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# ISIS Foreign Fighters after the Fall of the Caliphate

With the fall of Baghouz, the last Syrian village controlled by the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) in March 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) officially declared ‘the destruction of the so-called Islamic State organisation’.<sup>1</sup> But while the Islamic State as a *state-like* organisation has indeed been destroyed, ISIS as a terrorist organisation remains robust.

Since mid-2017, military advances achieved by the United States-led Combined Joint Task Force engaged in *Operation Inherent Resolve* (CJTF-OIR), the anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria, had already pushed ISIS to abandon conventional fighting and overt control of territory to revert back to insurgency-like strategies,<sup>2</sup> eventually compromising its ability to hold territory but only degrading its ability to fight. In early 2019, US estimates put the number of local and foreign ISIS fighters still active around the Middle Euphrates River Valley at 2,000, with an estimated flow of 50 new foreign fighters entering the area to join ISIS ranks each month.<sup>3</sup>

The flow of foreign fighters moves in multiple directions, further compounding the problem: if one of ISIS’s critical lifelines comes from the movement of jihadists *into* the organisation, the international community’s efforts to tackle the phenomenon also have to deal with the flow of foreign fighters attempting to return to their countries of origin, and with those attempting to relocate *across* areas where ISIS is still present. Even more problematic is the lack of coordination so far demonstrated by governments involved in these tasks. A short-term, wait-and-see international response to the management of captured foreign fighters has left countries of origin more, rather than less, vulnerable. As Turkey’s military advance under the banner of *Operation Peace Spring* has put the country in charge of thousands of ISIS detainees in northern Syria, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been using unilateral repatriations of European and American foreign fighters for diplomatic leverage.<sup>4</sup>

Given the phenomenon’s multidirectional flow and the range of pathways available to aspiring and veteran foreign fighters, it is possible to group ISIS foreign fighters into four categories. Firstly, ‘new foreign fighters’ and ‘remainers’ are either those attempting to reach Iraq, Syria or another ISIS branch (*wilayat*) around the world from their own country, or ISIS veterans who remained in Iraq and Syria after the fall of the caliphate. Secondly, ‘relocators’ are those who have moved to other *wilayat*. Thirdly, ‘captured’ are those who are currently detained, either in their countries of origin or abroad, as well as those who have been repatriated after capture. Finally, ‘returnees’ and ‘untracked’ are those who have returned to their home countries undetected or without being prosecuted or charged, or who are expected to attempt to do so.

Each of these categories poses challenges of its own. While Western governments grapple with the thorny issue of how to deal with their citizens currently detained as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, the flow of veteran fighters to other locations, such as Southeast Asia and Africa, underlines ISIS’s resilience as an organisation. Meanwhile, the fragile security situation in Syria and Iraq might effectively revive it at its core.

## The rise of ISIS foreign fighters between 2013 and 2018

The international community responded urgently to foreign fighters joining ISIS as the organisation expanded its presence in Iraq and Syria. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 2178 in September 2014 and Resolution 2396 in December 2017. Among other things, these resolutions provided a definition of ‘foreign terrorist fighters’;<sup>5</sup> encouraged member states to strengthen their traveller risk-assessment and screening procedures; and, most importantly, urged all countries ‘to intensify and accelerate the exchange of operational information regarding actions or movements’ of suspected or known foreign fighters, stressing

the international dimension of the problem and the need for transnational cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

Individual states face numerous and complex challenges in dealing with the movement of foreign fighters. Identifying aspiring foreign fighters attempting to leave is a complex task. To avoid raising suspicions, those who are trying to leave will reach conflict zones through 'transit' countries from which they will then be helped into their final destination by local fixers or ISIS smugglers. The Istanbul–Gaziantep–Kilis route into Syria, for example, has led thousands of foreign fighters from around the world into the country, becoming known as the 'Jihadi Highway'.<sup>7</sup> Prosecuting those who have returned from conflict zones and been charged with being foreign fighters is hard. Collecting evidence on their actions in the caliphate and gathering enough intelligence to present in court have both proven difficult.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, taking charge of those foreign fighters who have been captured abroad does not always seem to be a priority for governments of the countries from which they originated.

Over the years, ISIS put together the 'most operationally experienced, lethally skilled and highly networked group of jihadis to date'.<sup>9</sup> Particularly since the official establishment of the caliphate in June 2014, there has been exponential growth in the number of ISIS foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, from 6,000 in 2013,<sup>10</sup> to an estimated 20,000 foreign fighters in 2015,<sup>11</sup> up to more than 40,000 in 2017, according to UN data.<sup>12</sup>

After the Islamic State proclaimed the establishment of the caliphate, new *wilayat* were declared under ISIS control. In 2014, the organisation's expansion reached parts of Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Algeria. In January 2015, a group of Afghan and Pakistani jihadist groups joined ISIS under the banner of Wilayat Khorasan, while in June 2015, various insurgent groups of the North Caucasus pledged their allegiance to ISIS, forming Wilayat al-Qawqaz. This put Russia directly in ISIS's crosshairs, as demonstrated a few months later by the attack on the Russian Metrojet flight over Sinai that killed 224 people, the vast majority Russian.<sup>13</sup>

While territorial control over *wilayat* in Libya and Afghanistan was quickly lost, in 2017 the so-called 'Siege of Marawi' demonstrated ISIS's growing strength in Southeast Asia. A town of 200,000 inhabitants located on an island in the Southern Philippines, Marawi was captured by 900

jihadists, with 40 foreign fighters leading combat operations. After five months of intense urban fighting, the Armed Forces of the Philippines eventually regained control – ISIS, however, had already achieved an important propaganda victory, putting the Philippines more firmly on the jihadist map and driving at least 100 new foreign fighters to join its militias in the country.<sup>14</sup>

Temporary achievements in Southeast Asia, however, contrasted with the rapid decline of the caliphate's presence in the Middle East: the expansion of CJTF–OIR operations against the heartland of the caliphate meant that, by February 2018, ISIS had lost over 98% of its formerly controlled territories in Iraq and Syria, with most of its foreign fighters either dead, fighting in the last pockets of resistance or fleeing.

While the eventual collapse of the caliphate has deprived ISIS of a territory it could directly control, the organisation has quickly reverted to its insurgency roots, scattering across eastern Syria and Iraq, and attempting to regroup and take back the initiative. In one of his last messages to ISIS fighters, then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released an audio message in September 2019, calling on all fighters to continue their war: 'From [Afghanistan] to Iraq to Yemen, to Somalia to western and central Africa, eastern Asia, northern Africa: sacrifice your lives if you have to.'<sup>15</sup>

### **New foreign fighters and remainers**

The flow of foreign fighters has turned to a trickle compared to 2013–17, owing to factors including the absence of a physical safe haven for fighters to reach (i.e. the caliphate) and stricter international controls. However, the mobilisation of foreign fighters towards Iraq and Syria has not stopped. The most recent CJTF–OIR estimates say that, as of mid-2019, 'ISIS likely retains between 14,000 and 18,000 "members" in Iraq and Syria, including up to 3,000 foreigners'.<sup>16</sup> Recruitment from outside Iraq and Syria is ongoing, with the constant arrival of new recruits adding to the challenge of fully eradicating ISIS from those countries.<sup>17</sup>

Quantifying ISIS foreign fighters still operating between Iraq and Syria is no small task. Militants are once again adopting insurgent tactics. They maintain a minimal military footprint and overall visibility, operate mainly in rural and remote areas and rely on safe houses and tunnels to stay 'below

the radar'. New foreign fighters remain a main life-line in this context.<sup>18</sup>

Research carried out on European foreign fighters shows how, contrary to expectations, the vast majority have not returned to their country of origin after ISIS was put on the back foot by the CJTF–OIR military advance. While many have been captured by anti-ISIS forces, a large proportion of surviving foreign fighters likely remained in ISIS's last pockets of resistance to 'fight to the death',<sup>19</sup> either out of ideological commitment or because the strong military presence around ISIS territories made leaving the area undetected much more difficult than in the past.<sup>20</sup>

While new foreign fighters and remainers represent the most visible manifestation of the foreign-fighter phenomenon, strategic challenges related to relocators, returnees and captured foreign fighters are becoming increasingly pressing. As former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford highlighted, 'the flow of foreign fighters, the ability to move resources, and the ideology that allows these groups to operate'<sup>21</sup> are the connective tissue that allows ISIS to survive – and the flow of foreign fighters *into* Syria and Iraq is only one aspect of a broader problem.<sup>22</sup>

## Relocators

So-called relocators, or foreign fighters who have left one front-line to join the fight elsewhere, are particularly important because their mobility enables ISIS to evade direct confrontation and to strengthen recruitment efforts across the world. ISIS reportedly relocated at least 5,600 fighters out of Iraq and Syria during 2014–17,<sup>23</sup> but estimates on the overall number of fighters that have relocated are unreliable.<sup>24</sup>

Significant relocation trends warrant attention, however, especially when considering group, rather than individual, relocation. One of the most substantial contingents in this category is from the North Caucasus. 2015 estimates put the overall number of Russian ISIS fighters active in Iraq and Syria at 4,000–5,000,<sup>25</sup> a large number of whom are Chechen and Dagestani veteran jihadists<sup>26</sup> who pledged allegiance to the caliphate and moved their armed struggle to Syria due to the de-escalation of the conflict at home.<sup>27</sup>

Other notable relocation waves have taken place in response to ISIS's strategic needs and direct calls.

In 2015, the organisation's media outlets asked militants to join the fight in Libya. Its local militias were preparing a military offensive to expand the territory that their *wilayat* controlled there, while also enticing Sudanese volunteers to enter Libya via smuggling routes with the promise of a salary.<sup>28</sup> In the same year, ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani 'repeatedly called for Muslims to emigrate to other "provinces" abroad including Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, Afghanistan, and West Africa'.<sup>29</sup>

In 2017, as pressure on ISIS militias in Iraq and Syria started to mount, other *wilayat* stepped in to take charge of coordinating attacks abroad and to welcome the foreign fighters who could not circumvent security forces to enter Syria. In addition, thousands of ISIS fighters fled from ISIS-held locations in Syria, mainly into Turkey and then on to other destinations, often negotiating their withdrawals with their enemies.<sup>30</sup> Over that period, the propaganda victory brought by the 2017 Siege of Marawi, coupled with the difficulties in reaching Iraq and Syria, paved the way for the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia to become priority relocation destinations for veteran foreign fighters.<sup>31</sup>

Monitoring and challenging the flow of relocators presents important and specific operational challenges for governments tracking their national foreign fighters abroad. These fighters' evasive techniques include transiting through various countries and sometimes temporarily resettling in them. Journeys from one front-line to another can take several months and take in various countries of residence, making multilateral intelligence sharing and cooperation critical in combatting the flow of relocators. Accordingly, the role of Interpol has become of fundamental importance in tackling the mobility of foreign fighters, so much so that UNSC Resolution 2396 (2017) has recognised Interpol's contribution in addressing the challenge posed by foreign fighters, while UNSC Resolution 2462 (2019) formally 'encourages Member States to make the best use of Interpol policing capabilities, such as relevant databases and analytical files'.<sup>32</sup>

## Captured foreign fighters

The long-overlooked question of how to deal with captured foreign fighters is now becoming a pressing issue, as surrendering fighters and their families are massing in large numbers in SDF-controlled

prisons. Despite appeals from the UN for the international community to increase its coordination efforts,<sup>33</sup> governments are avoiding taking charge of the repatriation, trial, detention and eventual reintegration of thousands of ISIS affiliates.<sup>34</sup>

UNSC Resolution 2178 (2014) provides a definition of ‘foreign terrorist fighter’ and thus created a legal category that member states can use to develop domestic legal frameworks to prosecute individuals who travel abroad to participate in terrorist acts. Many national approaches have emerged, but none has yet successfully addressed the ‘difficulty of securing a criminal conviction’.<sup>35</sup> Prosecutors face major difficulties in finding evidence on individuals who operated in war zones.<sup>36</sup>

As of September 2019, 17,000 prisoners charged with terrorism offences were held in Iraqi prisons.<sup>37</sup> While most were ISIS fighters, the tally also included their wives and children. Until mid-October, the SDF alone held another 10,000 prisoners in ‘pop-up prisons’ in Syria. Of these, 2,000 were foreign fighters,<sup>38</sup> 500 women (wives or widows of foreign combatants), ‘more than 1,000 children associated with the foreign ISIS fighters in their custody’ (as of the beginning of 2019),<sup>39</sup> and ‘thousands of children above the age of 12 – considered to be of “fighting age” – ... held in incommunicado detention’.<sup>40</sup>

The SDF’s inability to manage such large groups of prisoners was already apparent after the US began reducing its military presence from the beginning of 2019,<sup>41</sup> and Turkish declarations of a possible military advance into SDF-held territories further exacerbated the problem,<sup>42</sup> with SDF representatives stating that they may have to release a large number of ISIS detainees in the event of such an offensive.<sup>43</sup> As a consequence, the US<sup>44</sup> – which has only an estimated 272 ISIS affiliates of its own<sup>45</sup> – took a leading role in coordinating the response and committed ‘to assist in repatriation of foreign ISIS fighters to their home countries and to identify potential alternatives for long-term detention of those who cannot be repatriated’.<sup>46</sup>

The sudden withdrawal of all US military forces from northern Syria in October 2019, and the subsequent incursion of Turkish forces into SDF-held territories, however, saw the situation quickly spiral out of control: many SDF units were repositioned away from ISIS detention facilities to the front-lines, leaving prison camps severely undermanned.<sup>47</sup> As the Turkish military advance progressed, Turkey

took control of several detention facilities; the chaos ensuing from the transition facilitated the escape of an unspecified number of ISIS fighters, with at least 76 jihadists reportedly joining Turkey-backed Syrian militias operating in northern Syria.<sup>48</sup>

Controlling these detention camps is a double-edged sword for Turkey, as it gives President Erdogan a bargaining chip with Western governments while further intensifying international scrutiny. Unfazed by the responsibility, ahead of an official visit to the US in November Erdogan and his minister of the interior stated they were going to repatriate European foreign fighters that were held by Turkish security forces ‘in 72 hours’,<sup>49</sup> in a move that echoes the recurrent threat of ‘opening the gates’ and letting Syrian refugees currently located in Turkey into the EU.<sup>50</sup> In mid-November, the first repatriation by Turkey saw a British foreign fighter returned to UK soil.

With one of the largest foreign-fighter contingents in Europe,<sup>51</sup> and 250–300 captured British foreign fighters currently held in Syria,<sup>52</sup> the UK’s ‘not-in-my-backyard’ response is just one example of how returning captured foreign fighters have become a contentious political and diplomatic issue. Once captured, dual-nationality foreign fighters have been stripped of their UK citizenship, in line with legislation previously passed. The Canadian government lamented in August 2019 that in this way the UK was ‘offloading its responsibilities’ to other countries.<sup>53</sup> In a similar fashion, during an official visit to the UK, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stressed the need for all European countries to ‘work to take back their foreign fighters and continue to hold those foreign fighters’.<sup>54</sup> In response, UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace made the claim that ‘ministers would be guilty of “rendition” if the government brought British ISIS fighters and their families back from Syria against their will’.<sup>55</sup>

### **Returnees and untracked foreign fighters**

Returnees and untracked foreign fighters are the most concerning category for those in counter-terrorism circles.<sup>56</sup> There are, however, nuances in the degree of risk that returnees and untracked foreign fighters pose to their countries of origin, as not all of them are committed to continue fighting. According to 2017 estimates, 5,600 foreign fighters from around the world have returned home, including 1,200–2,000 fighters that left the EU to join ISIS in Iraq and



Syria and are now back in their countries of origin.<sup>57</sup> In the UK, at least 400 of the estimated 800 returnees remain unaccounted for. Of those who have been identified, only 40 have been prosecuted; the majority have been included ‘in rehabilitation schemes’.<sup>58</sup> According to then UK home secretary Sajid Javid, as of February 2019, ‘all ISIS fighters who re-entered the UK had been investigated and “the majority have been assessed to pose no or a low security risk”’.<sup>59</sup>

From a European perspective, the problem has two dimensions: the mobility of foreign fighters *into* and *within* the EU. Operations by Interpol and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) in September 2019 identified ‘more than a dozen’ foreign fighters attempting to enter the EU from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. They also demonstrated that coordination and intelligence sharing<sup>60</sup> are a critical asset even in monitoring foreign fighters’ mobility within the EU. Despite pledges by European institutions to prioritise the fight against ISIS and the threat of foreign fighters, threat perception and political priorities vary significantly among individual governments, as does the manpower dedicated to tracking and monitoring returnees. Almost half of the European foreign fighters who reached Iraq and Syria originated from only a handful of EU countries. This lack of effective coordination facilitates the mobility of foreign fighters within the Union.<sup>61</sup>

Outside the EU, the problem is particularly significant for those countries whose foreign fighters left to acquire combat experience and grow within the ISIS ranks, only to bring the fight back home. That is the case for a large proportion of Tunisian and North Caucasian foreign fighters.<sup>62</sup> The Bardo National Museum and Sousse attacks in 2015 and the Battle of Ben Guerdane<sup>63</sup> in 2016 revealed how well developed the connections among North African ISIS militants have become. The flow of foreign fighters into Libya created a significant security threat for Tunisia as a substantial number of Tunisian jihadists were, and still are, committed to return to Tunisia to fight.<sup>64</sup> As for Russia, the ongoing jihadist insurgency in the North Caucasus is a well-established security priority.<sup>65</sup> Moscow’s strategy has focused on turning a blind eye to foreign fighters’ departures while targeting them in Syria and preventing their return to Russia. Official Europol reports cite an article in the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* which suggests that Russian security services might

have proactively facilitated the outflow of North Caucasian jihadists away from Russia into Turkey (en route to Syria) to reduce the risk of a violent escalation within its borders, and then applied even stricter border controls to prevent their return.<sup>66</sup>

## Strategic implications

While the potential threat from returning fighters has occupied much of the media and decision-makers’ attention, research has shown that the risk of direct action (i.e. a terrorist attack) carried out by returning foreign fighters is historically quite low. Only a minimal share of those who return plot or carry out further terrorist activities:<sup>67</sup> a pivotal 2013 study on the issue of returnees identified that only one in nine returning foreign fighters commits to carrying out acts of domestic terrorism.<sup>68</sup> The risk remains, however, that these fighters may inspire terrorist attacks or would-be foreign fighters upon their return.

Moreover, the effectiveness of controls over ‘new’ foreign fighters has led to counter-intuitive results. A new, under-investigated category has emerged, the so-called ‘frustrated travellers’ – aspiring foreign fighters who have been detected before they managed to leave their country, or somehow failed to reach their destination. These individuals have resorted in several cases to improvised and rather primitive terrorist operations in their home countries, such as a lorry attack in Sweden and a series of stabbings targeting security personnel in France.<sup>69</sup>

In the short term, relocators will continue to have the option to transfer to *wilayat* around the world, but not the opportunity to revive a state-like organisation such as the caliphate. Since mid-2019, ISIS has been reorganising some of its key Asian *wilayat*, potentially to strengthen their ability to operate autonomously and maximise targeted-recruitment efforts. The Afghanistan–Pakistan–India triangle in particular seems of growing interest for the organisation, especially given the power vacuum in areas along smuggling routes across the Afghanistan–Pakistan border.<sup>70</sup>

In Southeast Asia, the Philippines has become central to ISIS’s propaganda narrative, particularly after the Siege of Marawi. But the organisation’s actual presence across the region is quite limited and disorganised: attacks such as the Sri Lanka Easter bombings in April 2019 demonstrate ISIS’s reach while also highlighting how isolated its units

are:<sup>71</sup> The region therefore seems more suited to hosting smaller and fairly autonomous jihadist groups, rather than a united front under the ISIS banner – even more so since the collapse of the caliphate has significantly reduced the resources and manpower available.<sup>72</sup>

Although ISIS's presence in Libya is consolidated, it is also fairly isolated from other *wilayat*, making it unfit to become the new hub for a caliphate in North Africa and relegating it to be more of 'a regional hub than a strategic fallback, as evidenced by the growing ties between Libya provinces and the Sinai Province'.<sup>73</sup> Key cities and strategic areas are constantly contested by a range of state and non-state military actors, meaning

ISIS's presence in the country is rather nomadic and making it difficult to create effective governance institutions.<sup>74</sup>

Critically, it is the humanitarian situation of foreign fighters in Syria coupled with the political situation in Iraq that might actually provide, once more, the fundamental hotbed for the resurgence of ISIS. Makeshift prisons in which 10,000 individuals,<sup>75</sup> including veteran jihadists and their families, survive in hardship offer an ideal environment for exacerbating existing grievances, and to potentially breed a new generation of ISIS militants. In addition, the political tensions that have been shaking Iraq since October 2018 might provide breathing space for ISIS's insurgency as well as its re-emergence as a state actor.

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