Beyond Information Sharing: NATO and the Foreign Fighter Threat

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ABSTRACT: Despite disagreement among experts and policymakers over its significance, the foreign fighter threat to Europe is very real. Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), such as NATO, have an important role to play in countering this threat, including through information sharing. Even though the North Atlantic alliance has its hands full at the moment, member states can further leverage NATO's unique advantages.

The foreign fighter threat in Europe and North America is a real one, as the January 2015 attacks at the office of the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* have made clear. However, there is significant debate among experts over just how significant that threat is. On the one hand, the flow of foreign fighters from the West to Syria and Iraq today is larger than that of any recent conflict. On the other hand, few of those fighters appear to be returning to Europe or the United States to engage in terrorist plots or attacks, and so the threat appears real yet not terribly significant.

Regardless of which side of the debate one supports, the challenge of foreign fighters, like all transnational problems, is not one individual states can solve on their own. Certainly states can and should individually take necessary steps to prevent, prohibit, and respond to the threat of foreign fighters. However, collective measures are necessary as well to maximize, leverage, and enable the actions taken by individual countries.

To this end, several Western states have engaged in bilateral and multilateral exchanges of information and other forms of collaboration, such as the All Partners Access Network, an unclassified information sharing service developed by the US Department of Defense (DoD). In addition to these *ad hoc* forms of cooperation among two or more states, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) may have an important role to play. Indeed, there is already evidence IGOs, such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have begun to contribute to countering the foreign fighter challenge.

Specifically, the North Atlantic alliance has emphasized the importance of intelligence sharing as a means of countering the foreign fighter threat. But is this the role it is best suited to play? How can NATO's member states best leverage the alliance's comparative advantages, especially since membership includes the United States and its vast array of military resources? If the United States is to play an increased or modified role through NATO, how can the US Army contribute? In order to answer these and related questions, this article first surveys the nature and scope of the foreign fighter threat. Determining the significance of the foreign fighter threat is critically important to assessing whether and how NATO might do more. Certainly facilitating information sharing,

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as the alliance does today, is vital, but NATO is equipped and structured to do more, or to do so more effectively. Some members may be reluctant to see the securitization – or NATO-ization – of a domestic law enforcement area, while outside critics might argue NATO lacks effective tools to address the foreign fighters' center of gravity. In short, although the short-term outlook for a greater NATO role in this area is likely limited, the allies risk foregoing an important means of countering the foreign fighter problem if they do not fully leverage NATO's potential.

Foreign Fighters

"Foreign fighter" is the label used to refer to nonindigenous individuals who choose to engage in insurgent military operations in foreign conflict zones without the promise of financial remuneration.[1] One prominent scholar has defined Islamic foreign fighters as unpaid combatants with no apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity.[2] Depending on the number of foreign fighters flowing into a given conflict zone, as well as the capabilities and skills they bring with them, foreign fighters can play an important role, perhaps even a decisive one, in a particular conflict.

Whatever their role, when that conflict ends, or whenever foreign fighters choose to return to their countries of origin, they may pose a significant threat to the security of their home country. This risk seems particularly high in Europe today, given the number of EU nationals of Islamic faith who have recently traveled to fight in Syria and Iraq. Reliable figures are difficult to obtain, but researchers put the number of Europeans fighting in Syria and/or Iraq at roughly 4,300 – of which the greatest concentrations come from France, the United Kingdom, and Germany.[3]

Foreign Fighters in Syria/Iraq			
Austria	100-150	Netherlands	200-250
Belgium	440	Norway	60
Denmark	100-150	Spain	50-100
Finland	50-70	Sweden	150-180
France	1,200	Switzerland	40
Germany	500-600	United Kingdom	500-600
Ireland	30	Western Balkans	500
Italy	80		

1   For a discussion of various foreign fighter definitions, see Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, *Foreign Fighters Under International Law* (Geneva, Switzerland: Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, October 2014), 5-7.

2   Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2010-2011): 53.

3   Table compiled by author based on data from Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), Department of War Studies, King's College London,* January 26, 2015, www.icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/; and from Adrian Shtuni, "Ethnic Albanian Fighters in Iraq and Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 4 (April 2015): 11-14.

Separately, the US Director of National Intelligence has testified before Congress that roughly 3,400 Westerners have traveled to Syria since 2011.[4] Disagreements over the numbers do not change the fact that the foreign fighter challenge is not a problem specific to any particular region of Europe; on a per capita basis, the leading sources appear to be Kosovo in southeastern Europe, Belgium in western Europe, and Denmark in northern Europe.[5]

Moreover, the foreign-fighter threat to Europe appears to be real and growing, as evidenced by well-publicized attacks over the last several months, as well as disrupted plots. For instance, in May 2014, a returning French jihadist who had recently fought in Syria killed four people at a Jewish museum in Brussels. Later that same year, in October, a Canadian jihadist who had also fought in Syria killed one Canadian soldier at a war memorial in Ottawa.

Just a few months later, in January 2015, Chérif and Saïd Kouachi attacked offices of the satirical French newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 12 people. Before their attack, the Kouachi brothers had declared themselves followers of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and both traveled to Yemen for weapons training in 2011. At almost the exact same time in January 2015, Amedy Coulibaly, an avowed follower of the Islamic State (ISIS), attacked a kosher supermarket in Paris, killing a policewoman and four hostages. Most recently, in June 2015, a suspected Islamist beheaded his boss and tried to blow up an American-owned industrial gas plant in the suburbs of Lyon, France. Shortly thereafter, in mid-July 2015, French officials revealed that they had thwarted an Islamist plot to attack a military installation in the south of the country.

Serious, but not Significant

Despite these recent and vivid examples, there are different perspectives on the precise scope of the foreign fighter threat. On the one hand, some look at the available evidence and conclude the foreign-fighter threat is real, but not terribly significant. For one thing, the skeptics argue similar concerns regarding foreign fighters were expressed in the wake of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, and yet the threat proved far less virulent than many predicted.[6]

Certainly the foreign-fighter threat is nothing new. Foreign fighters have been a part of various military conflicts for decades, if not centuries.[7] For example, over 30,000 foreign fighters participated in the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939. Of this number, almost 3,000 were Americans who traveled to Spain and served in various units which collectively became known as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Similarly, roughly 20,000 foreign fighters traveled to Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 to fight against Soviet forces there. These fighters largely came from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, as well as Egypt, Tunisia, and Indonesia.

4   James R. Clapper, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," Statement for the Record before the US Senate Armed Service Committee, February 26, 2015.

5   Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000"; and Shtuni, "Ethnic Albanian Fighters in Iraq and Syria."

6   Daniel L. Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (November/December 2014): 37-42, 44-46.

7   Barak Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 189-202.

Skeptics of the significance of the foreign-fighter threat also argue, perhaps more importantly, the "blowback rate" in the case of the conflict in Syria and Iraq today is not terribly high, at least not yet.[8] The blowback rate refers to the proportion of foreign fighters who return to their countries of origin and engage in terrorist plots or attacks.

Low blowback rates may exist for any number of reasons. For example, many fighters leave their home country to fight in foreign conflicts with no intention of returning to conduct terrorist attacks.[9] These individuals, who are estimated to comprise the vast majority of foreign fighters, lack violent intentions toward their fellow countrymen. Instead, they may be motivated to become foreign fighters by a genuine desire to help those they perceive as oppressed by some other political entity.[10] And in some cases, they may travel to conflict zones to fight against Islamic extremism.[11]

In many instances, foreign fighters die in conflict zones – either as suicide attackers or in combat against opposing forces – and therefore never get the opportunity to return home.[12] One European intelligence official put the figure at roughly 20 percent of Europeans who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to participate in the fighting there have died in combat.[13] Additionally, evidence suggests Western fighters are considered relatively less effective in combat, as they lack battle-hardening experience of other groups such as those from Chechnya.[14] As a result, some reports indicate Westerners are used for suicide missions, which obviously also prevents them from returning home to conduct attacks.[15]

Alternatively, foreign fighters may choose to participate in religious wars elsewhere.[16] In some cases, foreign fighters may decide never to return home. Instead, they may settle elsewhere to avoid arrest, which is increasingly appealing to them as more and more Western states criminalize traveling to, or fighting in, recognized conflict zones.

Evidence also suggests many of those who travel to fight in foreign conflicts become disillusioned quickly. Many find the reality to be far

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8   Thomas Hegghammer, as quoted by Andrew Gilligan, "Syria Suicide Bomber: When will Britain take Jihadis Seriously?" *The Telegraph*, February 14, 2014, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10638616/Syria-suicide-bomber-When-will-Britain-take-jihadis-seriously.html. "I suspect that the blowback rate [from Syria] will be relatively low," said Hegghammer, "but it could change."

9   Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 10.

10   Asim Qureshi, *Blowback: Foreign Fighters and the Threat They Pose* (London: CAGE, 2014), 8-9. In the early days of the Syrian civil war, many Western foreign fighters were motivated by a desire to help fellow Muslims against Bashar al-Assad's government, as noted in "It ain't Half Hot Here, Mum," *The Economist*, August 30, 2014.

11   Stephanie Huang, "Not All Foreign Fighters are Jihadists," *The Drum* (Australian Broadcasting Company), June 4, 2015, www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-05/huang-not-all-foreign-fighters-are-jihadists/6523562.

12   Mary Anne Weaver, "Her Majesty's Jihadists," *New York Times Magazine*, April 14, 2015.

13   As quoted in 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), 20.

14   Comments made by a US intelligence analyst assigned to Europe during an unclassified discussion on the foreign fighter threat, Zagreb, Croatia, June 11, 2015.

15   Ibid.; Barak Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 201; and comments made by a US officer assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency during an unclassified discussion on the foreign fighter threat, Zagreb, Croatia, June 11, 2015.

16   Peter Neumann, as quoted in Weaver, "Her Majesty's Jihadists."

different from what they were led to believe by recruiters, social media, or other propaganda.[17] Others become disillusioned because they are prevented from engaging in actual fighting. There is evidence those who volunteer to fight abroad are viewed with suspicion by local fighters, who fear some have been sent by foreign intelligence services.[18] As a result, some get turned down by Islamic extremist organizations while others spend weeks or months in menial tasks, unrelated to combat.

Finally, others are arrested or otherwise intercepted by intelligence services or border security personnel, either going to or coming back from Syria and Iraq. Recent reports indicate Turkish officials in particular have begun to gain better control of their lengthy borders with both Syria and Iraq.[19] Additionally, some of the very tools foreign fighter networks rely upon for recruitment and inspiration – especially social media and the internet – provide an effective vehicle for intelligence services to learn about, track, and investigate foreign fighter activity in the West.

Skeptics also discount the threat of ISIS or other foreign fighters hiding among migrants heading to Europe. First, sending foreign fighters into Europe by way of migrant flows is risky – many migrant ships fail to make it, and others are seized by authorities. Second, ISIS must conserve resources and consolidate its positions in Syria, where it faces a Russian-backed Assad regime, and in Iraq, where it faces an Iranian- and American-backed, Shiite-dominated regime. The combination of poor odds and limited resources means sending fighters to Europe via migrant flows is a particularly ineffective and inefficient methodology.[20]

Serious and Significant

In contrast to skeptics, many see in the available evidence a major security threat that is only getting worse. Those who argue the threat is significant point out that regardless of the extent of the volunteer blowback, foreign fighters with battlefield experience are capable of committing more lethal attacks than those without it.[21]

Secondly, those who see the threat as significant maintain ISIS views the United States and the West as strategic enemies.[22] They point to Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the Islamic State's chief spokesman, who proclaimed, "We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at

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17   Shiraz Maher and Peter R. Neumann, "Boris Johnson's Proposal for British Fighters in Syria and Iraq is Dangerous and Counterproductive," *The Independent (UK)*, August 26, 2014, www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/boris-johnsons-proposal-for-british-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-is-dangerous-and-counterproductive-9692303.html. Also, comments to the author made by a US intelligence analyst assigned to Europe during an unclassified discussion on the foreign fighter threat, Zagreb, Croatia, June 11, 2015.

18   Weaver, "Her Majesty's Jihadists."

19   Erin Cunningham, "The Flow of Jihadists into Syria Dries Up as Turkey Cracks Down on the Border," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2015.

20   Christian Nellemann, as quoted in Danny Kemp, "Europe Migrant Terror Threat Overblown: Experts," *Agence France Presse*, May 22, 2015.

21   Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," 11.

22   Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/.

the slave market."[23] They also note that in January 2015, ISIS released a video via social media networking sites reiterating the group's encouragement of lone wolf attacks in Western countries, specifically calling for attacks against soldiers, law enforcement, and intelligence personnel.

In fact, a growing number of cases appear to substantiate or validate this perspective. Officials in Australia, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom have recently disrupted terrorist plots, and in some cases individuals linked to ISIS, or other violent extremist groups, have attacked security officers.[24] For example, in December 2014, a French national entered a police station in Joue-les-Tours near the city of Tours in central France, and began stabbing police officers in a violent extremism attack before being killed by police. In September and October 2014, British and Australian authorities separately thwarted attacks targeting local law enforcement – those arrested in each of these scenarios had suspected ties to ISIS.

Thirdly, according to US officials, the flow of potential terrorists to Syria is greater than it has been for any other theater of conflict in decades – more than Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia.[25] To date, the United States estimates that over 20,000 foreign fighters have traveled to Syria from more than 90 different countries; of this number, at least 3,400 have come from Western countries. As noted earlier, the largest numbers of Western foreign fighters are believed to come from France, Britain, Belgium, and Germany, but in per capita terms Kosovo, Belgium, and Denmark lead in Europe.

Accordingly, many foreign fighters – more than in past conflicts – have Western passports. With such passports, and thanks to the Schengen Agreement and other visa-free travel regimes, crossing borders in the West is relatively easy. Moreover, Iraq and Syria are geographically much closer than Afghanistan or Somalia, and hence easier for West Europeans to travel to.

Meanwhile, US officials also maintain Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) continues to pose one of the greatest threats to the West.[26] In addition to plots to cause large-scale loss of life, including by attacking transportation infrastructure, AQAP is evidently capable of encouraging, inspiring, and even directing individual or lone-wolf attacks in the West.[27]

23   As quoted in Caleb Weiss, "Islamic State Spokesman Again Threatens West in New Speech," *Long War Journal*, September 21, 2014, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/09/islamic_state_spokesman_again.php.

24   Michael Steinbach, Assistant Director, Counterterrorism Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Official Statement before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Washington, DC, February 11, 2015, www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/the-urgent-threat-of-foreign-fighters-and-homegrown-terror.

25   Nicholas J. Rasmussen, "Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror," Statement before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Washington, DC, February 11, 2015, www.docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM00/20150211/102901/HHRG-114-HM00-Wstate-RasmussenN-20150211.pdf.

26   Michael Steinbach, Assistant Director, Counterterrorism Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Official Statement before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Washington, DC, February 11, 2015, www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/the-urgent-threat-of-foreign-fighters-and-homegrown-terror.

27   Ibid., and Priya Joshi, "Chalie Hebdo Paris Shooting: MI5 Head Warns Al-Qaeda are Now Plotting 'Large Scale Massacre' in Britain," *International Business Times*, January 9, 2015, www.ibtimes.co.uk/mi5-head-warns-al-qaeda-are-plotting-large-scale-massacre-britain-1482583.

AQAP's online English-language magazine *Inspire* regularly encourages lone wolves to conduct attacks on Western targets. The March 2014 edition promoted the use of car bombs in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, specifically aimed at "sports events in which tens of thousands attend, election campaigns, festivals and other gathering [*sic*]. The important thing is that you target people and not buildings."[28] The December 2014 edition encouraged lone wolves to carry out small arms attacks and provided detailed instructions for constructing a bomb. The Tsarnaev brothers reportedly used similar instructions to construct explosives used in the Boston Marathon bombings.[29]

Indeed, the lone-wolf problem is potentially even more challenging than that of centrally-planned Al Qaeda or ISIS attacks. Both organizations use high-quality, traditional media platforms – such as *Inspire* magazine mentioned above – as well as widespread social media campaigns to propagate extremist doctrine.[30] The recently attempted attack on a provocative cartoon contest in Texas typifies both the danger as well as the difficulty in countering it.[31]

An Increasing Role for IGOs

Western countries have implemented an array of individual responses, including criminal provisions, preventative and punitive administrative tools, and counter- or de-radicalization measures. Within Europe, most states have addressed the foreign-fighter challenge at both departure and return stages through a mix of repressive and preventive measures.[32] These steps reflect the conventional wisdom that a comprehensive approach is necessary, one spanning law enforcement as well as preventative measures, and including tactics such as stepped up border security, tightened immigration controls, and measures to counter violent extremism.

At the same time, a consensus is emerging that while primary responsibility for dealing with this challenge rests with individual states, intergovernmental organizations can play important supporting roles.[33] This is especially so in standardizing common practices, sharing information, and institutionalizing *ad hoc* arrangements.

In support of such steps, in September 2014, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2178. This resolution called on all UN

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28   As quoted in Lazar Berman, "Al-Qaeda Magazine: Strike NY, DC with Car Bombs," *The Times of Israel*, March 19, 2014, www.timesofisrael.com/al-qaeda-magazine-strike-ny-dc-with-car-bombs/.

29   Abby Ohlheiser, "NYPD Beefs up Times Square Security after Online Call for 'Lone Wolf' Attacks," *The Washington Post*, September 18, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2014/09/18/nypd-beefs-up-times-square-security-after-online-call-for-lone-wolf-attacks.

30   Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, "ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon," *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2015, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/isis-and-the-foreign-fighter-problem/387166/.

31   Associated Press, "Texas Incident Fuels Concern about Lone-Wolf Terror Attacks," *The Chicago Tribune*, May 7, 2015, www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-lonewolf-terror-attacks-20150506-story.html#page=1.

32   European Parliament Research Service, *Foreign Fighters: Member States' Responses and EU Action in an International Context* (Brussels: European Parliament Research Service, February 2015), 6.

33   The Council of Europe, "Foreign Fighters and Returnees from a Counter-Terrorism Perspective, in Particular with Regard to Syria," Memo 16768/13, as cited in Asim Qureshi, *Blowback: Foreign Fighters and the Threat They Pose* (London: CAGE, 2014), 1; and European Commission, "Fighting Terrorism at EU Level, an Overview of Commission's Actions, Measures and Initiatives," January 11, 2015, www.europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-3140_en.htm.

member states to ensure increased border security, "by effective border controls and controls on issuance of identity papers and travel documents, and through measures for preventing counterfeiting, forgery or fraudulent use of identity papers and travel documents."[34] The resolution also called on member states to employ "evidence-based traveler risk assessment and screening procedures," and for states to arrest foreign fighters travelling to or returning from conflict areas.[35] Finally, it called upon member states to develop and further enhance their efforts to counter violent extremism, placing increasing emphasis on pro-active, preventative measures.[36]

Meanwhile, the EU has been somewhat slow in engaging the foreign fighter problem, largely for two reasons. First, the recent EU electoral cycle and the changing of the guard in the EU Commission resulted in a lack of senior-level attention to the foreign fighter threat.[37] Second, data protection and privacy concerns have been raised by civil libertarians and center-left members of the European Parliament.[38]

Over the last year evidence increasingly suggests the EU is expanding its efforts to coordinate the domestic responses of member states and to support other member state efforts with regard to the foreign-fighter challenge. In June 2014, the European Council promulgated a series of guidelines emphasizing the importance of judicial and police cooperation, a reinforced coordination role for Europol and Eurojust, and the development of an EU Passenger Name Record system.[39] In October 2014, the European Union adopted a strategy for countering ISIS and the threat of foreign fighters. The strategy itself is classified, but the outline was released publicly, and emphasizes the necessity of developing best practices, sharing lessons learned, building counter-narratives, identifying recruitment and facilitation networks, and prosecuting foreign fighters as necessary.[40]

Most recently, in April 2015, the European Union launched a new five-year security strategy that includes a number of initiatives aimed at the foreign fighter threat.[41] Key elements of the strategy include establishment of a European counter-terrorist center, the launch of an EU forum on information technology (IT) to encourage greater cooperation between member states and the IT sector, and increased funding for programs such as the European Criminal Records Information System.

34   UN Security Council, Resolution 2178 (2014), adopted on September 24, 2014, p. 4, available at www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2178%20%282014%29.

35   Ibid.

36   Ibid., 6-7.

37   Teemu Sinkkonen, *War on Two Fronts: The EU Perspective on the Foreign Terrorist Fighters of ISIL* (Helsinki, Finland: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, January 2015), 3.

38   Nikolaj Nielsen, "MEPs Clash with EU Officials Over Foreign Fighters," *EUobserver*, November 5, 2014, www.euobserver.com/justice/126396.

39   Conclusions of the European Council Meeting, EUCO 79/14, Brussels, June 26-27, 2014, www.data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-79-2014-INIT/en/pdf. The European Council is comprised of all heads of state or government of the member states and the president of the European Commission. Europol, or the European Police Office, is the law enforcement agency of the EU, handling criminal intelligence and combating serious international organized crime. Eurojust is the EU agency responsible for judicial cooperation among member states in criminal matters.

40   General Secretariat of the Council, "Outline of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy for Syria and Iraq, with Particular Focus on Foreign Fighters," 5369/15, Brussels, January 16, 2015, www.data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5369-2015-INIT/en/pdf.

41   Suzanne Lynch, "EU Reveals New Five-Year Strategy to Combat Terrorism," *The Irish Times*, April 29, 2015..

Similarly, NATO has been playing an important role in countering the foreign fighter threat through its efforts in intelligence sharing. The sharing of relevant intelligence forms just one part of the alliance's broader approach to addressing the threat from terrorism, which is spelled out in "NATO's Military Concept for Defence Against Terrorism."[42] This concept, known as MC-472 in NATO bureaucratic parlance, was developed by the NATO's Military Committee in late 2001 and then approved by the alliance heads of state and government at the November 2002 Prague summit. It outlines ways in which the alliance might contribute to member state efforts against terrorism in four areas:

- Antiterrorism (essentially defensive measures);

- Consequence Management (dealing with, and reducing, the effects of a terrorist attack once it has taken place);

- Counterterrorism (primarily offensive measures); and,

- Military Cooperation.

Under the heading of anti-terrorism, the alliance concept noted the importance of intelligence sharing and, related to it, the necessity of "effective intelligence."[43] In order to help share intelligence as well as assess and analyze terrorist threats, the alliance also established a Terrorist Threat Intelligence Unit (TTIU) at the Prague Summit. The TTIU performed liaison functions between member-state intelligence services and national terrorism coordination centers.

However, the alliance has struggled to achieve an appropriate degree of effectiveness in terms of both intelligence content and the process of intelligence sharing. During a December 2005 workshop – four years after the Military Committee had completed its work, and three years after the alliance had formally declared the necessity of more and better intelligence sharing for the purposes of defending against terrorism – a group of transatlantic intelligence experts concluded the alliance needed to "increase co-operation and intelligence sharing among national intelligence agencies" in the context of fighting terrorism.[44] This same group noted a 'substantial' amount of sharing, but when it came to intelligence assessments (as opposed to source-derived, raw intelligence), there was still much room for improvement, especially in the following areas:

- Sharing intelligence related to NATO's clearly defined missions, including those in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and the Mediterranean.

- Improving organizational structures within NATO regarding intelligence.

- Providing for regular, informal personal interactions among intelligence operatives.

- Integrating law enforcement purposes in intelligence sharing.

The following year, the alliance took a major step forward when it created a NATO Intelligence Fusion Centre, thereby addressing

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42   International Military Staff, "NATO's Military Concept for Defence Against Terrorism," *NATO*, January 4, 2011, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69482.htm.

43   Ibid.

44   "The Changing Face of Intelligence: NATO Advanced Research Workshop – Report," The Pluscarden Programme for the Study of Global Terrorism and Intelligence, St. Antony's College, Oxford, December 9-10, 2005, www-old.sant.ox.ac.uk/centres/Nato_conf_report_0106.pdf.

concerns noted at the December 2005 workshop and elsewhere. Based in the United Kingdom, and initially operational in October 2006, the purpose of the fusion center is to provide intelligence to warn of potential crises and to support the planning and execution of NATO operations. In 2010-2011, the alliance attempted to better fuse civilian and military intelligence inputs by implementing a significant intelligence reform effort at NATO headquarters. This initiative saw the establishment of a new NATO Intelligence Unit, which subsumed the functions of the TTIU and provided the alliance with more crisis-prevention tools.[45]

Most recently, at the alliance's Wales summit in September 2014, NATO member states pledged to increase the exchange of information regarding returning foreign fighters, and Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg regularly references intelligence sharing through NATO as a primary means of countering the foreign fighter threat.[46] Additionally, the alliance has committed to improving its performance in terms of intelligence sharing, especially when it comes to identification of likely problems before they metastasize into crises. Specifically, the commander of NATO's Allied Command Operations (ACO), General Phil Breedlove, has committed to changing what he calls the, "culture of intelligence sharing."[47]

However, despite reform efforts, intelligence sharing through NATO in the absence of a named operation or a specific ongoing or impending crisis continues to be challenging due largely to the counterintelligence threat created by multilateral intelligence sharing. Widening the audience for intelligence products necessarily increases the risk the intelligence will be compromised in some way.[48] Another important reason is most of the intelligence sharing within Europe, as well as between the United States and its European allies, occurs bilaterally through national law enforcement agencies.[49] Additionally, there is no single civilian official in charge of intelligence within NATO. Instead, the Deputy Secretary General is typically saddled with intelligence oversight responsibility, among many other duties. This structure makes it easier for NATO's various intelligence-related entities, including the Intelligence Unit, to avoid transparency and adequate information sharing.[50] Finally, the aftershocks of Edward Snowden's revelations regarding US spying on its allies continue to be felt, inhibiting closer cooperation and coordination between the United States and some members of NATO such as

45   Jamie Shea, "Keeping NATO Relevant," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 2012, www.carnegieendowment.org/files/keeping_nato_relevant.pdf.

46   NATO Heads of State and Government, Wales Summit Declaration, Press Release (2014) 120, September 5, 2014; also see for example the joint press conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, Brussels, April 29, 2015, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_119074.htm?selectedLocale=en; and the press conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Brussels, January 30, 2015, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_117022.htm.

47   Mike Corder, "NATO Military Commander: Alliance Needs to Improve Intelligence Sharing," *Associated Press*, March 27, 2015, www.bigstory.ap.org/article/b4158b2e44444024ad6129665ff12766/nato-military-chief-alliance-needs-better-share-intel.

48   Derek S. Reveron, "Old Allies, New Friends: Intelligence-Sharing in the War on Terror," *Orbis* 50, no. 3(Summer 2006): 453-468.

49   Renée de Nevers, "NATO's International Security Role in the Terrorist Era," *International Security* 31, no. 4 (Spring, 2007): 34-66.

50   For example, the International Military Staff also has an Intelligence division (IMS-INT). Brian R. Foster, *Enhancing the Efficiency of NATO Intelligence Under an ASG-I*, Strategy Research Project (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, March 2013), www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA589230.

Germany.[51] These challenges are unlikely to disappear overnight, and so it seems unlikely NATO will be able to improve intelligence sharing dramatically to counter the foreign fighter threat in the short run.

An Expanded Role for NATO?

Looking beyond intelligence sharing, could NATO also play a larger part, somehow better leveraging its unique capabilities and its inclusion of the United States? NATO is unlikely to play a significant role vis-à-vis the foreign-fighter challenge, especially if Western leaders and constituencies assess the threat is not significant. There are two primary reasons for this possibility. First, most European members of the alliance view the foreign-fighter threat as a challenge for domestic or state-level agencies to handle.[52] They may therefore be reluctant to see yet another issue-area securitized and handed to NATO, or they may simply believe greater emphasis should be placed on preventative or civilian reintegration measures. Instead, the EU and the UN – not the North Atlantic alliance – are viewed as more appropriate intergovernmental vehicles for cooperation. In fact, NATO's own "Policy Guidelines on Counter-Terrorism," approved by the alliance's heads of state and government during the Chicago summit in May 2012, explicitly describes NATO's role as one that supports "the broad, *UN-led* international effort to combat terrorism." It further notes "most counter terrorism tools remain primarily with national civilian and judicial authorities," and makes it clear "individual NATO members have primary responsibility for the protection of their populations and territories against terrorism."[53]

Alternatively, with its law enforcement-centric approach to counterterrorism and the importance it places on preventive measures, the European Union may be far better placed – at least in theory – than NATO to fulfill an intergovernmental role in support of state-level efforts.[54] However, even here, some argue the European Union may lack both the competencies and the capabilities necessary to play a major role.[55]

Second, NATO has struggled to master the speed, agility, and creativity necessary for successful information operations and strategic communications.[56] If the alliance itself has difficulty mastering these

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51   Anton Troianovski, "Germany Halts Some Intelligence Sharing With US," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2015, www.wsj.com/articles/germany-restricts-some-data-sharing-with-u-s-1431021158; and Richard Walker, "Intelligence Sharing: 'A Necessary Fact of Life'," *Deutsche Welle*, May 15, 2015, www.dw.com/en/intelligence-sharing-a-necessary-fact-of-life/a-18451009.

52   European Parliament Research Service, *Foreign Fighters*, 4; Letter to the Chairman from Lord West of Spithead, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Home Office, October 22, 2009, as found in "The Home Office's Response to Terrorist Attacks," Sixth Report of Session 2009-10, Volume 2, House of Commons (UK), Home Affairs Committee, Ev51.

53   North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO's Policy Guidelines On Counter-Terrorism," Chicago Summit, May 20-21, 2012, www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_topics/ct-policy-guidelines.pdf. Emphasis added.

54   Global Center on Cooperative Security, Human Security Collective and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, *Addressing the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon from a European Union Perspective: UN Security Council Resolution 2178, Legal Issues, and Challenges and Opportunities for EU Foreign Security and Development Policy*, Policy Brief (Goshen, IN: Global Center on Cooperative Security, December 2014), 14-15.

55   See for example, Oldrich Bures, *EU Counterterrorism Policy: A Paper Tiger?* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 2.

56   Andrew T. Wolff, "Crafting a NATO Brand: Bolstering Internal Support for the Alliance through Image Management," *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 1 (March 2014): 73-95.

skills, it seems unlikely it could play a leading role in helping its member states develop counter-narratives, which are collectively viewed as a primary center of gravity for ISIS and AQAP recruitment of European fighters.

Should the alliance expand its role in this issue area? Probably not, especially again if the threat is not deemed particularly significant. NATO is already dealing with an array of security challenges, at least one of which is far more existential than that posed by foreign fighters returning to conduct attacks in Europe. Specifically, the Russian annexation of Crimea and its invasion of the Donbas have fundamentally altered the security situation across the continent, and NATO members Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland feel particularly threatened and vulnerable.[57] Elsewhere, several allies in Southern Europe perceive migrant flows from North and Sub-Saharan Africa to be a growing threat, certainly economically and perhaps politically.[58] Meanwhile, the alliance is engaged in a counter-piracy mission off the Horn of Africa, a ballistic missile defense mission in Turkey, a counterterrorism mission in the Mediterranean Sea, and a training mission in Afghanistan. In short, NATO has its hands full with an array of issues and missions, all during a time when the it is under pressure to contain costs and reduce personnel strength.

Conversely, if the threat is determined to be significant, there may be some limited areas in which NATO can leverage its comparative advantages, including US membership. How and where the alliance might do this – and whether the US military and the Army in particular might contribute – depends on some of the unique characteristics of the threat, as described earlier in this article.

First, most experts, as well as some political leaders, acknowledge some foreign fighter and lone wolf attacks are inevitable.[59] A perfect defense is most likely impractical and certainly unaffordable. Hence, resilience – the ability to sustain and recover from an attack – is critical. NATO can help here by offering and continuing to refine its capabilities in providing support for civilian authorities, disaster mitigation, and command and control in crisis situations.

Within the United States, the US Army should continue to leverage initiatives such as the State Partnership Program (SPP). Through the SPP, the US reserve component – which is home to much of the US military's expertise in civil affairs and military support to civil authorities – engages foreign counterparts through exchanges, familiarization

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57   John R. Deni, "NATO's New Trajectories after the Wales Summit," *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 57-65.

58   It might be argued that the foreign fighter threat is a southern flank issue, given the geographic proximity of Syria, Iraq, and Libya to southern Europe (at least relative to northern Europe), and that NATO member states in southern Europe ought to naturally find the issue a more compelling one than northern or eastern European members of the alliance. However, this is not necessarily so. As shown in the table earlier in this article, foreign fighters come from all over Europe, not just the south, the north, the west, or the east. Furthermore, as discussed above, most recent foreign fighter attacks in Europe have occurred in western Europe. Therefore, the foreign fighter challenge is not easily categorized as a 'southern flank' issue, certainly not in the same way as instability in North Africa.

59   For example, see Ian Traynor, "Major Terrorist Attack is 'Inevitable' as Isis Fighters Return, Say EU Officials," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/25/major-terrorist-attack-inevitable-isis-eu; and Byman and Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid*, 23.

events, and educational activities. Adding foreign-fighter threat scenarios and themes to the SPP agenda would be a wise step.

Second, NATO needs to develop a better understanding of the philosophies and theologies of the various violent extremist organizations, since it appears that the blowback rate varies significantly depending on the foreign extremist group in question. Hundreds of Western foreign fighters went to fight in Somalia in the previous decade, but few of them returned to conduct terror attacks. In contrast, those who went to Afghanistan and Pakistan during the same period had a higher blowback rate.[60] The difference lies in the fact that the latter region is home to al Qaeda's global leadership, which has emphasized attacking targets in the West. Hence, a key independent variable here is whether the group in question strategically targets the West.

However, this is but one variable of perhaps several that are collectively necessary to provide NATO member state security and law enforcement agencies with the ability to discern individuals who deserve arrest and detention from those who simply ought to be denied a travel visa. Beyond the sharing of intelligence content that NATO is already engaged in to some degree, the alliance can help here by leveraging its considerable convening power. Specifically, it can create forums, including formal "Article 4" political consultations, for the exchange of information and best practices among defense, security, and law enforcement agencies, to include those from the United States. This may be particularly valuable to smaller allies, which lack the intelligence gathering and analysis resources of larger allies like the United States, Germany, France, or the United Kingdom. The US Army can contribute here by reducing bureaucratic hindrances to multinational educational and professional collaboration and by incentivizing the sharing of best counterterrorism practices with and among NATO allies.

Finally, even after years of fighting and operating side by side in a number of operations, and as argued in the preceding section, the process of sharing intelligence remains challenging within the alliance. It is arguably the most daunting of the alliance's interoperability challenges. This challenge is especially difficult for the United States, which has a great deal of intelligence assets and information to offer, but which suffers from a decades-long culture of over-classification as well as the more recent hangover associated with the Edward Snowden revelations.[61]

Over-classification was identified by the 9/11 Commission as the leading reason the US Government failed to detect and disrupt the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. In order to try to overcome this problem, the US Congress passed the *Reducing Over-Classification Act* in October 2010, which was subsequently signed into law by President Obama and which requires, among other things, the Director of National Intelligence to produce annually an over-classification report for Congress. Despite

60   Thomas Hegghammer, "Will ISIS 'Weaponize' Foreign Fighters?" *CNN Online*, October 17, 2014, www.cnn.com/2014/10/16/opinion/hegghammer-isis-foreign-fighters/.

61   Steven Aftergood, "Telling Secrets," *Foreign Policy*, October 18, 2010; Ronan Farrow, "The Real Concern: Why are so Many US Government Documents Classified?" *The Guardian*, June 28, 2013, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/28/nsa-surveillance-too-many-documents-classified; and Elizabeth Goitein and J. William Leonard, "America's Unnecessary Secrets," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2011.

these measures, over-classification remains a challenge, for the United States and others. Member states could help here by changing personnel incentives so that sharing – by developing releasable intelligence assessments in the first instance, for example – is encouraged and rewarded on a consistent basis. NATO could play a part by pressing its existing intelligence entities, including the Intelligence Fusion Centre as well as the Intelligence Unit, to facilitate greater intelligence sharing among and between national security and national law enforcement agencies, further breaking down barriers and facilitating the *process* of intelligence sharing. The US Army could assist here by developing and promoting a culture of appropriate classification and intelligence sharing, and by working to eliminate the zero-defects mentality when it comes to classification decisions.

Conclusion

The fighter threat is potentially significant, as evidenced at least in part by several high-profile terror attacks and uncovered plots over the last year or more. It seems likely some number of unreported plots have also been thwarted. Disagreement remains over just *how* significant the threat actually is, or how it stacks up against other, seemingly more compelling threats confronting Western interests today.

If the threat is not terribly significant, it seems unlikely the West will call upon NATO to play a major role. Other intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations, and especially the European Union, have the necessary expertise, skills, and organizational culture to make tangible differences in how states manage the foreign fighter challenge. And given pressing security challenges in Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, and beyond, it is difficult to argue that NATO should elbow its way into the room.

However, if the foreign fighter threat is deemed significant, the West should indeed consider leveraging NATO and its unique capabilities, assets, and attributes – not the least of which is US membership. Strengthening Western resilience against an attack by promoting effective military support to civil authorities, refining the content and sophistication of Western intelligence, and further chipping away at bureaucratic and cultural hurdles to intelligence sharing are all things NATO could assist with. Moreover, these are all areas in which the US military can also play a supporting role. To the degree necessary depending upon the scope of the threat, the West should seek to leverage all available tools at its disposal, including NATO.[62]