

Shutting the Door to the Islamic State

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Sep 9, 2017

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/ghlq-albab-fy-wjh-tnzym-dash\)](/ar/policy-analysis/ghlq-albab-fy-wjh-tnzym-dash)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

As foreign terrorist fighters return home, Western officials must prioritize international information-sharing and cooperation at critical border crossings.

The Islamic State (IS) is all but defeated in Mosul and now on its heels in Deir al-Zour. Together with the battle for Raqqa, the Islamic State faces increasing pressure to project power and influence even as its physical caliphate crumbles. The IS leadership has become less centralized, delegating responsibilities to local commanders and encouraging external attacks by sympathizers and members. According to a [UN Security Council report \(https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/573&referer=/english/&Lang=E\)](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/573&referer=/english/&Lang=E), IS has begun sending money to areas where the group does not currently have affiliates, in preparation for the fall of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria and to ensure its ability to carry out attacks abroad.

With each battlefield defeat, IS evolves a bit more from a militant group governing territory to a terrorist and insurgent group operating without fixed territory. And with that progression, the terrorist threat the group poses in the region and beyond increases as well. While homegrown violent extremism (HVE) is one aspect of this threat, countries must also be concerned about the return of battle-hardened foreign terrorist fighters.

Foreign fighters trained by the Islamic State are fleeing from Iraq and Syria, hoping to return to their home countries. Of the approximately 30,000 fighters in Iraq, 9,000 are from East Asia, 8,000 from Europe, 6,000 from Tunisia, and 3,000 from Saudi Arabia. The European Union counterterrorism coordinator [reported \(http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/foreign-fighters-iraq-isis-counterterrorism.html\)](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/foreign-fighters-iraq-isis-counterterrorism.html) that about 1,500 Europeans, predominantly from France and Belgium, have returned home after being trained by IS in Syria and Iraq.

The UN report suggests that returning foreign fighters should be grouped into three general categories as authorities assess the danger they present to their home countries upon their return from Syria and Iraq. The first category includes disenfranchised individuals who return having been put off and disappointed by the stark difference

between the Islamic State's utopian propaganda and its actual ideology and practices. These, the UN suggests, may be suitable candidates for deradicalization and reintegration into society. The second category describes a smaller group of foreign fighters, who return even more radicalized than when they first departed and no less committed to IS. These individuals may well return with the intention of carrying out terrorist attacks in their home country and present a serious security threat. The final category includes individuals who have severed ties with IS due to their disillusionment with the organization but remain radicalized and could be willing to join another terrorist group.

Such distinctions are important to understanding the different challenges that returning foreign fighters pose to their home countries and to the countering violent extremism (CVE) programs being developed to address the returnees, especially in Europe. But these must be coupled with much-improved border security efforts, especially since some of the most dangerous returning foreign terrorist fighters are likely to travel back home not on their legitimate travel documents using their true names, but using sophisticated forgeries and false documents to cross borders.

This is not a new phenomenon -- in 2001, the [CIA documented](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/369169-2001-07-06-expanding-links-between-alien.html) (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/369169-2001-07-06-expanding-links-between-alien.html>) its concern about the "expanding links between alien smugglers and extremists," noting how terrorist groups, from Hamas and Hezbollah to the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, were then using such smuggling networks to facilitate terrorist travel -- but it is now more sophisticated than ever.

There are several tools that could help address the threat before these individuals even cross international borders. Such measures, however, can only be effective with sufficient international cooperation:

- Interpol has developed a number of tools that have been implemented by UN member states at their borders, including facial recognition software, a global foreign terrorist fighter database, and a fingerprint database. Member states investigating individuals can send pictures to Interpol, which will use its facial recognition software to electronically compare the pictures with those stored in the database. Interpol is working to make facial recognition capabilities available to officers at border checkpoints.
- The [Passenger Name Record \(PNR\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/preparing-to-counter-isis-2.0-european-ct-efforts-since-charlie-hebdo) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/preparing-to-counter-isis-2.0-european-ct-efforts-since-charlie-hebdo>) could be another important tool to facilitate information exchange at borders. The PNR provides UN member states with data from airlines that can help identify high-risk travelers and prevent them from moving freely across Europe and elsewhere.
- Lastly, the Schengen Information System II (SIS II) compiles the personal information of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters and creates a more complete profile of adversaries for intelligence and border patrol officials. In one example, SIS II identified a foreign terrorist fighter attempting to return to the Netherlands. Using SIS II, authorities were able to identify and question him upon his arrival to the Netherlands airport.

Had these systems been in place earlier, Europe may have been able to prevent attacks like the 2016 Brussels bombing. While [Belgian federal police maintained a list of terrorist suspects](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/opinion/brussels-attacks-raise-questions-on-readiness.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/opinion/brussels-attacks-raise-questions-on-readiness.html>), including those who had returned from fighting in Iraq and Syria, they could have benefited from information sharing and electronic connections to Interpol at border crossings.

We must not mistake the Islamic State's territorial demise as the end of its terrorist threat to the region and beyond. Evidently, the group is prepared and remains determined to carry out external terrorist attacks, particularly in the West. As foreign terrorist fighters return home and grow the jihadist diaspora, we cannot afford anything short of prioritizing international information sharing and cooperation at critical border crossings.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)