



**Remarks for the
Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF)**

Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF)
Working Group Plenary Meeting

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About The Soufan Center

The Soufan Center (TSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive conversations in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, media, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues—from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

The Soufan Center is a 501c3 non-profit organization

About The Forum on Returning Foreign Fighters

The *Forum on Returning Foreign Fighters: Policies and Actions to Address the Threat and Protect Vulnerable Communities* took place from 30-31 October, 2018, in Doha, Qatar. For more information, please visit <https://foreignfightersandreturnees.com/> and <http://thesoufancenter.org/foreign-fighters-forum/>.



I am honored to be here today representing my organization, The Soufan Center, a U.S.-based think-tank that focuses on the nexus between security, human rights and humanitarian crises. I thank the GCTF and the FTF Working Group co-chairs, Jordan and the United States, for this kind invitation.

Our team has been monitoring the foreign fighter phenomenon since 2014, providing figures on the numbers of foreign recruits who travelled to join jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria.

Beyond the numbers, we provide analysis of the types of people who joined, and the policy considerations surrounding the foreign fighter phenomenon.

In 2014, we documented over 12,000 foreign fighters from at least 81 countries who had joined jihadist elements in Syria. By 2017, our research found that over 40,000 foreign individuals had travelled from more than 110 countries to join the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Given recent events, the need for practical approaches to managing the movement and the ultimate disposition of this population is even more acute. As IS loses its last remaining stronghold in Baghouz, eastern Syria, the international community is faced with the imminent challenge of what to do with the men, women and children of IS.



For years, my colleagues have recognized the continued importance of the FTF phenomenon. For that reason, in October 2018, The Soufan Center, along with our partners, Georgetown University Doha, Qatar University, and the Qatar International Academy for Security Studies (QIASS), organized a conference on returning foreign fighters in Doha, Qatar.

The *Forum on Returning Foreign Fighters* convened officials and experts from over 60 countries, and included Ministers, Ambassadors, heads of intelligence agencies, counter-terrorism practitioners, policy analysts, human rights experts, academics, journalists, and members of the film industry.

The *Forum* aimed to identify practical ways to implement UN resolutions focused on the FTF phenomenon, and to convene the foremost experts in the field to discuss related issues, including terrorist financing, prison radicalization, and strategic narrative campaigns.

Throughout the two-day conference, the concept of a “whole of society” approach to solutions, which engages governments, civil society organizations and bi- and multi-lateral institutions, was emphasized.



The following are some of the recommendations made during our Forum:

1. First, good policy is informed by good data. During our *Forum*, we had world-renowned terrorism experts – from the UN, EU and governments – point out how little we actually know when it comes to numbers and data. Crucially important points, including precise numbers of how many FTFs have died, how many have returned, how many have exited to another location, and how many remain a true threat, are unknown.

Local researchers based in the regions where the threats are greatest are an essential component for providing governments and multi-lateral bodies with the data and numbers they need to enact smart and effective policies.

2. Second, the FTF phenomenon is a global problem that will require local solutions that involve whole of society responses. That means interventions at the individual, family, community, city, and nation-state levels are necessary. Governments must do their part, researchers theirs, NGO's theirs, and so forth.

In the case of multi-lateral bodies, codifying international norms that work to combat terrorist groups while respecting the balance between security and human rights, is key. For states, encouraging compliance by leading by example is crucial.



- 3. Third, narratives resonate when people feel like their own experience bears them out.** In order for extremist narratives to not hold sway, a focus on good governance, equality and equity are necessary.

- 4. Fourth, the principles surrounding the exchange of FTF-related information among governments are of particular importance, as are the principles related to the prosecution and/or rehabilitation of FTFs.** Even with much discussion, including on biometrics and the prevalence of fraudulent travel documents, many member states still have insufficient tools to address the problem of inadequate information sharing.

- 5. Finally, we must recall the cyclical nature of terrorism.** While we may prefer to view the threat as linear, the reality is more complex. For example, the ways in which families and communities are often stigmatized should be of deep concern to the international community.

Relatedly, while the international community is focused on returning and exiting foreign populations, there are thousands of people from Iraq and Syria who fought for or otherwise supported the Islamic State who will remain in Iraq and Syria. Their situations—the extent to which they are being incarcerated and/or rehabilitated—should be of paramount interest to the global community, considering their current and future impact on global security.



The twin problems of stigmatization and sectarianism, both of which fragment society, are rife in present-day Iraq and Syria. To stem the cycle of violence and eliminate the push and pull factors of radicalization, this fragmenting of society must stop.

Recent Developments

Since we held our *Forum* last October, a lot has changed on the ground – in Syria especially. I'd like to take the time to share some thoughts from my organization on recent developments and responses by states.

In our view, we would recommend that each state take responsibility for their respective citizens and we have outlined the following observations:

- 1. The present situations in Iraq and Syria makes local prosecution of foreign nationals problematic.** Prolonged armed conflict in Syria and ongoing political and social instability in Iraq mean that the judicial systems in both countries are not equipped to manage the large number of crimes carried out within their territories, including by foreign nationals. The issue of torture, the use of the death penalty, and the absence of functioning courts in many areas further complicates the situation. The largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are not an internationally recognized government



and they will be both unwilling and unable to prosecute and/or hold foreign nationals in detention indefinitely.

- 2. As a result, we recommend that states should actively identify and repatriate their respective nationals.** Repatriation and prosecution remain the recommended course of action for male and female members of the Islamic State, who will both pose some degree of risk once returned to their home countries. Foreign children and infants born in IS-controlled territory should not face uncertain futures in camps – and the consequences of hundreds, if not thousands, of children growing up stateless and without resources will be dire.

- 3. States should not strip their nationals of citizenship or deny citizenship to any children born in IS-controlled territory as a means of solving this situation.** By taking citizenship away from individuals who travelled to join the Islamic State, states risk creating future “citizens” of the Islamic State or a different terrorist group. These actions only feed the narrative of IS, and other groups, and reinforce these groups’ appeal that Sunni Muslims will never truly be accepted as equal members of any state except for the “Islamic State.”

- 4. The international community should avoid the past mistakes that allowed al-Qaeda to become a global movement.** Osama bin Laden, along with many adherents from the Gulf, Levant, and North Africa, joined the Afghan jihad in the 1980s. Once the fight was over, this cohort of foreign



terrorist fighters was unable to return home. States revoked their citizenships and Osama bin Laden began coordinating a global network of jihadis who had been left stateless: Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Saif al-Adel, Abu Yahya al-Libi—among many others. Past attempts to revoke citizenship of foreign terrorist fighters only served to create a global subculture of stateless individuals who were able to coordinate a global campaign of violence.

Furthermore, IS has currently established provinces around the globe and after their possible release by the Kurds, foreign fighters may simply join new theatres of the fight.

- 5. The international community should recognize the advantages of the present situation.** The Islamic State has lost its territory and captured members are presently detained and contained in confined locations. The international community presently has the upper-hand to manage this population in line with international human rights standards and international legal obligations. If each state deals with its respective citizens, then the international community will retain control of the situation. While not perfect, this is likely the best opportunity states will have to repatriate and prosecute individuals – before they evade justice, disappear completely, or regroup in new conflict zones. Since before 2014, foreign nationals have been traveling to Iraq and Syria and states cannot simply ignore this challenge indefinitely.



The consequences are likely to be far greater down the line if states avoid taking responsibility for their citizens now, with the conditions for doing so far less favorable.

Thank you all for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions.