

Return of the Jihadi

Thousands of foreign fighters are streaming back from Iraq to places as far-flung as London and Lebanon. What happens when the jihadis come marching home?

Today, as the American adventure in Iraq nears its endgame, prescient policymakers have begun turning their focus toward the American soldiers returning home: How will these soldiers cope with society? How will society cope with them? How have our soldiers been affected by their experiences? It seems that every week the media reports another story of the pains of return, from the horrors of navigating the military's medical bureaucracy to the families broken on the shoals of post-traumatic stress. Among the costs of the Iraq War are the millions being spent—and the millions that will be spent—to treat their psychological wounds.

Of course, it takes at least two sides to have a war. Yet nowhere are policymakers seriously considering where the other side's soldiers go when the war is over. While we shouldn't be too concerned for our adversaries' health and well-

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being, it nevertheless has security implications when considering what comes after a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. Accordingly, we need to ask what happens when Omar comes marching home. What will the foreign jihadists do? Where will they go? And what should we do about them?

Our enemies are already having the conversation. From refugee camps to Internet chat rooms, jihadists-in-waiting eagerly ask those either still in Iraq or just returned how they should carry the fight to the American imperialists. “Don’t come to Iraq,” they are told. “We’ve already won here.” In the same way that Iraq has gone far worse than our policymakers imagined it would in 2003, it has gone far better than the jihadists ever imagined. Now these jihadists—and their followers—are looking for new battlefields.

We should not take these jihadists lightly. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the toughest opponents I fought from 2002 to 2004 were foreign fighters. I vividly remember a raid in late 2003 on a compound near Fallujah, in which eight foreign fighters armed with AK-47s and grenade launchers chose to fight—rather than surrender—against several dozen Army Rangers and other commandos backed by close air support. They all died quickly, but they fought ferociously in what anyone could see was a hopeless battle. And that was five years ago; jihadists’ fighting skills and collective combat knowledge can only have improved since. That means tough times ahead for the moderate Muslim nations they will return to—countries like Morocco and Jordan—and tough decisions for U.S. policymakers. They talk about the need to leave enough troops in Iraq to prevent a regional war or genocide. But what happens if that regional war takes place not in Iraq but in, say, Lebanon, where the United States has no troop presence? Already, returning jihadists have been party to that nation’s fiercest domestic conflict since the end of its civil war in 1990. By focusing all of its energies on Iraq, the United States is oblivious to the fact that the regional war so feared by analysts and generals may have already seeped out of Iraq’s borders.

So far, the U.S. presidential campaign has reflected a debate between Republicans, who largely prefer to focus U.S. military and political efforts in Iraq, and Democrats, who largely favor a renewed effort in Afghanistan with a policy of “conditional engagement” in Iraq. Both views of the global war on terror, though, are far too restrictive. What we need is a low-intensity, global approach capable of working with dozens of countries around the Middle East and greater Asia to not only defeat far-flung terrorist cells and insurgencies but also to manage the inevitable return of jihadists who now have the skills to bring the battle back home, threaten the stability of nations throughout the Muslim world, and present serious challenges to Western countries with large, unassimilated Muslim populations.

The Return

The effect of “return” differs from country to country and, in many cases, depends on the individuals and their specific environment. A college-educated engineer returning to London is going to face different conditions than an illiterate shepherd returning to Yemen. But any jihadist who has been part of a pan-Islamic struggle in Iraq would hardly be content to consider his fighting days over, move back home, and settle into a normal life. Theirs is a different war than the one fought by Americans in a conventional war like World War II, or even Americans fighting today in Afghanistan and Iraq. Unlike conventional soldiers, jihadists are driven by an ideology that is both all-encompassing and sectarian, separating them from the rest of even Muslim society. Whereas conventional soldiers return “home” in both the physical and ideological sense, a jihadist is likely to see the same alien forces

around him in Beirut or Birmingham as he is in Baghdad or Basra.

But more important than ideology may be psychology. Just as U.S. veterans struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, so too can we expect returning jihadists to suffer from disorientation after leaving Iraq. Lieutenant Colonel Bob Bateman, a respected military

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historian who served as one of General David Petraeus’s strategists in Iraq and has done considerable research on combat trauma, notes four factors that affect how combatants respond to their experiences: the nature of the combat, their social environment while in combat, the social mores they bring to the combat environment, and the social environment to which they return.

In each of these cases, the trauma of war is likely to be harsher for jihadists than most soldiers, with the result that they are likely to continue their combat lives regardless of their ideological disposition. The experience of a jihadist in Iraq might not be as jarring as that of a doughboy in the trenches of World War I, who was subject to endless artillery barrages and gas attacks. But at least those soldiers deployed with large units comprising their friends and neighbors. A jihadist leaves for Iraq in a pair or as part of a small group. Unit cohesion, perhaps the defining stabilizing factor in a conventional soldier’s combat experience from training to battle to home, is missing for him. Thus, even if he undergoes the same objective traumas as a U.S. Marine, he is more vulnerable to the stresses of combat and liable to react violently to his home environment.

We’ve seen this happen before. Consider the return of the “Afghans” in the 1980s, men—including Osama bin Laden—who took the ideology, experience,

and trauma of war against the Soviets into the Balkans, the Maghreb, and the Middle East, resulting in over a decade of war and terrorism. And we have already seen examples emerging from the latest round of jihad-driven conflict: The fighters of Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon, many of whom had combat experience in Iraq, treated both the local authorities in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared and the Lebanese state with disdain during the battles there last year.

Indeed, these new, transnational cadres are in many ways more dangerous than local actors like Hezbollah or Hamas. Both Hezbollah and Hamas draw their legitimacy from the support of their local constituencies. But the rootless returnees are not responsible to any local constituency and thus have no “red lines” they won’t cross. They answer to no one but their pan-Islamic visions. Local authorities have negligible sway over their behavior. Thus, as militants filter back home, more violent clashes between Islamist militants and Arab states outside Iraq are almost inevitable—and many of these states will be fragile nations allied with the United States.

All this leaves policymakers in a bind. The obvious solution is to assist the security services in the affected countries. But doing that in places like Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan would mean supporting illiberal regimes often anxious for an excuse to silence their secular and Islamist dissenters. The irony here is clear: Whereas success in Iraq was supposed to usher in an age of democratization throughout the Middle East, the failure in Iraq may have instead led to the largest crack-down on dissidents and political speech the region has seen in decades. The challenge, then, lies in finding solutions that address the problem without surrendering our values.

This is not to say that in cities throughout the Muslim world, men with the dust of the battlefield on their boots and AK-47s slung over their shoulders are walking off planes and onto new battlefields. The homes to which they return are varied. Some will return to weak states (such as Lebanon), others to strong states (such as Egypt), and some to liberal democratic states (such as the United Kingdom). Understanding these differing home environments is critical to devising an appropriate policy response. At the same time, the jihadist return is not just a threat to the countries that they call home. The Internet facilitates cooperation among returning jihadists worldwide, creating, in effect, the “cyber-return,” a phenomenon with drastic implications for the United Kingdom, France, and other western countries with large and unassimilated Muslim populations.

LEBANON

Lebanon is a prototypical weak, democratic state and as such provides an excellent case study for how returning jihadists can upset an already fragile domestic

security situation. Less than a year after the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, the people of Lebanon were again held hostage to violence, this time sparked not by Shia militants but rather by Sunni groups based in the Palestinian refugee camps. As in the 2006 conflict, the weak central government in Beirut deserved part of the blame. Since the 1960s, the camps have been no-go zones for the government, a strategy that avoided immediate conflict but allowed the construction of, essentially, safe havens for not only Palestinian militants, but also other militant groups and criminal elements. The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that between 20,000 and 40,000 Iraqis have taken refuge in Lebanon, with another 1.2 to 1.4 million refugees in neighboring Syria.

No reliable estimates exist to show how many foreign fighters might have traveled from Iraq to Lebanon. But given their prominence in the 2007 fighting, the number is significant. The militants from Fatah al-Islam were not majority Palestinian; rather they were both Lebanese and citizens from a number of other Arab nations, especially Saudi Arabia. As Nir Rosen reported for the *Boston Review*, some of these militants had fought in Iraq with Ahmed Zarqawi's Al Qaeda-allied organization, while others were lured to Lebanon in the hopes of training in the camps and then fighting in Iraq or the Palestinian territories. Rosen, interviewing jihadists in other Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon who had fought in Iraq, explained that in Nahr al-Bared, "The new men in the camps were largely foreign jihadists, with the same weapons, tactics, and sectarian goals of Iraqi resistance fighters." These men brought a deadly new mentality to the camps of Lebanon. They fought without regard to collateral damage or civilian casualties. When the shooting stopped, Nahr al-Bared—previously home to 30,000 luckless refugees—had been reduced to rubble. One hundred sixty-three Lebanese soldiers lay dead along with more than 200 militants and 42 civilians.

On a visit to Beirut last summer, I was struck by the prevailing fear—from secular Maronite Christians to even Hezbollah supporters—that the latest round of fighting with Sunni militants is only the beginning. Everyone agrees that it is not a question of whether more militants will return from Iraq, but rather how many. What happens, they asked, when two or three Sunni militants, fresh from Iraq, decide to continue that country's war in Lebanon and blow themselves up in a Shia mosque on a Friday afternoon? Hezbollah, the Shiite guerrilla group-cum-political party that is the *de facto* ruler of large parts of Lebanon, might respond forcefully (of course, that fear may have a silver lining, driving the country toward firm action against an untenable situation in the camps). The Lebanese border with Syria continues to be porous, which has both allowed

Hezbollah to re-arm and Sunni militants to cross back and forth through Syria on their way to Iraq. The result will be, at the very least, a heightened political tension, if not a more brutal and explosive war in the near future.

MOROCCO

In contrast to Lebanon, Morocco is a stable monarchy, and as such it, and other nations like it, will face dramatically different challenges from returning jihadists. In July 2007, while on a State Department-funded tour of northern Morocco, I walked off the beaten path with two friends in the town of Tetouan, the former Spanish colonial capital. At no point in our aimless walk did I feel in any danger. It seemed like a typical Moroccan village. And yet a few weeks later, a friend in Rabat told me that Tetouan has a reputation for providing most of the Moroccan suicide bombers in Iraq and was the hometown of the men who plotted the 2004 Madrid train attack that killed 191 people. A little while later, a long cover story in the *New York Times Magazine* profiled Tetouan as a center for jihadist militarism. The revelation upset assumptions about terrorist “breeding grounds.” But it also raised another, unanswered question: What happens when Tetouan’s jihadists return home?

Whereas Lebanon is a weak state with very little central authority, Morocco is an established monarchy with effective bureaucracies and a strong security service boasting a close working relationship with the Western security services. Theoretically, Morocco’s institutions should be strong enough to handle even a serious internal security threat.

Ironically, the greater danger is not that the state will exert too little authority but rather too much. Following coup attempts in 1971 and 1972, King Hassan II permitted horrific human rights violations, even imprisoning some of the military officers who conspired against him in a medieval prison of Tazmamart, described in grotesque detail in Taher Ben Jelloun’s haunting 2002 novel *This Blinding Absence of Light*. Hassan II’s son and successor, Mohammed VI, has a better human rights record, perhaps the best in Africa. But as a non-democratic nation, the country is liable to tilt toward oppression as soon as it senses an internal threat from returning jihadists. And we have already seen countries similar to Morocco—Egypt, most notably—resort to oppressive measures to counter terrorism. Worse, they have used the threat of terrorism to expand their oppressive measures to include all sorts of dissent. As terrorism expert Jessica Stern notes, allowing allies to practice torture and human rights abuses in their fight against Islamists may unintentionally both feed the Islamist narrative of victimization and lead to the replacement of U.S.-allied regimes with regimes led by the radical Islamists themselves. And as West Point researcher Clinton

Watts noted in a recent study of jihadists' national origins, most foreign fighters in Iraq hail from countries with records of oppressing their own citizenry.

CYBER-RETURN

But you don't need to go to Tetouan or a Lebanese refugee camp to see the potential effects of the jihadi return. Just go to London. Take my working-class neighborhood in the city's East End. A few blocks away from where I am writing this essay—an apartment located above a Bangladeshi-owned restaurant and across from a Pakistani-run barber shop—is the mosque that most of the alleged conspirators of the 2006 plan to attack Heathrow Airport attended while drawing up their scheme.

From this same apartment—or anywhere else in the world—I can log onto jihadist chat rooms in which young men from my neighborhood ask their brothers in the Middle East where they can go to aid in the fight against the United States and its allies. This too is part of the “return” from jihad in Iraq. In a wired world, jihadists can transmit their experiences—their stories, their training, their anger—across the Internet. Conversely, the jihadist wanna-bes are getting all the inducement and knowledge they need to continue the fight abroad without leaving their computer desks. In political scientist Audrey Cronin's estimation, this revolution in the way “armies” are raised is equivalent to the way in which Napoleon's *levée en masse* revolutionized warfare in Europe two centuries ago. And like the Prussians in 1806, we are not ready for the challenges we are about the face.

Nor do jihadists necessarily need a physical space to conduct their training. All the information needed to build a suicide vest, for example, is easily available over the Internet. And if it's a tutor a young jihadist-in-training needs, that too is available through easily accessible chat rooms. In immigrant-heavy, working-class neighborhoods such as mine, disaffected Muslim youths slumped in Internet cafes surf them around the clock. Most of the young men who visit these Web pages do nothing, of course. Then again, it took barely a handful to plan and execute the 7/7 bombings in London. What leads them to act? An investigation by Al Qaeda expert Jason Burke for the *Observer Magazine* concluded that while few common threads connect the young Britons who have turned to radicalism, one factor that emerges with alarming consistency is the propaganda and emotive imagery from Iraq downloaded via the Internet, everything from videos of attacks on American soldiers to the gruesome beheading videos that emerged in 2003 and 2004.

This isn't a new tactic. In the 1990s, Hezbollah realized that by videotaping and then broadcasting images of their attacks against the Israel Defense Forces in southern Lebanon, they amplified the actual effect of their attacks.

To do this, Hezbollah had to set up and then use its own television station, al-Manar, to broadcast the videos. Today, who needs a television studio when you have YouTube? On one Internet site, BaghdadSniper, which is translated into eight languages besides Arabic, youths at computer terminals can follow the exploits—real or imagined—of militants fighting in Iraq. Some tapes and reports are of dubious quality, and some doubt exists whether all of them are even real. But that hardly matters. Angry youths in Muslim Britain are not motivated by actual dead Americans but by the idea of dead Americans, a fantasy these sites help feed. These videos, says journalist Amil Khan, “give you an alternative narrative. Instead of feeling like your community is powerless or weak, they give you the sense that ‘your people’ can be strong—and even stronger than the world’s leading powers. It’s a seductive alternative to the self-image many Muslims, young and old, have that their community, the *umma*, couldn’t organize a picnic much less challenge the world’s only superpower.”

Contrary to recent newspaper reports, Europe, not the United States, will feel the brunt of this propaganda. Terrorism expert Thomas Hegghammer, in addition to noting the way in which the Iraq War has led to a surge in jihadist “strategic studies,” believes a careful reading of jihadist publications since 2003 reveals an expansion of jihadist targets post-Iraq and a new focus on the European countries as legitimate targets. And while European intelligence analysts are probably correct to assume there will not be a mass physical return of jihadists to Europe from Iraq, there can be no doubt that Europe is now firmly in the crosshairs of transnational jihadist groups. This development—and Europe’s failure to integrate its immigrant communities—could have adverse effects on relations with the United States. European nations might be more reluctant to commit themselves to the mission in Afghanistan or elsewhere if they feel such missions might further inflame their disgruntled immigrant populations.

A New Counterinsurgency

Despite the spreading threat of returning jihadists, policymakers would rather argue about the origins of the Iraq War than concentrate on its fallout. Consequently, they are not focusing on the obvious steps that must be taken immediately. Number one on the list is that the United States should partner with foreign governments on intelligence sharing, specifically by compiling a database of foreign fighters who have been to Iraq, Afghanistan/Pakistan, or the Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon. Second, working with the British Home Office, it should also develop robust “counter-cyber-insurgency” efforts, including disinformation and computer hacking. Although we are understandably reluctant to engage in counter-network operations—shutting down or hacking sites that

broadcast propaganda—we cannot rule out such options. The precedent set by such operations would be grim, amounting to open warfare on the Internet. But hackers attempt to break into U.S. government servers every day. Surely we would be justified in hacking insurgent websites.

In the returnees' home countries in the Muslim world, the United States must be careful in the way in which it supports allied governments. The aid cannot merely arrive in the form of cash shipments or weapons systems, as it has in the past. American aid to Pakistan since September 11 has demonstrated how such resources can be diverted toward other military efforts—in Pakistan's case, the standoff with India over Kashmir. What's more, as West Point's Watts notes, putting the focus on aid to the national government would likely reinforce jihadists' ideological convictions. Therefore, while not going around Rabat or Beirut per se, U.S. military officers and intelligence officials must play an active, on-the-ground role supporting and advising local authorities, whether they be in Morocco, Lebanon, or places in between. The officials can ensure U.S. money is well-spent, as well as provide needed training and intelligence to local authorities. This isn't to say that cooperation with the central government is unnecessary; in terms of coordinating policy, if nothing else, it is absolutely necessary. But it can't be seen as the primary focus, either.

Once there, American advisers not only would train police and militaries in basic counterterrorism practices, but also instruct them on the psychology and combat knowledge that returnees will bring with them. It is a model that has worked well elsewhere. In the Philippines, while the U.S. Army labored half a world away in large-scale operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Special Forces teams and CIA operatives successfully helped the military defeat the Al Qaeda-inspired Abu Sayef group. In North Africa, Special Forces teams, again, work with the Algerian military to fight Islamist terror groups in what has thus far been a successful partnership. These strategies, it must be noted, are directed toward pre-existing militant groups and not returning jihadists. The job these counter-terror teams face could only get more difficult as jihadists return with new skills and experience. But the overall strategy of partnering training teams with indigenous counterterrorism forces is sound.

To be sure, several factors have thus far prevented the United States from replicating these successes. One, of course, is that while most Sunni militants have begun to move on from Iraq, the U.S. military has not. Iraq continues to suck up military resources, both physical and intellectual, that are badly needed elsewhere. Whereas the situation in Iraq has benefited from a "surge" of troops and an able field commander in David Petraeus, the war in Afghanistan is being fought with a fraction of the troops necessary. As a result, efforts beyond the

two war zones are getting an even shorter shrift. Furthermore, Special Forces units—also known as the Green Berets, the teams of soldiers who, trained in regional language and cultural skills, have historically trained foreign militaries—are kept busy with commando-style “direct action” missions in Iraq when their skills are desperately needed elsewhere.

But even if the Special Forces were freed of their obligations in Iraq tomorrow, the United States still would not have nearly the number of qualified advisers and trainers necessary to fight the kinds of quiet wars the U.S. military is and will be waging in North Africa and East Asia. Already, conventional units have been training foreign militaries across Africa—especially in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, an effort made famous in Robert Kaplan’s *Imperial Grunts*. Using our finite conventional forces for this mission, though, keeps them off the battlefield in Afghanistan where they are more needed.

One solution, then, is to create an Army “Advisor Corps”—a group of soldiers with the specific mission of training and advising foreign militaries on combating returning jihadists and the counterinsurgencies they will lead. This idea, first advanced by Army

Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl and endorsed by Senator Barack Obama, is one of the few truly novel ideas to grow out of the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has not, however, found many supporters within the Pentagon, where Army general officers prefer, along with the Marine Corps, to see themselves as traditional war-fighters. Military innovations that so directly challenge the constitutive norms of the military—the way the institutions see themselves and their mission—rarely succeed.

But maybe the problem with Nagl’s bold idea is that it isn’t bold enough. Nagl agrees with Colonel H. R. McMaster that “military campaigns must be subordinate to a larger strategy that integrates political, military, diplomatic, economic and strategic communication efforts.” This is “the comprehensive approach” alluded to so often since 2003. Yet it must go beyond the Pentagon. The U.S. government as a whole needs to get serious about advising our allies on how to stop the spread of the jihadist threat. Teams that deploy to Algeria or the Philippines or Pakistan cannot just be a group of Green Berets with a CIA liaison officer, or even a battalion of Army advisers. Advisory teams should be tailored to the country to which they are being sent and comprise members from the State Department, the Justice Department, the military, and the intelligence

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services along with regional language and cultural experts. They might also include psychologists or sociologists, who can better understand how terrorist groups and returning veterans interact within their society. Representatives from the Departments of State and Justice would ensure counter-terror and counter-insurgency measures fall within the boundaries of American law and international norms, and they could work with local agencies to build human-rights capacity where it doesn't yet exist. This holistic approach to counterinsurgency is the only way to instruct host nations on the problems of today, but also the challenges of returning jihadists tomorrow.

Such a strategy, however, requires fixing a hapless interagency process in which only the Department of Defense currently possesses an expeditionary mindset. This is not the fault of the State or Justice Departments. Employees in departments outside the Pentagon justly complain that if they are ordered to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan, they will not receive nearly the amount of institutional support given to returning soldiers and Marines. But institutions can be strengthened, and the younger generation of civil servants who enlisted after the September 11 attacks is surely willing to deploy to areas of harm and danger if they can be assured they will earn the same respect and rights given to uniformed servicemen. In the same way, the military would be more likely to send its talented officers and noncommissioned officers on such missions if they contained career incentives. What's more, building those incentives into the timelines of officers should be easy compared with building a separate advisory corps.

The U.S. military remains flexible and formidable despite the strains of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Policymakers and politicians, meanwhile, seem more interested in focusing on the flawed decision-making process that led to the Iraq War than on the problems that have arisen since. And they remain more committed to expensive weapons systems better suited for conventional war with the Soviet Union than building the kind of capacities needed to fight the irregular wars. While the Iraq War is an issue fraught with political and strategic complexities, we must look beyond the problems of today and begin grappling with the daunting realities of the post-Iraq world. If we do not, the problem of returning jihadists will surely be one that comes home to roost for our country and our allies. ■