



## THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PROBLEM: RECENT TRENDS AND CASE STUDIES

By Tally Helfont, *Rapporteur*

FPRI's [Program on National Security](#) held a conference on the foreign fighter problem, September 27-28, 2010, in Washington, DC at the Reserve Officers Association, which cosponsored the conference. General William Ward, Commander of US Africa Command, delivered a videotaped message to the conferees, and Terence Ford, Director of Intelligence and Knowledge Development for US Africa Command, delivered the keynote. Audio and video files of the proceedings are posted on FPRI's website at: <http://www.fpri.org/research/nationalsecurity/foreignfighters1009>. Selected papers from the conference will be published in *Orbis* and other outlets. [Samuel Helfont](#), [Tally Helfont](#), [Michael Horowitz](#), and [Michael P. Noonan](#), served as panel moderators. FPRI's Program on National Security is supported by a contribution from FPRI's Vice Chairman John M. Templeton, Jr.

The views expressed herein are those of the speakers and should not be construed to represent any agency of the U.S. government or other institution. What follows is a summary of the keynote address, major panel presentations and discussions.

### VIDEO MESSAGE

In a video message played at the outset of the conference, *General William E. Ward*, Commander of U.S. Africa Command, said he believed “very strongly that the foreign fighter phenomenon is a measurable threat to global peace and security.” He stressed that the degree to which these organizations operate globally is an important aspect of the current phenomenon. Through the “recruiting, indoctrinating, training, equipping, and employing individuals in different locations around the globe,” foreign fighters have been able to exploit “vulnerabilities in under-governed areas and even within relatively well-developed nations.” Gen. Ward cautioned that, “like many places, Africa is vulnerable” and referenced some of the dilemmas that have arisen in trying to stem the foreign fighter problem. In closing he applauded the aims of the conference, which he said “continues some of the important and insightful dialogue from last year’s [foreign fighter] conference,” and expressed his eagerness to hear its results.

### KEYNOTE ADDRESS

*Terrance Ford*, Director of Intelligence and Knowledge Development for U.S. Africa Command, delivered the conference’s keynote address. Ford noted that “globalization has changed how foreign fighter networks operate throughout the world,” enabling these networks to be far more efficient, lethal, and clandestine. Likewise, Ford pointed out that foreign fighters “often see themselves—and are perceived by some others—as freedom fighters.” Motivated by ideology, religion, oppression and social injustice, these fighters take up arms to further what they consider a noble cause and “bring a fervor to the battlefield that is lacking in mercenaries and combatants.” He cautioned, “we should be mindful of these attributes as we craft anti-recruitment strategies” and “prepare operational plans to militarily defeat them.” Finally, Ford emphasized the need for countries to develop “self-sufficient security apparatuses capable of defending individual state borders.” He added that regional cooperation between stronger and weaker nations in defense of common borders would serve “to deny the safe havens on which the foreign fighter networks rely.”

### PANEL 1: RECENT TRENDS IN FOREIGN FIGHTER SOURCE COUNTRIES AND TRANSIT NETWORKS

*Stephanie Kaplan*, a Ph.D. candidate in MIT’s Political Science department and a Visiting Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, offered three arguments for understanding the causes and consequences of the Muslim foreign fighter phenomenon.

First, Kaplan argued that “contemporary terrorism research is too terrorism-centric, and that war is the most profitable lens through which to view the global jihadist movement.” In support of this assertion, she referenced data suggesting, “more violent Islamic extremists participate in the movement through war than through terrorism.” Likewise, she added that information culled from the Harmony Documents<sup>1</sup> focused more “on concepts of guerrilla warfare, weapons and inventory”—traditional methods of armed conflict—than on terrorism.

In Kaplan’s second argument, she posited that the “foreign fighter problem is actually several problems ... that mirror the life cycle of the foreign fighter phenomenon.” She explained that this cycle is comprised of the pre-war phase, the war phase, and the post-war phase and that each phase raises a host of disparate questions that would require unique treatment.

Third, she stressed the need for a conceptual framework to understand the problem across time and space. Kaplan explained that the discussion of this phenomenon has been focused for too long on ad hoc case study analysis, which she described as being “very descriptive and very reactionary,” rather than predictive. According to Kaplan, each war generates capabilities—operational, organizational, logistical—and by looking “at the problem through this framework, not only can we accurately assess what’s going to happen in wars” but come up with better preventative prescriptions.

*Marc Sageman*, an FPRI Senior Fellow and author of *Understanding Terror Networks* and *Leaderless Jihad*, focused on the phenomenon in terms of a potential “bleed-out” effect that may occur *after* foreign fighters take part in global jihadi conflicts. Sageman argued that acts of political violence carried out in the West by returned foreign fighters are an important measure of the threat posed by this group. Citing numerous examples, he concluded that the number of instances in which foreign fighters carried out such attacks in the West was limited, therefore refuting the concept of the “wandering mujahideen.”

Likewise, Sageman challenged the concept of foreign fighter groups, such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as being franchises. “It’s a wrong metaphor,” and implies that the central organization is consciously setting up franchises. Rather, Sageman suggested that it is more aptly characterized as a phenomenon. Citing additional examples of terrorism, he illustrated that often the plots that succeed come together in an organic fashion and that the days of systematic, lengthy training and recruitment are gone.

*Lorenzo Vidino*, currently a visiting fellow at the RAND Corporation, built on Sageman’s point about the asystematic nature of the phenomenon. Based on his interviews in Italy of “former jihadis” regarding their experiences as foreign fighters, Vidino argued that the foreign fighter pipeline was very much “random.” “The whole experience of foreign fighters is often shaped by coincidences in advance largely beyond the control of the ‘wannabe’ foreign fighter,” said Vidino, adding that the locale often had nothing to do with the fighters themselves but rather with the handlers that they had come across.

Vidino also noted that, when looking at Europe, certain countries favor specific conflict arenas to channel their foreign fighters. For example, “In Spain, the pipeline really goes to mostly North Africa. It used to be Iraq. If we’re talking about Sweden, it’s largely Somalia. Germany, as we heard, is really Pakistan ...” and so on. This point served to strengthen Vidino’s assertion that the foreign fighter pipeline can, in many instances, disregard personal preferences for certain conflict zones for the sake of supply and demand.

Vidino concluded with a point about American foreign fighters. For a long time, said Vidino, it has been a common understanding that the foreign fighter phenomenon was a European issue that it “did not really affect Muslims in the United States.” He explained that according to this view, “American Muslims are virtually immune to radicalization because they’re well integrated into society, while European Muslims have not well integrated, and hence more prone to radicalization.” Citing several well-publicized cases spanning back to the 1980s, Vidino maintained that the facts simply do not support this understanding.

*Clinton Watts*, a Managing Director for Innovative Analytics and Training (IAT), highlighted five points that he believed were critical to understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon from a global perspective. First, Watts noted that while the places change, the process stays the same. He posited that “most of the foreign fighter recruits come from maybe two dozen towns around the globe” and because these towns are known for terrorist recruitment, anti-radicalization and anti-recruitment tactics should be focused there.

Second, Watts dealt with the concept of “fighters versus martyrs.” Watts referred to the Sinjar Documents<sup>2</sup> where recruits

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<sup>1</sup>The Harmony Documents were captured by the United States Military during the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, which include correspondence by al Qaeda operatives in the 1990s. The declassified documents are currently part of the Defense Department’s Harmony Database, administered by The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. <[http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/harmony\\_docs.asp](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/harmony_docs.asp)>

<sup>2</sup> The Sinjar Records refers to a subsection of the Harmony Documents that were captured by coalition forces in October 2007 in a raid near Sinjar, along Iraq’s Syrian border. These records contain a collection of more than 600 foreign fighter personal records collected by al Qaeda in Iraq. The Records are publicly available through The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point: English [www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/FF-Bios-Trans.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/FF-Bios-Trans.pdf)>, Arabic: <[www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/Foreign\\_Fighter\\_Bios-Orig.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/Foreign_Fighter_Bios-Orig.pdf)>

themselves made the decision whether to be fighters or martyrs. Watts believes that choosing to be a fighter is significant because of the bleed out effect mentioned by Sageman.

Third, Watts argued that while both physical and virtual recruitment exists, the physical manifestation is much more powerful because of the personal trust that can be established. He pointed out that the old Marine adage, “The best recruiter of a Marine is a former Marine,” is also applicable in this phenomenon: “The best recruiter of a foreign fighter is a former foreign fighter.”

Fourth, Watts suggested that the foreign fighter model is more closely likened to “how ant colonies form to find food sources” as opposed to a strictly hierarchical model. According to this logic, would-be foreign fighters seek out their targets using varying methods. Once the target is found by an individual, signals are sent out to the colony—or the cell, in this case—to organize around that target. Understanding these networks as being ant-like can, according to Watts, facilitate the disruption of foreign fighter mobilization.

Finally, Watts suggested that a strategic approach to dealing with foreign fighters would be “to make villains, not martyrs.” In short, trying to create a local environment that looks upon the activities of returned foreign fighters as atrocities, rather than greeting them with a heroes’ welcome.

## PANEL 2: SOMALIA CASE STUDY

*Ambassador (ret.) David Shinn*, an Adjunct Professor of African Affairs at The George Washington University, focused his remarks exclusively on foreign fighters from the al-Shabaab movement, although he acknowledged that there are other foreign elements engaged in fighting in Somalia.

Shinn explained that initially, al Qaeda had a difficult time “recruiting Somalis to the jihadi cause,” despite the chaotic situation in the country during the 1990s. However by 2007, al-Shabaab, which came out of the fractured Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), began trying to establish closer links to al Qaeda. Shinn clarified that while “al-Shabaab is not under the operational control of al Qaeda” nevertheless, it still maintains very close links to the group.

According to Shinn, “al-Shabaab is organized into three layers,” and while the top layer is comprised of Somalis, “you have other layers in the leadership that are very, very critical to the organization,” which include “a significant and growing number of foreigners—either foreigners or Somalis from the diaspora with foreign passports.” He added that of “the 85 member executive council of Al-Shabaab today, 42 are Somalis and 43 are foreigners.” As such, “the hardliners led by the foreign jihadis wield enormous influence and have access to resources and the means to dictate their wishes to the less powerful factions.” Shinn also emphasized that “the foreign veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq play an important part of al-Shabaab Field Commanders because of their military experience,” teaching “techniques of suicide attacks, remote controlled roadside bombings, kidnappings and assassinations” to the rest of the group.

Shinn underscored that “al-Shabaab has developed one of the most effective media recruitment programs ever developed by a militant Islamist organization,” which has “been particularly successful in the Somali diaspora in Europe, North America, the Middle East, Africa and even Australia.” These recruitment efforts, he said, have “motivated a significant number of these people to go to Somalia” and join al-Shabaab. (A write-up of Ambassador Shinn’s was published as an FPRI Enote, accessible at: <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/201011.shinn.somalia.html>.)

*Ted Dagne*, a specialist on East African affairs, noted that “of all the regions in Africa, it is the Horn of Africa that has emerged in the past 15 years as a region highly vulnerable to terrorist attacks and a safe haven, not just for international organizations, but for local terrorist organizations as well.” Dagne stressed that while Somalia has been used as a terrorist safe haven in part due to its lack of central authority, the “emphasis on foreign fighters and foreign influence” frequently has been overstated given that the terror attacks “being carried out against Somalis is basically by Somalis, largely, with the help of some foreigners.”

He argued that “the Ethiopian invasion, with the support of the United States, is seen by many observers as contributing to the emergence of al-Shabaab and the proliferation of other extremist groups in Somalia.” Dagne also remarked that al-Shabaab’s ability to recruit and retain recruits has been reduced over the past year, “in large part because of their own misdoings—because of the attacks they’ve been carrying out, because of their affiliation ... with foreign entities.”

Dagne added, “for the first time in the past several years, we have seen Somalia move beyond the clan politics.” Specifically “the leadership of Al-Shabaab, or the leadership of the ICU, it’s more inclusive than any time,” pointing to the new reality in which “religion is more important for Shabaab” than clanism.

*Daved Gartenstein-Ross*, the Director of the Center for the Study of Terrorist Radicalization at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, asked, “Why has Shabaab placed so much emphasis on foreign fighters from the West?” Drawing from some

earlier comments made during the conference, Gartenstein-Ross noted that al-Shabaab's active recruitment strategy stands out from foreign fighter recruitment tactics in other arenas. He suggested that active recruitment is likely a part of the group's operational strategy to seek out individuals, who are technologically savvy and familiar with English (as opposed to recruits who are useful militarily). Gartenstein-Ross added that this strategy may also be "designed to expand Shabaab's transnational reach."

He highlighted the importance of the oft "neglected non-western foreign fighters" and specifically the "Somalis born in Kenya and Ethiopia" to al-Shabaab as an organization. From a threat standpoint, he argued that this group is problematic not only because of "what they do when they're inside Somalia" but also for "what they do when they leave"—"whether they might carry out some sort of terrorist attack or some other kind of jihadi-related activity while they're in the United States."

Gartenstein-Ross also posed the question, "why Shabaab is not an al Qaeda affiliate?" According to its public messaging and public addresses, it is clear that al-Shabaab holds al Qaeda in high regard, "and likewise, al Qaeda leaders, who don't always embrace any jihadist group out there, have also issued a number of statements favorable of Shabaab." Gartenstein-Ross therefore suggested that al Qaeda has yet to give al-Shabaab its official imprimatur because "perhaps Somalia is actually being seen as a real possible base of strength," and it "doesn't want to attract greater U.S. attention to that theater of war," in case things go poorly for the group in Afghanistan and Iraq.

*Ken Menkhaus*, a professor of Political Science at Davidson College, situated the "question of foreign fighters in Somalia, foreign fighters for that matter in Africa in broader context"—namely, "an African context of political weakness." He charged that "Africa is the theater for other people to play out their wars," explaining that "what's happening in places like Somalia and elsewhere is very much a function of a political vacuum."

Menkhaus identified an additional factor as to why the Somali diaspora supported al-Shabaab (not only financially or morally, but also physically by going to Somalia to join the group): Somalia "was a perfect fit for the al Qaeda meta-narrative." Specifically, the Ethiopian intervention in 2006 was seen as "a Christian-dominated government of Ethiopia coming in a crushing and oppressing Muslims with the backing of the evil empire, the United States." This, Menkhaus said, made it "relatively easy for some to be convinced that this was the next great front in their struggle."

Menkhaus added that the poor state of the Somali economy and the country's dependence on remittances from abroad have acted to constrain the influence of al-Shabaab to an extent. Menkhaus explained that the diaspora is the lifeline of the Somali people, and "if they start engaging in terrorist attacks in the United States, elsewhere, they run the risk of a law enforcement clamp-down ... jeopardizing the remittance system itself."

### PANEL 3: MAGHREB CASE STUDY

*J. Peter Pham*, the Senior Vice President of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy and an Associate Professor at James Madison University, remarked that prior to the establishment of al Qaeda and the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Maghrebis—that is, Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians and others—made up a significant percentage of the suicide bombers "in the al Qaeda led insurgency in Iraq." This participation "helped facilitate, if you will, the building of the trust networks" between al Qaeda central and the Maghreb-based combatants, culminating in the announcement in 2007 "by the GSPC [*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC*] that it had become al Qaeda in the land of the Islamic Maghreb."

Because some of those sent to fight in Iraq returned to the Maghreb and joined AQIM, Pham argued that it may be more appropriate to label these combatants "as foreign trained, rather than as foreign fighters." Moreover, these foreign-trained fighters brought back new terrorist techniques that had not been used previously in the Maghreb, effectively broadening the scope of AQIM's capabilities in terms of casualty rate, lethality, and the execution of multiple, coordinated attacks.

Pham observed that "robust action on the part of Algerian government has largely changed the nature of the [AQIM] campaign," in effect, defeating the guerrilla war or counterinsurgency centered in Kabylia in the North. He said that "the nature of the organization is also changed because of the defeats," in which AQIM has less of a "hierarchical structure, and now the former zone commanders have a great deal of autonomy."

*Lianne Kennedy Boudali*, an International Policy Analyst with the RAND Corporation, suggested that "regional foreign fighter incidence is on the rise in the Maghreb," or to be exact, "increasing numbers of fighters from states in Africa are participating with AQIM activities." Boudali attributed AQIM's need "to expand its activities into the Sahel" to its "inability to sustain itself through recruitment." However, she clarified that AQIM's "increased cooperation with fighters, who are from Mauritania, from Mali, from Niger, has allowed them to expand their support networks," including social support for recruitment, financial support, and the use of criminal networks. She assessed that while AQIM is not "in a position to destabilize any of the states in the region," the fact "that they are able to draw [in] these additional populations" poses some threat to regional security.

Boudali cautioned that “the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan serve to socialize a young generation of potential recruits, both in North Africa and in the Sahel states, making them perhaps more susceptible to AQIM's recruitment messages.” However, she made the distinction that recruits from the Sahel countries are often in “units where you see more criminal activity taking place; ... they're more in the mold of the guerrilla fighter than what we think of as a ‘foreign fighter’ seeking martyrdom.” Therefore, “their utility to AQIM may derive more from their social, tribal, or in fact their criminal connections” than from their ideological or martyrdom aspirations. She noted that “the criminal activity ... gives the United States an interesting angle to increase its collaboration in the area,” perhaps diffusing some of the skepticism of American involvement on the continent.

Boudali suggested that “AQIM’s activities in the Sahel have caused economic harm to some of the disadvantaged populations in the Sahel”—the Tuareg, the Berbers, and others. Those groups “being harmed by the loss of the tourism, income and so forth from AQIM’s activities” have less of an incentive to cooperate with AQIM, said Boudali.

*Audra K. Grant*, a political scientist at the RAND Corporation, explained that the organizational make-up of AQIM, which is comprised of mostly “Algerians, and has substantially fewer Moroccans, Libyans and Tunisians ... is partly due to effective counterterrorism efforts in those countries, but also to weaknesses in the jihadi movements in these countries.”

Grant listed some of the “conditions that have made this sort of [jihadi] activity permissive, particularly in the Sahel region, where al Qaeda has had more success in extending its outreach.” Specifically, she noted that the existence of “huge swaths of remote, difficult to govern territory” along with extremely porous borders makes the Sahel region extremely vulnerable to AQIM’s network operations.

When looking at the North African fighters who returned from Afghanistan, Grant pointed to an alarming number coming “specifically from two cities—Darnah and Benghazi [Libya].” These cities “are revered among local residents for their historic resistance and rebellion, being former sites of Islamic rebellion.” Grant added that, in her view, “urban settings are important for playing a role in terms of foreign fighter recruitment” due to factors like a lack of “economic opportunity, high levels of unemployment, anti-Western sentiment, frustration with governments, lack of political opportunity,” among others. Grant also said that the Internet “has a function in radicalizing individuals who do end up becoming foreign fighters,” which she believes “was the case for those who went to Iraq, at least for some Maghrebi countries.”

*John Entelis*, a Professor of Political Science and Director of the Middle East Studies Program at Fordham University, raised the notion that “AQIM, in its new manifestation, is a manifestation of decline, not a manifestation of strength or empowerment.” According to Entelis, there are five factors associated with the AQIM decline theory. The first factor is the national reconciliation effort in Algeria promoted by Abdelaziz Bouteflika that resulted “in more and more jihadis turning themselves in” and the defection of GSPC founder, Hassan Hattab, himself.

A second factor is “the success of [the] splits within AQIM.” “The reconciliation processes formed division among AQIM fighters” who were unsure “whether or not members should accept the government’s amnesty offer.” Entelis explained that on the one hand, “Hattab has been particularly vocal in calling for AQIM members to lay down their arms.” On the other hand, “it inspired AQIM leader [Abdelmalek] Droukdel to provide religious justification for suicide attacks”— a relatively new phenomenon in the Algerian context.

A third factor is AQIM’s “stance towards the parent organization” regarding “division between locally focused objectives and more global ones,” in which “certain GSPC members resent having been reduced to mere agents of al Qaeda.”

A fourth factor relates to intellectual figures—such as Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif (aka Dr. Fadl), a known source of al Qaeda’s philosophy—who challenged the legitimacy of AQIM and declared GSPC’s jihad to be illegitimate.

The fifth factor affecting the weakness in AQIM is “the changing international stance and shrinking sources of aid.” Entelis elaborated, stating “since September 11th, a global response to terrorism has seriously interrupted operations, including the sources of funding.” This “can help explain this wave of kidnapping and ransom that is to make up for this loss,” he said.

Challenges to the decline theory, according to Entelis, are based on five alternative factors, including 1) the absence of political freedoms, 2) the crisis itself in civil society throughout North Africa, 3) regional instability and a climate of conflict, 4) weak regional cooperation, and 5) a hopeless socioeconomic environment.

#### PANEL 4: YEMEN CASE STUDY

*Christopher Boucek*, an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Middle East Program, stressed that when “talking about Yemen, especially in the last year or so, the issue has been all about terrorism and security, and terrorism and security is not Yemen's biggest problem.” Rather, according to Boucek, “Yemen is facing a number of challenges, and terrorism and security are just one of these challenges.” If Yemen is in danger of becoming a collapsed state, it is first and

foremost because of “issues like the economy, governance, corruption, subsidies—a whole range of larger systemic issues, including resource depletion, but primarily focused on the economy.” However, there is a correlation between these factors, as the latter are “the conditions that lead to instability and the foreign fighter issue.”

He suggested that there are three separate groups currently active in al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen: 1) Yemenis, who are focused on Yemen’s domestic issues, 2) Saudis, who are uninterested in what goes on inside Yemen but rather are focused on “going back to Saudi Arabia and fixing what they got wrong the last time around,” and 3) the third-country nationals, including Pakistanis, Egyptians, and others. In light of this breakdown, “what can be done about the foreigners who are active in al Qaeda?” In Boucek’s estimation, “you might be able to get someone to turn out the foreigners—the Saudis and the Pakistanis—but not the Yemenis.” Boucek posited that this “raises some interesting questions for counterterrorism policy and how we deal with Yemen looking forward.”

Boucek warned that released Yemeni Guantanamo detainees, both those who have already returned to Yemen and the 90 or so that will eventually be released and return, pose a significant threat to the country’s stability. He explained that “Yemen doesn’t have an adequate system in place now for dealing with this and they won’t have an adequate system in place for dealing with other returnees.” Furthermore, Boucek said that Guantanamo detainees often keep in touch with one another after their release, coordinating their activities to travel to Yemen and engage in jihad, “not only amongst themselves but with other third country returnees.”

*Brian O’Neill*, a freelance writer and blogger focusing on Yemen and U.S. foreign policy towards the country, challenged the assertion commonly found in the media that explains Yemen’s “jihadi problem” as resulting from al Qaeda being beaten in the AfPak region and therefore seeking out new territory. He suggested instead that these fighters are “there because they want to be there, because AQAP is strong and it’s a viable franchise, and the conditions in Yemen seem profitable.” O’Neill added that “AQAP doesn’t exist because of these foreign fighters—it’s an organic, homegrown organization.”

O’Neill noted that AQAP “has done a really excellent job of beginning to insinuate themselves into the tribal system through marriage and through recruitment ... creating these safe havens, but safe havens with an element of control to them,” which he thought was “a much more profitable venue for jihad than say, the chaos of Somalia.” Therefore, dealing with this problem, he said, becomes more difficult as lines between AQAP and Yemeni society “begin to blend and blur.”

O’Neill acknowledged that Yemen provided a disproportionate number of people going to wage jihad abroad, and that, as was mentioned by one of the webcast participants, those who returned took up leadership positions and shared their expertise with local combatants in AQAP.

*Barak Salmoni*, a visiting defense fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, pointed out that although there is a great “need to reform Yemen’s sociopolitical structures,” this does not imply “that there were coherent structures to begin with.” It is important to remember that “there has not been a unitary Yemen ever, governed from Sanaa, where the ruler was able to reign throughout the land,” and that it has “frequently been the site of political and armed contestation based upon ideology.”

Salmoni suggested that, in Yemen, a “hyper-local identity” exists, which includes “an enduring north-south gulf” and “an enduring sense of Yemeni-ness—often opposed to outsiders.” This is important because “the notion of foreign control, the hidden hand, has been a leitmotif both to the opposition to the Yemeni regime, as well as on the part of the Yemeni regime itself.” The Saleh regime has been known for playing different factions off one another and using “irregular, often tribal, auxiliaries” that are seen as foreign to fight “out of region.” Salmoni said that this tactic “reignites notions of who is from here and who is foreign—and can work against even the sub-regional community.” Understanding these notions of foreign and non-foreign is “significant to understanding the challenges Yemen will face.”

Salmoni also emphasized the role of diaspora communities in financing violent elements within Yemen and how this affects efforts to combat violence and terrorism in the country. He explained, “There are legal networks of commercial exchange that go from the northern highlands down through Sanaa or through Aden, and then pass internationally into the Gulf sheikdoms and even into Iran.” These financial exchanges then can make their “way back into Yemen in terms of funds which can be used locally—locally to acquire weapons, locally to buy loyalty of tribes in a temporary way ...” In essence, this cycle which includes the participation of diaspora communities serves as fuel to perpetuate violent activities within Yemen.

## PANEL 5: AFGHANISTAN & PAKISTAN CASE STUDY

*Brian Glyn Williams*, an Associate Professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, provided a review of the history of jihadi foreign fighters in Afghanistan over the last 30 years. He discussed the post-9/11 period and the invasion of Afghanistan by American forces in detail, focusing specifically on the ethnic origin of the foreign fighters and how different groups engaged in different aspect of the conflict. Moreover, Williams explained that while the foreign fighters who came to fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan included, among others, Uzbekistanis (not Afghan Uzbeks), Tajiks, and

Arabs, there was also a massive force of Pakistanis—of both Pashtun and Punjabi origins—that joined, “bolstering the Taliban army.”

Williams described the extremely high casualty rate among foreign fighters, adding that in certain instances, cadres of fighters were deliberately used as cannon fodder. “Fortunately for the foreign fighters,” Williams said “in 2002, the Bush administration sort of turned its back on Afghanistan. There was no interest in doing nation building.” Accordingly, due to the low levels of American troops in Afghanistan at the time and the administration’s shift to Operation Iraqi Freedom, foreign fighters and al Qaeda were able to regroup and to re-infiltrate their previous strongholds in Afghanistan. Williams explained that “al Qaeda began teaching the Taliban how to use IEDs from Iraq, how to use suicide bombings,” despite the fact that “suicide bombings had always been taboo in Afghan culture.” In short, during this period of limited American activity in the country, foreign fighters learned new techniques from other conflict zones and began applying them locally.

*Sameer Lalwani*, a Research Fellow with the New America Foundation’s American Strategy Program and a Ph.D. candidate in political science at MIT, discussed the concept of foreign fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan through the lens of civil war and insurgency. Lalwani noted that while the foreign fighter phenomenon has been examined from two perspectives—“the inflow of foreign fighters into a civil war insurgency or the outflow of foreign fighters to engage in acts of terrorism”—in the AfPak arena, “we’re interested in the first category but obviously it has implications for the second.”

Lalwani underscored the need to examine “the definition of what it means to be ‘foreign’ or a ‘foreign fighter’” and suggested thinking about the foreignness of the combatant “in terms of nationality and political boundaries, ethnicity, regional identity,” and “...whether or not these fighters are governmental or non-governmental forces.” He provided an example in Afghanistan where, “The Afghan national police in some particular areas of Afghanistan are seen as tremendously foreign and hostile, corrupt, invading the role of locals and in other places they are deeply integrated with local communities and command structures of local forces.” This factor is important because in the latter scenario, these forces often have a difficult time “combating insurgents within their territory because they’re seen to be of the same ethnic stock or tribal background.”

Additionally, Lalwani raised the point about the role of states in the foreign fighter phenomenon. He argued that “neighboring states play a major role in backing transnational rebels; whether it’s through sanctuaries, as Pakistan has done with Afghanistan, or even through tacit sanctuaries or tacit displacements of foreign forces ...” Therefore, state “policies are chief determinants of the role of foreign fighters” and thus a point of leverage.

*Bruce Riedel*, a Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution’s Saban Center for Middle East Policy, commented that the number of foreign fighters that exist in any given arena is “very, very murky,” raising “a definitional question... what is an al Qaeda fighter? Is he signed up for the al Qaeda pension plan? Does he have the al Qaeda secret handshake?” Riedel suggested that figures relating to organizational numbers connote “that we know exactly how big the al Qaeda problem is” and in his view, we simply do not. He added, however, “al Qaeda and the foreign fighters, whatever their numbers are, have acted as a force multiplier in Afghanistan,” and “have provided the cutting edge of training” and propaganda development in theater.

He discussed the role of American foreign fighters in the AfPak arena, pointing to “an increasing tendency of American citizens—usually of Afghan or Pakistani origin—to go to Afghanistan and Pakistan where they are now being trained by al Qaeda.” Riedel emphasized that “in terms of counterterrorism, this is probably the single most important problem we’re facing today.”

Riedel suggested, in conclusion, that “... the only serious way to control this foreign fighter problem is with the assistance of the government of Pakistan. And at the end of the day, that comes down to the assistance of the Pakistani Intelligence Service—the ISI.”

*Stephen Tankel*, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s South Asia Program, focused his remarks around two concepts: “why foreign fighters were drawn to conflicts,” and “the idea of foreign fighters as force multipliers.”

Tankel suggested looking at these questions “through the prism of Punjabi militant groups.” According to Tankel, “Punjabis occupy a very specific place in the jihadi milieu,” because they are not far at all from Pakistan and yet are “considered to be foreign fighters in Afghanistan and also potentially in the tribal areas as well.” He added that while they “were foreign fighters in terms of ethnicity,” it was their “identity that drew them together,” since “the Taliban was Deobandi as were many of these Pakistani Punjabi militant organizations.” In effect, he suggested that over time, “while those foreign fighters still count as ‘foreign’ in Afghanistan,” the relationships have moved away from being simply “a marriage of convenience” to more of “a strategic alliance.”

Regarding foreign fighters as force multipliers, Tankel suggested that “the destabilization in the FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas] has been very troublesome for Pakistan” and “these Punjabis, who are to a degree foreigners in

the FATA ... have been able to contribute to the insurgency” in three ways: 1) their networks reach “into the heartland, which can be used to launch terrorist strikes into Islamabad and Rawalpindi and Lahore,” 2) they engage, promote, and foster the idea of sectarianism within tribal Pashtuns, and 3) they bring expertise from their training under the Pakistani Army and the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence). In short, “a very small number of people can have a very disproportionate impact.”

## CONCLUSION

*Michael Noonan*, the Managing Director of FPRI’s Program on National Security and organizer of both Foreign Fighter Conferences, summarized the major themes covered in the panels. Noonan noted that a common thread throughout the conference, particularly in the cases of Yemen and Somalia, was the extent to which local politics colored the regional manifestation of the foreign fighter problem and how indirect strategies probably served as the best way to deal with them. He concluded by remarking that however “elastic or inelastic you want to use the term ‘foreign fighters,’ I think we can all agree that it is a serious strategic international issue in terms of terrorism, but also a very important issue tactically on the ground.”

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