (Muslim), and the United States (Christian)." (Roggio, Al Qaeda leaders play significant role in Shabaab 2010)

Demonstrating the transnational ideological movement, one individual who was connected to conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia while planning an attack in Europe, was recently arrested in Denmark. Lebanon born Swedish citizen Munir Awad "was arrested... for plotting to kill employees at (a) Danish newspaper... Awad had been arrested twice before because of his suspected ties to the (al Qaeda) terror network—once by Ethiopian forces in Somalia and a second time in Pakistan." (Joscelyn 2010) Awad was arrested in Denmark for allegedly plotting a "Mumbai-style" attack as revenge for the cartoon depictions of Muhammad in the Danish newspaper. Islamic extremism seems to inspire individuals like Awad, certainly more than nationality.

Foreign Fighter Life Cycle

As mentioned earlier, there are three distinct phases within the foreign fighter life cycle; 1) recruitment at source country or flashpoint city 2) training and movement via safe havens and transit networks and 3) engagement at target locations. (Watts 2009) As the chart below indicates, the global foreign fighter flow can be cyclical with fighters potentially returning to source countries after training and gaining fighting experience.

Suicide bombers, one of the most potent and potentially damaging foreign fighters obviously end their martyrdom journey at the target. The key ingredient to this flow cycle is ideology. Ideology feeds the potential recruit with the aspiration and motivation to join the insurgency. Ultimately, the recruiting and initial entry phase at the source countries is the pivotal area for stemming the foreign fighter flow into conflicts. "The future success of AQ hinges on its recruitment process in which former foreign fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan guide the recruitment and production of future foreign fighters who will conduct regional and global terrorist attacks. Left unchecked, the Second Foreign Fighter Glut will produce the next generation of terrorist organizations and attacks much as the First Foreign Fighter Glut fueled AQ." (Watts 2009) Not only will the focus on source countries curtail the flow of foreign fighters to current conflicts, but potentially limit the number of fighters for future conflicts.



Global Foreign Fighter Flow (Watts 2009)

Potential Solutions

Combating transnational criminal and trafficking networks requires a multidimensional strategy that safeguards citizens, breaks the financial strength of criminal and terrorist networks, disrupts illicit traffick¬ing networks, defeats transnational criminal organizations, fights government corruption, strengthens the rule of law, bolsters judicial systems, and improves transparency. (Obama 2010)

Identify Perceived Grievances

Identifying countermeasures that prevent potential recruits from joining an insurgency at the source requires further analysis at each source country. "Designing holistic strategies to stem foreign fighter flow requires examination of AQ's recruitment and integration process." (Watts 2009) Each source country's recruiting environment is different. Ted Robert Gurr's motivational theory offers a starting point in which analysts can begin to determine potential countermeasures and discourage the potential recruit from joining the cause or perhaps reduce the reasons a potential recruit would contribute to violent extremism. In other words, to stem the flow of foreign fighters at the source, we must first identify recruiting factors such as grievances potential recruits may have related to current conflicts. In order to further identify these recruiting factors in each source country, we can use the components of Gurr's motivational theory.

In Gurr's motivational theory, four perceived conditions exist within the terrorist's targeted constituency; 1) relative deprivation, 2) source of that relative deprivation, 3) perceptions for the chance of success, and 4) perceptions of what constitutes a "better tomorrow." (Hanle 2009) Ultimately, the potential recruits have a grievance or problem they feel strongly enough about to use violence. In the previously mentioned conflicts, Islamic extremists used selected Muslim tenets as a venue for enticing the targeted constituency. These recruits believed their religious faith was in danger (relative deprivation). In order to save their religious faith, they were convinced they had to fight the Western influence at the target locations (sources of deprivation). In the media or at recruiting and training centers, potential recruits see successful attacks against coalition forces (perceptions for a chance of success). Finally, the potential recruit can be convinced that these successful attacks will lead to the security of their religious faith (perceptions of a "better tomorrow"). It is important to note that all of the aforementioned conditions need only to be perceived as true by the potential recruits. The point in identifying these perceptions is to identify and execute countermeasures that can nullify these perceptions and prevent extremist recruiting. If the recruiting process cannot be prevented, the grievances are still known and recruits who choose to fight could be identified.

The recent unrest in the Middle East demonstrates all four of Gurr's conditions. The people in Tunisia and Egypt believed, rightfully so, that the dictatorial regimes deprived them of certain rights and a better way of life. When the protests began and the people saw the power they possessed to change the government, they proceeded in mass. The future for human rights and more representative governments in the Middle East is on the horizon, but this could also be the time for extremist recruiting if extremist groups manage to acquire credit for the uprisings. New government relationships need to be established in order to build required regional partnerships in thwarting extremism. The sooner these partnerships are established, the more likely we will succeed in stemming foreign fighter flow, in phases one and two, from these countries.

Where the U.S. Military Can Counter Foreign Fighter Flow

"Through stability operations, military forces help to set the conditions that enable the actions of the other instruments of national power to succeed in achieving the broad goals of conflict transformation. Providing security and control stabilizes the area of operations." (Army 2008)

Developing methods to counter ideology and malign cognitive agendas is not something in which the U.S. military is currently designed to engage. The U.S. military's force structure is not explicitly designed for asymmetric warfare in which foreign fighters greatly contribute. However, there are stability operations the military currently participates in that can assist source and transit countries curtail foreign fighter flow. Military to military engagements support for regional institutions, information sharing, operational assistance, and key leader engagements are tools the US military can use to help stem the flow of foreign fighters into areas of conflict. These tools should be used in conjunction with diplomatic engagement between US embassies, consulates and the host nations in which foreign fighters originate, train or transit through.

Military to Military Engagement

One of the first methods the U.S. military can use in order to stop the foreign fighter flow at the source is to engage with host

nation or source country military components that may be responsible for identifying and stopping local terrorist threats. One tool the US military has for this type of engagement is the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Some of these types of engagements may fall under other agencies such as the FBI, Border Control, or the Coast Guard. Ultimately, the U.S. diplomatic representative within the host nation would have to decide what US agency can better assist the host nation.

Regional Institutions

Another method the U.S. military uses to engage with foreign fighter source countries in order to enhance counterterrorism efforts is to work with regional institutions. An example of this is the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). Numerous North and West African countries are members of this partnership and have conducted various training programs and exercises as well as conducted counterterrorism operations that reduced the threat and flow of terrorism in the region. Partnerships like this can be developed within other source regions and potentially stem further terrorist movements.

Information Sharing

Another potential engagement opportunity for the U.S. military involves sharing information. The U.S. often has an abundance of information resources that host nations may lack in terms of infrastructure or technology. Using these resources to share information and analysis would assist the host nation in identifying problem sets related to terrorism and allow them to conduct their own countermeasures in a timely fashion. This can be done on a bilateral basis or by using regional entities focused on regional security.

Operational Assistance

Many nations may be pre-occupied with other internal or regional conflicts and simply do not have the resources to conduct additional counterterrorism measures. The U.S. military can assist source countries who participate in conflicts of strategic significance to the United States. One example is the training and assistance the U.S. conducts with Ugandan troops. Uganda has an internal threat, the Lord's Resistance Army, which requires military resources to fight. Uganda is also the largest troop contributor to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) Somalia is considered a safe haven for al-Qaeda aligned terrorists. The U.S. military conducts training and exercises with Uganda as well as other countries in the Horn of Africa. This training assists Ugandans with their troop contributions to AMISOM while allowing Uganda to deal with internal threats as well. Similar programs could be developed in foreign fighter source countries, alleviating the stress on military components fighting terrorism.

Key Leader Engagement

Establishing and maintaining dialogue at the highest possible levels between governments is certainly an important aspect in coordinated efforts against terrorism. These key leader engagements help set the stage for collaborative efforts. Combatant Command (COCOM) commanders often visit senior military officials in their assigned Area of Responsibility (AOR). These visits could emphasize counterterrorism efforts, specifically ways in which each military can work together to stem the flow of foreign fighters. Such visits should focus on both foreign fighter source and transit countries. This senior level dialogue is vital to initiating the required information sharing that facilitates countermeasures to the foreign fighter flow into conflicts. COCOM commanders and staffs should work together to ensure cross-COCOM counterterrorism efforts are coordinated and complimentary.

Conclusion

> "Recognizing the inextricable link between domestic and transnational security, we will collaborate bilaterally, regionally, and through international institutions to promote global efforts to prevent terrorist attacks." (Obama 2010)

To reduce the effectiveness of foreign fighters, the aforementioned military actions need to be incorporated into an overall "whole of government" approach. The military alone is ineffective against a belligerent ideology. "This is a fight in which ideas have become the new center of gravity." (Brachman 2009) Diplomatic measures and relationships must be exercised in each foreign fighter source country long before any military action can take place. Eventually, the battle of ideas may take a new, less simplistic and violent approach. "Attacks still matter to (al Qaeda senior leadership), but in an era of increased counterterrorism pressure, al Qaeda is beginning to realize that it is a lot more effective at being a movement, an ideology, even a worldview. It is starting to see that terrorism is only one of many tools in its arsenal and that changing minds matters more than changing policies." (Brachman 2009) A joint, interagency, multi-COCOM approach to limit the flow of foreign fighters

is only one part of this ideological battle, but it is a piece that will reduce the cost of peacekeeping and ultimately enhance US relations with source countries.

Bibliography

Agence France-Presse. Hostages held by al-Qaeda scattered: Mali source. January 23, 2011. http://www.expatica.com/fr/news (accessed January 23, 2011).

Army, Department of the. "Stability Operations." FM 3-07. Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, October 2008.

Brachman, Jarrett. "The Next Osama." Foreign Policy, September 2009.

CIA. World Factbook. Washington, DC: US Government, 2011.

Felter, Joseph, and Brian Fishman. Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records. Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2007.

Gates, Robert. "Quadrennial Defense Review." Wahington, DC, 2010.

Gates, Robert. The National Defense Strategy: Striking the Right Balance. Joint Forces Quarterly, 2009.

Hanle, Donald J. "Developing Terrorism Analysts." National Academy of Sciences- Committee on Behavioral and Social Sciences Research. National Defense Intelligence College, 2009. 27.

Joscelyn, Thomas. "Danish newspaper plotter arrested twice before." The Long War Journal, 2010.

Malet, David. "Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions." Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 2010: 18.

Mathur, Neha. The Protection Project. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2002.

Meece, Roger. Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Kinshasa: United Nations, 2010.

Obama, Barack. National Security Strategy . Washington, DC: White House, 2010.

Roggio, Bill. "Al Qaeda in Iraq is 'broken,' cut off from leaders in Pakistan, says top US general." The Long War Journal, 2010.

Roggio, Bill. "Al Qaeda leaders play significant role in Shabaab." The Long War Journal, 2010.

Roggio, Bill. "Al Qaeda, Taliban create female suicide cells in Pakistan and Afghanistan." The Long War Journal, 2010.

Roggio, Bill. "Jordanian al Qaeda operative killed in Afghanistan." The Long War, 2010.

Roggio, Bill. "Suspected suicide bomber kills 21 in attack on Egyptian church." The Long War Journal, 2011.

Roggio, Bill. "US Predators kill 4 'foreigners' in North Waziristan strike." The Long War Journal, 2011.

Shinn, David. "Al-Shabaab Tries to Take Control in Somalia." The Foreign Fighter Problem: Recent Trends and Case Studies. Washington, DC: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2010.

U.S. State Department. U.S. Department of State. October 12, 2010. http://www.state.gov (accessed January 23, 2011).

—. U.S. Department of State. September 20, 2011. http://www.state.gov (accessed January 23, 2010).

—. U.S. Depatment of State. August 02, 2010. http://www.state.gov (accessed January 23, 2011).

Watts, Clint. "Countering Terrorism from the Second Foreign Fighter Glut." Small Wars Journal, 2009.

Major M. Daniel Kolva is a strategic intelligence officer for US Army Africa, US Africa Command stationed in Vicenza, Italy. He holds a Master of Science in Strategic Intelligence from the National Defense Intelligence College and a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice from the University of South Carolina. Major Kolva has participated in exercises as an observer with the East African Standby Force and is currently deployed to Iraq in support of Operation New Dawn.