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Foreign Fighters and U.S. Policy: Tracking Mobilization Hubs to Stem the Flow

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By examining the growth of such hubs during the Islamic State's caliphate years, two experts assess how the international community can limit recruitment in these areas and address local grievances.

On April 22, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Nate Rosenblatt and Naureen Chowdhury Fink. Author of the new Institute study "[*A Caliphate That Gathered: Addressing the Challenge of Jihadist Foreign Fighter Hubs*](#)," Rosenblatt is an International Security Program fellow at New America. Chowdhury Fink is executive director of the Soufan Center and former senior policy advisor on counterterrorism and sanctions at the UK Mission to the UN. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Nate Rosenblatt

Five years ago, an Islamic State (IS) fighter smuggled himself and his family out of the organization's so-called caliphate and across the border into Turkey. Before leaving his life as a member of the IS internal security division, he stole a flash drive from his superior's desk, later offering it to European authorities in exchange for immunity from prosecution. This drive contained registration forms for approximately 3,500 fighters from around the world, making it the largest cache of publicly available IS registration data.

The data is particularly valuable due to its specificity. It reveals that many foreign fighters came from localized recruitment "hubs" of varying size, ranging from individual city neighborhoods to larger regions of a country. Some of these hubs were located in major urban centers, and others were more rural, but all of them produced disproportionately high volumes of fighters. In the Middle East, hubs that comprised just 11 percent of the region's total population contributed roughly 75 percent of its foreign fighters.

The factors that drove these fighters to the jihad in Syria and Iraq varied. For many, financial incentives outweighed the risks associated with joining IS. Others believed that affiliating themselves with the organization would protect them from rival armed groups or local authorities. And many were likely mirroring the actions of friends and family—for example, in one hub located in the suburbs of Tunis, 81 percent of documented recruits indicated that they knew at least one person who had traveled to Syria to fight. Thus, as the scope of jihadist activity expanded in both the caliphate and the hubs, the likelihood of further individuals joining IS from one of these hubs increased as well.

Similarly, the larger the hub, the more easily IS was able to recruit new members there. In many hubs, IS members or affiliated individuals dominated the local security apparatus, so residents often found that joining the organization was their safest option. This penetration also gave IS substantial insight into local personalities and grievances, enabling recruiters to compile case studies on potential fighters and select the most advantageous circumstances for making their approach.

Several notable features distinguish fighters who originated in hubs from those who did not. First, "hub fighters" were on average three years younger than other foreign fighters. Second, they were less likely to be married or have children. Third, they were half as likely to have previous experience fighting abroad.

The latter characteristic is emblematic of the serious threat posed by hubs: they are not just the main engines of recruitment during major jihadist campaigns, but also a gateway to international jihadism when such conflicts have ebbed. IS hubs pull disproportionate numbers of recruits into the ranks of foreign fighters—militants who are known

to exacerbate and prolong conflicts around the world. Many of these individuals may not have a battlefield to fight on at the moment, but they still pose a threat to local populations and U.S. national security.

Unfortunately, current conditions in and around recruitment hubs all but ensure a future wave of foreign fighters. The deterioration of socioeconomic prospects and political freedoms in many Middle Eastern states is exacerbating grievances and inhibiting citizens' ability to speak out without fear of retaliation by the state. Additionally, the abundance of "internationalized" civil wars in the region often inspires individuals to push back against foreign invaders and view conflicts as ideological battles. Meanwhile, a widespread unwillingness to repatriate foreign fighters is creating a cadre of semiprofessional soldiers who can migrate from conflict to conflict. By abandoning their citizens who joined IS, governments are indirectly contributing to the next wave.

Naureen Chowdhury Fink

Much of the international community's appetite for investing in more-effective counterterrorism strategies waned after IS lost its territorial caliphate. Yet now is the ideal time to focus attention and resources on prevention strategies instead of simply waiting for the next crisis to surface.

During peaks of terrorist violence, a great deal of attention is paid to the question of ideology as a motivating factor, but one must also analyze the emergence of foreign fighter hubs, since they illustrate the critical role played by a fighter's community. When an individual's friends and family are involved with an extremist group, that person's access and attraction to the group are greatly affected. These affiliations and loyalties can stretch far beyond immediate, local relationships. Many fighters, particularly in the first wave following the Syrian uprising, were compelled by a sense of vicarious grievance and affinity for those in their perceived communities abroad who were coming under immense pressure. Such motivations helped draw in foreigners from countries far outside the Levant, including Western Europe and North America.

Another powerful motivator was the presence of women and children appearing to go about their daily lives in the caliphate. Such imagery helped legitimize the IS narrative that its governance was suitable not only for frontline fighters, but also for their families. Approximately 20 percent of foreign fighters were female—although they are often depicted as helpless victims tricked into immigrating to the caliphate, they had just as many motivations to join IS as their male counterparts. Some were indeed manipulated or forced into the journey, but others left home out of a fervent belief in the organization's cause. And the fact that many women have shown continued loyalty to IS even after the caliphate's collapse helps preserve the group's legitimacy.

To stem the next flood of foreign fighters, counterterrorism practitioners must first address the conditions that make recruitment hubs so conducive to extremism. Here, the United States can draw on its local and international partnerships to foster development and build resiliency. In doing so, however, officials must be careful not to further stigmatize and isolate these hubs, which often emerge due in part to past stigmatization stemming from ethnic, class, or tribal conflicts. This will require consultation with and active participation by experienced local actors who can identify a community's grievances and earn its trust. Additionally, civil society partners can engage individuals who hold such grievances and provide them with credible pathways to action at the state or local level.

International support can complement U.S. initiatives. The UN and other bodies have made considerable investments in capacity-building, and these efforts should be expanded to human rights and gender-sensitive security delivery. Legal cooperation is necessary as well, not only to stop the flow of fighters and bring violent actors to justice, but also to ensure that states do not abuse counterterrorism missions in order to suppress peaceful dissent.

Moreover, the same social networks that cultivate foreign fighter hubs can be a key part of the solution too. A tight-knit community increases the likelihood that a vulnerable individual's path to radicalization will be interrupted by a

concerned friend or family member. Thus, it is essential to provide these communities with assistance when they ask for it.

Such factors also underscore the importance of repatriating foreign fighters and shifting attention to accountability and deradicalization. When states refuse to repatriate, they exacerbate grievances among disaffected populations and enable networks of fighters to organize in places [like al-Hawl refugee camp](#). Instead, more individuals should be permitted to return, provided they go through the appropriate risk assessment screening processes before being reintroduced to their communities. How these former IS adherents are treated by their communities and governments will not only determine their individual reintegration prospects, but also affect where and how future recruitment hubs form.

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