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Foreign Fighters Trickle into the Syrian Rebellion

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Foreign Islamists are beginning to play a role in the fight against Assad's forces, albeit a small one.

Ever since the Syrian uprising began to show signs of becoming an armed rebellion, President Bashar al-Assad and other regime officials have painted the opposition as terrorists or other foreign actors who have penetrated the country in order to create anarchy. Although that general characterization is inaccurate, a small but steady stream of foreign Islamists is entering the fight against Assad's forces. More worrisome is that some mainstream clerical voices as well as violent Islamists are now calling for jihad in Syria.

WHY SYRIA?

One of the reasons why the ground is fertile for greater jihadist penetration in Syria is because the regime turned a blind eye to foreign fighters passing through the country to join al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004-2007, the height of the post-Saddam insurgency. Although the facilitation networks established during those years became less active in 2009-2010, they appear to have reignited of late. Therefore, the jihadist elements currently entering or already active in Syria are not starting from scratch -- they probably still have contacts to help them bring in more fighters from Iraq, North Africa, and Europe.

In Libya, many worried that NATO's involvement would spur jihadist penetration, but that did not occur on any appreciable scale. In Syria, however, the past six months have seen the arrival of significant numbers of foreign fighters. One difference is that al-Qaeda and key global jihadist ideologues have actively incited individuals to join the fight in Syria. For example, Sheikh Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, a Mauritanian considered the most important such ideologue still at large, has endorsed the new Syrian jihadist organization Jabhat al-Nusra.

HOW MANY ARE THERE?

Although no reliable data is available regarding the number of foreign fighters in Syria, many sources have discussed their presence. A broad survey of reporting on the issue found at least thirty-three English, Arabic, and French news accounts that mentioned statements by foreign fighters and facilitators in Syria, confirmed deaths of such individuals, or confirmed arrests at the border. Jihadist forums also discuss such fighters, occasionally mentioning individuals who have been "martyred" in Syria (though it is uncertain whether these sources are describing the same individuals or separate cases).

With the above limitations in mind, the collective evidence suggests that between 700 and 1,400 foreign fighters have entered or attempted to enter the country this year alone. If estimates of the size of the Syrian insurgency are accurate -- the latest figure is around 18,000 fighters -- then foreign fighters make up about 4-7 percent of that total. The lower end of that range seems more plausible at present. It is worth noting that the Assad regime has identified only around forty individuals as jihadists, according to a list Damascus sent to the UN in May.

Comparing Syria's situation to jihads in other Muslim-majority countries is instructive. For example, despite the lack of precise data, experts suggest that foreigners made up 10-15 percent of the fighters active in Afghanistan in the 1980s, 1-3 percent of those in Bosnia in the 1990s, 3 percent of those in Chechnya in the 1990s, 1-3 percent of those in Afghanistan in the past decade, and 4-10 percent of those in Iraq post-Saddam. Therefore, the current estimate for Syria is not an outlier, but situated toward the median.

WHO ARE THEY?

The foreign fighters in Syria reportedly include Arabs (Lebanese, Iraqis, Jordanians, Palestinians, Kuwaitis, Tunisians, Libyans, Algerians, Egyptians, Saudis, Sudanese, and Yemenis) as well as other Muslims, including South and Central Asians (Afghans, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis) and Westerners (Belgian, British, French, and American). The largest contingents -- totaling approximately 500-900 fighters -- seem to hail from Syria's neighbors: namely Lebanese, Iraqis, Palestinians, and Jordanians, many of whom previously fought U.S. forces in Iraq. The second-largest contingent hails from North Africa: around 75-300 fighters from Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria.

According to media reports, the majority of these individuals arrived in Syria via Lebanon or Turkey. Smaller numbers have trekked through Iraq and Jordan.

Although some of the fighters lack prior training or battlefield experience, others have either participated in previous jihads or attended recent training camps. Some reports state that such camps have been set up in Lebanon and Libya. In Lebanon, jihadists appear to be using camps established in the northern Beqa Valley in 2008, following Hizballah's takeover of Beirut. And in Libya, camps have reportedly been established in the desert near Hon and in the Green Mountain area in the east, serving North African and European fighters.

No full picture is available yet regarding these fighters' affiliations. Many are reportedly linking up with the main rebel force, the Free Syrian Army, while others (especially the Lebanese) are establishing their own independent battalions or militias. Elements of the

Lebanese group Fatah al-Islam and the multinational Abdullah Azzam Brigades have also crossed into Syria; they are not fighting under those banners, however, but simply as "mujahedin." In addition, French media reported in December that a Libyan detachment led by Abd al-Mehdi al-Harati -- a close associate of Abdul Hakim Belhaj, former leader of the defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group -- had joined the conflict. There is no hard evidence that the homegrown jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra has recruited foreign fighters, but at least some of them have likely connected with the movement.

IMPLICATIONS

Although the trickle of foreign fighters into Syria seems to have picked up in recent months, they still comprise a very small portion of those battling the Assad regime. Any verified evidence of such fighters no doubt plays into Assad's rhetoric, but he has grossly exaggerated a small phenomenon -- all estimates indicate that well over 90 percent of the fighters are Syrian and non-jihadist.

Nevertheless, the issue bears watching -- foreign fighters in Syria have yet to have a known force-multiplying effect on the level seen in Iraq, but the longer the conflict persists and the more jihadists attempt to join in, the more likely it is that they might punch above their weight in influence. Therefore, Washington should work with its allies in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq to help better secure the border from infiltration.

In addition, Washington must contend with extremist rhetoric emanating from Saudi Arabia. Some Saudi clerics are exhorting individuals to wage violent jihad against the Assad regime and have used deliberate anti-Shiite language. The kingdom's religious establishment has denounced such declarations -- a development that Washington should applaud. Saudi state support for Syrians fighting in their own country is to be welcomed, but Saudi clerics urging young non-Syrians to wage jihad on their own should be discouraged.

Another issue is what the foreign fighters will do after the struggle is over. Following the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, some fighters returned home and attempted to overthrow their own governments using the new skills they had gained. Others got caught up in al-Qaeda's worldview, directing their efforts against the West. Washington must therefore begin thinking about how to curb such scenarios in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict.

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