

## The Counterinsurgency Dilemma: Foreign Fighter Influence on Insurgencies in Afghanistan and Somalia

### Description

Episode 154 of the Irregular Warfare Podcast examines a core puzzle in intrastate conflict: how a small number of foreign fighters can exert outsized influence on insurgencies. Anchored in [Professor Tricia Bacon's The Counterinsurgency Dilemma](#), this episode explores when foreign fighters strengthen insurgent groups—and when they undermine them.

While foreign fighters are often associated with higher levels of violence, they typically make up only a small share of insurgent forces. As Bacon argues, this reveals a key insight: local insurgents—not foreign fighters—drive outcomes. They control strategy, resources, and relationships with the population, making them the decisive actors in any insurgency.

Foreign fighters can still provide meaningful advantages. They bring combat experience, specialized skills, and sometimes external funding. Their high risk tolerance and ideological commitment can make groups more aggressive and tactically capable. In fragmented insurgencies, they can even shift the balance of power among rival factions.

However, these benefits come with serious costs. Foreign fighters often lack cultural understanding and local legitimacy, and their preference for extreme violence can alienate civilian populations. Over time, this can strain relationships within insurgent movements, reduce local recruitment, and erode long-term effectiveness.

Drawing on his experience as U.S. Ambassador to Somalia, [Steven Schwartz](#) highlights how groups like al-Shabaab evolved from foreign-influenced networks into locally driven organizations. Their durability, he notes, stems less from popular support than from their ability to impose predictable order—often outperforming weak governance alternatives.

Ultimately, the episode reframes foreign fighters as a diagnostic tool rather than the central problem. High levels of foreign fighter influence often signal a weak insurgent group, while limited influence suggests a stronger, locally embedded movement. For practitioners, this distinction matters: effective counterinsurgency must focus on the local dynamics that sustain insurgencies—not just the foreign fighters who draw attention.

[Ben Jebb](#) and [Alex Chinchilla](#) are the hosts for this episode. Please reach out to Ben and Alex with any questions about this episode or the [Irregular Warfare Podcast](#).

The *Irregular Warfare Podcast* is a production of the [Irregular Warfare Initiative \(IWI\)](#). We are a team of volunteers dedicated to bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners in the field of irregular warfare. IWI generates written and audio content, coordinates events for the IW community, and hosts critical thinkers in the field of irregular warfare as IWI fellows. You can follow and engage with us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, or LinkedIn.

Subscribe to our monthly newsletter for access to our written content, upcoming community events, and other resources.

**Date Created**

2026/05/08