

The Challenge of Deterring ISIS

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Through its coalition against ISIS, the West and its local allies are struggling to save a region now teetering on the edge of a geopolitical precipice. The amalgam of coalition forces—much of it still notional—is an engineer’s nightmare: composed of countless moving parts of marginal quality, with American pressure and a fear of ISIS as its only lubricants. The U.S.-led force also confronts an unpalatable reality: the adversary is undeterrable.

Foreign fighters pouring over Turkey’s border to do battle in Syria can make one final stop before gliding through the Bab Al-Salam gate. Before a perfunctory wave through by border officials, aspiring jihadists can sell their passports to a well-positioned café owner who knows these fighters will never again need them. Drawn from a life of marginalization to one of empowerment and eventual salvation, dozens of young men will transform themselves into human bombs at the direction of ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra.

Seemingly inexhaustible in number, Sunni boys and men from America to Indonesia and more than 75 countries in between are drawn by the dramatic imagery, fueled by social media, of heroic fighters doing battle against all manner of evil. These young men—many of them illiterate and poor—move from a life devoid of choice, dignity, and respect to an environment impervious to reason and fear.

A long-sought caliphate is in place, they are told, and it needs defending at all costs.

Willing to die in defense of their religion and the self-declared caliph who interprets it for them, many of these fighters are energized by the promise of a favorable postmortem evaluation of their Earthly deeds. Helping to cleanse holy lands of corrupt, despotic, Western-controlled Sunni governments (and even more detestable Shi’a regimes) is intoxicating indeed. The excesses and failures of corrupt governments have thrust them—fearless and energized—to the front lines of a holy war.

For some of those who do not perish on the battlefield, their onward movement presents an entirely new threat. At times withdrawing through the same border

crossing in Turkey, there is the option of buying a now-repurposed passport for travel to Europe. Chances are, the documents on offer were once held by some of the estimated 3,000 European fighters who journeyed to the region, many hailing from one of 30 U.S. “visa-waiver” countries. Soon they could be on an airplane to America—intentions unknown, but quite likely lethal.

What can be done about ISIS and its team of motivated, trained foreign fighters and other non-state actors like them? Is the only solution arrest or death, or can those two sanctions prevent them from taking up arms in the first place?

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Unfortunately, a deterrence strategy, which by definition is based on the threat of consequences, is unlikely to succeed in the fight against ISIS or similarly minded groups. Death is a goal for many jihadists, and one to be celebrated. With few deterrent options, the United States and its partners should support efforts aimed at dissuading would-be fighters before they make the decision to join ISIS. This may include local efforts to engage family members, clergy, community leaders, and law enforcement, who in turn can discourage plans by those most at risk to fight and die in Syria or Iraq. These influences must be brought to bear before an ISIS commander or facilitator makes his mark on the individual over social media or in person. After that point, stemming the flow of fighters will be much harder and more expensive to achieve. ►