United Nations Security Council

Topic A: Countering the Flow of Foreign Fighters to Combat Zones

“Here at the United Nations we have led a Security Council Resolution to disrupt the flows of finance to ISIL, to sanction those who are seeking to recruit to ISIL, and to encourage countries to do all they can to prevent foreign fighters joining the extremist cause.”

–David Cameron

The nature of warfare has changed and conflicts are increasingly being fueled by foreign fighters joining the fray. The age of the internet has ushered in new methods of proselytization and distribution of propaganda as means of recruitment. However, as recruitment has expanded, the international community has sought new ways to combat it and prevent the flow of foreign fighters into combat zones.

Background:

Role of the Security Council for Peace and Security

The Security Council is tasked as primarily responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security in the Charter of the United Nations, and to that end has been heavily involved combatting the flow of foreign fighters into conflict zones. Since the 1990s, the Security Council has heavily penalized States that harbor terrorist organizations or non-State actors that recruit foreign fighters, in some cases working to penalize non-State actors directly. Prime examples of this are the sanctions placed on Libya, Sudan, and al-Qaida in 1992, 1996, and 1999, respectively. The Security Council has also attempted to unify Member States to prevent terrorist acts and stem the flow of foreign fighters, starting in 1999 with S/RES/1269, which condemned all acts of terrorism and called upon States to cooperate in the prevention and suppression of terrorist acts.  

In the wake up the terrorist attacks on New York City of September 11th, 2001, the Security Council Adopted S/RES/1373, which established the Counter-Terrorism Committee to “bolster the ability of United Nations Member States to prevent terrorist acts both within their borders and across regions.” This included calls for States to improve porous borders to prevent movement of fighters and non-State actors. While these early efforts to address terrorism would

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theoretically make it more difficult for foreign fighters to cross borders into conflict zones, more than 100 countries had their citizens migrate to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2015. In response to this growing issue, the Security Council adopted S/RES/2178 in 2014. In so doing, the Security Council compelled Member States to work to prevent the “recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning of, or participation in terrorist acts.”

The resolution also called for higher levels of information sharing and national legislation to be implemented aimed at preventing foreign terrorist fighters from flowing from Members to extremist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Al-Nusra Front (ANL), or Al Qaida, and also to prevent their return to their country of origin. In the time since, the Security Council has followed-up on the issue of foreign fighters several times, most recently in 2015. S/2015/683 outlined several of the challenges in the implementation of S/RES/2178 and included some specific recommendations for preventing inter-State travel of foreign fighters.

Current Issues:

ISIL and the Middle East

While many Member States have made strides in their attempts to prevent the flow of citizens into conflict zones, there are still clear and present challenges. New motivations for individuals to take part in combat have exacerbated efforts at preventing an end to the situation in the Middle East. There porous borders in the areas surrounding most conflict zones, but they exist in many developing regions and even in Europe. Additionally, technology has aided non-State actors’ ability to recruit and train new members without being detected by local authorities. In Libya, the number of ISIL fighters has nearly doubled, leading to a loss of government control of many key Libyan cities. In Syria and Iraq, the number of foreign fighters flowing into the conflict is unprecedented and with no slowdown expected in the near future. While existing frameworks are meant to provide guidance on how Member States can prevent this, action is still needed in several specific areas.

Motivations for Foreign Fighters

7 Id.
In today’s environment the motivations of foreign fighters to enter into a combat zone have changed dynamically. Western foreign fighters who are entering into the fray of combat were originally motivated to join the fight in an attempt to defend Islam and Muslims they felt were under threat. Past inspirations for foreign fighters to go into combat involved Muslim countries that were invaded or attacked by non-Muslim states. Examples include the invasion of Afghanistan at the hands of the Soviet Union and the United States, Iraq (the War in Iraq), and the invasion of Somalia by their neighbor Ethiopia.10

Presently, the Syrian conflict inspired foreign fighters to take part in major combat operations in support of ending the brutal practices that the regime was subjecting its citizens to rather than repelling or expelling an invading Western/foreign enemy. But as the conflict has evolved, so too have the motivations for entering the fray. Specifically, this conflict has morphed into a religious divide between Sunnis and Shi’a Muslims that has spilled over from the Iraq civil war to the Syrian conflict. Making matters worse, both regimes have consistently made the conflict out to be sectarian to attempt to discredit the opposition and thereby unify non-Sunnis around the governments.11

A second common motivation for foreign fighters is that recruiters reinforce the theme that the end of the world or the apocalypse is upon the world and that the conflict in Syria is the decisive battle between good and evil. Only a small number of persons who volunteer to fight in this conflict actually believe this is the case, but they do believe that the Syrian conflict is at the heart of the Arab/Muslim world in its history and symbolical significance.

The newest motivation amongst Muslims has been world is proving one’s worth via toughness and hardened personalities. Segments of Muslim youth have played well for ISIS recruitment, specifically those who are already engaged in criminal activities. Other benefits of joining this organization include, uniforms, media access, can appeal to Westerners, and proclaims to be building an Islamic State. Lastly, going to fight in the Syrian conflict poses significant recognition and notoriety for recruits within the Muslim community. Leaving home for conflict in Syria has shown that that particular person receives greater recognition back home and is seen as being a hero for taking action within the conflict.

Border Control

Most foreign fighters come from States near conflict zones and they are often able to freely travel into conflict zones because of porous borders. Moreover, many States with porous borders

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11 Ibid.
lack the finances or expertise to secure, or even monitor, their borders.\textsuperscript{12} This is particularly true in South and West Africa and the Middle East, where borders are typically not based on geographic boundaries. Unsecured borders can breed cross-border violence and aid in the recruitment of foreign fighters throughout regions.

However, this problem is not unique to developing countries. Many developed countries lack coherent communication between law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and customs officials, which causes them to inadvertently allow their citizens to leave the country to go to conflict areas and return with impunity. In addressing border security, Member States need not only the resources for physical security, but legislation and systems in place that can allow them to apprehend fighters travelling through secured borders. In many cases, this may require cooperation between Member States and harmonized laws and tracking methods.

\textit{Information Sharing}

It is difficult for most Member States to identify and track potential foreign fighters, and as such it is becoming increasingly important for there to be information sharing mechanisms. In some cases, even when information sharing mechanisms are in place, there is not an adequate legal regime or procedure that ensures that data is being used to effectively deter the movement of foreign terrorist fighters. For example, flight data within the European Union is currently shared with the United States Department of Homeland Security, but there is no legal framework that allows that data to be shared with relevant intelligence agencies.\textsuperscript{13}

Information sharing could have a particularly powerful role to play in the tracking of foreign fighters from industrialized countries, where records and travel information is already tracked and readily available. When used in tandem with higher levels of physical and technological border security, more effective information sharing could drastically lower the ability of foreign fighters to flow into and out of conflict zones.

\textit{Technology and Recruitment}

Twitter, Facebook, Vimeo, and Instagram have played an increasing role in recruitment efforts for non-State actors and terrorist groups. The internet has become the perfect mode of communication for these organizations as it permits them to disseminate information directly, and anonymously, to a mass of youth willing to perpetuate their cause. For example, videos

\textsuperscript{12} Carik, Daniel S. “Porous Borders and the Insecurity of Civilians: Cross-border Violence in Darfur and Eastern Chad”. Available at: <http://www.fordinstitute.pitt.edu/Portals/0/General_PDF/Porous%20Borders%20and%20the%20Insecurity%20of%20Civilians_Carik.pdf>.

surfaced in the UK that showed teenage British citizens reenacting beheadings that were posted online only a few weeks prior, indicating not only that they became sympathetic to the cause of the terrorist organization, but that they were willing to help spread its message.\textsuperscript{14}

With the prominence of internet in today’s society, one could expect a surge in terrorist activity online and a much higher rate of foreign fighters flowing into conflict zones. In fact, between 1998 and 2009, there was a 58,000\% increase in terrorist websites, many of which are aimed at recruitment.\textsuperscript{15} Unfortunately, the internet was not built with an architecture that allows for this information to be easily blocked. Additionally, many governments worry that attempts to shut down access to this type of information will impact the free speech and access to information rights of their citizens. Even monitoring access to these sources of information has proven controversial as many States have privacy concerns.

**Future Outlook:**

Non-State actors and terrorist groups are engaging in higher levels of foreign recruiting than ever before and increasingly control vast swaths of land, using fear to exert control and influence. It seems likely that such groups will continue to use methods of digital recruitment to attract fighters to their cause, and as their sophistication increases they will increasingly be able to take advantages of weaknesses in borders and States policies. However, through coordinated efforts aimed at securing borders, increasing information sharing, and enacting legislation that will prevent foreign fighters from flowing into conflict zones, Member States and the Security Council could greatly reduce the prevalence of this issue.

The Security Council is likely to reiterate many of the calls that it has made before, but has the opportunity to encourage harmonization of policies across Member States that will help stem the flow of foreign fighters into conflict zones. The Counter-Terrorism Committee will also continue to play an important role in following up on relevant Security Council resolutions and attempting to ensure that States are compliant with calls to prohibit the quartering, or harboring, of foreign terrorist fighters where “there is credible and relevant information giving serious reasons for considering that they have been guilty of such conduct”.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Homeland Security Institute. "The Internet as a Terrorist Tool for Recruitment and Radicalization of Youth". Available at: <http://www.homelandsecurity.org/docs/reports/Internet_Radicalization.pdf>.

\textsuperscript{15} Id.

Focus Questions:

1. Has your country signed/ratified S/RES/1269, S/RES/1373, or any other form of international agreement that concerns this issue?
2. What have you done to assist other nations dealing with this issue?
3. What can be done to address newer motivations, porous borders, information sharing, and technology at the national and regional levels?
4. To what extent should the international community multilaterally, or Member States unilaterally, monitor or censor information transmitted digitally?
5. How has your State combatted the flow of foreign terrorist fighters?
Works Cited


