

Foreign Fighters in Syria



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Photos by Reuters

Tracking the trends and assessing the threat

Protests and unrest in Syria in March 2011 grew, seemingly overnight, into full-blown civil war. From the outset, the conflict attracted a variety of state and nonstate actors who believe they have a stake in the outcome. As the violence escalated, the war in Syria became the focal point of “global jihad,” as promoted by al-Qaida and related groups. Now in its third year, the Syrian conflict has attracted an unprecedented number of foreign fighters — experts estimate 11,000 from more than 70 different countries — many of whom are violent jihadists.¹ The scale of the problem and ongoing ties between Muslim foreign fighters and jihadist terrorism generate deep concern that fighters will further radicalize while overseas and return home intent on carrying out domestic terrorist attacks.

It is therefore vital to conduct an accurate threat assessment and review the range of policy options available. I will draw upon recent studies of jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and other conflicts to examine who the fighters are, why and how they are going to Syria, what they are doing when they get there, and what they are likely to do if and when they return. I will also discuss options for dealing with the threat from a counterterrorism perspective.

FOREIGN FIGHTER PROFILES

About 70 percent of foreign fighters in Syria are from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), particularly Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Lebanon and Libya. Eighteen percent come from Western Europe — in particular France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. The remainder originates from a multitude of other countries, including the Balkans and former Soviet states, but also the United States, Canada and Australia.²

The vast majority of these fighters are young males, primarily in their 20s, although a growing number of females as young as 15³ are going to Syria as well. In terms of demographic data, detailed statistics have yet to be compiled; however, past research shows that violent jihadists do not conform to a single profile. Marginalized and politically oppressed youth are particularly susceptible to radicalization and recruitment, but the jihad in Syria — like those before it — attracts people from all walks of life.

MOTIVES AND METHODS

What motivates people to leave home in search of war? Foreign fighters in Syria are primarily set on overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s government and establishing Islamist rule in Syria and beyond; however, factors such as adventure, friendship, peer pressure, status, a “macho” fascination with violence and, in some cases, financial reward also drive participation. At its heart, fighters arrive out of a desire to defend fellow Muslims from being tortured and killed. Propaganda and recruitment materials thus tend to make “simple, visceral appeals to people’s sense of solidarity and altruism”⁴ using images and videos of human suffering and violence, as opposed to relying upon complex, ideological arguments.

Just as there isn’t a simple demographic profile for all foreign fighters, neither is there one recruitment method. Based on previous studies of jihadist mobilization and what we now know about foreign fighters going to Syria, recruitment appears to involve a combination of top-down and bottom-up, face-to-face and online processes and influences. The Internet is playing a more prominent role in Syria than in any previous conflict. Jihadist propaganda is

Fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant confront civilians demonstrating against rebel infighting in Aleppo, Syria, in January 2014.



easily accessible via a multitude of websites and social media pages, which additionally provide networking opportunities.⁵ Furthermore, hundreds of fighters use personal social media accounts to document experiences, answer questions and advise those interested in joining them. Hence, the knowledge and connections necessary to find one's way to Syria and join a jihadist organization are now much more accessible than in past conflicts.

Face-to-face radicalization and recruitment have nevertheless predominated historically and continue to play a major role. This may especially be the case in the MENA, which produces the largest numbers of foreign fighters, though fewer people have access to the Internet.⁶ Even in Western countries, it would be a mistake to ignore the importance of physical networks. For example, it has been alleged that extremist groups associated with Al-Muhajiroun — an outlawed group that began in the UK and has since spread across Europe under a variety of names — have been sending people to Syria.⁷ Indeed, at least 30 members of Sharia4Belgium have gone there,⁸ and several European recruitment networks have been dismantled since the start of the war.

Whether actively recruited or self-radicalized, individuals must prepare for combat. Domestic training opportunities vary considerably, but at a minimum, aspiring mujahedeen are encouraged to improve their physical fitness before attempting to join the jihad. If recruits are self-financing, this also allows them time to raise enough money to travel and, in some cases, make a contribution to the cause. Some resort to criminal means, and counterterrorism experts are increasingly concerned that “charitable” collections are being used to finance jihadist organizations in Syria. However,

the majority rely on legitimate means. In the words of Abu Fidaa, the official spokesman of Dutch mujahedeen in Syria: “The costs to buy a ticket, hotel and taxi are not more than a few hundred euros. Furthermore, life here is really cheap. We get a good monthly payment and when you participate in big fights, you get your share in the spoils of war.”⁹

Another lure is its location. Syria is relatively easy to get to — a major reason why it attracts so many foreign fighters in the first place. Fighters coming from the southeast, for instance, make use of well-established smuggling routes originally created to send jihadist volunteers in the opposite direction during the U.S. occupation of Iraq.¹⁰ Most Western volunteers arrive via Turkey, which is easily accessible with a European passport. Once they clear customs, volunteers make their way south to prearranged safe houses before being taken across the border. As one safe house operator explained: “It’s all done through invitations from friends.”¹¹ Alternately, some may enter Syria using aid convoys before seeking out militant connections.¹²

OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES

Although there are many jihadist organizations operating in Syria, most foreign fighters appear to be joining either Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), which is the official representative of al-Qaida, or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which split from al-Qaida in February 2014 and is widely considered to be the most extreme and violent group of them all. Regardless of which group they join, recruits must complete basic training, which can last up to six weeks.¹³ The duration and nature of training varies and is influenced by individual preferences. For example, in the past, foreign volunteers joining al-Qaida in Iraq would be asked

Fighting

in Syria

Middle Easterners and Europeans continue to represent the vast majority of foreign fighters in Syria. By the end of 2013, an estimated 3,300 to 11,000 individuals had arrived in Syria to fight the Assad regime. These figures include those still fighting in the country as well as those who have died, been arrested or returned home. In tracing the origins of foreign militants in Syria, experts have identified at least 74 source countries, including men from Central and South Asia, North America, Australia and Sub-Saharan Africa.



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

COUNTRY	Low estimate	High estimate
1. Algeria	68	123
2. Bahrain	12	12
3. Egypt	119	358
4. Iraq	59	247
5. Jordan	180	2,089
6. Kuwait	54	71
7. Lebanon	65	890
8. Libya	336	556
9. Mauritania	2	2
10. Morocco	77	91
11. Oman	1	1
12. Palestine	74	114
13. Qatar	15	14
14. Saudi Arabia	386	1,016
15. Sudan	2	96
16. Tunisia	382	970
17. Turkey	63	500
18. United Arab Emirates	14	14
19. Yemen	14	110

EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

COUNTRY	Low estimate	High estimate
1. Albania	9	140
2. Austria	1	60
3. Belgium	76	296
4. Bosnia	18	60
5. Chechnya (Russia)	36	186
6. Denmark	25	84
7. Finland	4	20
8. France	63	412
9. Germany	34	240
10. Ireland	11	26
11. Italy	2	50
12. Kazakhstan	14	150
13. Netherlands	29	152
14. Norway	33	40
15. Spain	34	95
16. Sweden	39	87
17. United Kingdom	43	366

Source: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation

on arrival whether they wanted to be a fighter or a suicide bomber, determining which type of training they received.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the majority of foreign fighters in Syria seem to be enrolled as combatants and after training will be assigned to a particular unit or brigade, sometimes based on nationality or language.¹⁵

As a fully trained member of ISIS or a similar organization, fighters take part in battles against rival opposition groups, as well as the Assad regime, and fulfill other duties, such as controlling the border of their group's territory.¹⁶ In general, jihadist organizations employing foreign fighters are known for being particularly zealous and brutal, and Syria is no exception. Recent social media posts show that Europeans have proudly taken part in executions, including beheadings.¹⁷ When not in combat roles, foreign fighters also take part in social welfare activities, such as handing out food to civilians and producing and disseminating online propaganda.¹⁸

At face value, foreign fighters are a “force multiplier,” adding manpower and, in some cases, expertise. They are believed to have played decisive roles in certain battles.¹⁹ However, many are inexperienced and appear to be little more than cannon fodder. Those who joined ISIS, in particular, have contributed significantly to growing sectarianism, brutality and infighting between rival militias and, in that sense, are weakening the rebellion. In addition to their impact within the conflict zone, foreign fighters' social media exploits and contributions to propaganda are no doubt playing a role in radicalization and recruitment in their countries of origin. The next question is, what happens when jihadist fighters return home?

COMING HOME

The biggest fear of “production” countries is that fighters will return and commit a terrorist attack at home. Providing that they are not immediately imprisoned, there are at least seven possible roles that fighters can play upon their return home:

1. actively assist authorities and/or attempt to dissuade others from going to fight;
2. cease involvement with militants and return to a “normal” life;
3. brag about their exploits and radicalize others;
4. actively facilitate the travel of new recruits to the conflict zone;
5. send money and/or equipment to the mujahedeen overseas;
6. recover from their “tour of duty” and seek additional conflicts in the future; and
7. plan and/or attempt to execute terrorist attacks.

Although an individual may transition between different roles over time — occasionally playing several roles at

once — it helps to conceptualize the range of possibilities. Given the sheer numbers of foreign fighters compared to the number of incidents and arrests for terrorism, the majority of veteran jihadists do not conduct attacks when they return home. In Europe, only about 12 percent of Islamist terrorists have previously trained and/or fought abroad.²⁰ In fact, the best estimate to date, also focused on Western fighters, suggests that only about one in nine fighters conducts attacks back home.²¹ Some foreign fighters in Syria have gone on record stating that they have no intention of pursuing terrorist acts at home,²² and significant numbers are said to have become disillusioned by infighting and other negative experiences.²³

Yet, having been a foreign fighter remains one of the best predictors for becoming a jihadist terrorist.²⁴ Veteran fighters also significantly increase the capability of groups that are planning attacks,²⁵ and an accumulation of anecdotal evidence suggests that they are extremely influential radicalizers and facilitators. Furthermore, several foreign jihadists in Syria have threatened that Western targets are “next,”²⁶ and it is believed that a number of individuals are being trained for this specific purpose.²⁷ Although the majority of foreign fighters do not appear to have domestic ambitions before they leave, such decisions are often made while in the conflict zone.²⁸

The negative effects of returning foreign fighters are already coming to fruition. In September 2013, a veteran of the war in Syria and former military officer named Walid Badr blew himself up in Cairo.²⁹ In February 2014, several fighters who had returned from Syria were arrested in Kyrgyzstan on suspicion of planning multiple attacks in Central Asia.³⁰ In March, two plots involving returning fighters were reportedly foiled — one in the UK³¹ and one in France³² — and another plot, involving a member of JN, was foiled in Egypt in April.³³ At the beginning of May, Saudis announced that they had discovered an ISIS cell that was collecting donations, coordinating the smuggling of individuals and weapons, and preparing to resume assassinations and bombings in the kingdom.³⁴ More recently, a 21-year-old man who had fought in Syria was arrested in the Netherlands as he allegedly planned to commit an armed robbery in support of jihad.³⁵ In late May 2014, French jihadist Mehdi Nemmouche, who had spent a year in Syria, was charged in an attack at the Jewish Museum in Brussels that left four people dead.³⁶

The bottom line is that, although most returning foreign fighters will not become domestic terrorists, an unknown minority of them will. Some countries are more likely to be targeted than others, but even in the absence of an attack, the potential for veteran jihadists to radicalize others and perpetuate the cycle of recruitment should not be ignored, nor should the fact that they are often responsible for extremely serious crimes while abroad.

POLICY OPTIONS

There are three stages of foreign fighter activity: before, during and after their time abroad. Corresponding efforts to stifle the phenomenon can be broadly classified as prevention, management and mitigation. Each of these can then be further subdivided into repressive and persuasive measures.

Prevention

Preventing the mobilization of foreign fighters should be the goal of counterstrategies, in spite of inadequate financial investments. Repressive preventive measures focus primarily on deterrence, early intervention and prevention of travel. Examples of behavior to target include possession or dissemination of terrorist training materials, participation in domestic terror training, fundraising for terrorism, conspiring to support or join a terrorist organization, and engaging in preparation for acts of terrorism. Such offenses enable a proactive approach, whereby individuals can be prosecuted before they leave the country. For example, in January 2014, two women were charged in the UK with planning to provide money to terrorists in Syria after one was arrested at Heathrow en route to Istanbul with 20,000 euros hidden in her underwear.³⁷ Nevertheless, successful prosecutions depend upon sufficient evidence, and it is extremely difficult to demonstrate prior intent vis-a-vis terrorism in a court of law.

When prosecutions are not feasible, an increasingly popular alternative involves applying legally authorized sanctions. Examples include the confiscation of passports or identity documents and restricting individual movements through the use of “security certificates” or similar legislation. Such measures are based on intelligence, as opposed to evidence, and thus have a lower threshold for when they can be applied. Nevertheless, restricting individual freedoms without trial is controversial. In some cases, it may be seen as also punishing suspects’ families, and there may be significant legal challenges. Combined, these factors can undermine the legitimacy of the government and add to the alienation of vulnerable communities.

A possible solution to these problems is to enforce bans on going to Syria or elsewhere for the purposes of fighting without establishing a person’s connection to terrorism. Intuitively, this makes sense; laws like this already exist in countries such as Saudi Arabia and the Netherlands and are being implemented elsewhere. However, it is worth noting that Belgium recently rejected a proposal to criminalize foreign fighting on a number of grounds, including that people are less likely to come forward with information, fighters are likely to become even more secretive, and evidence gathering would become a greater challenge.³⁸ Moreover, it remains to be seen whether these laws will actually be effective.

There are other repressive options available, such as notifying suspects that they are being watched, censoring online material and banning extremist organizations that appear to be contributing to radicalization. In general, however, these all suffer the fundamental flaw of treating the symptoms rather than the cause and can therefore result in additional resentment against the state. “Harassing” suspects confirms their negative worldview and is likely to increase, rather than decrease, their desire to leave the country. Meanwhile, forcibly preventing people from traveling may provoke them to take out their frustrations at home. This is where persuasive “soft” approaches can be beneficial.

Generally referred to under the catch-all of “countering violent extremism” (CVE), persuasive approaches aim to undermine the appeal of extremist narratives, either directly or indirectly, and allow a greater role for nongovernmental participation. Indirect approaches include things such as aid and development projects or providing education and employment, either at home or abroad. In secular countries, this may include efforts to improve integration of Muslim populations through education, individual mentoring or interfaith dialogue.³⁹ Although these measures are unlikely to have an immediate impact, over the long term they may help to quell grievances that extremist recruiters exploit and reduce the pool of potential recruits who are most susceptible to radicalization and recruitment.

Direct persuasive approaches include a variety of counterradicalization projects, which specifically deal with extremists and extremism. An example is the Channel Project in the UK, which aims to identify people vulnerable to radicalization before they commit offenses and steer them from extremism using a combination of mainstream social support mechanisms and tailored counterradicalization initiatives to challenge extremist beliefs.⁴⁰ Countermessaging can also take place online. The Assakina Campaign⁴¹ in Saudi Arabia has been engaging extremists over the Internet since 2004 and has had some success in persuading people to abandon violence. More recently, Western governments, including the U.S.⁴² and UK,⁴³ have taken to social media in an effort to undermine extremist narratives.

Persuasive efforts, whether physical or virtual, preventive or otherwise, are not without their limitations and potential drawbacks. To begin with, secular governments lack credibility in religious matters. Furthermore, CVE initiatives can exacerbate problems of alienation and radicalization by reinforcing the notion that Muslims are “suspect communities.” It is also extremely difficult for secular governments to navigate the complex landscape of their respective Muslim populations, especially when choosing nongovernmental partners.⁴⁴ Moreover, it is nearly impossible to gauge the true impact of preventive

persuasion, since there is no way of telling if levels of foreign fighter mobilization would have been higher in the absence of intervention. Nevertheless, a failure to contest jihadist narratives would be to accept defeat a-priori in the “war of ideas” and, ultimately, the potential benefits far outweigh the costs.

Management

Relatively few options are available for individuals who have left home and joined the jihad in Syria or elsewhere. The primary task in repressive measures is to confirm that a person is indeed participating in the conflict and then gather as much information as possible on his background and friends, how he was recruited, how he got to Syria, which specific group he has joined overseas, what he is doing, and whether he is eventually killed. This information is usually difficult to acquire, although monitoring jihadist social media accounts is an excellent place to start. Collected data have multiple applications, such as identifying recruitment and facilitation networks, building a prosecution, and conducting a risk assessment for when a fighter comes home, which can determine how to proceed. Personal information might also be used to entice or coerce fighters to come home.

Sanctions can be applied at this stage, including withholding social benefits and freezing financial assets, which can suppress terrorism financing, force some fighters to return home and deter others from going altogether. More severe sanctions can include canceling residency rights and stripping a person of citizenship if he holds dual nationality, which may prevent active foreign fighters from returning home. Such sanctions are highly contentious. Their degree of deterrence is questionable and, although they may protect domestic populations in the short term, the resulting resentment may raise the risk of domestic terrorism in the long-run.

Persuasive approaches designed to manage the potential threat presented by a returning fighter have yet to be fully

developed. The U.S. State Department is actively engaging jihadists online — including individuals in Syria — with its “Think Again Turn Away” Twitter campaign,⁴⁵ trying to coax them away from violence by highlighting the blunders, hypocrisy and brutality of groups such as ISIS and JN. This is an encouraging start, although it remains to be seen

how effective it will be. EXIT Germany’s Hayat program is a good example of a promising nongovernmental approach. It provides specialized counseling to the families of Islamist extremists in order to prevent them from going abroad to places like Syria or to persuade them to abandon violence and come home.⁴⁶ This program focuses on maintaining open lines of communication between the families and the individuals in question and avoiding a judgmental or confrontational approach that could drive them further away.

When it comes to managing the foreign fighter threat, it is not just about the suspects themselves but also very much about their families and their communities. While it is true that families can contribute to radicalization, they are often in the dark about their loved ones’ activities until after they have left the country, and it is frequently family members who first notify authorities that there is a problem. Supporting families and building good community relations should

therefore be a priority for authorities. It is important to prevent feelings of resentment and, possibly, further radicalization, and is essential to stimulate cooperation and the flow of information.

Mitigation

When veteran fighters return home, the task becomes damage control. For those countries that have outlawed foreign fighting, prosecution is an option, and Jordan, for example, is using it aggressively.⁴⁷ However, this may stir up domestic grievances. Furthermore, most countries lack the necessary laws, and returning fighters are likely to be interviewed and released, at least initially. Suspects



Defendant and Saudi citizen Abdulrahman al-Shihri is arraigned at a state security court in Sanaa, Yemen, in September 2013. He is one in a group of five Saudis charged with involvement in al-Qaida. Some countries are increasingly using their legal systems to curb individuals’ involvement in terrorism.



Militant Islamists are sentenced at a court in Ismailia city, about 120 kilometers (75 miles) outside Cairo in September 2012. The Egyptian court condemned 14 militant Islamists to death and four to life imprisonment for attacks on army and police forces in the Sinai Peninsula.

may be subsequently monitored until such time they are no longer deemed to be a threat or until they show signs of committing an offense, such as inciting terrorism or planning attacks. At that point a criminal investigation will commence. There are several limitations with this approach. First, risk assessment is not foolproof, meaning that false negatives are a real possibility. Second, it places a tremendous strain on security services, and it is likely that there will be too many former fighters for effective monitoring. Third, there are questions about how intrusive monitoring should be and how long it should last. Repressive approaches alone are insufficient to mitigate the threat.

Persuasive options for managing returning foreign fighters include “deradicalization” programs. These exist in various forms in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. However, very few have been created specifically to deradicalize veteran jihadist fighters. One notable exception is Saudi Arabia’s program, which historically included three separate sections: domestic security offenders, those caught trying to go fight in Iraq or who had returned from fighting, and former Guantanamo detainees.⁴⁸ Although each country’s approach is culturally unique, this would be a good time to re-examine the Saudi program with a specific focus on lessons learned from dealing with foreign fighters. It would make sense to combine this with a study of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) initiatives,⁴⁹ as well as veterans’ programs from around the world.⁵⁰ Indeed, the ultimate goal of persuasive approaches to fighters returning from Syria should be that they refrain from violence and promoting violence and peacefully reintegrate into society. With this in mind, specialized deradicalization programs may or may not play

the lead role. Authorities should make use of mainstream health and social services and work with local communities to find the most culturally appropriate solutions.

CONCLUSION

So far, the problem of foreign fighters going to Syria has been dealt with mainly through repressive approaches, focused primarily on mitigating the threat once fighters return home. Repressive measures are absolutely necessary and can be improved, for example, through greater international cooperation. But they also have limitations. Overreliance on repressive measures treats only the symptoms and may add to domestic frustrations, thereby reinforcing jihadist narratives and increasing chances of terrorism at home.

To achieve a more comprehensive and long-term solution, governments should rebalance strategies to include more preventive and persuasive approaches, as well as “management” tactics for fighters already overseas. Such efforts should be pursued in collaboration with families and communities when possible. In particular, more investment in strategic communications might undermine the appeal of the jihadist, foreign fighter identity.⁵¹ To this end, attempts to highlight the appalling atrocities that they commit should continue, but more effort and creativity is needed. UK Security Minister James Brokenshire recently affirmed that the Syrian people have said very clearly that “they don’t want foreign fighters — they want humanitarian aid.”⁵² This is an extremely important message that should be repeatedly advertised in multiple platforms. For example, Syrian refugees could be interviewed on television explaining how foreign fighters are making things worse. The families of foreign fighters who were killed should appear in the media

so that would-be jihadists can see the grief that they could cause their loved ones. Furthermore, disillusioned veteran fighters should be utilized to get these messages across, including the reality that jihadists in Syria are spending more time killing fellow Muslims and members of the opposition than they are fighting Assad.

Finally, it is important to realize that Syria is only the latest in a succession of wars that have attracted jihadist foreign fighters since the 1980s, and it will not be the last of these conflicts. Policymakers must strive to mitigate the current threat. There have been encouraging signs of progress in a number of countries, including Germany, France and the UK. But we must also look beyond Syria and consider what needs to be done to stifle the next, inevitable wave of jihadist mobilization of foreign fighters. □

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