

Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan

What Foreign Fighter Data Reveals About the Future of Terrorism

Clinton Watts

INTRODUCTION

Recent information on foreign fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan provides an updated picture of future terrorist threats to Western interests. Based on newly-released detainee data from Guantanamo and foreign fighter records captured in Iraq, we can now more precisely identify trends in al-Qa'ida recruiting. Although the data tells us little about fighting inside Iraq and Afghanistan, it reveals a great deal about the modern Sunni mujahid who fights as a volunteer in Middle East conflicts:

- He is a young man who likely comes from a handful of cities in North Africa and the Middle East—what I call flashpoint cities. He is probably from a country that has a high infant mortality rate, a high unemployment rate, and few civil liberties.
- The mujahid was not mobilized by Internet content or a centralized recruiting organization but instead by a returning foreign fighter or a local religious leader. The returning fighter or religious leader told him how to travel to a country where he could engage in combat. The mujahid, and probably some friends, traveled by a commercial plane or ground transportation to a country that neighbors the conflict area and then paid a local smuggler to get him in.
- The mujahid's financial assets and spending habits vary between countries. If he is Saudi, he will contribute significantly more money to the fight. Meanwhile, a

Moroccan will give his life as a suicide bomber but does not have much cash to spare. Regardless of location, the mujahid is also likely unemployed or a student (which usually amounts to the same thing) or works as a common laborer. He is not necessarily impoverished but has time on his hands and a lack of purpose, making him more susceptible to radicalization and giving him enough free time to travel in support of jihad. If he has experience fighting, he will elect to fight; if not, he will elect to be a suicide bomber.

In addition to informing the above profile of al-Qa'ida's foot soldiers, the data suggests alternative techniques for countering the organization and its foreign fighter recruits in North Africa and the Middle East. This study, which will be released serially, examines the asymmetric nature of foreign fighter recruitment, the utility of smuggling networks for counterterrorism, varying motivations for martyrdom, and trends for future terrorism analysis with the drawdown of forces from Iraq and Afghanistan.

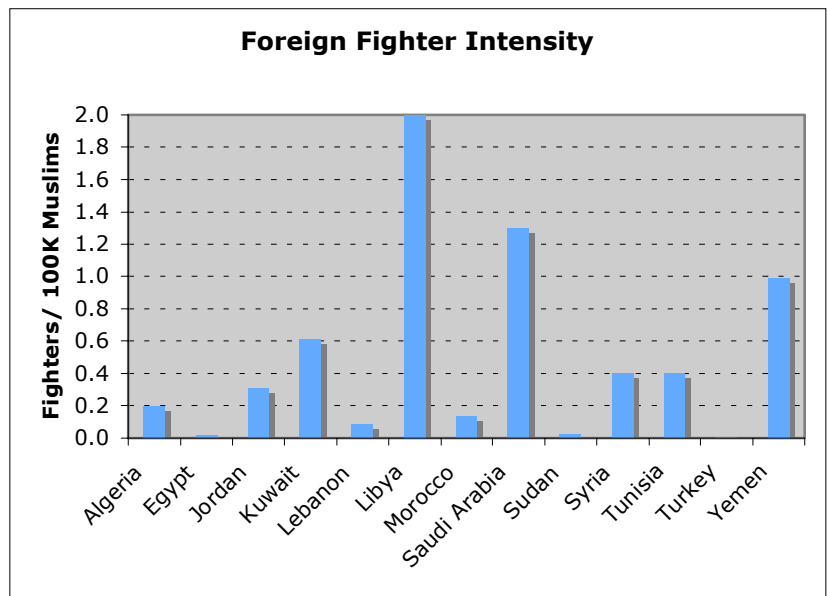
Two caveats: First, this study does not analyze the threat of terrorism from South Asia. Pakistan still remains the headquarters of al-Qa'ida, and the diversity of Pakistani militant groups pose a serious foreign fighter threat as well, evidenced by attacks in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. However, the records from Sinjar and Guantanamo Bay do not support analysis of this phenomenon.¹ Second, in addition to detainee data available from Guantanamo, this study is based on my own analysis of the Sinjar records released in December 2007. A recent Combating Terrorism Center study identified 595 discrete entries from the translated Sinjar records, whereas I found only 563 unique fighter records stating a country of origin outside of Iraq. For a complete description of the data, see Appendix A at <http://pjsage.com/products.htm>.

PART ONE: FOREIGN FIGHTERS - WHERE ARE THEY COMING FROM?

Our Allies, Our Enemies

The recently declassified Sinjar records, when combined with the detainee records from Guantanamo Bay, provide an empirical portrait of the foreign fighter threat. Examining 563 Sinjar records captured in Iraq, 315 detainee records from Guantanamo, and information about the nineteen 9/11 hijackers,

one can calculate the production rate of foreign fighters for Muslim populations from 20 home countries identified in the Sinjar and Guantanamo records. (See Figure 1 / Table 1 on pages 3 and 4. Foreign Fighter Intensity equals the number of foreign fighters from a country per 100,000 Muslims in the country.) The data demonstrates that Libya,



Saudi Arabia, and Yemen produce the most foreign fighters per Muslim, each averaging from four to eight times as many fighters as the average rate for the twenty countries analyzed. The second tier of foreign fighter producers consists of Kuwait, Syria, Tunisia, and Jordan. While all second tier countries produced less than half as many fighters as the top tier producers, they still produced more than the twenty-country average (see Table 1).

A composite of the Sinjar and Guantanamo datasets demonstrates that the foreign fighter flow is largely from North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabian Peninsula produced almost 58% of all fighters while making up just fewer than 15% of the Muslim population from the twenty countries analyzed. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Yemen produced nearly 1.1 foreign fighters per 100,000 Muslims, three times more than Levantine countries and more than seven times the North African countries. Saudis and Yemenis in particular provide a constant stream of volunteer fighters to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The North African strain of foreign fighters is more disturbing and surprising. While the level of Saudi and Yemeni commitment has remained constant, the commitment of North Africans has grown. Comparatively, North African foreign fighter travel to Iraq has increased substantially. For every North African in Guantanamo, there are nearly four North African foreign fighters in the Sinjar records. But the growth is uneven and depends on the country. Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia have demonstrated sharp increases in foreign fighter flow, while Egypt and Algeria remain more constant. Libya has the second largest number of foreign fighters going to Iraq (109) and represents the highest production rate of any country analyzed, producing two fighters per 100,000 Muslims and eight times the rate of the twenty-country data set.

TABLE 1 Country	Sinjar Fighter	Sinjar Intens.	Total Fighter	Total Intensity
Algeria	40	0.1212	64	0.1939
Belgium	1	0.2500	2	0.5000
Bosnia	1	0.0549	2	0.1098
	5	0.0069	11	0.0152
France	2	0.0419	4	0.0837
Jordan	12	0.2155	17	0.3053
Kuwait	1	0.0470	13	0.6104
Lebanon	1	0.0427	2	0.0853
Libya	109	1.8614	117	1.9980
Mauritania	1	0.0306	3	0.0917
Morocco	35	0.1050	44	0.1321
S. Arabia	232	0.8405	359	1.3007
Sudan	1	0.0036	7	0.0254
Sweden	1	0.2500	1	0.2500
Syria	48	0.3358	57	0.3988
Tunisia	30	0.2979	40	0.3972
Turkey	0	0.0000	2	0.0028
UAE	0	0.0000	4	0.1125
UK	1	0.0609	4	0.2438
Yemen	42	0.2837	144	0.9896
Total	563	0.1676	897	0.2672

Although Levantine countries produced a large number of foreign fighters, the numbers are more difficult to analyze. While these countries produced just over 0.3 fighters per 100,000 Muslims, the data for Syrian fighters is likely skewed for several reasons. First, all Sinjar fighters infiltrated through Syria, and it is likely that some reported their last location in transit rather than their country of origin. Second, it is impossible to know from the records how many fighters were actually Iraqi refugees residing in Syria that decided to return to Iraq. Third, the ease of travel from Syria to Iraq versus other countries suggests that there might be more Syrians joining comparatively.ⁱⁱ

Flashpoints for Jihad: Darnah, El Oued, Bin Arouss, Sanaa...

A small set of flashpoint cities produce foreign fighters well beyond what one would expect. The most interesting cities in the Sinjar records have a small portion of their country's population yet produce a large percentage of the country's foreign fighters (See Table 2, Pg. 5).

Locations such as Darnah, Libya; Dayr al-Zur, Syria; el Oued, Algeria; Bin Arouss, Tunisia; the Jeddah-Mecca-Taif region, Saudi Arabia; and Sanaa, Yemen produce numbers of fighters that are much higher than comparable cities in the same countries. (See Appendix C for a complete table.)

The concentrated city recruitment demonstrates that the call for jihad may be global, but recruitment is extremely *local*. Flashpoint cities like Darnah, Tetuan, el Oued, Sanaa, and Bin Arouss have the underlying conditions and militant ideologies necessary to attract and radicalize fighters for jihad. Local leaders, like radical religious figures and veteran foreign fighters, combine anti-Western political messages and militant religious justifications to inspire young Muslims to join the jihad.

RECOMMENDATION:

Focus counterterrorism efforts on cities and nodes, not nations and regions

Defeating the current cycle of foreign fighter recruitment will require the U.S. and its allies to allocate their resources like Jihadi recruiters allocate theirs: focus on the most fertile fields. This means microscopically focusing on flashpoint cities and dense social network hubs rather than nations or regions. High-producing foreign fighter countries like Saudi Arabia and Libya probably do not want to produce foreign fighters any more than the U.S. wants them to produce foreign fighters, but they have been unable to stem the tide of recruits flowing from their countries. Many current counterterrorism strategies use conventional, symmetric military, economic, and diplomatic measures to counter an extremely asymmetric Jihadi threat. By focusing on the national governments of foreign fighter producing countries, these approaches fail to allocate resources where they are most needed. Additionally, military support and financial aid for terrorism funneled through national governments may increase individual political motivations to join jihad. Directly sponsoring North African and Arab leaders reinforces the Jihadi militant ideology and political justifications for attacking the West. Providing Western military equipment and foreign aid through national governments may accentuate the cultural cleavages between the central government and aggrieved groups, leaving aggrieved groups further enticed to use terrorism tactics.

Table 2: City	Country	Fighters	City % Pop.	% Fighter /City
Darnah	Libya	52	1.39%	60.47%
Mecca	S.Arabia	43	5.71%	21.83%
Jawf	S.Arabia	16	0.12%	8.12%
Dayr al zur	Syria	16	1.10%	43.24%
Sanaa	Yemen	14	4.85%	53.85%
Wadd	Algeria	8	0.36%	38.10%
Dara	Syria	7	0.27%	18.92%
Algiers	Algeria	5	5.22%	23.81%
Adlab	Syria	5	0.28%	13.51%
Tetuan	Morocco	5	1.09%	19.23%
Bin Arouss	Tunisia	5	0.74%	29.41%

The asymmetric structure of foreign fighter recruitment requires an asymmetric response. Western countries must look past international boundaries and focus on cities and hubs of radicalization. Counter-terrorism efforts must expand beyond traditional military and high-level diplomatic efforts and move towards underdeveloped soft power methods of grass roots strategic communication, economic development, and human intelligence collection focused on

flashpoint cities and terrorist hubs. Successful asymmetric counter- terrorism strategies require human solutions, relying on cultural, linguistic, and low-level negotiation skills tailored to the cities of origin.

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ⁱ For a further description of the data used and the weaknesses of this data, see Appendix A.

ⁱⁱ See Appendix C for the complete city analysis data set and the supporting statistics utilized in this study.

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