



## The United States is doing something right in the war on terror

BY FRANK CILLUFFO | FEBRUARY 15, 2012



*John Moore/ Getty Images*

Are Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) still the prime destination for jihad-minded foreign fighters from the West? The short answer is that we really don't know because empirical data is hard to find. Anecdotal evidence referenced by Western security officials, researchers, and even jihadists does suggest, however, that the FATA just might have lost its magnetic appeal. If so, we need to ensure that this positive development is not a fleeting one. And to determine the best way forward, we need to look at how and why it came to be.

But first, let's remember why this phenomenon matters. Foreign fighters, especially those emanating from the West, bolster terrorist and insurgent factions within conflict zones.

Foreign fighters, as well as the bridge figures who recruit them, inspire, radicalize, and motivate individuals to the jihadi cause. Foreign fighters serve key operational and propaganda functions -- in essence, they provide both effect and affect. Their role makes them a threat to Western policy objectives. Together, their ability to return home, their Western passports, and their familiarity with potential targets they may select to attack make them a direct threat to Western security.

There is no shortage of examples of Westerners who trained in the FATA and then went on to execute (or attempt to execute) attacks against the West. Consider Najibullah Zazi, who planned to bomb the New York City subway but was thwarted by U.S. law enforcement and intelligence officials. Or Faisal Shahzad, the so-called Times Square bomber, whose car bomb fortunately fizzled. Or Mohammad Sidique Khan, the ringleader of the 7/7 homicide/suicide bombings that killed more than 50 and wounded over 700 in London in 2005. Or Eric Breininger, a young German national featured in propaganda videos of the Islamic Jihad Union, who was ultimately killed in Waziristan. And the list goes on.

It's definitely good news that there may be a drop in the number of Western foreign fighters traveling to the FATA, but it should come as no surprise. First and foremost, military actions -- including the use of drones -- have made the environment less hospitable for those traveling to it. These military activities have had significant operational effects on al Qaeda (and associated entities) by disrupting pipelines to the region, activities of key facilitators, and training camps. The challenge now is to continue, consolidate, and solidify these gains.

Recent U.S. and allied military successes undoubtedly serve also as a strong deterrent. Think of it as suppressive fire: The more time al Qaeda and its ilk spend looking over their shoulders, the less time they have to train, plot, and execute terrorist attacks. And with al Qaeda senior leaders on their back heels, now is the time to exploit this unique window of counterterrorism opportunity by maintaining, if not accelerating, the operational tempo.

Yet there's reason to be concerned that the net effect and impact of suppressive fire may be dwindling: U.S. and International Security Assistance Force operations in the region are expected to be scaled back soon -- a casualty of the triple whammy of U.S. political fatigue, economic austerity, and Pakistani protests. Let's not forget that, whatever the extent of recent success in deterring foreign fighters, it did not happen in a vacuum. Now is not the time to buckle under pressure, Pakistani or otherwise. Al Qaeda is a resilient organization, and the FATA is a complex and fluid environment. We must not allow al Qaeda the means to regroup there or relocate from FATA to another safe haven.

The foreign-fighter phenomenon in the FATA is also just one piece of a much bigger and more ominous picture, which underscores the significance of ungoverned and undergoverned spaces across the globe. History shows that the threat will gravitate and metastasize to the areas that will best support its nefarious activities and ideology. This is precisely why al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations operate out of the FATA,

Somalia, the Sahel, Yemen -- and even the Internet. Localized counterterrorism successes must therefore be woven into a larger, sustained, and strategic effort -- one that continues to apply targeted pressure to deny adversaries the time and space to maneuver.

The terrorism threat today comes in various shapes, sizes, and forms, ranging from al Qaeda's senior leadership (Ayman al-Zawahiri and his top deputies), to its principal franchises al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (based in Yemen), al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (operating in southern Algeria, northern Mali, and eastern Mauritania and spreading elsewhere in the Sahel), and al Qaeda in Iraq, to its affiliates al-Shabab in Somalia (also the newest official franchise) and Boko Haram in Nigeria, to individuals inspired by (if not directly connected to) al Qaeda's ideology -- which includes the "homegrown" threat.

Pakistan is especially complex -- and dangerous. Groups that were once regionally focused now increasingly subscribe to al Qaeda's goals and the broader global jihad. This toxic blend includes the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (often dubbed the "Pakistani Taliban"), Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI), Jaish-e-Mohammed, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan -- all of which cooperate with al Qaeda on a tactical and sometimes strategic basis, linked by an affinity for militant Islamist ideology -- with U.S., Indian, Israeli, and Western targets increasingly in their cross-hairs.

Historically, collaborative efforts among such groups were primarily limited to covert logistical support, including the provision of money, safe havens, and arms, as well as the movement back and forth of key personnel from one entity to another. For instance, al Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah was captured in an LeT safe house in Faisalabad, Pakistan, in 2002. Jemaah Islamiyah's Umar Patek, currently on trial for the 2002 Bali bombings, received training from al Qaeda in Afghanistan in the 1990s before returning back to Indonesia in the early 2000s. When he was arrested in January 2011, Patek was back in Pakistan -- where, according to West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, he was apprehended in Abbottabad by authorities who followed a known al Qaeda operative to the safe house where Patek and his wife were staying. Patek was subsequently extradited to Indonesia in August 2011.

Today, the relationships between terrorist groups are becoming more overt and strategic in nature. On Feb. 12, LeT, Jamaat-e-Islami, and the banned Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan held a rally in Karachi to support their Difa-e-Pakistan Council and its anti-American, anti-Western political agenda. Jamaat-e-Islami is reportedly moving to partner with former members of Pervez Musharraf's regime. These open relationships are unlikely to be a sign of decreased tactical collaboration; they are a warning of deepening strategic ties. Prior to his reported demise in a June 2011 drone strike in Pakistan, HuJI's military commander, Ilyas Kashmiri, built strong operational ties between myriad Islamist terrorist groups. Among other things, Kashmiri served as a coordinator between these groups and radicals in the West, as demonstrated by his linking up David Headley and Tahawwur Hussain Rana with LeT for the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

So let's not get complacent. There will be no shortage of opportunities for foreign fighters who wish to travel to jihadi conflict zones. The threat landscape is dynamic and ever evolving. Even if we were to succeed in draining the swamp (a big "if") that is the FATA, further challenges and dangers abound in Africa, especially Somalia (where recent reporting indicates a spike, not dip, in the numbers of Western foreign fighters), and beyond, including in areas not yet on the public's radar screen such as Kenya, Nigeria, and the Caucasus. Compounding the situation, current events on the ground in Syria, including al Qaeda's bid to leverage the crisis by calling for foreign fighters to exploit the revolt, may reshuffle and intensify foreign-fighter pipelines. Against this backdrop, determination and focus will be needed, especially because the pool of indigenous fighters is plenty deep. As for the FATA, it's a good start -- and now is the time to double down by ramping up the counterterrorism and military actions that got us this far.

*Frank Cilluffo directs the Homeland Security Policy Institute at George Washington University. He is co-author of "Foreign Fighters: Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones" and previously served as special assistant to the president for homeland security under George W. Bush.*