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Detecting and combating the threat of foreign ISIS fighters

ISIS After the Caliphate

28 November 2017

At its territorial peak in fall 2014, the Islamic State controlled 41,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria—a territory larger than the size of Indiana—and ruled over eight million people. It attracted more than 40,000 foreign fighters from 120 countries; it also mobilized over 25,000 from inside Syria and Iraq. Economically, it was self-sustaining through oil sales, taxes, looting, smuggling, and extortion. It averaged $81 million a month in revenues in spring 2015.

By November 2017, the ISIS caliphate had imploded after the loss of 95 percent of its territory. It lost its two biggest properties: Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, in July, and the northern Syrian city of Raqqa, its nominal capital, in October. More than 60,000 fighters had been killed, over 130 leaders eliminated. More than seven and a half million people had been liberated. ISIS revenues had also plummeted—to $16 million a month by spring 2017.

“The caliphate is what drew so many of these foreign fighters to join ISIS and what makes it a global network,” Brett McGurk, special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, told reporters. “They try to fund their so-called affiliates around the world from the resources that they pick up in Iraq and Syria. We have dramatically targeted and degraded their ability to resource themselves. We’ve dramatically degraded their ability to get foreign fighters into Syria. It’s almost impossible for them to do that now.”

SYRIA

ISIS, which had its roots in al Qaeda in Iraq and then the Islamic State of Iraq, regrouped in Syria in 2013. It conquered Raqqa, a city of more than 220,000, in January 2014. Raqqa became the center for ISIS planning, financing, execution, and inspiration of terrorist activities worldwide, including attacks in Paris, Berlin and others, U.S. officials said. It later captured Manbij in the north and Deir Ezzour in the east. Manbij became a center for the mobilization and training of foreign fighters. Deir Ezzour was pivotal for cross-border operations and smuggling. At the end of 2014, the caliphate controlled roughly a third of Syria.

After a four-month campaign, ISIS was ousted from Raqqa on October 20, 2017 by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. The SDF was a local militia dominated by Kurds but included Arabs and other ethnicities. An estimated 2,500 Islamic State fighters were in Raqqa at the beginning of the battle. Some 400 fighters surrendered to SDF forces, but most were killed inside the city. Deir Ezzour fell shortly after on November 3. Surviving fighters from ISIS, known in Arabic as Daesh, retreated to the desert borderlands in the eastern Euphrates Valley between Iraq and Syria.

Abu Kamal, a small town on the Euphrates River along the Syria-Iraq border, was the Islamic State’s last major stronghold. The Syrian army and pro-regime forces captured the town on Nov. 8, 2017. Syria declared victory over ISIS the next day. But two days later, ISIS cells took over half of Abu Kamal. Syrian forces regained control on November 19. The liberation
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of Abu Kamal “signals the general fall of the terrorist Daesh organization’s project in the region,” the Syrian military said in a statement.

The U.S.-led coalition behind Operation Inherent Resolve heralded the military campaigns. “Daesh's loss of Mosul and now Raqqah are turning points for the terrorist organization whose leaders grow ever more distant from a dwindling number of terrorist adherents,” it said. “Residents were forced to live under a brutal regime that routinely carried out public executions, extortions billed as "taxation," and forced conscriptions. In January, ISIS was actively plotting terrorist attacks against our allies and our homeland in Raqqah.”

FATE OF FIGHTERS

ISIS was estimated to have more than 60,000 fighters—some 40,000 foreigners and more than 25,000 local recruits—join its militant jihad. The largest contingents of foreign fighters came from former Soviet republics and other Middle East and North Africa countries. The vast majority were killed on the battlefield, according to the U.S.-led coalition. Over a thousand surrendered in Iraq.

IRAQ

The ISIS blitz in Iraq began in January 2014. It first seized western Fallujah. By June 10, it captured Mosul. On June 29, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria—and himself caliph. At its height, the Islamic State controlled 40 percent of Iraq, including Tikrit and Ramadi in central Iraq and Tal Afar in the northwest near the Syrian border.

ISIS did not take any new territory, however, as of May 2015. It began to lose ground when Iraqi Security Forces retook Tikrit in April 2015, followed by Ramadi in December. The biggest turning point was the liberation of Mosul on July 10, 2017, after a costly and destructive nine-month campaign. Tal Afar was liberated a month later. ISIS lost its last city in Iraq, al Qaim, on the border with Syria, on Nov. 3, 2017. The U.S.-led coalition provided critical support in daily airstrikes; military advisers helped coordinate Iraqi strategy.

"Iraqi Security Forces have fought hard to reach this point," said Maj. Gen. Robert P. White, Commanding General of the Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command - Operation Inherent Resolve. "The threat remains, and there is still hard work to do, but we will continue to stand side-by-side with the Iraqi Government and the ISF to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS.”

Source: "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees" by The Soufan Center and The Global Strategy Network

At the Islamic State’s peak recruitment, in spring 2015, between 1,500 to 2,000 foreign fighters crossed into Syria or Iraq a month. The "explosive growth in foreign fighter travel to Syria and Iraq surpassed other jihadist conflicts in both scope and magnitude,” a September 2015 Homeland Security Committee report said. By October 2017, it had dropped to almost zero.

Thousands also returned to their home countries. By the time the caliphate collapsed, at least 5,600 men, women and children from 33 countries had already returned home, according
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to a report by The Soufan Center and The Global Strategy Network.

Over 250 Americans either attempted or succeeded in traveling to join ISIS. Only seven returned from Islamic State territory, although 135 have been charged for terrorism offenses in the United States. By late 2017, 77 had been convicted.

More than 5,000 foreign fighters from European countries—including Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom—joined ISIS, according to a report by the European Commission’s Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN). The study, published in July 2017, found that an average of 30 percent of fighters had returned to European countries. But nearly half of the fighters from Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom had returned.

Between June 2014 and February 2017, the Islamic State conducted or inspired approximately 143 terrorist attacks in 29 countries, resulting in the deaths of over 2,000 people, according to The Soufan Center and The Global Strategy Network. RAN reported that ISIS carried out 38 attacks against Western targets between 2014 and 2016.

REMAINING "PROVINCES"

In August 2016, the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center reported that the Islamic State operated in 18 countries, from Mali to the Philippines. By November 2017, after the loss of 95 percent of its caliphate, ISIS still had more than three dozen wilayats, or provinces, on three continents. Some were small. Some were dormant. But all have been deadly. Many fighters fleeing the caliphate were opting to travel to established branches or wilayats in third-countries rather than returning to countries of origin. They include:

Yemen
- Aden-Abyan Province (southwest)
- Hadrawmat Province (east)
- Sanaa Province (capital)
- Green Brigade Province (southern Ibb and Taiz)
- Bayda Province (center)
- Shabwah Province (east)
- Lahij Province (south)
- Ataq Province (southwest)

Libya
- Barqa Province (Derna and Benghazi in the east)
- Tarabalus Province (Sirte in the west)
- Fezzan Province (south)

Afghanistan/Pakistan
- Khorasan Province (South Asia)

Egypt
- Sinai Province (north)
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**Philippines**
- Islamic State in the Philippines (Marawi City)

**Algeria**
- Al Jazair Province

**Saudi Arabia**
- Najd Province (center)
- Hijaz Province (west)
- Bahrain Province (east)

**Gaza**
- Islamic State in Gaza

**Nigeria**
- Gharb Ifriqiyaa Province (West Africa)

**Somalia**
- Islamic State in Somalia (northeast)

**Democratic Republic of the Congo**
- Islamic State in Central Africa

**Caucasus**
- Qawqaz Province

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**ECONOMIC LOSSES**

The Islamic State has reportedly generated more revenue than any other extremist organization. The RAND Corporation estimated that ISIS had already amassed more than $875 million before its conquest of Mosul in June 2014. After capturing Mosul, it plundered about $1 billion to $1.2 billion from banks, according to the RAND Corporation. By the end of 2014, it had an annual income of approximately $1.9 billion dollars. In spring 2015, ISIS was averaging $81 million in monthly revenue; 50 percent was levied through taxes and 43 percent was from oil sales, according to a report by IHS Markit, an economic analysis firm in London. The rest was earned through illicit activities.

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**Islamic State Income 2014-2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taxes and Fees</td>
<td>$300-400 million</td>
<td>$400-800 million</td>
<td>$200-400 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil</td>
<td>$150-450 million</td>
<td>$435-550 million</td>
<td>$200-250 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td>$20-40 million</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>$10-30 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antiquities</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Donations</td>
<td>Insignificant</td>
<td>Insignificant</td>
<td>Insignificant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looting, Confiscations,</td>
<td>500 million – 1 billion</td>
<td>$200-350 million</td>
<td>$110-190 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$970 million – 1.89 billion</td>
<td>1.035 – 1.7 billion</td>
<td>$520-870 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: “Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State’s Financial Fortunes” by the International Centre for Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence
But in 2016, the Islamic State’s annual income dropped to a maximum of $870 million. By spring 2017, its monthly revenues were reduced by 80 percent, to an average of $16 million. The drops were largely due to loss of oil resources and a population to tax. “Losing control of the heavily populated Iraqi city of Mosul and oil rich areas in the Syrian provinces of Raqqa and Homs, has had a particularly significant impact on the group’s ability to generate revenue,” said Ludovico Carlino, senior Middle East analyst at IHS Markit.

The Islamic State’s oil production peaked at 56,000 barrels per day (bpd) from July to December 2014, according to a World Bank study. Oil production steadily declined over the next two years, falling to an average of 35,000 bpd in 2015 and 16,000 bpd in 2016. “The results show that Daesh was ineffective in comparison to historical trends at exploiting the fields under its control,” the World Bank concluded. The Islamic State supplemented its income with taxes and looting. But by June 2017, income from taxation was down 79 percent, according to a report by IHS Markit. ISIS oil revenues were down 90 percent, by October 2017, according to the Global Coalition against ISIS.

LOSING THE NARRATIVE

Among extremist groups, the Islamic State has been one of the most sophisticated on social media and in messaging. The movement published or broadcast in 35 languages. It had 40 sites in 2015. But by the spring of 2017, it lost more than half of its internet outlets after losing the cities of Mosul and Fallujah. Mosul was one of the Islamic State’s main media operation centers. Its monthly output of propaganda dropped by 75 percent during the pivotal six months – between November 2016 to April 2017—when it began to lose strategic territory and top propagandists. The Islamic State’s message also shifted—from glorifying the caliphate as a utopia in 2014 to preserving the ISIS mission by fighting, in the region and abroad, in 2017.

After the fall of Raqqa in October 2017, media output dropped “from an average of about 20 to 30 unique media items per day through IS’s official channels on Telegram, down to 10 or less items per day,” according to Mina al Lami, a jihadi media expert at BBC Monitoring. Two of ISIS’s leading outlets, including Al Bayan radio, also disappeared. Al Bayan used to transmit from both Mosul and Raqqa. It had also offered podcasts in multiple languages, including English, Russian and French, to widen its reach. “This was a key feature of its daily propaganda that has been going since April 2015 and since the 25th of October, these broadcasts, these podcasts stopped,” al Lami said.

ISIS’s most noted publications have been al Naba, a 16-page weekly newsletter; Amaq News Agency, its official wire service; and Rumiyah, a slick on-line magazine published monthly in several languages, from English and Russian to Uighur and Indonesian. Amaq News Agency is often the first place to publish claims of responsibility for attacks. ISIS also used al Naba to claim two U.S. attacks in Las Vegas and New York.

Al Naba began as an annual newsletter in Arabic, but morphed into a weekly newspaper. It has been distributed via the messaging app Telegram and as an online PDF. It has featured interviews, opinion pieces, infographics and
updates on ISIS activities in Iraq, Syria and abroad. In early October 2017, it reached a milestone with the release of the 100th issue. Publication has continued, despite the loss of its capital in Raqqa. Rumiya, however, missed publication after Raqqa’s fall.

“I think that the physical core of the caliphate is going to go away,” said Joint Staff Director Lieutenant General McKenzie. “I think that, however, through the Internet, through cyber, through broad information exchange, we're always recognize the possibility of self-radicalization across the globe, and ISIS has been pursuing that very aggressively.”

IS foreign fighters: 5,600 have returned home - report
24 October 2017
At least 5,600 supporters of so-called Islamic State (IS) have returned to their home countries as it loses ground in Iraq and Syria, a new report says.

The Soufan Center, a US-based think tank, says 33 states have reported arrivals in the past two years.

The figure includes half of the estimated 850 people who left the UK.

The report says the returnees - most of whom are imprisoned or disappear from view - will continue to present a security challenge for years to come.

IS has lost much of the territory that once made up the "caliphate" it proclaimed in June 2014, attracting thousands of jihadists from across the world.

Last week, US-backed alliance of Syrian Kurdish and Arab fighters said they had taken full control of Raqqa, the jihadists' de facto capital.

The Soufan Center's report says the flow of foreign fighters came to a virtual standstill in late 2015, as IS began to suffer defeats and states implemented better measures to prevent travel.

The recovery of data following the fall of IS administrative centres such as Raqqa has helped confirm the identities of 19,000 of the more than 40,000 foreigners from 110 countries estimated to have flocked to Iraq and Syria to join the jihadist group.
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The data does not, however, reveal what has happened to them.

Citing figures provided by the authorities in 33 countries, the Soufan Center says at least 5,600 foreign fighters are now believed to have returned home.

They include 400 of the 3,417 fighters from Russia; 760 of the 3,244 from Saudi Arabia; 800 of the 2,926 from Tunisia; and 271 of the 1,910 from France.

Added to the unknown numbers from other countries, this represents a huge challenge for security and law enforcement entities, according to the report.

"Although there is disagreement over the threat that returning foreign fighters may present to their countries of residence or origin, or to other countries they pass through, it is inevitable that some will remain committed to the form of violent 'jihad'," it says.

The report warns that as the territorial "caliphate" shrinks and is increasingly denied an overt presence, the IS leadership is highly likely to look to supporters overseas, including returnees, to "keep the brand alive".

"Returnees may be particularly vulnerable to contact from people who were part of the network that recruited them, or appeals for help from ex-comrades in arms."

Retrenched women and children represent a particular problem, as states struggle to understand how best to reintegrate them, the report adds. Proper mental health and social support mechanisms will be especially relevant for children.

The Soufan Center noted that Tunisia’s government had revised down the number of Tunisians believed to have joined IS from 6,000 in 2015 to 2,920. That change meant Russia was the home of the most foreign fighters.

The head of the UK Security Service, MI5, told the BBC last week that fewer than expected of the 800 Britons who joined IS had returned recently and that at least 130 had been killed.

Those who were still in Syria and Iraq might not now attempt to come back because they knew they might be arrested, Andrew Parker said.
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The Islamic State’s Foreign Fighters Are Coming Home

And Western countries need a plan to defuse the threat they pose

By Richard Barrett

1 November 2017

Investigators work around the wreckage of a Home Depot pickup truck that was used in a terror attack on Oct. 31 in New York City. The driver pledged loyalty to the Islamic State. (Jewel Samad/AFP/Getty Images)

Once again, terrorism has struck the United States — this time close to Ground Zero in Manhattan, where our current era of terrorism was inaugurated. Tuesday’s attack, of course, was nowhere on the scale of 9/11. But by showcasing the wide array of everyday objects, like trucks, that can be weaponized, and the infinite availability of targets, it highlighted just how easy it can be to commit an act of terrorism.

The more consequential question is how many potential attackers are out there eager to exploit such opportunities. And finding an answer has never been more complex or difficult than right now, as the so-called Islamic State continues to melt away and many of the thousands of foreigners who flocked to join it over the last five years begin to go home.

Based on my research of official figures from 48 countries published in October, at least 2,000 former Islamic State members have returned to Western countries. Many others remain unaccounted for. So far, only seven are known to have returned to the United States — and the Manhattan attacker was not one of them — but around 400 have gone back to Britain and around 300 each to both France and Germany. The flow has slowed since last year, but with the disappearance of the last territorial possessions of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, a growing number of Islamic State supporters are wondering where to go and what to do next.
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For Western officials, Islamic State returnees pose an enormous challenge with no easy solution. A tempting response, and certainly the easiest, would be to throw all returnees into prison, or even do what can be done to stop them coming home at all. But this will only postpone or divert the problem, rather than offer a solution. Under many jurisdictions, returnees will have committed a crime merely by becoming a member of the Islamic State, but the collection of evidence will be hard and time-consuming, and even if prosecutions succeed, prisons are already crowded and contain many people on the margins of society who may be vulnerable to radicalization. Allowing committed members of the Islamic State the chance to recruit them could prove to be a mistake — but so too could separating the returnees from the rest of the prison population, thus allowing them to forge closer bonds and harden their resolve to fight on.

Authorities therefore face the difficult job of weighing the multiple factors that determine the threat posed by each returnee and devising solutions that extend beyond law enforcement. They should start by considering the precise reasons why a given person decided to undertake the uncertain journey to join the Islamic State. There are several possibilities: Some members were driven by a sense of helplessness at home, where the prospects for self-betterment may have seemed remote at best; others were committed to the idea that the Islamic State was truly on the path to creating a new world order in which humiliation and discrimination would be eliminated and society would finally be organized along religious lines in accordance with prophecy.

In every case, the motivation will be mixed and probably confused.

It is unlikely that anyone who sought their future in the Islamic State’s self-declared “caliphate” saw themselves — at least initially — as a domestic terrorist in the making. They were far more likely to be motivated to join something new than to destroy something that already existed. But their attitudes on return will inevitably reflect their experiences while abroad, which may have changed them in ways unknown even to themselves.

If authorities hope to catch potential terrorists before they strike, they must also understand why returnees came back. Broadly speaking, returnees can be divided into five categories: those who left soon after they arrived, those who left later but became disillusioned with the leadership, those who left having had enough of conflict but without regrets, those who left because there was no place to stay as a result of loss of territory, and those who left because they were told by the leadership to go home and mount attacks there. The level of threat will be different for each category, and for each individual within each category.

Law enforcement and security agencies don’t only have to take into account the immediate threat returnees pose — they also have to assess how their attitudes may change in the future. Even those returnees who showed the least interest in pursuing the apocalyptic objectives of the Islamic State may yet be tempted back as nostalgia clouds their memory and their circumstances at home continue to frustrate them. The more time people spent with the Islamic State, especially during its precipitous descent into the dystopian nightmare of the last two years, the more susceptible they may be to approaches from previous comrades in arms who ask for help with terrorist attacks.

The other partners in the long and complex task of mitigating the threat from returnees must be the communities they left and to which they return. Their range of required action will vary from merely keeping an eye on the returnee to trying to ensure that any residual sympathies for the Islamic State are not expressed through violence. In most communities, someone will be aware of who went to Syria or talked of doing...
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so, and there should be a range of interventions available to identify and address the underlying causes of individual radicalization. But families and community leaders may need guidance and support in figuring out the best course of action. In this respect, success will depend on the levels of dialogue and trust that exist between the authorities and local community leaders and within the community itself.

The women and children who are returning from the Islamic State pose a new and daunting security challenge. Their numbers will be less than for men, but nonetheless significant, with hundreds coming back to Western countries. Some of these women will have done little while in the caliphate other than fulfill the Islamic State’s archaic and restrictive conception of the role of wife and mother. But even so, they will have absorbed some of the horror, and perhaps some of the ideology surrounding them. Even if most did not join the Islamic State to commit acts of violence, they nonetheless knew what they were getting into.

Many of the children who return from the Islamic State will have little memory of any other sort of life; some will have been born there. The Islamic State begins its indoctrination of children from the age of five, and military training from the age of nine, but even those who were too young for any direct contact with the organization may suffer psychological problems and experience difficulties with integration and acceptance by their communities at home.

The Washington Post

How harsh counterterrorism measures can play into the hands of the Islamic State
By Rick Noack 1 November 2017

Countries often undertake painstaking diplomatic efforts to get their citizens extradited if they are accused of committing crimes abroad. Not so in the cases of Islamic State fighters.

In Britain, which has long banned the death penalty, a minister recently said “the only way of dealing with them will be, in almost every case, to kill them” on the battlefield. France has reportedly sent elite units to ensure that French Islamic State fighters are not captured alive. And at home, the French Parliament approved a controversial national security bill last month to expand the state’s power to fight terrorism. A
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number of countries, including Israel, Australia and Bahrain, have revoked fighters’ citizenship. Much more draconian measures are in place in countries such as Russia and Uzbekistan, which relied on harsh punishments early on to deter fighters from returning.

Those measures appear to be working to some extent, as fighters are less likely to return to countries where harsh punishments for returnees are almost certain. Long jail terms or even death sentences, which have been harshly criticized by human rights watchers, may deter fighters from returning, but disproportionate counterterrorism measures have also been blamed for being one of the chief radicalization factors to begin with.

Of the more than 40,000 foreigners who joined the Islamic State in Syria or Iraq in recent years, at least 5,600 have since returned to their home countries, according to the most recent report by the Soufan Center, titled “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees.”

Two or three years ago, officials were still debating whether Islamic State returnees could be used in public outreach efforts to warn others against joining the group. That debate abruptly stopped after the devastating November 2015 Paris attacks, and the crackdown on civil rights that ensued has contributed to a perception among some Muslims in Europe and elsewhere that they are being excluded and stigmatized.

Yet, recent research has so far shown that returnees do not pose the biggest terrorist threat and that the kind of measures in place to counter them could actually make the bigger problem — “homegrown terrorism” — even worse. While circumstances are not totally clear, it appears that the vast majority of recent attacks in Europe and the United States were committed by individuals not directly coordinating with the Islamic State.

“At least initially, those who have traveled to Syria are less likely to see themselves as domestic terrorists than those IS sympathizers who have stayed at home,” writes Richard Barrett, the author of the recent report. “They
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generally appear to have had a stronger desire to join something new rather than destroy something old. As a result, returnees have, so far, proved a more manageable problem than initially anticipated,” he writes. Other researchers cited in his report have come to similar conclusions, although there are concerns that the threat may rise over time.

“It is highly likely that even as the territorial caliphate shrinks and is increasingly denied an overt presence, its leadership will look to supporters overseas, including returnees, to keep the brand alive,” according to Barrett.

German authorities released a monthly analysis of Islamic State returnees last year that indicated that most fighters came back early on, in 2013 and 2014, which shows that authorities have had years to find ways to either jail or reintegrate those individuals. Few countries have launched reintegration schemes to deradicalize returnees, however. Such programs could also have prevented others, who never traveled to Syria or Iraq, from committing attacks in their home countries.

Many of them see themselves in a war with the West, but younger extremists, especially, are often still open to an intervention by authorities, parents or social workers if the appropriate schemes exist.

Public statements about killing fighters in order to avoid granting them a fair trial are not likely to be helpful in these efforts.
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