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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Future of Syria's Foreign Fighters

AARON ZELIN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Gary Greco

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INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Contents

FEATURE ARTICLE

- 1 Managing the Muhajirin: The Future of Syria's Foreign Fighters**
AARON ZELIN
-

INTERVIEW

- 11 A View from the CT Foxhole: Gary Greco, Former Office Chief, Joint Intelligence Task Force Counterterrorism, Defense Intelligence Agency**
DON RASSLER
-

ANALYSIS

- 15 The Case for Exit Comms: Raising Disengagement Rates from Violent Extremism**
JAMES KHALIL, ANDREW GLAZZARD, JOHN HORGAN, AND ALASTAIR REED
-

FROM THE EDITORS

Managing the foreign fighters who remain in Syria has emerged as a defining test of the country's transition, Aaron Zelin writes in this month's cover article. It is a complicated, nuanced task, one that Zelin finds would not be made easier and could in fact be made far more difficult with a "disarmament-by-headcount framing." "Syria's foreign fighters are not a stockpile of weapons to be confiscated," he cautions. "They are a differentiated, fracturing population that has been substantially absorbed into the state, that is drawing new arrivals, and that now sits at the center of Syria's contested reintegration into international politics."

Our interview is with Gary Greco, who served for over 40 years in the U.S. intelligence community with the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Ahead of the 25th anniversary of 9/11, he reflects on the events of that day and also considers future threats: "Terrorists are always going to be opportunists, but they are also technology driven, and we're always a step behind," he warns.

James Khalil, Andrew Glazzard, John Horgan, and Alastair Reed examine the utility of "Exit Comms," communication campaigns aimed at individual or group-level disengagement from violent extremist (VE) organizations or movements during active conflicts. They offer an analytical framework based on five dimensions—audience, messenger, channel, format, and content—to inform Exit Comms' design and evaluation. "Despite [a] lack of attention to date," they write, "emerging evidence from cases such as Colombia, Nigeria, and Somalia suggests that Exit Comms can provide an effective tool for increasing exit rates from VE organizations."

Don Rassler and Kristina Hummel, *Editors-in-Chief*

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Cover: Soldiers stand in ranks during a military graduation ceremony held by the Syrian Ministry of Defense at Sadallah al-Jabiri Square in Aleppo, Syria, on February 12, 2025. (Kasim Yusuf/Anadolu via Getty Images)

Managing the Muhajirin: The Future of Syria's Foreign Fighters

By Aaron Y. Zelin

The disposition of the foreign fighters who helped topple the Assad regime has become one of the defining tests of Syria's transition, and of the West's willingness to deal with the government that emerged from it. A provision in the U.S. Senate's Fiscal Year 2027 National Defense Authorization Act would condition American support for Syria's transitional government on its progress in disarming the foreign fighters and jihadis who remain inside the country. This article argues that the provision misdiagnoses the problem. Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Damascus has pursued an "integrate-or-arrest" strategy that has absorbed most of its foreign fighters (*muhajirin*) into state command structures rather than leaving them armed outside them. The foreign fighter population is internally differentiated (pro and adjacent to the new government or Islamic State-affiliated, which the government already fights with U.S. support) and fracturing (between those who integrate versus those who want to remain independent). The threats that have actually materialized in 2026 (an assassination campaign against integrated fighters, the repackaging of grievance toward anti-Israel mobilization, and the arrival of new foreigners exploiting post-Assad openness) are not addressed by a disarmament-by-headcount framing. The West's experience in Bosnia, where an externally imposed expulsion clause and a later coerced denaturalization campaign both backfired, offers a direct and cautionary precedent: Ejection exported the threat, while anchoring largely retired it.

Few questions have proved as durable a test of Syria's transition as what to do with the foreigners who fought in it. Tens of thousands of *muhajirin* traveled to Syria over the course of the war. The several thousand who remained after December 2024 are now distributed across the security forces, the marketplaces, and the mosques of the state they helped bring into being, and they sit at the intersection of three separate problems: a domestic one for Damascus, which must assert authority over armed men to whom it owes a debt; a diplomatic one, since Beijing, Moscow, Tashkent, Paris, and Washington each have claims on some portion of them; and a counterterrorism one, whose contours are widely asserted and rarely specified. How that population is managed, and by whom, will shape not only Syria's internal consolidation, but the terms on which the West is prepared to engage a government that emerged from a jihadi insurgency.

In June 2026, the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee approved its version of the Fiscal Year 2027 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) with a provision conditioning American support for Syria's transitional government on its progress in disarming the foreign fighters and jihadis who remain inside the country. A narrower condition of this kind has been on the books since the FY2026 NDAA, which addressed foreign fighters in senior government roles. What is new in the FY2027 text is the extension of the requirement from senior appointments to the entire foreign fighter population, and the addition of disarmament and monitoring as the operative metrics.^{1a} The concern is not misplaced. Syria hosts one of the largest concentrations of foreign fighters in the world, a population whose skills in explosives, unmanned systems, and small-unit tactics have obvious transnational salience, and some whose relationship to a resurgent Islamic State remains a live counterterrorism question.²

Yet, the instrument the NDAA provision selects (disarmament, measured as a reduction in the weapons held by foreign fighters) rests on three assumptions that the evidence from post-Assad Syria does not support. The first is that the danger these men pose

a The operative language appears in the committee-reported bill's Syria section, which provides that no funds may be expended for cooperation with the Government of Syria until the Secretary of Defense certifies to the congressional defense committees that Damascus has taken credible steps "(1) to remove all foreign fighters and jihadists from the military forces of Syria and from other services of the Government of Syria; (2) to disarm all foreign fighters and jihadists who remain in Syria; (3) to implement a system to monitor foreign fighters and jihadists so as to prevent attacks on the United States and allies and partners of the United States, including the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces." S. 4784, 119th Congress (2026). The provision, introduced by Senator Ted Budd, is not without precedent: The FY2026 NDAA required certification that the Syrian government "has removed, or is taking steps to remove, foreign fighters from senior roles in the Government of Syria, including those in the state and security institutions of Syria." S. 1071, 119th Congress (2025). The differences between the two are of scope, standard, and instrument rather than of subject. The FY2026 formulation reached senior appointments only and accepted demonstrable progress ("is taking steps") against a sanctions-relief backdrop. The FY2027 text reaches every foreign fighter in the country, adds affirmative disarmament and monitoring obligations to removal, and attaches them to defense-cooperation funding.

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scales with the arms in their hands. The second is that those arms sit outside the Syrian state. The third is that removing weapons removes capability. In a country awash in weapons, with porous borders, informal arms markets, and officials who can be paid, disarmament is a transaction that can be reversed at modest cost, and the two capabilities most relevant to transnational plotting (improvised explosives and commercial drones) are the least susceptible of all to a confiscation metric.

Since Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allies toppled Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the government of President Ahmed al-Sharaa has neither disarmed its foreign fighters nor left them as free-floating armed formations. It has systematically absorbed the majority into its own security forces while selectively detaining those it judged liabilities.³ The consequence is that a demand to “disarm all remaining foreign fighters” would, if taken literally, pressure Damascus to dismantle the very command structures that now contain them and are part of the Syrian government. The provision draws no distinction between a foreign fighter and a foreign fighter in uniform. Its first certification requirement therefore reaches those serving in the military forces and other services of the Syrian government, which is to say the integrated cohort of foreign fighters specifically. Its second reaches all foreign fighters who remain in Syria. On the face of the text, integration is not an exit from the target set, but the first place the requirement looks.

It should be clarified and qualified that this discussion is not about the Islamic State. The Syrian government, and before that HTS, has been fighting against the Islamic State for more than a decade, which this author has laid out in this publication during the HTS years and in the aftermath of the fall of the Assad regime.⁴ For example, in the first two weeks of August 2026 alone, Damascus has arrested four Islamic State cells, with two of them containing foreign fighters.⁵ Further, while this discussion is broadly about foreign fighters, it is worth noting that the only attack on U.S. forces in Syria to cause casualties since the fall of the Assad regime was carried out by a Syrian rather than a foreigner: a suspected Islamic State member that infiltrated the Syrian security services, who ambushed a joint U.S.-Syrian patrol near Palmyra on December 13, 2025, killing two U.S. soldiers and an American interpreter.^b Therefore, the issue of weapons outside state control and the state’s monopoly on violence in general is an important one that is relevant to Syrians, just as much as it relates to remaining foreigners who had been in HTS previously or adjacent to the group.

This article makes three empirical claims and one comparative argument. Empirically, it contends that Syria’s foreign fighter population that was in HTS or adjacent to the group prior to the fall of the regime: (1) has largely integrated into state structures rather than remaining armed outside them; (2) is not monolithic, but internally differentiated, and has actively fractured, with the key dividing line running between those that have joined

the state and those seeking to remain independent of it; and (3) is increasingly defined by risks (assassinations of integrated fighters, ideological repackaging, and a new inflow of arrivals as well as the entrepreneurial freelancing of external attacks by non-integrated individuals) that a disarmament frame cannot capture. Comparatively, it argues that the closest historical precedent for the NDAA’s approach, the post-Dayton handling of the foreign foreigners in Bosnia and Herzegovina, demonstrates that externally imposed ejection of foreign fighters exported the threat while integration and anchoring largely neutralized it, and that a subsequent, U.S.-pressured campaign of coerced denaturalization produced negligible security gains and durable grievance. The article concludes with possible implications of the provision for U.S. policy.

The Foreign Fighter Population in Post-Assad Syria

Estimates of the total number of foreign fighters in Syria vary widely, but the composition of the population is better understood than its precise size. The largest single component is Uyghurs affiliated with the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). One International Crisis Group assessment holds that Uyghurs constitute roughly two-thirds of Syria’s foreign fighters when their families and affiliated media structures are included, living in significant part as a collective community with its own camps and institutions.⁶ According to another source, the second major bloc is Central Asian—principally Uzbeks associated with Katibat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (KTJ) and related formations, followed by North Caucasians (Chechens and Dagestanis) linked to groups such as Junud al-Sham, a French-speaking contingent centered on Firqat al-Ghuraba, and smaller Turkish, Arab, and Western elements.⁷

This diversity matters analytically because the blocs differ in their degree of organizational cohesion, their relationship to the new state, and their exposure to external pressure. They differ, no less consequentially, in ideological orientation. The Turkistan Islamic Party’s program is bound to a Uyghur national cause and has always been oriented toward a homeland elsewhere; the Central Asian formations retain more of the transnational-jihadi frame from which they emerged; and Firqat al-Ghuraba’s outlook is that of a Francophone diaspora milieu with its own quarrel with Paris. These are not interchangeable constituencies, and they will not respond to the same pressure in the same way. The Uyghurs, entangled with both Beijing and Ankara, present Damascus with a delicate diplomatic problem that the government has managed partly through civilian channels, including a February 2025 decision exempting “Turkestan” students from university fees.⁸ The Central Asians have been the most publicly outspoken and the most internally divided, producing both the loudest denunciations of the government on Telegram and the most prominent pro-government foreign brigade.^{9 c} The French contingent, though small, is disproportionately visible in propaganda terms. Running beneath all of this is the separate, but related population of Islamic State family members previously held in the northeast at the Al-Hol camp, whose members occasionally intersect with the integrated foreign fighters now serving in the Syrian army.¹⁰

A further complicating feature of the population is the

b The assailant was a recently recruited member of the Ministry of Interior’s forces who had reportedly been flagged for suspected extremist sympathies days before the attack, a detail that bears directly on the screening and vetting argument developed here. U.S. Central Command responded with Operation Hawkeye Strike, a series of retaliatory strikes on Islamic State targets beginning on December 19, 2025. See Taylor Luck, “Attack on US forces in Syria tests anti-ISIS mission, warming ties,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 15, 2025, and “Syria arrests five suspects over shooting of US, Syrian troops in Palmyra,” Reuters, December 14, 2025.

c The point is not that Central Asians are more hostile to the state than other blocs, but that their public argument is conducted openly and on both sides of the integration question.

“The state armed and absorbed those who accepted its authority while detaining those who retained independent agendas, threatened third states, or became media liabilities. Damascus was, in effect, sorting its foreign fighters rather than expelling them.”

persistence of independent ‘tactical’ formations that have continued to produce training content and propaganda well after the integration drive began. Groups such as Malhama Tactical, Musafeer/Mujahir Tactical, and the Uyghur-associated Yurtugh Tactical continued to publish training videos and imagery through fall 2025, but have since ceased their independent media activity.¹¹ Their apparent dissolution follows the broader trajectory of other foreign fighter formations, whose members have mostly entered new state security structures, returned to civilian life, or a minority remained associated with groups operating outside the state. This matters for any assessment of the population’s trajectory: The existence of an ecosystem of independent brands more than a year into the integration process is direct evidence that absorption has been partial rather than total, and that the state’s writ over the foreign fighters is uneven. It is precisely this residual autonomy, rather than the arms held by integrated fighters, that constitutes the more plausible locus of future risk.

The Integrate-or-Arrest Strategy

The defining feature of Damascus’ approach to the foreign fighters residing in its territory, and to those who were adjacent to HTS before the fall of the regime, has been a dual-track strategy that can be summarized as integrate-or-arrest. The integration track was evident within weeks of the regime’s fall. In late December 2024, al-Sharaa promoted a slate of officers that included six foreigners to senior positions within the Ministry of Defense, a step that analysts read less as a reward than as a form of coup insulation, placing loyalists without independent Syrian constituencies at sensitive nodes of the security apparatus.¹² The move was controversial enough, both domestically and in Western capitals, that the senior-rank appointments to foreign nationals were subsequently reported to have been partly rescinded.¹³

Over the following year, integration was institutionalized. In June 2025, Reuters reported that the United States had given a qualified green light to the incorporation of foreign ex-rebels into the Syrian armed forces, and the Turkistan Islamic Party formally announced its dissolution, with its fighters folded into the structure of the national army.¹⁴ Reporting at the time indicated that some 3,500 foreign fighters were to be integrated into a newly constituted

division.^d Foreign veterans also appeared in training roles within regular formations: Open-source researchers documented a Turkish citizen serving as a special-forces trainer for the 50th Division in May 2025.¹⁵ The bargain implicit in this integration was consistent: Foreign fighters were offered a place inside the state in exchange for accepting a Syria-centered-Damascene chain of command and surrendering their independent organizational identities.

The arrest track operated in parallel, and its selection logic appears to reveal the strategy’s underlying purpose. In January 2025, Syrian authorities swiftly jailed an Egyptian militant who had threatened Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a signal that post-Assad Syria would not serve as a platform for destabilizing neighboring states.¹⁶ In August 2025, authorities detained the prominent Uzbek military trainer and media figure known as Abu Dujana, reportedly in the wake of a visit by Uzbek jihadis to the sensitive southern corridor around Daraa, Quneitra, and Suwayda. His detention generated significant discontent across Central Asian jihadi channels.¹⁷ In December 2025, Syrian security forces arrested the American Islamist media activist Bilal Abdul Kareem in al-Bab, in Aleppo province, who had publicly campaigned for the *muhajirin* to be granted citizenship.¹⁸ The framing of Abdul Kareem as merely a “journalist” penalized for citizenship advocacy, advanced by his supporters and repeated in much of the coverage of his arrest, is, however, incomplete: The more immediate trigger for his detention appears to have been his interview with and platforming of Hani al-Siba’i, a prominent pro-al-Qa`ida ideologue who had denounced al-Sharaa as an apostate, together with the associated accusation that Abdul Kareem had himself lent legitimacy to the excommunication (*takfir*) of the new government. This reframes the case as one of the state acting against jihadi-ideological media activity rather than simply suppressing an advocate for the *muhajirin*. Nearly eight months after the arrest, in August 2026, Abdul Kareem reportedly remained held without formal charge in a security prison in Aleppo city, with his wife indicating, in an interview published that month, that any release was conditioned on his signing an agreement severely curtailing his media activity.¹⁹ It is a case that concretely illustrates the opaque detention practices that fuel some “independent” *muhajirin* distrust of the state.²⁰

What connects these cases is not foreignness as such but autonomy: The state armed and absorbed those who accepted its authority while detaining those who retained independent agendas, threatened third states, or became media liabilities. Damascus was, in effect, sorting its foreign fighters rather than expelling them. The citizenship question sits at the heart of this sorting. In August 2025, Reuters reported that foreign fighters had petitioned the new government for citizenship, fearing imprisonment or death if returned to their countries of origin—an appeal that both underscored their dependence on the Syrian state and highlighted the absence of any viable return pathway for much of the population.²¹ The government’s handling of that appeal has been ambivalent, granting a place inside the state to some while detaining prominent advocates of the broader demand.

The tension between absorption and suspicion has periodically

d The figure refers to the newly formed 84th Division, which Syrian and Western analysts have described as the principal vehicle for absorbing foreign personnel and which is projected to grow larger. See “Will foreign fighters test the stability of post-Assad Syria?” New Arab, October 29, 2025, and “The Struggle to Pacify Syria’s Foreign Legions,” International Crisis Group, which estimates that roughly 5,000 foreign fighters remained under arms in Syria as of May 2026.

spilled into the open. Central Asian Telegram channels raised funds for detained Islamic State families in August 2025, even as the government convened a Syrian-Uzbek Economic Forum in Aleppo only days after foreign fighter tensions had peaked.²² It was an illustration of Damascus' effort to deepen state-to-state ties with Tashkent while simultaneously policing Uzbek nationals on the ground.²³ The dual-track strategy, in short, is not a stable equilibrium, but a continual balancing act, and it is precisely this balance that an externally imposed disarmament mandate would likely destabilize.

From Battlefield to Marketplace

By mid-2026, a third dimension of integration had become visible: the movement of former fighters into civilian life. Analysts and open-source researchers documented a “battlefield-to-marketplace” trend, with former *muhajirin* opening restaurants and businesses and enrolling in higher education across the northwest.²⁴ The most emblematic case was that of Abu Dujana, released in April 2026 after roughly eight months in detention, who by mid-2026 was operating a restaurant in the town of al-Fu'ah in the Idlib countryside.²⁵

This civilian turn, however, should not be mistaken for depoliticized assimilation. In July 2026, open-source researchers noted that Abu Dujana's restaurant prominently displayed a photograph of the Basmachi movement—the Turkic, largely Central Asian insurgency that fought Soviet consolidation between roughly 1916 and the early 1930s.²⁶ The image is a reminder that integrated life and a preserved ideological-historical memory can coexist in the same individual. The broader analytical point is that the *muhajirin* are not converging on a single end-state, whether disarmed civilians or armed threats. They are dispersing across army units, businesses, universities, and independent enclaves while carrying their identities and networks with them. A metric that counts weapons alone is structurally incapable of registering this differentiated absorption, and a policy built around such a metric would only likely serve to disrupt it.

The civilian turn does not, however, move foreigners beyond the reach of state authority. It changes the domain in which that authority is exercised. Damascus has drawn red lines in the security sphere, visible in the arrests of independent fighters and in its friction with the French and independent Uzbek factions. It has drawn them in the civilian and religious sphere as well. In August 2026, the Ministry of Religious Affairs reportedly blocked a niqab-distribution event organized by an Egyptian Islamist known as al-Dhahabi, whose “religious outreach” (*dawa*) campaigns the ministry had previously tolerated. The refusal came amid a broader tightening around conservative public activism, including a hardliner backlash to a Lebanese content creator's appearance at the same Damascus mall.²⁷ The episode signals that a foreigner's turn toward ostensibly civilian activity (commerce, education, or *dawa*) does not place him beyond the reach of the state's authority. The red line simply shifts domains. Integration into the new Syria is conditional in the marketplace and the mosque as much as in the barracks, and for the *muhajirin*, the terms of that conditionality remain the state's to set.

A Fractured Legion: The Central Asian Split

If the foreign fighter population were a monolith, the internal tensions of 2026 would be inexplicable. In fact, the most consequential development of the year within Syria's foreign fighter

population was the emergence of an open fracture within one of the larger and more restive blocs. The friction did not appear suddenly. Central Asian jihadi channels had voiced mounting discontent with the al-Sharaa government since at least August 2025, complaining that “*muhajirin* and *mujahidin*” were being imprisoned while other constituencies (Alawites and Druze) were courted.²⁸ Tensions between independent Uzbek *muhajirin* and the government had been building toward a security campaign in May 2026 that targeted Uzbek fighters in the Idlib-countryside towns of Kafraya, al-Fu'ah, and Kafr Jalis, producing arrests, protests, and reported clashes.²⁹ By early June 2026, Uzbek groups were publicly accusing the government of pressure, defamation, and marginalization, even as an Uzbek channel simultaneously reached out to Syrian “brothers” in an apparent effort to contain the rupture.³⁰

Two months after the May campaign, the fracture was laid bare in a pair of competing public statements. On July 10, 2026, a pro-government formation, the Abu Obayda bin al-Jarrah Brigade, composed of Uzbeks drawn from the former Katibat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad and now incorporated into the Ministry of Defense, issued a statement defending its integration into the military. The following day, an independent channel styling itself the “Uzbek Muhajirin,” endorsed by the French Firqat al-Ghuraba, issued a rival statement condemning the government's arrests and judicial process and rejecting what it characterized as oppression.³¹ As the analyst Aymenn Al-Tamimi observed, the decisive cleavage among the Uzbeks now runs not between foreigners and the state, but between *muhajirin* who have aligned with and been absorbed by the government and independent *muhajirin* who reject it.³² In the latter camp, primarily, are the French-majority Firqat al-Ghuraba and the independent Uzbek channel as the loudest of the dissenters.³³

The policy implication is direct. “Foreign fighters and jihadists,” as the NDAA provision phrases it, are not a single target set, but at least two constituencies now in open conflict with one another. One set of Uzbeks holds rank within the Ministry of Defense. Another denounces that same ministry from channels aligned with Firqat al-Ghuraba, the French-majority formation that publicly endorsed the independent Uzbek statement. A blanket disarmament demand, applied as written, would reach both, pressing Damascus to break the loyal, integrated brigade in order to reach the independents, when it is precisely the integrated formations that furnish the state's leverage over the remainder. Moreover, the independents' grievance narrative (arbitrary arrests, opaque courts, betrayal by a government they bled for) is the precise seam that Islamic State counter-recruitment is positioned to exploit. A policy that manufactures more of that grievance would either aid or likely be performing the adversary's outreach for it.

Violence Against Integrated Fighters

The gravest development of 2026, and the one that most directly inverts the NDAA provision's threat model, has been the emergence of an assassination campaign against integrated and formerly HTS-aligned foreign fighters. An early indicator came in June 2025, when an Iraqi commander formerly affiliated with HTS was shot dead in Azmarin, in western Idlib.³⁴ The pattern sharpened a year later. On June 6, 2026, unknown gunmen assassinated Mustafa al-Russi, a Chechen-origin commander of the “Red Bands” who had recently been serving within the Syrian Ministry of Defense.³⁵ Twenty-two days later, on June 28, 2026, a second former foreign fighter of the same profile, an Uzbek ex-HTS “Red Bands” member,



Mustafa al-Russi (Source: Firqat al-Ghuraba Telegram channel)

was killed in Idlib province.³⁶ Two targets sharing a single profile, three weeks apart, suggest a pattern rather than a coincidence.

The strategic significance of these killings is difficult to overstate. Islamist commentators speculated openly about the death, with some mourning al-Russi and others attributing the killing to alleged hardliners within the security forces.³⁷ It is possible, and in this author's view likely, that the Islamic State was involved, and that it used the attack as a way to undermine the integration process, alienate foreigners, and take further advantage of that seam. If Damascus proves unable to protect the foreign fighters it has absorbed, the Islamic State acquires a ready-made narrative of abandonment with which to court the next recruit. In counterterrorism terms, the assassinations represent a form of involuntary ejection—ejection by other means. The fighters are being removed from the state's protective umbrella by violence rather than by decree, and the historical record, examined below, indicates that ejection is the more dangerous outcome. It is worth underscoring the counterproductive, and presumably unintended, incentive structure that the NDAA foreign fighter disarmament would introduce here: A disarmament mandate that weakens the integrated formations would reduce the state's capacity to protect its foreign fighters at exactly the moment an assassination campaign is testing that capacity, which could accelerate the very ejection dynamic that history warns against.

The Repackaging of Grievance

A further development complicates any assumption that the independent *muhajirin* will simply subside if pressured. As the paths to integration and Western recognition have narrowed, the most prominent independent faction has demonstrated an ability to repackage its grievance into a nationalist-defensive cause. In late July 2026, Firqatul Ghuraba abruptly shifted its messaging from demands for the release of jailed foreign prisoners to calls for Syrians to confront Israeli military strikes. On July 27, via its

al-Faransiyyin Telegram channel, the group released a video urging Syrians to resist alleged Israeli aggression and chiding both the al-Sharaa government and ordinary Syrian Muslims for their "silence."³⁸ The pivot is analytically significant because it arrives as Damascus is reportedly pursuing a security understanding with Israel, and because it demonstrates how quickly a foreign fighter grievance can be reframed into a banner: defense of Syrian Muslims against an external enemy that the state cannot easily suppress, at the very moment the government is courting Washington and negotiates with Israel.³⁹ Coerced disarmament would likely accelerate exactly this kind of ideological repositioning, handing the independents a mobilizing cause at the moment they are most alienated from the state.

This capacity for reinvention points to a subtler and more durable danger than domestic mobilization: the potential for individuals within the non-integrated milieu to freelance external operations. One precedent lies in HTS' own former territory. In October 2020, the French schoolteacher Samuel Paty was beheaded in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine after showing caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in a lesson on free expression.^e The last contact of the perpetrator, Abdoullakh Abouyedovich Anzorov, an 18-year-old Chechen immigrant, was allegedly Farouk al-Shami, a Tajik member of HTS based in Idlib. French investigators believe he may have influenced Anzorov to conduct the attack.⁴⁰ It is unlikely that HTS as an organization had anything to do with the attack,⁴¹ and that distinction is precisely the point: The danger was entrepreneurial. An individual in the group's territory independently encouraged a sympathizer abroad to commit violence. This was personal initiative, not an attack ordered by the group's leadership. This is the vector that should most concern Washington, and it maps onto the independent and non-integrated fighters rather than the brigades absorbed into the Ministry of Defense. A disarmament mandate that fractured the integrated formations would move men out of formations in which their movements and contacts are visible to the state, and into precisely the autonomous, unaccountable space in which such freelancing incitement thrives, while leaving the entrepreneurs themselves untouched.

The New Inflow

The foreign fighter file in Syria is a problem of new arrivals as well as of legacy ones. In late July 2026, Australian media reported the case of Patrick Stevenson, a 20-year-old convert who had radicalized in Australia and traveled to Syria in late 2025 (a full year after the fall of the regime). He was subsequently detained in Idlib and charged with the premeditated murder of another Australian, Abdullah Glen Burgess, who had himself relocated to Syria with his family in 2025, after several months traveling in Afghanistan, and who was shot dead in the town of Darkush on December 31 of that year.⁴² Syrian authorities reportedly investigated, but stepped back from an Islamic State link, and the death-penalty charge signaled Damascus' intent to police such cases severely.⁴³

The case is not isolated, though the aggregate remains small and poorly measured, and it should not be overstated. French counterterrorism authorities identified at least seven French nationals who had reached or attempted to reach Syria in the five months after the regime fell, among them a former French army

^e Before showing them, Paty allowed any Muslim student to leave beforehand if they wanted to. Kim Willsher, "Teacher Decapitated in Paris Named as Samuel Paty, 47," *Guardian*, October 17, 2020.

engineer arrested en route to join Firqat al-Ghuraba; French officials were explicit that this was a trickle rather than a resumption of the mass departures of 2013-2015.⁴⁴ A far larger movement has taken place inside the country. After the Syrian government assumed control of the Al-Hol camp from the Syrian Democratic Forces in January 2026, many of the roughly 6,000 foreigners with Islamic State links previously held there reportedly relocated to Idlib and Aleppo. It is a redistribution of foreign personnel into the northwest that no disarmament count would register, and one that bears far more directly on the threat picture than the rifles held by an integrated brigade.^{45 f}

Whatever the specific facts of the case, its significance lies in what it reveals about the broader environment. Post-Assad Syria's openness and reduced border controls are drawing fresh foreign arrivals, including recently radicalized Westerners, into a permissive setting that the nascent state is poorly equipped to screen.⁴⁶ This reframes the policy problem in a way the relevant section of the NDAA does not anticipate. The text itself draws no distinction between a legacy cohort and new entrants—it speaks of foreign fighters who remain in Syria, and its operative metric applies to a population already present—so reading it as a legacy-cohort provision is an inference about its practical effect rather than a distinction the drafters made. The danger, in any case, is no longer confined to a cohort that can be disarmed. It increasingly also includes an inflow to be screened. A metric fixated on the weapons of existing fighters does not account for who is now entering the country and why—arguably, the more consequential long-term counterterrorism concern.

The Recognition Bargain

These dynamics are unfolding against the backdrop of Syria's broader reintegration into international politics, in which the foreign fighter file has become a form of currency. In early July 2026, Emmanuel Macron became the first Western head of state to visit post-Assad Damascus. Ahead of the visit, the dossier of French jihadis resurfaced prominently, and reporting indicated that the file (alongside counterterrorism cooperation and Syria's undeclared chemical stockpiles) was among the issues on the bilateral agenda.⁴⁷ French jihadis in Syria reacted to the visit with visible alarm on Telegram, with one channel noting that, for six years, every contact between French officials and Damascus had produced repercussions for them.⁴⁸ To coincide with the visit, Firqat al-Ghuraba released a video—first in Arabic, and only subsequently in French, English, and Uzbek—reiterating demands for the release of jailed foreign prisoners, an ordering of languages that signaled a primarily Syrian intended audience.⁴⁹

The Macron visit crystallized the central bargain now structuring the foreign fighter question: the interim government's bid for Western recognition and rehabilitation, weighed against external pressure to resolve the residue of foreign fighters. This

“Coerced disarmament would likely accelerate ... ideological repositioning, handing the independents a mobilizing cause at the moment they are most alienated from the state.”

is the context against which the NDAA provision finds itself, and it is a context in which Washington's conditions are read alongside, and weighed against, those of other governments with their own claims on Damascus. A demand that Syria cannot meet without unravelling its own security architecture does not compel compliance so much as it invites Damascus to bank the concession elsewhere. The recognition bargain also introduces a European dimension. France holds both equities and leverage that a purely American disarmament demand does not use: the commercial and infrastructure agreements advanced around the Macron visit, its weight in the European reconstruction and sanctions-relief discussions, its cooperation with Damascus on the chemical-weapons file, and the standing interest of French prosecutors in French nationals held in Syria, which gives Paris a concrete stake in a negotiated disposition rather than an abstract preference for one. None of this implies that Washington is without leverage of its own. It retains sanctions authorities, the counter-Islamic State partnership, security assistance, and the political recognition Damascus is seeking. The argument here concerns which variable that leverage should be aimed at, not whether it exists.

The recognition dynamic also shapes the incentives of the fighters themselves, which is why the timing of Firqat al-Ghuraba's interventions is not incidental. The group calibrated its messaging to the visit, using a moment of maximum international attention to press its demands and, when those demands went unmet, to pivot toward a cause—resistance to Israel—calculated to embarrass a government seeking Western favor. This is the behavior of actors who understand that they have become bargaining chips and are maneuvering to raise their own price. A coercive disarmament condition would likely sharpen precisely this incentive, giving the most alienated factions both a grievance and an audience. Conversely, a managed, recognition-linked framework that offered credible pathways (citizenship for the anchored, monitored return or prosecution for the dangerous) would reduce the leverage available to spoilers by reducing the number of fighters with nothing to lose.

The Bosnian Precedent

The most instructive precedent for the foreign fighter provision contained in the NDAA is not to be found in Syria's recent past, but in the West's own experience in the Balkans. After the Bosnian war, the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement required, under Annex 1A, the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Bosnia and Herzegovina within 30 days—the closest historical analogue to an externally imposed condition that makes the foreign fighter file the price of a political settlement.⁵⁰ The requirement failed almost immediately in its intended effect. Bosniak authorities and the foreign fighters circumvented the deadline, with many fighters acquiring Bosnian citizenship (sometimes through irregular means), marrying local women, and settling in depopulated villages such as Bočinja near

f The case concerned a former French army engineer indicted on April 29, 2025, for attempting to travel with his wife to join Omar Diaby's Firqat al-Ghuraba, which *Le Figaro* described as comprising some 50 identified and closely monitored French nationals. The same report noted that no mass departures had occurred. On the movement out of Al-Hol, see “Exodus of ISIL-linked detainees from Syria camp sparks security concerns,” Al-Jazeera, February 17, 2026, and “Syria: Security Situation,” EUAA, July 2026, section 2.2.3. Reliable aggregate data on post-December 2024 arrivals does not presently exist in open sources, and the figures cited here should be read as floors derived from prosecutions and camp reporting rather than as estimates of the whole.

Maglaj, where they lived under their own religious codes until the settlement was wound up in 2000-2001, under international and domestic pressure, to accommodate returning Serb refugees.⁵¹

What the subsequent three decades demonstrated is the analytically crucial point. The recidivism record of Bosnia's foreign fighter milieu split not along lines of ideology or nationality, but along a single axis: anchoring. Veterans who stayed, married, and embedded themselves into Bosnian society produced almost no subsequent operational violence. The single significant terrorist attack traceable to the wartime milieu, the 1997 car bombing in Mostar that wounded roughly two dozen people, was organized by a Saudi veteran, Ahmad Zuhair, who had already fled the country.⁵² Notably, every jihadi attack carried out inside Bosnia after 2005 (the 2010 Bugojno police-station bombing, the 2011 armed assault on the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, and the 2015 shootings at the Zvornik police station and at Rajlovac) was perpetrated by young local salafis with no service in the wartime El Mudžahid detachment,⁵³ the unit into which the foreign volunteers were formally organized in 1993. Service in it is the closest available proxy for membership in the wartime Syrian *muhajirin* cohort.⁵⁴

The individuals who became genuinely dangerous were, overwhelmingly, those who had been expelled or who had never anchored. The French converts of the so-called Roubaix gang, radicalized in Bosnia and pressed to leave after Dayton, resurfaced in a 1996 armed-robbery campaign and a failed car-bomb plot targeting a G7 summit in Lille; their Bosnia-veteran associate Fateh Kamel became a central figure in the Montreal network that produced Ahmad Ressay, perpetrator of the failed December 1999 Millennium plot against Los Angeles International Airport.⁵⁴ The wider alumni of the Afghan-Bosnian network who transited Bosnia and cycled back into the global jihad included figures connected to the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, the 2000 attack on the USS Cole, and, by several accounts, the September 11th plot.⁵⁵ The pattern is unambiguous: Ejection exported the threat, dispersing it into transnational networks, while integration—for all its moral ugliness, and the El Mudžahid detachment was implicated in genuine wartime atrocities—largely retired it.⁵⁶ That is a claim about the modal outcome rather than the universal one. A portion of any such cohort will refuse the bargain, in Bosnia as in Syria, and the record contains men who anchored and nonetheless remained dangerous. The policy question is not whether anchoring is complete, but whether the residual minority who will not anchor is best handled by measures that also break the majority who have.

Two objections to reading this pattern causally deserve to be met directly. The first is selection: Those who left may simply have been the men least disposed to settle in the first place, so that ejection and non-anchoring would be markers of prior intent rather than causes of subsequent violence. The objection has real force, and the Bosnia literature cannot resolve it cleanly. Some of those who departed were plainly looking for the next front rather than for a home. The second objection follows from the first: If anchoring

merely describes the men who had already decided to stand down, then anchoring explains nothing. What answers both is Bosnia's second act, examined below. The post-2001 denaturalization campaign did not fall on the self-selected leavers. It fell on men who had already anchored, who had married, settled, and in most cases held citizenship for a decade. Holding the population roughly constant and varying only the state's treatment of it, the campaign produced no measurable security dividend or a durable, organized grievance. That is the closest thing the case offers to a natural experiment, and it points in the same direction as the raw pattern.

Bosnia's second act delivers the sharper warning still, because it previews the consequences of a coerced reversal. After the September 11th attacks, under intense American pressure, Sarajevo turned against its own naturalized veterans. A state commission reviewed roughly 1,200 wartime naturalizations and revoked the citizenship of at least 300 individuals in proceedings widely criticized as opaque, offering neither adequate reasons nor meaningful avenues of appeal.⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch and other observers documented deportees who were mistreated on return, detainees held for extended periods on secret evidence, and, most notoriously, six men of Algerian origin rendered from Bosnia to Guantánamo in January 2002 over the objections of Bosnian courts.⁵⁸ The emblematic figure was Imad al-Husin (Abu Hamza), a Syrian veteran naturalized in the 1990s whom Bosnia could ultimately neither keep nor deport, after the European Court of Human Rights barred his removal to Syria on the grounds that he faced a real risk of ill-treatment there. He spent years in immigration detention, a *muhajir* with nowhere to go.⁵⁹ The security dividend of the entire campaign was negligible.

The rendition cases are the sharpest illustration. In November 2008, after the Supreme Court restored habeas review in *Boumediene v. Bush*, a federal district judge ordered five of the six men released, finding that the government's allegation—that they had planned to travel to Afghanistan to fight U.S. forces—rested on a single unidentified source whose reliability had not been established. The sixth, Belkacem Bensayah, was held on separate evidence of contact with an al-Qa`ida facilitator; that ruling was later vacated on appeal, and he was transferred to Algeria in December 2013. The distribution is instructive in both directions. It indicates that most of those the campaign swept up did not present the threat asserted, and it indicates equally that anchoring is not a guarantee: At least one man had settled in Bosnia and, on the government's account, remained operationally connected. Anchoring lowers the base rate. It does not eliminate the tail, which is precisely why monitoring capacity and a credible accountability mechanism have to sit alongside it rather than be assumed away by it.⁶⁰ The grievance it generated was durable, sustained by an association of El Mudžahid veterans capable of mobilizing thousands.⁶¹

Why anchoring should reinforce and harden a decision to stand down is not mysterious, and the mechanism transfers directly to the Syrian case. The mechanism does not require anchoring to be the sole cause of pacification. Where a fighter has chosen to settle, it explains why that choice becomes durable, why the cost of reversing it rises over time, and why an external actor should be reluctant to

g The El Mudžahid detachment was the formation, attached to the Third Corps of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina in August 1993, into which the Arab and other foreign volunteers were organized. Its wartime conduct was the subject of proceedings before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. It should also be noted that the Bosnia literature is uneven: Several of the standard accounts are advocacy-adjacent or rely on a small number of overlapping secondary sources, and the figures given here are best treated as orders of magnitude.

h Judge Richard J. Leon found that the government's allegation rested on a single unidentified source whose reliability had not been established. Bensayah's detention was upheld at first instance on separate evidence, vacated by the D.C. Circuit in June 2010, and he was transferred to Algeria on December 5, 2013.

reverse it on his behalf. A fighter embedded in a family, a livelihood, and a fixed community tends to accrue a set of hostages to fortune (dependents, property, reputation, and physical presence at a known address) that raises the personal cost of renewed violence and lowers his operational mobility.

This holds with particular force in Syria, where a substantial share of the *muhajirin* brought their families with them, gave up whatever property and standing they had at home, and have no safe return available to them. What they have built in Syria is, for many of them, all they have. Integration into a formal chain of command adds a further layer: It substitutes an accountable hierarchy for the autonomous cell, gives the state visibility into the fighter's movements and associations, and creates a disciplinary mechanism short of prosecution. Ejection strips away all of these simultaneously. The expelled fighter retains his skills, his ideological commitments, and his transnational contacts, but loses the local ties, the surveillance, and the stake in stability that had constrained him—an almost optimal recipe for reactivation. This is why the Bosnian veterans who stayed overwhelmingly stood down while those pushed out disproportionately reappeared in later plots, and it is why the assassinations now removing integrated fighters from Syria's protective structures should be read as a warning rather than as a convenient thinning of the foreign fighter ranks.

The Bosnian precedent does not establish that integration is clean, cost-free, or risk-free. It plainly is not, and some of the men now wearing Syrian uniforms bear responsibility for serious crimes. What it shows is narrower and more useful: that coerced reversal is worse than the disease it purports to cure. A disarm-and-remove push in Syria risks reproducing both Bosnian failures simultaneously: the ejection dynamic that led to various other jihadi plots in the mid- to late 1990s by alumni of the Bosnian jihad and the “denaturalization” backfire that the independent Uzbeks are already invoking to argue that the state cannot be trusted. The al-Husin case is not a distant analogy, but a near-exact template for the dilemma Syria's *muhajirin* now present: a population that the host state can neither fully expel nor, in many cases, safely return to countries of origin.

Policy Implications

The alternative to a disarmament-by-headcount condition is not to ignore the foreign fighter threat, but to direct U.S. leverage toward the variables that actually govern it. Five implications follow from the analysis above. They are presented in the order in which they would be operationalized, though the second of them (differentiation among the *muhajirin*) is logically prior to the rest, since every other judgment here depends on it.

First, conditionality should be built around command-and-control rather than a disarmament count. The relevant question is not how many weapons are collected, but whether integrated fighters sit within a vetted, accountable chain of command. It is anchoring within such a structure, on the Bosnian evidence, that does the work of retiring the threat. Benchmarks centered on unit vetting, biometric enrollment, and documented accountability for formations such as the integrated division and the pro-government Uzbek brigade would advance U.S. counterterrorism interests more effectively than a disarmament target that would shatter the structures currently providing control.⁶² In practical terms, this means privileging measurable indicators of state control (registries of integrated personnel, clarity of command relationships, records

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of disciplinary action, and the absence of autonomous foreign fighter enclaves operating outside the formal hierarchy) over the aggregate-disarmament metric, which is both difficult to verify in practice (weapons handovers can be staged and reported, but stockpiles cannot readily be audited in a country where materiel is abundant and dispersed) and counterproductive in its effects. This would preserve the underlying intent of the foreign fighter disarmament provision contained in the NDAA, while replacing its operative language accordingly.

Second, U.S. policy should differentiate among the *muhajirin* rather than treating them as a single category, a distinction the fighters themselves have already drawn. The dueling July 2026 statements demonstrate that the population has fractured into an integrated, state-serving majority and an independent, oppositional minority. Pressure should fall on the narrow transnational-threat set, while explicitly protecting the integration track, and Washington should reject any framing that conflates a Ministry of Defense brigade with the cells it is meant to contain. This differentiation is not merely analytical: The gravest external-attack risk—the entrepreneurial incitement of operations abroad by individuals within the group's former territory—concentrates in precisely the non-integrated minority, so a mandate that fractures the integrated formations would enlarge the autonomous space in which such freelancing thrives, while leaving the individuals most likely to engage in it, who hold no weapons a disarmament count would capture, entirely untouched.

Third, coerced removal is unlikely to serve U.S. objectives, and a managed alternative is available. Bosnia's citizenship-review campaign purchased minimal security and lasting grievances, and the al-Husin trap (a foreigner who can be neither kept nor deported) is Syria's dilemma in microcosm. The analogy has limits, and readers will reasonably note them. Bosnia's postwar authorities were not led by a former jihadi commander, and al-Sharaa's own history gives Damascus a set of incentives toward its foreign fighters that Sarajevo did not have. But the mechanism at issue—what happens to a foreign fighter population when an external power compels the host state to reverse an accommodation it has already made—does not depend on the biography of the government made to reverse it. A removal demand that Damascus cannot satisfy without exporting or further alienating the population in question is likely to yield neither removal nor security. The more promising course is to fold U.S. conditions into the European-brokered opening the Macron visit initiated, and to support a framework of

monitored return, prosecution where warranted, and rehabilitation for the harder cases.

Fourth, the protection and accountability of integrated fighters should be treated as a measurable benchmark, even if an imperfect and partial one, and the grievance pipeline should be monitored as a leading indicator. The 2026 assassinations are ejection by other means. U.S. engagement should be conditioned on credible investigations, force-protection measures, while intelligence resources track the independent channels whose messaging (now turning toward anti-Israel mobilization) offers the earliest available warning of defection risk. Measuring this will be difficult. Investigations may be opaque, and an absence of reported incidents can reflect either effective protection or unreported killings. The benchmark is nonetheless more tractable than a weapons count, because it can be assessed against observable state conduct, whether investigations are opened, whether findings are published, whether commanders are held to account, rather than against an inventory that no one can audit.

Fifth, U.S. assistance should prioritize screening and vetting, with emphasis on both the legacy foreign fighter cohort and the new inflow. The Stevenson case signals that post-Assad Syria's openness is drawing new arrivals that a fragile state cannot yet vet. The most forward-looking and concrete assistance Washington can offer is capacity-building for border screening, biometric enrollment, and watch-list integration.

Conclusion

Syria's foreign fighters are not a stockpile of weapons to be confiscated. They are a differentiated, fracturing population that has been substantially absorbed into the state, that is drawing new arrivals, and that now sits at the center of Syria's contested reintegration into international politics. The *muhajirin* have

functioned, over the 20 months since the fall of the regime, as a barometer of the new state's consolidation rather than as a detonator of instability. The risks that have actually materialized (an assassination campaign against integrated fighters, the ideological repackaging of the alienated, and a nascent inflow of new foreigners) would not be addressed by the NDAA's foreign fighter disarmament condition, which would pressure Damascus to dismantle the command structures that contain the population it seeks to neutralize. If there is a genuine detonator in this population, it is not the arsenal of the integrated brigades, but the capacity of non-integrated individuals to freelance attacks abroad—a danger that a fracturing disarmament mandate would arguably enlarge rather than contain.

While different in context, the Bosnian precedent is unambiguous on the essential point: An externally imposed program of ejection and denaturalization exported the threat and seeded durable grievances, while anchoring largely retired it. None of this implies that Washington should be indifferent to the foreign fighter presence, or that Damascus deserves a blank check. The Syrian government's own conduct, including the opaque detentions and the unanswered assassinations, warrants continued scrutiny. It implies, rather, that the United States should apply its considerable leverage to the variables that determine the threat (command, accountability, differentiation, and screening) rather than to a symbolic metric that would arguably degrade the state's capacity on each of them. The choice facing Washington is not whether Syria's foreign fighters retain their weapons, but whether they remain tethered to a state that can be pressed to account for them, or are cut loose to become, as their predecessors in Bosnia did, someone else's problem. On that question, the historical record does not leave much room for ambiguity. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Gary Greco, Former Office Chief, Joint Intelligence Task Force Counterterrorism, Defense Intelligence Agency

By Don Rassler

Gary Greco has served over 40 years in the U.S. intelligence community with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, retiring at the rank of Senior National Intelligence Service. He began his career in the U.S. Army serving in the Republic of Korea and the Federal Republic of Germany. He attended the U.S. Naval War College and was serving in the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

During his career, Greco provided operational support to Special Operations Forces in Panama, Somalia, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. He spent most of his career in counterterrorism and operations support at DIA and served as the Senior Advisor to the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center. Greco currently works in the DIA Office of History.

CTC: You have worked in counterterrorism for more than 40 years, and across that span of time have led key counterterrorism organizations such as the Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA) Joint Intelligence Task Force Counterterrorism (JITF-CT) and served in other roles. What led you into the field of terrorism and counterterrorism, and what have been some of the more meaningful and impactful roles you have played in the CT community? As I understand it, you were pulled into the DIA as part of a hiring push after the 1983 Beirut and Marine Barracks bombing in Lebanon.

Greco: I had just served in West Germany, and Europe was rife with terrorist groups. So, I had some background with the threat posed by these groups. As you mentioned, I took a job shortly after the embassy bombings and the Marine Corps barracks bombings. I originally served in DIA's Office of Security. At the time, the services saw terrorism as a security force protection mission. Fortunately, DIA Directorate of Intelligence staff officers, namely Harry Klein and Louis André—both Vietnam Special Forces guys and Middle East foreign area officers—were tasked to develop an organizational construct that put terrorism as a whole intelligence problem. They organized the office that would be responsible for current intelligence, indications and warning, and targeting out of one singular office.

This was a very unique organizational construct for DIA at the time, and there was great reservation about putting all that responsibility in one place. But Klein and André were very adamant in their plan for the office.

Luckily, they had some powerful backers, especially the then DIA director Lieutenant General Jim Williams, who actually was West Point Class of 1954. To do all that, I think we had less than 15 people. We had a huge span of responsibility. And I quickly fell under the influence of the mercurial and brilliant characters of Klein and André. I still see that period as a hallmark in my career.

CTC: What did you learn most from those individuals?

Greco: I learned a lot about leadership from both of them. They were under a tremendous amount of pressure. They were relatively junior guys, a Major and probably a GS-14 at the time. There were a lot of knives out for them. But what I did learn from them is that if you worked a terrorism issue for any length of time, you have to steel yourself, that you're going to be wrong a lot, and that there are consequences to your mistakes in the terrorism and counterterrorism business. As a leader, you have to bear those mistakes, and owning them means replacing blame with personal accountability. You have to acknowledge the error and fix it quickly. You have to approach these mistakes with great humility, transparency, and confidence. It was an invaluable lesson that I learned for my own personal, professional growth, but I definitely got it from those guys.

CTC: Can you take us back to the mid- to late 1990s? What did the U.S. counterterrorism community look like during that period? And when you reflect on that time, what stands out to you the most?

Greco: We were still deep in Hezbollah and Palestinian groups, like the PFLP-GC [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command], and Iranian state sponsorship. Europe and Latin America groups had kind of fallen away because they had lost their financial benefactor from the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries. We were beginning to put together a threat picture posed by this weird mix of Egyptian groups and a grab bag of jihadists that were returning home after seeking jihad in various places. They were followers of that iconic figure and theologian Abdullah Azzam. I kind of referred to them as a jihadist movement. I didn't look at them as al-Qa`ida at the time. That came a couple of years later. These jihadists were even in New York City. There was this array of returning jihad veterans that had landed in northern New Jersey and New York. They were getting involved in fraud scams and low-level crime. A lot of them had been wounded. So, we had this kind of comical grouping of one-arm, one-leg, one-eye nut jobs that admittedly we made fun of when they would screw something up. Even after the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, we were still kind of dismissive of these guys because the attack was not seen as serious, as one of the perpetrators had even gone back to the car rental agency to get his \$400 deposit for the vehicle.

I must say, at the time, the U.S. Attorney's Office in New York and the FBI field office there in New York were doing as good a job as they could with the limited resources and focus that the offices put on it, but they frankly continued to work within their own silo. That's an easy sketch of what it was like to be working during that period, from the start of the '90s to maybe 1995.



Gary Greco

CTC: You talked about the creation of what would evolve into JITF-CT at DIA. On 9/11, and in the lead up to 9/11, you were serving as the chief of DIA's Terrorism Warning Division. How was al-Qa`ida viewed at the time, and what type of resources did you and your team have?

Greco: I would say it took the Khobar Towers bombing and the East Africa Embassy bombing for us to receive funding that we could really cover down on these new threats. By then, we were focused on this threat, and we really began taking it seriously. We had some excellent people that we had been able to hire in the little bit of a budget plus-up we got after the Khobar Towers attack. A lot of people may not know that DIA was at the forefront of targeting al-Qa`ida, UBL [Usama bin Ladin] in Tarnak Farms outside of Kandahar, and a couple of [training camps] in Pakistan, at the time. This would have been circa '98, '99, 2000.¹

It's a whole interesting story that I've actually written about here [at DIA] in the work I'm doing on the history of CT and DIA. There were a lot of things going on that just did not catch the interest of the public or frankly senior decision makers. During that time period, as far as a community, we were superficially working together, but in reality, everybody was working within their own organizational silo.

CTC: What was it like at that time helping to support the senior decision makers and policy makers when it came to the issue of terrorism? People often refer to how during the 1990s the United States had more of a law enforcement mentality in terms of our approach to counterterrorism. And as you mentioned,

during the 1990s, counterterrorism was more oriented around force protection.

Greco: You are correct. The law enforcement model kind of pervaded. The FBI was doing a good job. I would say circa '99, we really started. Bin Ladin had moved around that time from Sudan back to Afghanistan. He now was kind of holed up in Tarnak Farms, and we began a serious effort directed by the Chairman [of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] to begin targeting him. DIA and U.S. Special Operations forces were at the forefront of that. It was the first concentrated use of a drone that we were using to monitor the Tarnak Farms compound.² Now, we only had like two hours of persistent surveillance, not like today, where we have more of an unblinking eye. Up until about 1995, NGA [National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency] had been a part of DIA. They were doing a great job at developing a pattern of life there on the Tarnak Farm compound. As a matter of fact, we saw this one lone individual pacing within the compound. We all got quite excited about that because NGA was able to measure this individual, and we found out that he was between 6'5" and 6'7". And we knew bin Ladin was tall. So, it was like 'tall man in white, pacing.' That's the way we would log the activity.

CTC: That kind of comes full circle given the efforts in Abbottabad, Pakistan, to try and understand who the figure was that would pace outside before the operation that killed UBL. It's interesting to hear you talk about this because you can see the seeds of other counterterrorism methods that would evolve and play more central roles with find, fix, finish, and that methodology, and reliance on drones for leadership decapitation.

Greco: During that time period, myself and another senior CT member in DIA, we were able to go over and work with a partner nation that was involved in a highly contested counterterrorism operation in their country. The stunning thing about watching them is they had persistent surveillance on their adversary. I mean, literally 24 by 7. They followed them all over. They knew what cars they were in. It was stunning to us to see the level that they were able to bring us. They were developing a pattern of life. And I remember he and I having discussions when we got back to our headquarters: 'What would we do if we had that?' A couple of years later, we did have that, but we were thinking along those lines of how we would prepare a workforce for that, how we would manage the problem. We had a lot of discussions about that.

It came to bear fruit, probably three or four years later. That was kind of the opening for us of really thinking of how to do this. We did develop this pattern of life at Tarnak Farms. There was some argument about arming the drone. Believe it or not, several players that you wouldn't think of argued against arming the drone. There was a bunch of testing that was done out at a facility out in the American West. There was the capability of doing it. The reason I believe we were never able to successfully launch some type of attack at that time was because we could not define down when there wouldn't be collateral damage. Because at the time, bin Ladin had two of his families with him, and we could never convince the general counsels that we could 100 percent say we wouldn't have collateral damage.³

CTC: We've spoken previously about your friend and colleague Ron Bucca,^a a DIA reservist who worked as a fire marshal for the Fire Department of New York and who was tragically killed while responding to the attacks at the World Trade Center. Years prior, in 1993, Ron responded to the first World Trade Center bombing, and that event shaped how he viewed al-Qa`ida, as prior to 9/11, he strongly believed that the World Trade Center would be attacked again. What can we learn from a hero like Ron who appreciated the threat before others?

Greco: I definitely want to talk about Ronnie, but I'd like to go back to that summer prior to 9/11. That'll lead us up to a conversation I had with Ronnie in the Pentagon just literally two or three weeks prior to 9/11. That summer before, NSA [National Security Agency] was doing a great job at picking up on jihadist communications, and amongst those discussions, there was this great expectation that something big was going to happen. We were getting so much of it, we started calling it 'chatter.' It became so persuasive that anyone working the threat at that time had this palatable feeling that we were going to get hit. Sadly, what we foresaw were attacks on embassies, military facilities overseas, not planes flying into buildings. That was a failure of imagination, but there was also, frankly, a failure in us being unable to convince senior decision makers of the threat.

Going back to Ron, our office had this really good fortune of being supported by several Army and Navy Reserve units. These guys were real force multipliers for us. They were mostly lawyers, bankers, cops, firemen from New York City, from Philadelphia, from Chicago. Ron was the ops officer for a small reserve intelligence detachment out of New York City. These guys became real experts in terrorism; many became qualified watch officers for us. They even had production responsibility for several groups. These guys really knew what they were talking about, and we weren't afraid to use them in any venue, not only just doing their weekend drill. A lot of times they would come down to D.C. and brief alongside us. We saw no difference between them and other intel officers that we had working for us.

Ronnie, through his professional duties with the Fire Department in New York City, had been on the famous Rescue One, which is like their SWAT team. He was severely injured in a fall, and he then became a fire marshal. He became the fire department's terrorist expert. He even had his own set of blueprints of the World Trade Center. He constantly studied them. He visited the site, spoke to tenants about their evacuation plans. He was a member of the New York City FBI Field Office's Joint Terrorism Task Force. As you mentioned, he had responded to the first World Trade Center bombing, and he recovered evidence.

In the weeks prior to 9/11, Ron's unit had done their two-week active-duty tour with us in Washington. During that time, Ron came over to my Pentagon office to discuss the ongoing threat in the chatter. And I will tell you, he totally believed that al-Qa`ida was going to come back and return to target the World Trade Center. We discussed this; I commented that we were going to have to take the first punch for us to respond. After that two-hour talk, I

"Terrorists are always going to be opportunists, but they are also technology driven, and we're always a step behind."

walked him out of the building, and that's the last I saw him. He was killed in Tower Two. Over the years, I know from meeting his family members and his partner that in the days prior to 9/11, he was prepared for the attack. He'd been studying the blueprints, talking to anyone that would listen to him. And I really believe that when he ran up those stairs in Tower Two, he knew exactly what he was running towards.

CTC: The conversation that you just mentioned with Ron before the attacks, can you help us understand what led to his conviction to believe that the World Trade Center was going to be a target? Why did he feel so strongly about that?

Greco: As I said, he was a terrorism expert. He had access to classified systems at his reserve unit, and I believe he spent a lot of time there looking at production and message traffic. What he was basing this on was al-Qa`ida had attempted to get the USS Cole several times and other Navy ships there in the Aden Harbor. They had kept trying to do it. He overlaid that, that they would come back to the World Trade Center because they hadn't been successful at it. That was the premise of his thinking. As I said, we spoke for two hours there in those weeks just prior to 9/11. Speaking to several of his family members, they remember that time period. They said he was consumed with what he thought was going to happen.

CTC: I think one of the startling things in hearing the story of Ron and his convictions about the al-Qa`ida threat and the World Trade Center, and then also the story of individuals like Michael Morell, who was serving as President Bush's daily briefer at the time and was with him on 9/11 when the attacks happened, was just how people who were intimately working the threat weren't surprised. They immediately knew the attacks were conducted by al-Qa`ida. From our conversations, I think that was abundantly clear to you as well, right after the attacks happened, that you knew the attacks were conducted by al-Qa`ida.

Greco: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, I was in the J34 office when the first plane hit tower one, and I immediately said, 'These are the attacks and also we can expect multiple near-term, near simultaneous attacks,' because that's what they had done in East Africa.

You have to remember, the community that was following al-Qa`ida at the time was very small. I know that's hard to believe now, but it might have been 20 people that really followed it from the entire community. I find it highly doubtful that anybody that truly was following al-Qa`ida at that time period would have been shocked at what happened. They would have been surprised, but the absolute immediacy, that we knew who it was, especially after we received the flight manifests with the names of the people

^a Ronald Bucca was a U.S. Army Green Beret who served in the Vietnam War and later worked as an analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency. Bucca was also a 22-year veteran of the New York City Fire Department.

involved. We saw that they were Saudis and Egyptians. That made us even more assured of ourselves.

CTC: You led and shaped the work of JITF-CT, DIA's predecessor organization to what is now called the Defense Combating Terrorism Office, a unit which has always been tasked with providing terrorism indications and warning (I&W) to the department. In your view, how has I&W as a practice area evolved since 9/11?

Greco: I've had a lot of discussions with the DCT leadership, and what I tell them—because I had lived through up-and-down funding literally since I began in the office—is that when all else fails, you have to fall back on I&W. The key thing about CT I&W is that it's impossible to forecast when and where there's going to be the next terrorist attack. Because of the level of human activity, it's almost impossible to detect or predict. We can and have reacted to terrorism over the years; building up force protection and awareness and a sense of environment has changed because of the result of the analysis that hinges on that. A lot of CT analysis postulates possible attack venues, but in the end, all you really do is harden a shell and you make the forces aware of the vulnerabilities and take appropriate actions to protect yourself.

It is like crime. Crime keeps happening and can be predicted, but now you have ubiquitous cameras, you have technical abilities to geo-fence and examine a criminal's cell phone activities forensically after a crime. We have Stingray, technical devices to track electronic signatures. It's amazing to me how we've kind of embraced a lot of that stuff that came out of the law enforcement model. We follow patterns. We know activity will reoccur, and we kind of resolve it through human and SIGINT [signals intelligence], but essentially you have to await the next event.

CTC: How transformative has technology been to I&W work?

Greco: In the history of modern terrorism, think of the time and distance from hopping on an airline or using a hidden gun and then taking a plane to Entebbe to using a quadcopter to fly an IED [improvised explosive device] into a Navy building in Bahrain. Terrorists are always going to be opportunists, but they are also technology driven, and we're always a step behind. The classic dilemma of CT is if you overpredict. In the I&W community, we warn at every possibility, and you end up losing your decision maker audience. They tell you they think you're overhyping the threat

because it's impacting ship visits, liberty calls. The Navy hates calling off a liberty call after guys have been stuck on a ship for three or four months, and here, these intel guys are saying there's this threat out there. They don't want to hear it.

CTC: The I&W space always seems like a difficult space to work in where there's the danger and you're potentially dismissed if you're crying wolf too often when you're just alerting decision makers about threats and what the information is telling you. But then, the one time when something gets through, or unfortunately happens, then you could be blamed for it. So there's a danger of losing on both sides of the equation there.

Greco: Absolutely. The moral of I&W in CT analysis is appropriate at one end of the evolutionary spectrum of an organization or an apparatus or even a weapon system. But you have to change as the threat becomes something else, as an ideology, as a political party, as an army, as a new set of tactics becomes available; you have to adapt to it.

CTC: When you reflect on the past 25 years, when it comes to counterterrorism, what has the United States achieved? What has al-Qa`ida achieved?

Greco: Sadly, it took the death of 3,000 people and also thousands of people killed in the war on terrorism for us finally to take the problem seriously. We developed this highly capable counterterrorism apparatus that has hunted our foes across the world. It has protected us to a point where terrorism is now considered a nuisance. Al-Qa`ida has diminished to a point where they have gone back to where we began this conversation as a bunch of jihadists looking for a target. That's the way I see the last 25 years.

CTC: When you think about the next decade, what terrorist threat or threats are you most concerned about?

Greco: I would say the ready access to harmful information, and how rapidly a curious person through a couple of keystrokes on the internet can become co-opted to action by a malign actor. A 13-year-old can now be convinced to action in mere days, where 40 years ago it would have taken years of spotting, assessing, recruitment, training. There's little ability to interdict this threat. That's what really keeps me up at night. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 Editor's Note: For background, see Lisa Myers, "Osama bin Laden: missed opportunities," NBC News, March 16, 2004.
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The Case for Exit Comms: Raising Disengagement Rates from Violent Extremism

By James Khalil, Andrew Glazzard, John Horgan, and Alastair Reed

‘Exit comms’ are communication campaigns designed to promote individual or group-level disengagement from violent extremist (VE) organizations or movements during active conflicts. Despite representing a key component of many contemporary disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, Exit Comms often remain under-resourced and siloed from wider interventions, and they continue to be underexplored in the associated literature. This reflects the historical legacy of DDR, with early interventions occurring only *after* the belligerent parties had agreed to demobilize their forces, making such communications largely unnecessary. By contrast, the current generation of DDR interventions also operate in contexts where conflict remains ongoing, resulting in the need for communications campaigns to promote exits. Despite this lack of attention to date, emerging evidence from cases such as Colombia, Nigeria, and Somalia suggests that Exit Comms can provide an effective tool for increasing exit rates from VE organizations. As such, the first objective of this article is to present this evidence and to advocate for Exit Comms to receive greater resources. The second is to provide a structured framework to help practitioners optimize the design and evaluation of Exit Comms by unpacking these campaigns into five key dimensions: audience, messenger, channel, format, and content. This latter aim is of particular importance in the current context of donor withdrawal and shrinking budgets, with DDR and related interventions facing increasing pressure to justify their spending.

Although evidence regarding the effectiveness of ‘Exit Comms’—communication campaigns designed to promote individual or group-level disengagement from violent extremist (VE) organizations or movements during active conflicts—remains scarce, current indications are positive. For instance, a 2023 study from Somalia revealed that communications played a critical role in influencing 15 of 16 former al-Shabaab associates to disengage, with radio campaigns and phone calls with family members providing the most effective channels.¹ Similarly, a 2018 study on radio campaigns in the borderlands of the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Uganda revealed a statistically significant correlation ($p < 0.05$) between the intensity of ‘defection messaging’ and disengagement rates from the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).² A 2023 study from Colombia similarly revealed a substantial increase in the number

of exits from *Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) on days immediately after national soccer games during which the state aired messages promoting demobilization.³ This effect was most pronounced for evening games, with the hypothesis being that this was because these events occurred during the FARC associates’ leisure time, increasing their exposure to the message. To be clear, not all Exit Comms are equally successful, with Enzo Nussio and Juan E. Ugarriza identifying no link between Christmas campaigns and demobilization rates in Colombia between 2010 and 2012.⁴ Nevertheless, these diverse cases suggest that Exit Comms can meaningfully influence the rate of disengagement under specific conditions.

These findings are particularly remarkable when contrasted with evidence regarding the effectiveness of preventative communications campaigns typically implemented under the preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) framework. For instance, based on her review of the existing literature, Kate Ferguson concludes that “the hypothesis that VE narratives or the real-life threat of VE can be countered by an alternative set of communications is an assumption that remains unproven.”⁵ Considering ‘live campaigns,’ Samantha Treacy et al. similarly conclude that “whilst there is some evidence of positive impacts from these campaigns, the evidence is limited and must be interpreted with caution due to the low and moderate quality of the evaluations [of these campaigns].”⁶ Focusing specifically on

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experimental and quasi-experimental campaigns, Sarah L. Carthy et al. also highlight the inconclusive nature of evidence regarding whether these interventions actually reduce the intent to act violently.⁷ Taken together, this inconclusive evidence concerning the effectiveness of preventative communications campaigns, alongside the growing body of research revealing the positive impact of Exit Comms, provides a basis for the reallocation of resources from the former to the latter in many contexts.

Having now briefly considered the existing evidence pertaining to Exit Comms, the following section provides a structured framework to help practitioners interpret these campaigns, before then considering how they can be optimized. This is followed by policy considerations concerning the application of Exit Comms, including the importance of alignment between information provided through these campaigns and the practical realities of DDR interventions on the ground, and the contexts in which policymakers should consider channelling additional resources to these interventions.

The Dimensions of Exit Comms

Drawing insight from key works within the communications studies literature,⁸ in this section, the authors offer an analytical framework that distinguishes between five dimensions of Exit Comms to inform their design and evaluation. The first of these dimensions (audience) is the target of the campaign, with the remaining four (messenger, channel, format, and content) pertaining to how the communications are constructed and delivered. Considering these in turn, the primary *audience* of Exit Comms are individuals directly or indirectly involved in ongoing VE campaigns. These individuals differ dramatically in terms of their motives for involvement, role (including combatant and non-combatant positions), rank, duration of involvement, and locations of operation, with this having substantial implications for the other four dimensions. In Somalia and Nigeria, Exit Comms tend to target individuals already inclined to leave al-Shabaab, *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (widely known as Boko Haram), and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), as opposed to ideologues within the ranks of these organizations.⁹ Such individuals represent the 'lowest-hanging fruit' for these campaigns, with many only remaining with their respective organizations because they fear being punished, potentially by death, for attempting to escape.¹⁰ Aside from these primary targets, Exit Comms also often have an *indirect* audience of family members, peers, and other intermediaries who may transmit the content of these communications to individuals directly involved in VE. Exit Comms specifically aim to target these indirect audiences in certain cases—for instance, with this applying to hotlines designed to offer practical guidance on exit processes to family members and others in Somalia.¹¹

The second dimension is *messenger*, which, depending on context, may include political figures, community leaders, family members, former participants in VE (widely known as 'formers'), and others. Political leaders were among the most effective messengers in the case of Somalia, including current and former presidents discussing the National Defectors Program on the radio.¹² This is also true for the 'Borno Model' program run by state authorities in northeast Nigeria from 2021, with government actors playing a key communicative role. This contradicts a prevailing opinion among many communications experts that state officials lack credibility. Many former associates of both al-Shabaab and Boko Haram also observed that phone conversations with family members played

a key role in their decisions to exit.¹³ Formers often also played a critical role in influencing others to disengage in these two cases, by recounting their own 'success stories' of exit on the radio and through private phone conversations with existing associates.^a These processes are more formalized in Nigeria's federally-run Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) program, which also involves formers helping to facilitate the disengagement of others.¹⁴ Family members and formers also acted as key messengers through the abovementioned radio campaign to promote exits from the LRA.¹⁵ The initiative during soccer games in Colombia featured various messengers, including military commanders inviting guerrillas to demobilize so that they could "watch the best football together."¹⁶

The third dimension is *channel*, which, again depending on context, may include leaflets, radio, television, classic mobile phones (also referred to as dumbphones), social media, and face-to-face conversations. For the purposes of the current discussion, the authors treat the internet (and devices through which it can be accessed, including smartphones) as a broader platform that encompasses multiple of these channels. As previously indicated, the 2023 research in Somalia revealed that radios and classic mobile phones were by far the most relevant of these channels, with access to the remainder limited by a combination of restrictions imposed by al-Shabaab and technical constraints in many remote locations where the insurgents were based.¹⁷ Research into disengagement through Nigeria's OPSC revealed similar patterns, but with leaflet campaigns also playing an important role.¹⁸ The Colombian military experimented with less conventional channels during their Christmas campaigns, including LED-illuminated balls containing personal letters that they released down rivers in insurgent territory, and trees on pathways frequented by guerrillas decorated with Christmas lights and emotive messages.¹⁹ Other channels in Colombia have included loudspeakers attached to helicopters, soccer balls containing messages released from planes, and fake peso bills with appeals to exit on their reverse.²⁰

The fourth dimension is *format*, with this including speeches, social media posts, news bulletins, dramas, poems, personal conversations, visual images, and so on. Although perhaps obvious, it is worth observing that this dimension is substantially contingent on the communications channel. For instance, radio broadcasts provide a suitable avenue for speeches, news bulletins, and dramas, but not visual images or personal conversations. Remaining with the Christmas campaigns in Colombia, the LED-illuminated balls and decorated trees lent themselves to a broad range of visual formats, including messages on banners, personal written appeals to guerrillas, and photos of families missing members due to their involvement with the FARC and other groups.²¹ Leaving aside the highly reductive nature of this final example, Colombian authorities also used faux lipstick advertisements in an effort to entice female rebels to demobilize, claiming that this would make them "feel like a woman again."²²

The fifth and final dimension is *content*, with the prevailing norm in PCVE communications being to distinguish between counter and alternative narratives. As first formulated by Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, and frequently reproduced since, the former are designed to "deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent

a It is important not to overlook the ethical issues associated with communications through formers, including how such campaigns can potentially expose them to an increased risk of being targeted by their former colleagues.

extremist messaging,” whereas the latter aim to undercut these narratives “by focusing on what we are ‘for’ rather than ‘against.’”²³ This binary distinction is poorly suited to Exit Comms as it actually excludes most of the content used to promote disengagement. Specifically, it neglects content emphasizing personal incentives for those leaving these organizations (“carrots”), as well as threats of punishment and other negative consequences for those who fail to voluntarily disengage (“sticks”). It also disregards the practical guidance that these campaigns often provide on *how* to escape from VE organizations and surrender to the security forces, rather than *why* they should do so. With these issues in mind, Table 1 presents an alternative classification system of content specifically for Exit Comms, drawing on an earlier version of this typology developed through the 2023 research in Somalia.²⁴

Table 1: Typology of Exit Comms Content

Category	Description
Counter and alternative narratives	These narratives aim to discredit the objectives, ideology, or strategy of individuals or groups involved in VE (e.g., by framing them as criminal or corrupt, undermining their assertions of religious authority, or emphasizing the extent to which they harm the communities that they claim to represent) or to promote identities (e.g., national identities) or values (e.g., diversity, tolerance, and religious freedom) opposed by VE actors.
Personal incentives (“carrots”) and disincentives (“sticks”)	This content aims to motivate exit from VE by emphasizing personal incentives associated with disengagement (e.g., amnesty, rehabilitation services, greater personal safety outside of the group, enhanced financial or educational prospects, the fulfillment of familial obligations to exit), or personal disincentives associated with remaining involved (e.g., punishments for those captured and ongoing risks to personal safety).
Practical guidance on exit and surrendering	This content aims to provide practical guidance on leaving VE organizations (e.g., how and when to exit these groups) and surrendering (e.g., how and where to surrender, which security forces to surrender to, and how to arrange safe passage).

Optimizing Exit Comms

Having now outlined the five dimensions of Exit Comms, this section explores how to optimize these campaigns to increase disengagement rates. Without denying the importance of lessons learned from comparable cases, it is worth explicitly observing that those tasked with designing Exit Comms should avoid assuming that an effective campaign in one location will also succeed in another.

As an obvious example, while an online campaign may deliver positive results in locations where internet access is common, it is unlikely to be as effective in remote parts of Nigeria or Somalia. Similarly, while appeals from political leaders may encourage exits in certain locations (including Somalia, as discussed above), their effectiveness is likely to be reduced in locations where these leaders are deemed to be hostile to members of specific groups on account of their religion, ethnicity, or other identity markers. It is worth also observing that many VE organizations and movements adapt to changing contexts, meaning that efforts to optimize Exit Comms must remain ongoing. For instance, some former members of al-Shabaab observed that their commanders reduced their access to mobile phones when the threat from the state security forces was at a peak.²⁵ Of course, campaigns that rely on access to potential defectors through mobile phones are likely to be less effective under such circumstances. With such issues in mind, localized research and continuous learning are essential to the design of Exit Comms.

Beyond these broad principles, Exit Comms practitioners should be primarily concerned with two fundamental questions: whether specific campaigns achieve their desired effect, and how and why these initiatives succeed or fail. Many researchers consider randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to be the gold standard for answering the first of these questions as they randomly assign participants to treatment and control groups. However, RCTs face many practical and ethical challenges when applied to security interventions,²⁶ and the authors are unaware of any research that has utilized these approaches in relation to Exit Comms. Instead, the above-mentioned initiative during soccer games in Colombia, and the research into radio campaigns against the LRA, applied quasi-experimental methods. These approaches are generally regarded as the strongest practical alternative to RCTs when random assignment is not possible. However, even quasi-experimental methods are likely to remain infeasible in contexts such as Somalia due to the opaque and decentralized nature of Exit Comms against al-Shabaab. While a third option is to collect data through perceptions surveys with formers, this approach cannot deliver definitive causal conclusions about the effectiveness of specific campaigns because it runs into a methodological issue known as ‘selecting on the dependent variable.’^b Nevertheless, perception surveys *can* provide tentative or indicative findings—for instance, if only a minute proportion of formers reported that leaflets influenced their decision to disengage in locations where these flyers were widely distributed, it would be reasonable to infer that this campaign did not substantially contribute to the exit rate.

Moving to the second question identified above, those tasked with optimizing Exit Comms campaigns should also aim to understand the underlying causal mechanisms that explain *how* and *why* specific initiatives succeed or fail. Remaining with the illustrative example of the unsuccessful leaflet campaign, these practitioners would benefit from knowing whether the problem was with the messenger (the leaflets may have featured an untrustworthy source), the channel (perhaps flyers are associated with propaganda in the location in question), the format (they may have benefited from more imagery and less text), or the content (they may have delivered

b The specific issue is that such samples consist only of individuals who have already exited the VE organizations in question. Without comparable data from individuals who remained with the groups, it is impossible to determine whether exposure to a given campaign was more common among those who exited than among those who did not.

better results by offering practical guidance on surrendering, rather than trying to motivate exits). This plays to the strengths of qualitative research, which is designed to deliver nuanced information of this nature. For instance, the 2023 Somalia study revealed that members of some al-Shabaab units were permitted to access radio stations of their choice, others were prohibited from listening to state-run stations, and yet others were only allowed to access those that were sympathetic to the insurgents.²⁷ This research also revealed that units maintained substantially different policies regarding when and for how long foot soldiers were allowed to use traditional mobile phones to contact their families.²⁸ Of course, this sort of information is invaluable for helping ensure that Exit Comms campaigns actually reach their intended audience.

Policy Considerations

Exit Comms do not necessarily need to be associated with structured DDR programs because in many locations, associates instead elect to escape from their VE entities and return to communities via ‘informal’ routes. However, where DDR programs do exist, policymakers and practitioners should be acutely aware of the potential negative effects of misalignments between information provided through these campaigns and the practical realities of DDR interventions on the ground (commonly referred to as a ‘say-do gap’).²⁹ For instance, if the rehabilitation and reintegration services provided through these programs are not as comprehensive as advertised, this information is likely to reach potential defectors and it may disincentivize some from exiting. More fundamentally, this is also true if former associates of VE entities experience unlawful detention, physical punishment, or other human rights abuses upon exit. Indeed, the fact that many OPSC defectors were processed through Giwa Barracks, a facility with a history of inhumane conditions, undoubtedly reduced the disengagement rate in Nigeria, at least until the period of mass exits from 2021.³⁰

Policymakers should also consider ramping up Exit Comms during periods when the VE entities in question are in decline or are experiencing military reversals as these communications may be more effective under such conditions. Research from Somalia has demonstrated that this can occur for multiple reasons, including because such organizations may be less able to enforce compliance at such times, as their associates are more likely to seek exit during periods of intense confrontations, and because the ‘chaos of battle’ often creates opportunities to flee.³¹ Conversely, there may also be periods when policymakers should consider reducing their focus on Exit Comms because their finite resources are more urgently needed to support other aspects of the disengagement pathway. For instance, this was arguably the case during the period of mass exits in Nigeria, where the critical weaknesses in the Borno Model were in the screening, rehabilitation, and reintegration phases, rather than in the communications efforts to promote exits in the first place.³² Taken together, these observations highlight the importance of aligning Exit Comms with realities on the ground.

Conclusion

This article has presented emerging evidence suggesting that Exit Comms can provide an effective tool for increasing exit rates from violent extremism. It also delivered a structured framework to help practitioners optimize the design and evaluation of these campaigns by unpacking them into five key dimensions: audience, messenger, channel, format, and content. The core conclusion of this article is that Exit Comms should receive greater resources to strengthen their delivery and to test whether they can provide comparable results in other contexts. In an era of donor withdrawal and shrinking budgets, failing to do so risks neglecting what appears to be a highly effective tool for reducing participation in violent extremism. **CTC**

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