

# Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization: National and Regional Ramifications?



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# SUMMARY



1.THE PAST : ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION & ISIS

2.SITUATION

3.THE BALKAN FFT UPDATE

4.RETURNEES

5.TODAY & FUTURE

6.CONCLUSIONS



Our conflicts used to look like this





# Now conflicts look like this

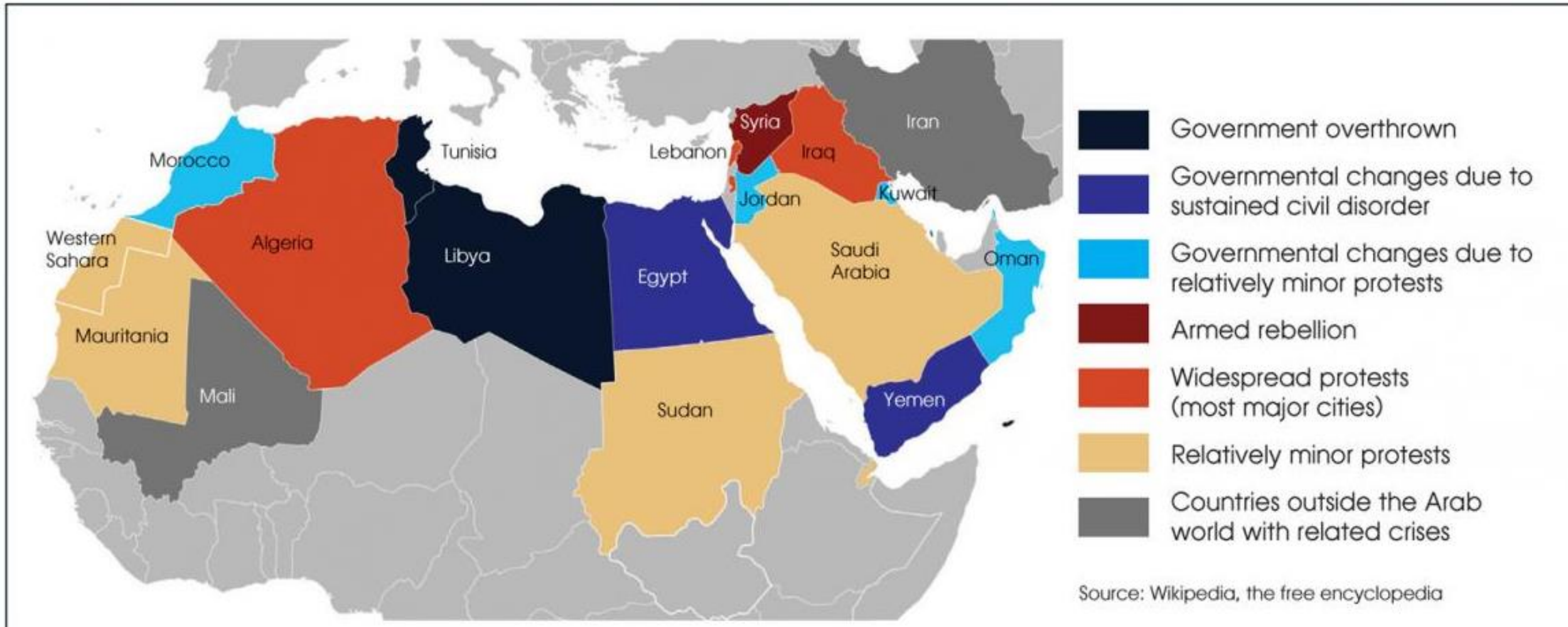




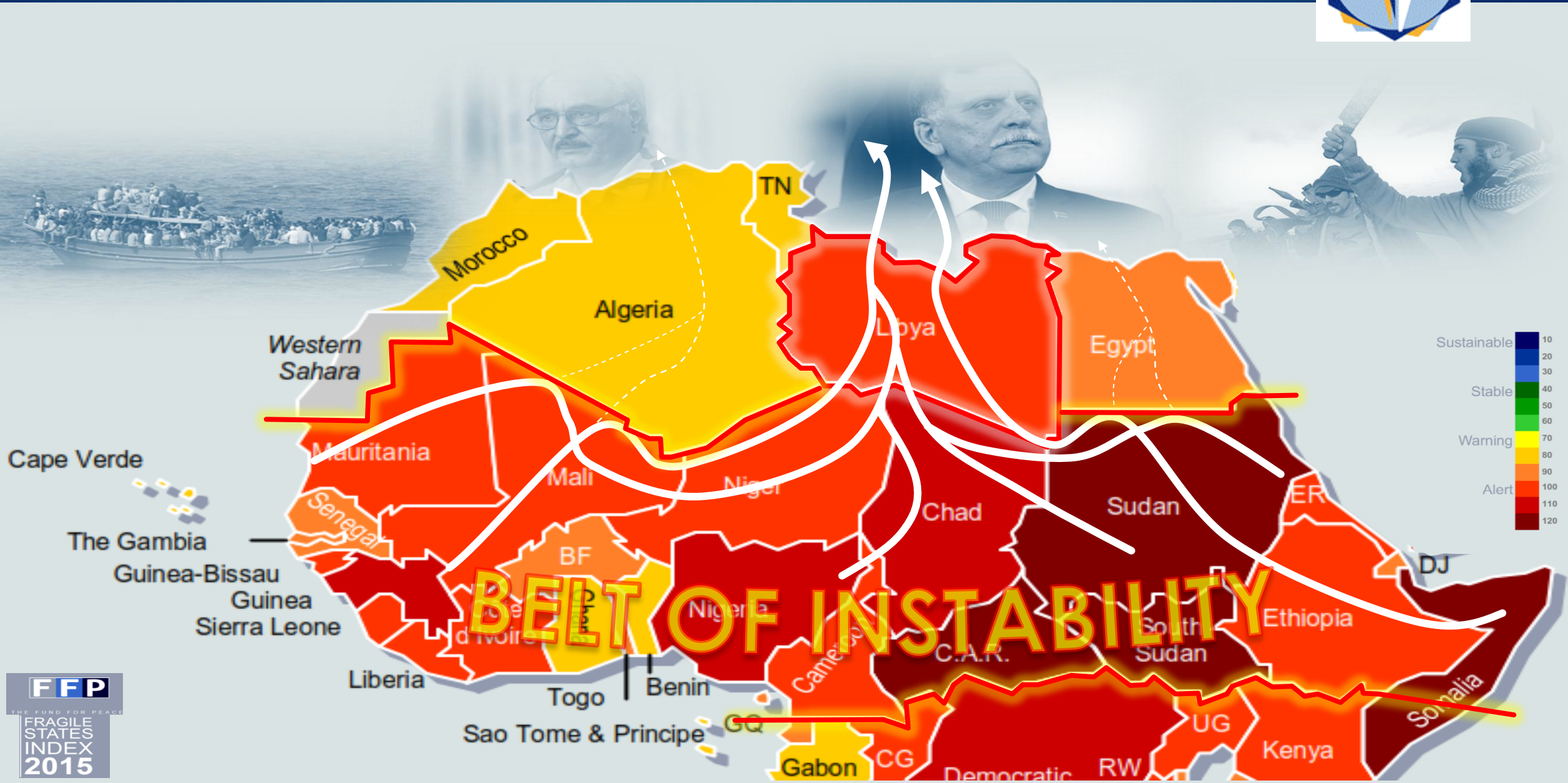
# "Arab Spring" in the MENA Region



Figure 1: Summary of Arab Spring regions



# LIBYA No stable state since the beginning....the big mistake: NO END STATE

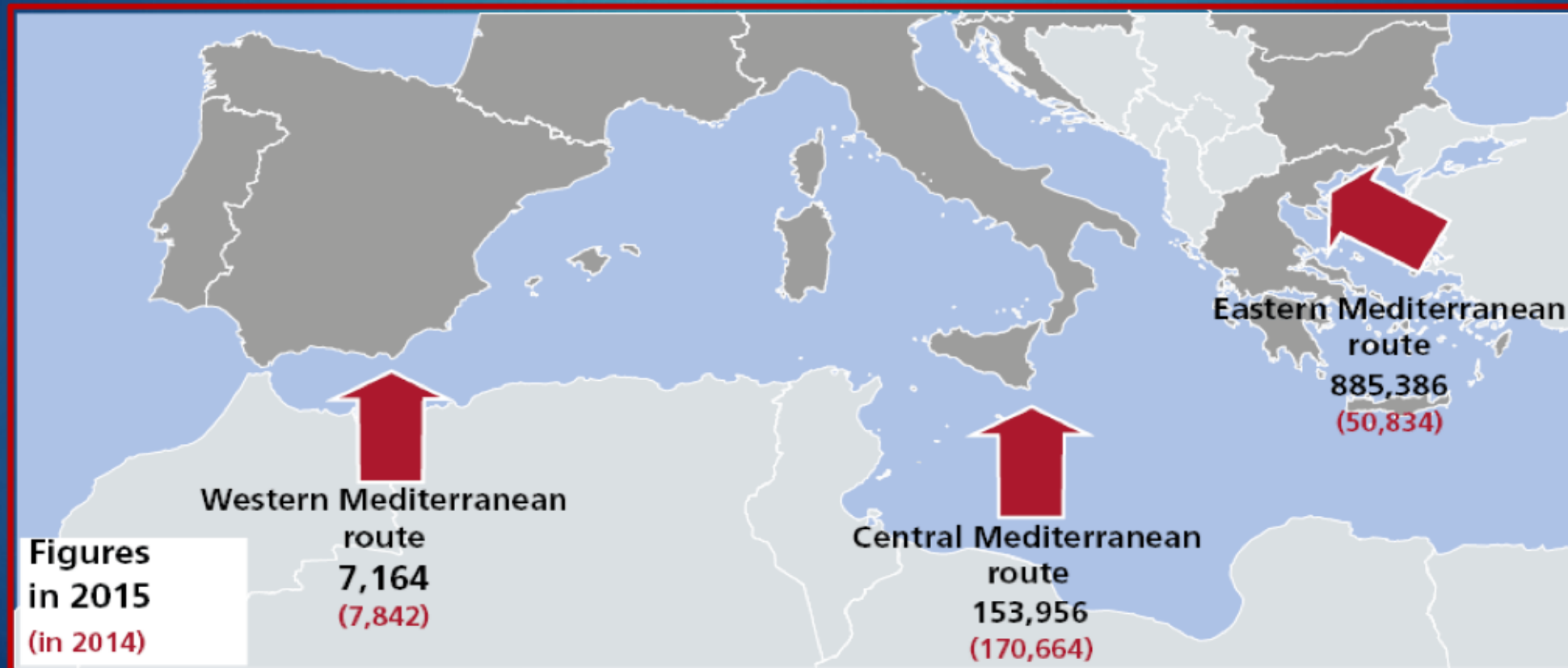


FFP

THE FUND FOR PEACE

FRAGILE STATES INDEX 2015

The International Office of Migration says that thus far in 2017 more than 170000 people have entered Europe illegally across the Mediterranean. Some 85% have made the crossing from Libya to Italy, with over 500,000 having passed through Italian ports since 2014. In 2016 over 10,000 arrived in Spain from Morocco, a 46% increase over the previous year.





# THE NEW ROUTE / THE SULTAN ROUTE





# Illegal/Criminal Activities



- Drug trafficking
- Weapons (small arms) trafficking
- Illegal fishing
- Kidnapping (and ransom)
- Extortion
- Human trafficking (acquisition by improper means) & migrants smuggling (illegal entry into a State)
- Smuggling (oil, tobacco, cars, antiquities, rice, sugar, pharmaceuticals, etc.)
- Forged documents, counterfeit or real
- Money laundering

# ISIS Old Business Model



- Territory: ISIS as one of the few terrorist groups identified in a territory
- Many sources: from imposing taxes to illegal trafficking in many different sectors and petty crimes
- ISIS was unique in recent history as one of the few terrorist groups to generate most of its funding from the territory it held—revenues amassed from taxation and extortion, sale of oil and various oil-related products, looting, confiscation of property and cash, and fines levied against the population by the religious police for a litany of offenses
- Expenditures toward the elite, the military and the population







# Changing the Business Model



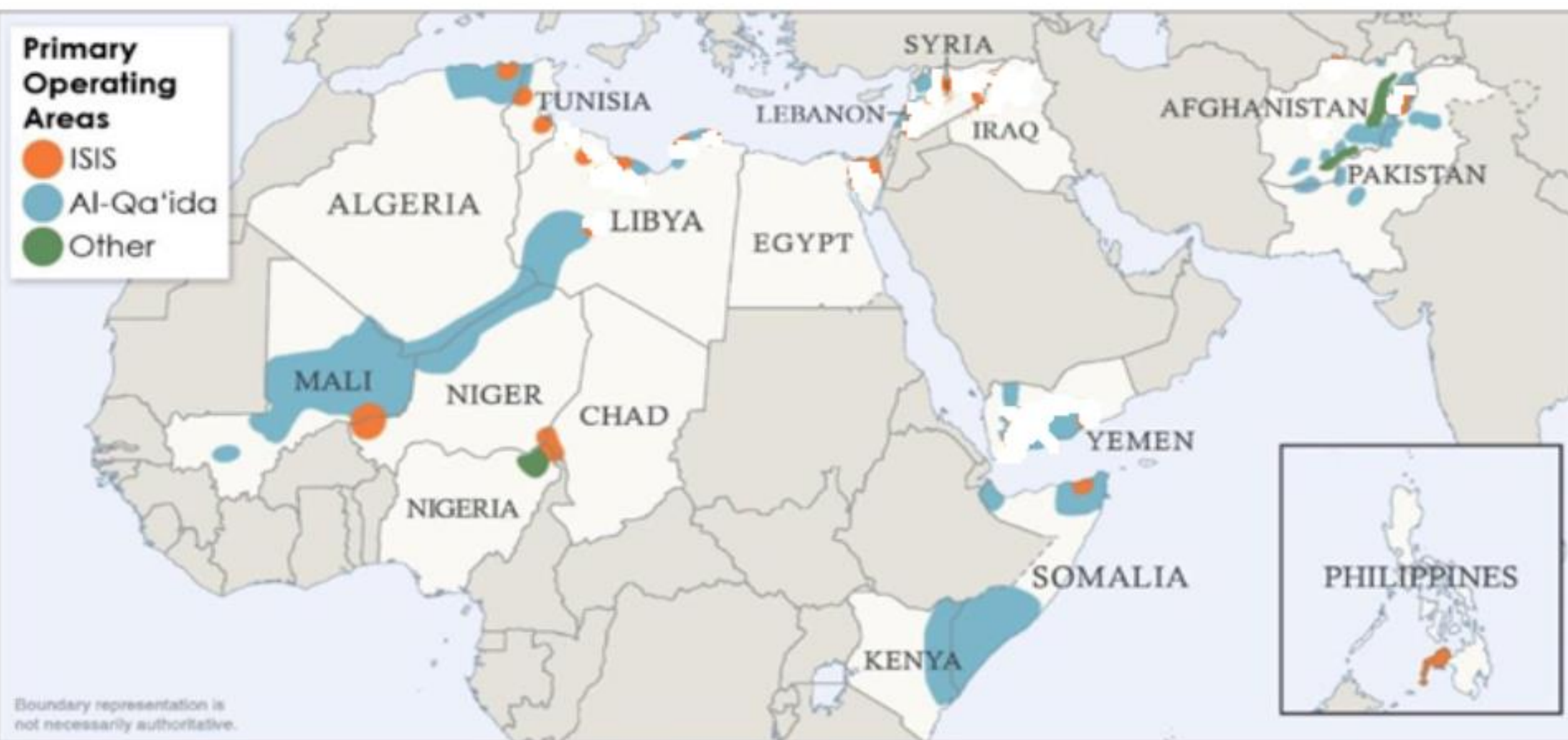
- Moving versus a new business model: more media, more trafficking and, in the future, more organised crime, cybercrime and infiltration in the legitimate economy of the area (i.e., exploiting reconstruction and extorting construction companies).
- While ISIS territorial control has declined, the financial power still retains; ISIS surviving leadership is alleged to have smuggled as much as \$ 400 million out of Iraq & Syria and used it to invest in legitimate businesses—hotels, hospitals, farms, and car dealerships—throughout the region, including in Turkey, where some militants have also reportedly made large purchases of gold.
- ISIS financial holdings and funding model have made it the wealthiest insurgent group in history. Its diversified funding portfolio and ability to raise money through criminal activities provides it with an opportunity to survive.



# The Future of the Global Jihadist 1/2



- Despite nearly two decades of a global counter-terrorism campaign waged by the United States and its allies, there may now be four times as many Salafi jihadist fighters as there were on September 11, 2001.
- The total number is currently estimated at 230,000 militants spread across approximately 70 countries, with the lion's share currently located in Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The spike in numbers comes at the same time that the Islamic State's (IS) caliphate has collapsed in Iraq and Syria.
- The group now only claims a mere one percent of the territory it once controlled at its peak in 2014-2015. These numbers suggest that despite the decline of the so-called caliphate, the global jihadist movement is alive and well, even if it is currently more fractured and atomized than at any point in recent memory.



## **SUNNI VIOLENT EXTREMISTS' PRIMARY OPERATING AREAS AS OF 2018**

Source: Trendsmap.com, Islamism map, elaborated by NDCF:

<https://www.trendsmap.com/twitter/tweet/963686363366346752>, 28/11/2018)

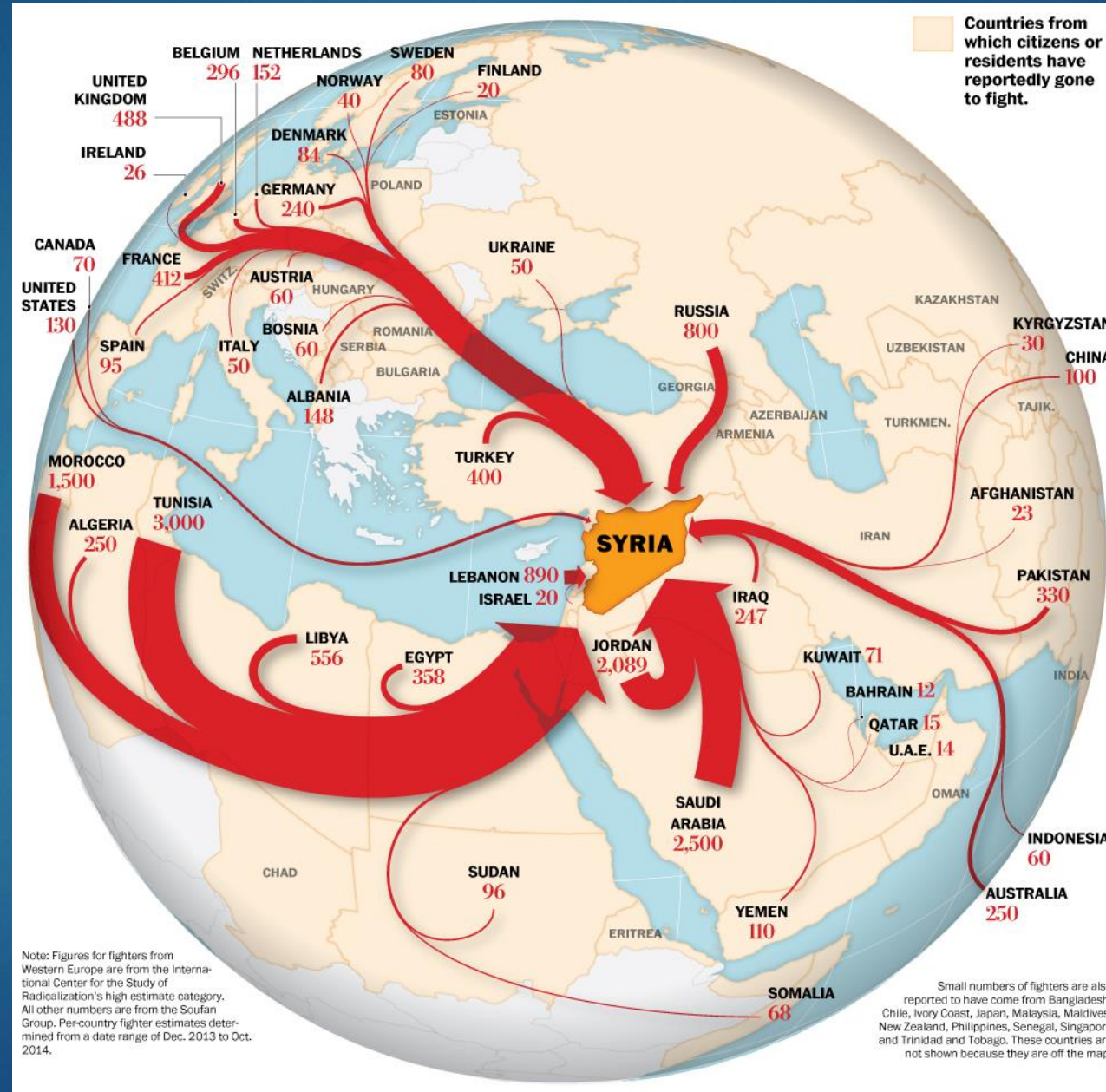


# The Future of the Global Jihadist 2/2



- The future of the global jihadist movement is therefore likely to resemble its past, with peripatetic and divided groups of militants dispersing to new battlefields, from North Africa to Southeast Asia.
- There they will join existing civil wars, establish safe havens and sanctuaries, and seek ways of conducting spectacular attacks in the West that inspire new followers. In this fragmented and atomized form, IS could become even more dangerous and challenging for counterterrorism forces, as its splinter groups threaten renewed and heightened violence throughout the globe.
- Even if foreign fighters return home in much smaller numbers than initially expected, the next five-year period could very well be characterized by a spike in attacks.

# Foreign Fighters







# SITUATION



*Over 1,000 adult male foreign fighters, women, and minors from the Western Balkans spent time in Syria and Iraq and around 500 from the region are still there, including children born in theater. After seven years of fighting and at least 260 combat deaths, the last active jihadi unit from the Western Balkans in Syria and Iraq is a modest ethnic Albanian combat unit fighting with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib.*

*The rest of those remaining in Syria and Iraq, mostly minors, are held in Kurdish-controlled camps. Some 460 others have gradually returned home, making the Western Balkans the region with the highest concentration of returning foreign terrorist fighters in Europe and creating a long-term security challenge compounded by inadequate resources and the threat posed by homegrown jihadi militants*

# FFT UPDATE



In the last seven years, about 260 of those who traveled to Syria and Iraq from the Western Balkans have been reportedly killed in armed hostilities, or, in a few cases, died of natural causes. That represents almost one-quarter of the original contingent of 1,070 individuals. Some 460 others have returned to their countries of nationality or residence. The majority had returned by 2015. A few others were transferred to North Macedonia by the U.S. military in 2018 after being captured by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), thus making North Macedonia one of the first in Europe to publicly repatriate Islamic State fighters detained in Syria. The repatriation continued in April 2019 with Kosovo accepting the transfer of 110 individuals, of whom 74 are children, 32 women, and four alleged male foreign fighters. This was one of the largest repatriations of its kind so far. Bosnia and Herzegovina repatriated only one alleged foreign fighter.





# FFT UPDATE



It is estimated that the size of the Western Balkans contingent of foreign fighters and family members remaining in Syria and Iraq stands at over 500 individuals, made up one-third by male combatants and two-thirds by children (including those born in theater) and women. They are mostly being held in Kurdish-controlled prisons and camps for displaced people while a smaller number continues to be embedded with the organizations they joined in Syria and Iraq. At least two foreign fighters, one from North Macedonia and one from Kosovo, are serving life sentences in Turkey. Nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina currently compose the largest group of the Western Balkans contingent remaining in the conflict theater.<sup>1</sup>



# *The Complex Challenge of Returnees*



From the start of the Syrian armed conflict, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia experienced some of the highest rates in Europe for mobilization into jihadi terrorist organizations relative to population size. A similar trend has characterized the reverse flow, where according to official data about 460 individuals from the region have returned home from Syria and Iraq, 242 of whom to Kosovo. By comparison, the countries of the European Union, with a cumulative population size of 500 million, have received about 1,500 returnees. As data indicates, the Western Balkans is currently the region with the highest concentration of returned foreign fighters in Europe. With some 500 other adult male combatants, women, and minors still in Syria, it is not inconceivable that the number of returnees may double in size in the future.



# RETURNEES



Kosovo, with its 134 returnees per million nationals, tops the chart, followed by North Macedonia with 42 per million. The United Kingdom, by comparison, has reported about 6 returnees of “national security concern” per million, whereas Germany and France about four per milion.

The emerging practice of stripping citizenship or permanent residence to foreign fighters that is gaining traction in some European countries might complicate things further for the Western Balkans, as it shifts the burden of prosecuting and handling dozens of returnees with dual nationality to countries already overburdened and ill-equipped to do so both in terms of resources and expertise.

# TODAY QUESTION MARKS..



Despite resource challenges, the Western Balkans countries have tried and sentenced a significant number of returning jihadis

Another concern related to foreign fighter returnees is the likelihood that some may have returned to the region with the assistance of support networks without being detected by the authorities, or at least have been able to evade them for some time





# AND NOW ?



The unprecedented jihadi mobilization wave of the last decade in the Western Balkans may have been sudden in its manifestation, but it did not occur in a vacuum. As such, the foreign fighters are only the most visible manifestation of a wider phenomenon of religious militancy in the Western Balkans, the size and threat of which is not easily measured.

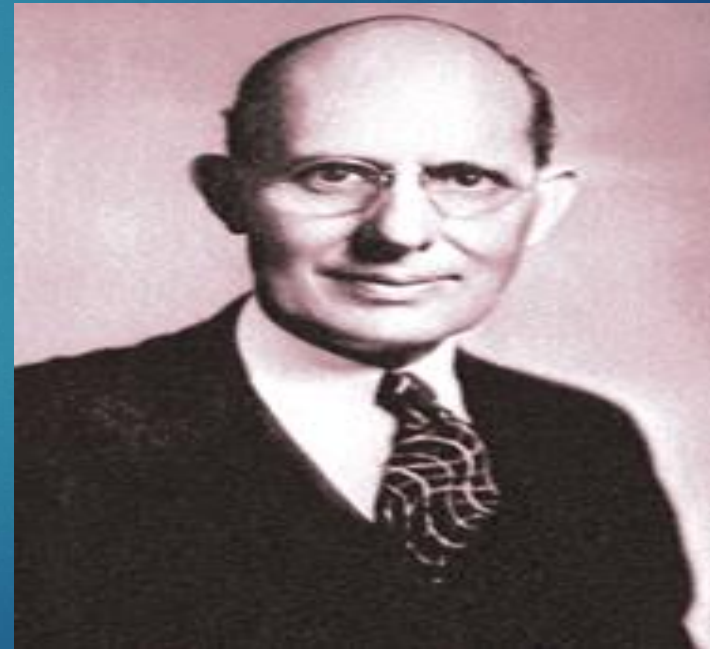
Numerous counterterrorism operations resulting in hundreds of arrests, convictions, and various foiled terrorist attacks have revealed the instrumental role of well-integrated radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization networks organized around salafi enclaves, 'unofficial' mosques, and a variety of faith-based charities, movements, and associations run by local fundamentalist clerics and religious zealots.

# WHY PREDICTION IS NECESSARY



**“My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there.”**

- Charles Maria F. Kettering,  
American inventor





# THE FUTURE



While the contingent of Western Balkans foreign fighters is only the most visible manifestation of the terrorist threat in the region, questions abound as to the size of the less visible component of the problem: the contingent of radicalized individuals that has often provided ideological, logistical, or financial support to foreign fighters and at times has been responsible for plotting terrorist attacks.

In a way, terrorism-related arrests and failed plots make some aspects of this problem set more visible. Although no official data exists for these countries, data and trends observed elsewhere in European countries may provide a general indication of the possible size of the problem in the Western Balkans

# THE FUTURE



**Two** other indicators point to the existence of a robust and ideologically committed contingent of jihadi militants operating in the Western Balkans: **the persistent activities of 'social media jihadis'** who openly support and disseminate the ideology and propaganda of terrorist organizations, and the **unprecedented number (as far as the region is concerned) of both foiled terrorist attacks and arrested homegrown terrorists in recent years.**

Following the clampdown on accounts disseminating jihadi content by Facebook, local 'social media jihadis' have partially migrated over the past years to other social media platforms such as the messaging application Telegram, which has a relatively less aggressive content removal policy.





# CONCLUSIONS



The presence of Western Balkans foreign fighters currently active in Syria and Iraq is likely at the lowest point since 2012 and the remaining contingent of about 500 individuals is made up for two-thirds by minors and women.

While already the region with the highest concentration of returning foreign fighters in Europe, additional repatriations are bound to compound the Western Balkans' long-term social and security challenge further.

Special attention and resources should be dedicated to assessing, monitoring, and actively countering the robust jihadi networks in the region.



# CONCLUSIONS



The considerable numbers of terrorism-related arrests, convictions, and foiled attacks in the Western Balkans clearly indicate that the countries of the region have stepped up their CT efforts in response to a heightened terrorist threat

Prison sentences that are not matched by substantive prison-based rehabilitation and post-incarceration supervision and support efforts are unlikely to duly mitigate the social and security risks posed by returnees and homegrown terrorist offenders.

Policy makers should consider proactively adjusting national security responses to the demographic shifts observed in the composition of the remaining Western Balkans contingent in Syria, currently dominated by noncombatants.

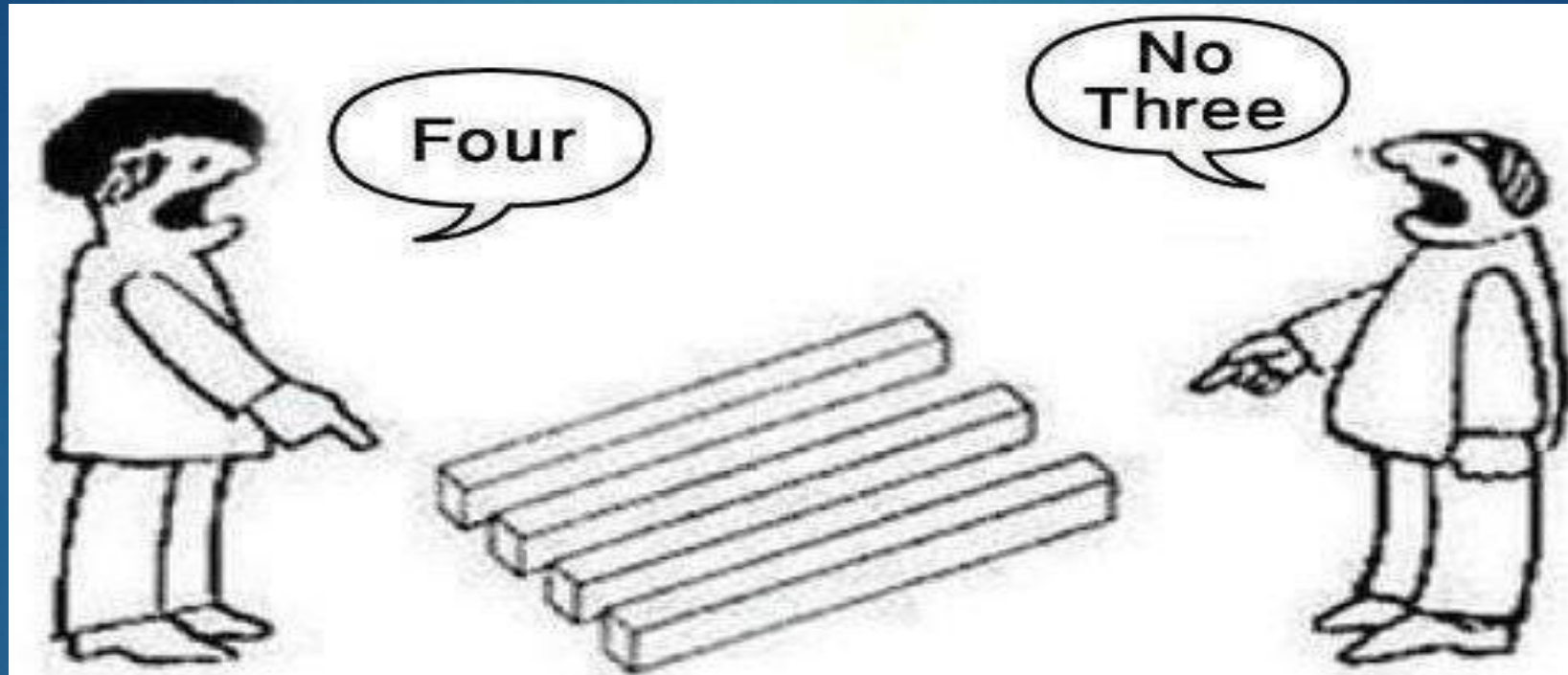
The “children of the Caliphate,” including those from the Western Balkans, will likely represent a long-term challenge with national security implications.







# QUESTIONS?



THANKS A LOT FOR YOUR ATTENTION