



## A Strategy for the ISIS Foreign Fighter Threat

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*Abstract: American efforts against the ISIS foreign fighter threat largely have failed because they underestimate the malignance of ISIS recruits. This article proposes a modified strategy comprising three aspects: 1) a counter-narrative stressing ISIS's attacks on Sunni Muslims, questioning their religious credentials, and accurately describing conditions in ISIS-controlled territory; 2) a comprehensive effort to disrupt ISIS recruitment on social media; and 3) countering foreign fighter mobility through a comprehensive international effort to identify foreign fighters, suspending their passports, and revoking their citizenship. Unfortunately, even these efforts will only be a partial fix for the vastly larger problems of jihadism and radical Islam.*

In what must be viewed as a major offensive attack in the Islamic State's self-declared war against the world, the November 13, 2015 massacres in Paris highlighted ISIS's effectiveness in recruiting and using foreign fighters. Their sophisticated and highly successful information strategy has recruited thousands of these fighters. Recent estimates indicate there are nearly 30,000 foreign jihadis<sup>1</sup>—which presumably do not include the numerous foreign jihadis who have already been killed<sup>2</sup>—and includes several thousand from Europe.<sup>3</sup> We are dealing with something unprecedented: while there have always been foreign fighters willing to travel to distant wars to fight for an ideal (the International Brigades in the Spanish

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Schmitt and Somini Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts," *New York Times*, Sept. 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/world/middleeast/thousands-enter-syria-to-join-isis-despite-global-efforts.html?src=me&r=0>.

<sup>2</sup> See Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "More than 330,000 people die while about 1,300,000 wounded and displaced since the beginning of Syrian revolution," Aug. 6, 2015, <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/2015/08/more-than-330000-people-die-while-about-1300000-wounded-and-displaced-since-the-beginning-of-syrian-revolution/>.

<sup>3</sup> Some estimates have run as high as 8,000—and that was several months ago. See Nancy Youssef, "3,000 More Foreign Jihadis Join ISIS," *The Daily Beast*, April 30, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/04/30/isis-loses-turf-and-gains-more-fighters.html>.

Civil War are an example, as is the Marquis de Lafayette in the American Revolution), we now have thousands of people traveling with the specific intention of dying in that distant war. ISIS recruitment emphasizes that anyone coming should be prepared to die.<sup>4</sup> It regularly uses massed suicide bombers.<sup>5</sup> ISIS combatants can be ordered to undertake “martyrdom” operations,<sup>6</sup> which means that such operations are accepted as a routine tactic and part of the self-identity of ISIS fighters. Not surprisingly, the foreign fighter danger caused great concern worldwide even before the recent Paris attacks, especially over the danger that survivors will return to their countries of origin or other countries as terrorists or organize attacks from ISIS-controlled territory. There is the additional threat that other ISIS sympathizers will undertake acts of terrorism without leaving their home countries.

Counterterrorism specialists and political authorities have widely discussed possible strategies for defending against the ISIS foreign fighter threat and countering the violent extremism ISIS represents. Unfortunately, much of this conversation has been superficial and the strategies proposed are likely to fail because they badly misread the nature of the enemy, dangerously underestimating both their fanaticism and their malignance. This article analyzes why this misperception has been the case, and proposes a possible alternative strategy. This alternative strategy will comprise three aspects:

- Challenging the ISIS narrative;
- Targeting recruitment channels;
- Dealing with ISIS wannabees.

## The Appeal of ISIS

While polling indicates that jihadis enjoy a modicum of support in both the Muslim world and among Muslims worldwide<sup>7</sup> (and possibly even in the United States<sup>8</sup>), there has *not* been a massive groundswell of popular support for ISIS, either in the world at large, the Muslim world, within Iraq, or even among jihadis.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Van Buren, “Islamic State’s rules of attraction, and why U.S. countermoves are doomed,” *Reuters*, Oct 21, 2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/10/21/islamic-states-rules-of-attraction-and-why-u-s-countermove-are-doomed/>.

<sup>5</sup> Awad Mustafa, “Islamic State Relying More on Suicide Squads,” *Defense News*, Aug 27, 2014, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20140827/DEFREG04/308270020/>.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Tucker, “The Islamic State Is Losing the Twitter War,” *Defense One*, Sept. 12, 2014, <http://www.defenseone.com/technology/2014/09/islamic-state-losing-twitter-war/94031/>.

<sup>7</sup> As of mid-2014, at least 11% of Jordanians, 15% of Egyptians and Indonesians, and 12% of Pakistanis admitted a favorable view of al Qaeda. Pew Research Center, *Concerns about Islamic Extremism on the Rise in Middle East*, July 1, 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/01/concerns-about-islamic-extremism-on-the-rise-in-middle-east/>.

<sup>8</sup> In a poll in 2011, “Just 5%...” (*Just?!?*) of Muslim Americans admitted some sympathy for al Qaeda. *Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism*, Pew Research Center, August 2011, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/Muslim%20American%20Report%2010-02-12%20fix.pdf>.

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