

NATO Commander Calls Refugees a Weapon of ISIS, Russia and Syria

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The commander of NATO armed forces said Tuesday that Russia, Syria and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) were using the refugees streaming out of Syria into Europe as weapons against European countries.

Using more restrained language than Donald Trump or European neo-fascists attacking refugees from Syria, US General Philip Breedlove voiced a similar opinion, declaring, "Europe faces the daunting challenge of mass migration spurred by state instability and state collapse, a migration that masks the movement of criminals, terrorists, and foreign fighters."

"Within this mix," he continued, ISIS "is spreading like a cancer, taking advantage of paths of least resistance, threatening European nations and our own with terrorist attacks."

No evidence has actually been provided of refugees from Syria engaging in terrorist actions within Europe. Most of those who staged the terrorist attacks in Paris last November, for example, were citizens of Belgium and France, some of them returned from fighting as part of US-backed forces in the Syrian civil war.

Breedlove discussed this movement of European-born Islamists from their home countries to the Syrian civil war and back again, saying, "As many as 9,000 fighters have gone, and as much as 1,500 fighters have returned back to Europe."

But he made no reference to the fact that these Islamists went to fight on the side of the US-backed insurgency against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, most of them with the encouragement of their own governments, and in some cases with the active collaboration of the intelligence services.

Breedlove was appearing at the Pentagon after testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, where he warned that Russia posed an "existential threat" to the United States, reviving language not used in public discussion by the US military since the height of the Cold War. In his remarks, both to the Senate panel and to the Pentagon press corps, Breedlove accused Russia and Syria of "deliberately weaponizing migration in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve."

He claimed that the unguided "barrel bombs" used by the Syrian military had no military usefulness, but were intended to spread fear and drive local populations out of targeted Syrian towns and cities. "It is a weapon of terror, and it is a weapon to get people out of a location, on the road moving, somewhere else, and make them someone else's problems,"

he said.

In answer to follow-up questions at the press conference, Breedlove claimed that there were three dangerous components within the refugee flow from Syria to Europe, "criminality, terrorists and foreign fighters," the last referring to European citizens who fought in Syria and then returned to their own countries.

In an unusual detour into American politics, Breedlove was asked about the furor over the open defense of torture by Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump and his call for the resumption of waterboarding and "much more." Several retired military commanders, including the former head of the National Security Agency, General Michael Hayden, said last week that the military would have to refuse orders to carry out torture in violation of international law and the Geneva Conventions.

General Breedlove declined to respond directly on the torture issue, but he said there was widespread discussion in NATO circles about the US elections. "I would just tell you that I get a lot of questions from our European counterparts on our election process this time in general," he said. "And I think they see a very different sort of public discussion than they have in the past, and I think I'll just leave it at that."

When a journalist asked directly who these "counterparts" were, he acknowledged they included military officers from other NATO member countries.

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