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FOREIGN FIGHTERS *IN SYRIA*

BY: RICHARD BARRETT

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The Soufan Group has provided this paper against a background of increasing international concern about the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and their possible actions on return. Given the potential scale of the problem and the limited resources available to deal with it, The Soufan Group believes that policies must be based on as full an understanding of the phenomenon as possible. This paper is a contribution to that end. Richard Barrett, Senior Vice President of The Soufan Group, is the author of the paper, with additional input from Robert McFadden, Senior Vice President, and Patrick Skinner, Director of Special Projects.

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KEY FINDINGS

- The Syrian war is likely to be an incubator for a new generation of terrorists.
- Over 12,000 foreign fighters have gone to Syria since the 3-year conflict began, more than traveled to Afghanistan during its ten-year war and violent aftermath. And they continue to arrive.
- Foreign fighters have gone to Syria from at least 81 countries and from all parts of the globe.
- About 3,000 foreign fighters are from Western countries.
- Motivation for going varies, but the ‘jihadist’ narrative is common among those who are joining extremist groups – and they make up the majority,
- The three groups that have attracted the most foreign fighters, despite the in-fighting between them, are Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and the Greater Syria (ISIS). All these were founded by people who at the time were members of al-Qaeda. These groups tend to be more inclusive, better organized, and better financed than their more moderate counterparts.
- The al-Qaeda leadership has taken a close interest in Syria, seeing it as an opportunity to recover from the hammering it has suffered since 2001, and it has sent senior operatives there to work with and influence affiliated groups.
- Leaving aside what may happen in Syria, if al-Qaeda can maintain a network of even a small number of motivated returnees, or recruit fighters to its terrorist agenda while they are still in Syria, it may once more pose a significant global threat.

- Some of the foreign fighters may not return as terrorists to their respective countries, but all of them will have been exposed to an environment of sustained radicalization and violence with unknowable but worrying consequences. An attack by a returned fighter in Brussels in May is one example.
- Advances in technology, communications, travel, and tactics (from a decade of fighting in the region) mean that even a very small percentage of returning foreign fighters could have a major impact on their homelands.
- National resources in most countries are insufficient to monitor more than a handful of returnees.
- Lessons from Afghanistan argue for more attention to the possible fall out from the Syrian war.
- The influx of fighters joining al-Qaeda affiliated groups in Syria raises questions about the effectiveness of the work that has gone into undermining the appeal of terrorism since 2001, and the general understanding of its causes.
- A new Afghanistan in the Levant? Unfortunately, as Syria becomes more permanently divided, extremist groups will put down deeper roots and establish safe havens. A further danger grows in the countries that play host to Syrian refugees. The longer young people spend in refugee camps, or otherwise displaced from home and school, the more vulnerable they will be to sectarian or other terrorist recruiters.

Social Media's Influence on Syrian Foreign Fighters and Extremist Ideology:

Social media such as Twitter or Facebook are highly effective in spreading a violent extremist ideology. They play a significant role in the recruitment and fundraising efforts of extremist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra.

But three factors are often overlooked that any counter-radical campaign will need to understand and leverage:

- The power of instantaneous and ubiquitous communication can also divide the extremist groups, much as is happening with ISIS and Jabhat

al Nusra. They are increasingly fighting each other using the same social media that brought them earlier prominence. Al Nusra and the al-Qaeda leadership tend to speak in Arabic on Twitter and Facebook, while ISIS uses multiple languages in their outreach to supporters.

- Different regions consume different social media. The target audience of young people in the Levant is overwhelmingly found through Facebook; in the Gulf it is more likely to be reached through Twitter.
- Regardless of platform, the target audience (young and emotionally engaged) does not get news or information about the war from traditional sources. Potential foreign fighters are interconnected within self-selected bubbles, and are isolated from anything outside.

Policymakers often underestimate the impact of what is happening in these closed circles even as they overestimate the impact of their own.

SUMMARY

Over 12,000 fighters from at least 81 countries have joined the civil war in Syria, and the numbers continue to grow.¹ Around 2,500 are from Western countries, including most members of the European Union, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. There are also several hundred from Russia. But the great majority are from the Arab World. Most are fighting with rebel groups, and increasingly with the most extreme among them; but many are also fighting with the Government, or with ethnic or faith communities that are trying to protect themselves from both sides. A lot are young, often teenagers, and a fair percentage of those arriving from non-Muslim majority countries are converts to Islam. These and others who share their faith commonly express their motivation as a religious obligation to protect fellow Muslims from attack. This sense of duty is captured by their loose use of the word ‘jihad’.

There is considerable international concern at what these young men – and some women – will do once they leave Syria, and although almost all appear (from interviews and the evidence of social media) to go without a thought of what next, the experience of being in a war zone and exposed to the radicalizing influences of sectarianism and other forms of extremism are bound to have an impact on their ability and willingness to resume their former lives.

The policy response so far has often focused more on prevention and punishment than on dissuasion or reintegration, but as the number of returnees increases, and the resources required to monitor their activities are stretched to breaking point, it will be important to examine more closely why an individual went, what happened to him while there, and why he came back. This paper attempts to provide some general context for answering those questions, and offers suggestions for policy development.

¹ As at 28 May 2014.

INTRODUCTION

Estimates of the number of fighters on either side of Syria's civil war, whether nationals or non-nationals, can only be informed guesses. Previous estimates of foreign fighters on the rebel side vary from 5,000 to 11,000, with little breakdown between those who may be fighting for more 'moderate' groups and those who are fighting with extremists.² At the end of January 2014, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence in the United States, estimated that there were in excess of 7,000 foreign fighters in Syria from approximately 50 countries.³ Both those numbers have risen considerably since then.

The great majority of foreign fighters appear to join extremist groups.⁴ One reason for this is the chronic failure of mainstream rebel forces to fight effectively and work together, which has led to a multiplicity of small groups operating locally and joining alliances as a way to maintain their influence rather than build a force capable of taking on the Syrian army. By contrast, the more extreme groups, especially those with a high number of foreign fighters, are better resourced, fight harder, are more disciplined, and better motivated. This gives them an advantage, both against government forces and when competing for recruits or territory with other rebel groups.

A further reason is that the extremist groups are better able to absorb foreigners who may not speak Arabic and generally have no military training.⁵ Their narrative of fighting to protect a global community from aggression, albeit in a local setting, is more naturally inclusive than the narrative of Free Syrian Army groups that are more solely focused on what is going on in Syria.⁶ On a practical level, the extremists are also often the first rebels that independent travelers meet on crossing the border, and are well placed to exploit the enthusiasm of a new fighter who will want to get involved as quickly as possible. Once caught in the group dynamic, the foreign fighter is unlikely to leave to join a rival.

This paper looks at foreign fighters on the rebel side, but there are many on the Government side as well, almost all from just three countries: Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Unlike the

² See, for example: Zelin, A. Y. et al. (2013) 'ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans', The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 17 December. <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>; and Hegghammer, T. (2013) 'Syria's Foreign Fighters', Foreign Policy, 9 December. http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/12/09/syrias_foreign_fighters.

³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/29/us-usa-security-syria-idUSBREA0S1XL20140129>.

⁴ So comprising a significant proportion of their overall strength, estimated by US authorities at around 26,000 in February 2014.

⁵ Just on one Twitter stream about the war during May 2014, there were 75 different languages used. English predominated, followed by Arabic, Hausa, Somali/Afar, and Dutch. Usage bore no relation to worldwide population patterns. For example, Hindi did not feature at all, while Hausa (Nigeria) was number three in popularity and Somali number four. This suggests pronounced interest from countries facing instability.

⁶ Some have even said that they do not want foreign fighters, just arms and other support.

foreigners who have joined the rebels as the result of an individual decision, these fighters are part of Iran's campaign to support the regime. Estimates of the scale of this support vary, but the Hezbollah contribution alone was believed to be between three and four thousand at the end of May 2014.⁷ In any case, the foreign support for the regime is sizable and it has proved decisive in several regime victories, most notably at al-Qusayr in April 2013. As well as fighting, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards al-Quds force have provided invaluable training to both the regular Syrian Army and to irregular shabiha units.⁸ They have also helped train Iraqi militias, which have played a prominent role in support of the regime, especially since the start of 2014.⁹

The involvement of foreign fighters on both the rebel side and the Government side has had a wider effect than just on Syria. Regionally, the existing conflict in Iraq has become worse as anti-Government fighters have been able to establish bases across the border in Syria and shuttle resources in both directions.¹⁰ In Lebanon, the fragile political balance is under threat as sectarian tensions grow and Syrian extremist groups establish branches there and mount attacks.¹¹ Sectarianism further afield, exacerbated by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, has made the problems of the Middle East still more difficult to solve, including the debate over the merits of political reform and appropriate systems of government.

But both in the region and beyond, the main consequence of the presence of foreign fighters in Syria is likely to be a general spread of violence. The civil war shows no sign of ending, and nor does the flow of foreigners who want to join in. The grinding brutality of the conflict will lead to yet more traumatized young men becoming accustomed to violence and ready to carry their binary worldview back home or to a new front. Not only will they be able and willing to commit acts of terrorism, but they will also be in touch with a wide network of fellow fighters to whom they are likely to feel a greater sense of loyalty than to any other community.

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

Some countries have publicly or privately provided official estimates for the numbers of their citizens or residents who have gone to fight in Syria. These figures are based generally on information gathered from social media, community sources or investigations. Inevitably,

⁷ This is less than it had been earlier in the war. Hezbollah fighters have been replaced in many areas by Iraqis.

⁸ The shabiha are para-military supporters of the regime under the control of the Assad family. They have a reputation for brutality towards civilians.

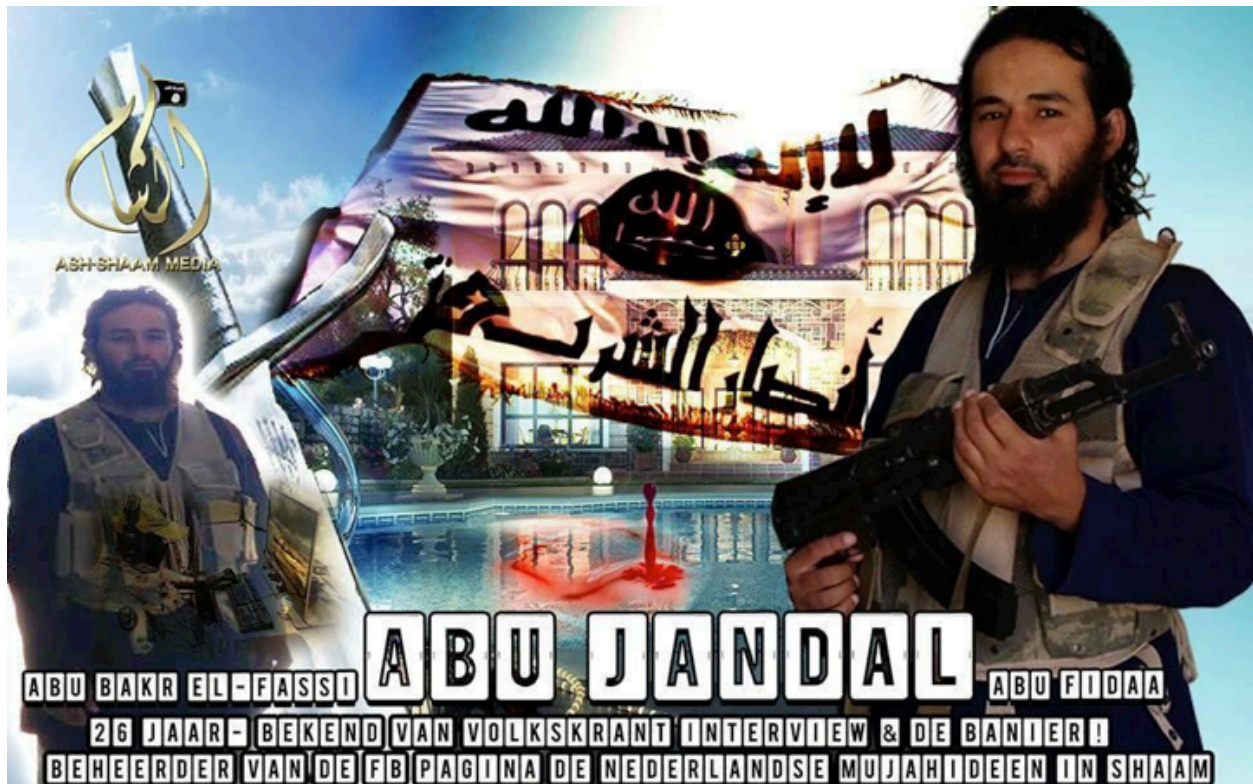
⁹ For example, Asaib Ahl al-Haq.

¹⁰ Also, the increasing involvement of Shia groups on the Syrian Government side has deepened the sectarian divide in Iraq.

¹¹ Both Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) claim to have branches in Lebanon. Attacks in Shia areas have been directly linked to the war in Syria.

they tend to underestimate the true numbers because would-be foreign fighters who wish to keep their activities secret have little trouble in getting to Syria without anyone knowing, and while there can conceal their identities. Furthermore, the groups themselves are not known to keep detailed records of who joins them.¹² It is often only when someone dies that his family learns that he went to Syria, either through a telephone call from a friend designated by the dead fighter for that purpose, or through a death notice published on a group's website, Facebook page or Twitter feed.

Picture of a Dutch fighter widely circulated by fellow fighters after his death



Other countries have acknowledged that they have nationals or residents in Syria but have no idea how many, or do not wish to say. A third group may have been unaware that anyone had gone to Syria from their territory until it was reported elsewhere. Combining all three categories, there is good evidence that fighters have travelled from at least 81 countries.¹³ Official figures are available for 25 of these, and although they are soon out of date, they give some indication of comparative volumes.

¹² However, the unexpected discovery in 2007 in Sinjar in Iraq of meticulous records of foreign recruits kept by the Islamic State of Iraq, a group then affiliated with al-Qaeda and the predecessor of ISIS, suggests that some groups may do the same in Syria.

¹³ In September 2013, the Syrian authorities said that fighters from 'more than 83 countries' had joined the rebels. http://gdebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/68/SY_en.pdf.

The following States have provided numbers or estimates of their citizens or residents who have gone to Syria to fight, though some have now returned or died.

Algeria:	about 200	(Official estimate, May 2014, plus up to 200 helpers)
Australia:	about 250	(ASIS, April 2014)
Belgium:	about 250	(Official figure, April 2014, 200 still in Syria)
Canada:	30	(CSIS, February 2014)
Denmark:	100	(PET, May 2014)
Finland:	over 30	(Supo, March 2014)
France:	over 700	(Official figure, April 2014, 275 still in Syria)
Germany:	270	(BfV, January 2014, 'about 300' March 2014)
Indonesia:	30 - 60	(Official estimate, May 2014)
Ireland:	25 - 30	(Ministry of Justice, February 2014)
Kosovo:	100 - 120	(OSCE report, March 2014)
Kyrgyzstan:	several	(10+) (Krygyz Security Service, May 2013)
Morocco:	about 1,500	(Official figure, April 2014)
The Netherlands:	120	(Ministry of Justice, February 2014)
Norway:	40 - 50	(NIS, February 2014)
Russian Federation:	over 800	(FSB, April 2014)
Saudi Arabia:	about 2,500	(Official estimate, May 2014; 1,200 MoI)
Singapore:	one	(Official figure, March 2014)
Spain:	51	(Official figure, April 2014)
Sweden:	about 30	(Säpo, April 2013)
Switzerland:	about 10	(Swiss Intelligence Service, May 2013)
Tunisia:	about 3,000	(Official figure, April 2014)
Turkey:	about 400	(Official estimate, April 2014)
United Kingdom:	about 400	(Official estimate, March 2014)
United States:	dozens(70+)	(FBI, May 2014)

Other States from which citizens or residents are reported to have gone to fight in Syria include:¹⁴

Afghanistan	Cote d'Ivoire	Japan
Albania	The Czech Republic	Jordan
Armenia	Egypt	Kazakhstan
Austria	Eritrea	Kuwait
Azerbaijan	Estonia	Lebanon
Bahrain	Georgia	Libya
Bangladesh	Hungary	Luxembourg
Bosnia and Herzegovina	India	The Former Yugoslav
Bulgaria	Iran	Republic of Macedonia
Chad	Iraq	Malaysia
Chile	Israel	Maldives
China	Italy	Mauritania

¹⁴ This list is drawn from comments by officials and the evidence of social media.

Montenegro	Portugal	Tajikistan
New Zealand	Qatar	Trinidad and Tobago
Oman	Romania	Turkmenistan
Pakistan	Senegal	Ukraine
Palestine	Serbia	United Arab Emirates
The Philippines	Somalia	Uzbekistan
Poland	Sudan	Yemen

As official estimates already total over 11,000, and that is just on the rebel side, it is reasonable to conclude that at least 12,000 foreigners have fought in Syria over the first three years of the war. This compares with an equally imprecise estimate of 10,000 for the whole ten-year period of the Afghan ‘jihad’ against Soviet occupation plus the period of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001.¹⁵ Although there have been dips and rises, the overall flow of foreigners to the Syrian war has remained fairly constant since late 2011.¹⁶

The great majority of these fighters are from the Arab world of the Middle East and North Africa, but in April 2014, Gilles de Kerchove, the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator for the European Union, estimated that over 2,000 had gone to Syria from the 28 member states of the EU.¹⁷ This compares with his estimate of 500 one year earlier.¹⁸ In March 2014, General Lloyd Austin, Commander of CENTCOM, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the United States intelligence community estimated that there were ‘upwards of 7,000 jihadists’ in Syria. He did not say how the intelligence community had arrived at that figure, nor exactly what ‘jihadists’ meant as opposed to other sorts of foreign fighters, but he did compare this number with an estimate made one year before of 800 to 1,000.¹⁹ James Comey, the Director of the FBI, has also commented on the increasing flow from the United States. In January 2014 he said that ‘dozens’ had gone, and while continuing to avoid a more exact figure, on 2 May 2014 he said that ‘a couple of dozen more’ had joined them.²⁰

Some countries are almost accidental participants in the war, such as Singapore and Japan, both with only one recorded fighter in Syria as at March 2014,²¹ but the numbers from other countries, such as Tunisia and Belgium, appear disproportionate to their populations. In all cases, however, numbers are imprecise and cover a wide range even when provided by government authorities. For example, an official of the Foreign Ministry of the Russian

¹⁵ Some estimates are as high as 20,000, but it is unlikely that there were ever more than 3,000-4,000 foreigners there at any one time, excluding Pakistanis.

¹⁶ The in-fighting between rebel groups caused a temporary fall off in new arrivals in early 2014.

¹⁷ Briefing on 29 April 2014.

¹⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22275456>. But this may also reflect a greater awareness of people who went earlier.

¹⁹ http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Austin_03-06-14.pdf.

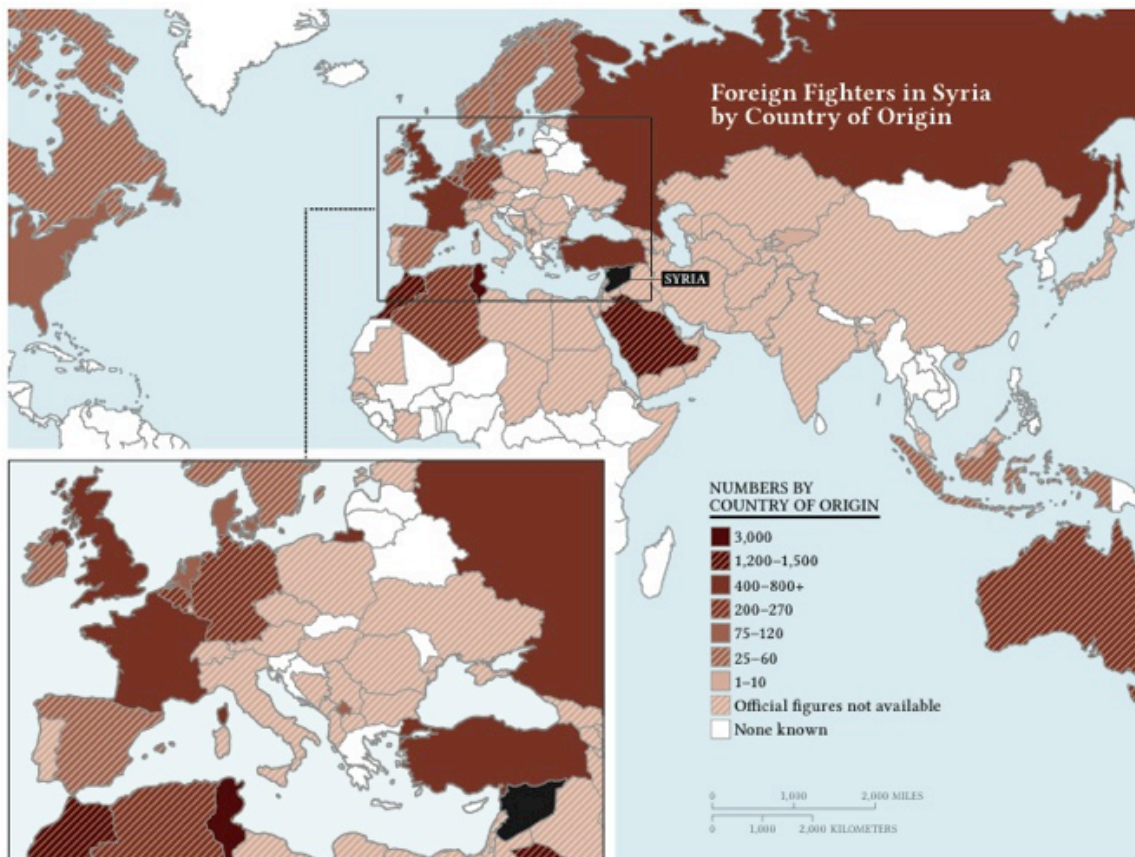
²⁰ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fbi-director-number-of-americans-traveling-to-fight-in-syria-increasing/2014/05/02/6fa3d84e-d222-11e3-937f-d3026234b51c_story.html.

²¹ Briefing by the Singapore authorities in March 2014.

Federation said in April 2013 that there could be anywhere between 600 and 6,000 of his fellow countrymen fighting in Syria,²² though one year later Alexander Bortnikov, the head of the Russian Federal Security Service, gave a more measured estimate of ‘over 800’,²³ but this figure did not include any Russian forces that may be fighting with the Syrian Army.

As an illustration of the variety and mix of foreign fighters, a commander in the Free Syrian Army, interviewed for this paper in April 2014, said:

Some of them fought with me in my battalion in Aleppo. The nationalities I remember were Saudis, Tunisians, Libyans, Egyptians, Pakistanis, Russians, Chechens and Germans. I also met an American. All those I met were Muslims and the majority were converts.



²² Vladimir Kotlyar, member of the Russian Foreign Ministry International Law Council, interviewed on Kommersant-FM, 19 April 2013.

²³ Briefing to heads of foreign Special Services and Law Enforcement Agencies, Sochi, April 2014.

WHO GOES

Judging by the profile of individuals who are known to have gone to Syria or who have self-identified as foreign fighters, the typical age range is 18-29, though there are many instances of 15-17 year olds, as well as of people in their 30s. This makes the average age rather younger than in the earlier Afghan 'jihad' where the typical foreign volunteer was 25-35, and follows a general trend since the mid 2000s of recruits to extremism being younger. Almost all are males, though a certain number of women, in particular from Western countries,²⁴ are reported to have joined friends or gone with husbands, or even travelled to Syria on their own.

In March 2014, a member of Ahrar al-Sham, a group associated with al-Qaeda, described a Swedish couple that had driven independently to Turkey and then joined a humanitarian convoy going to Idlib. As head of a local battalion, the man had asked them how Ahrar al-Sham might help. Speaking broken formal Arabic, the Swedish man had said that he had come for 'Jihad' and wanted a gun. He was provided with an AK 47, and his wife with a pistol. The Swedish man was a 22 year-old convert to Islam, his wife was 21. A British woman, who had converted to Islam some four years earlier, went on her own to Syria in 2013 with a similar motivation, having been unable to find anyone who would go with her. Soon after her arrival she entered an arranged marriage with a Swedish fighter.²⁵

Most foreign fighters arrive without any military training or previous experience of fighting, though there is a hard core of older fighters who have fought on other fronts. For example there are around 500 Saudi nationals fighting with the two main extremist groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), who have been active for some years in Iraq.²⁶ Similarly, there are many Russians who have fought in the Caucasus. These men have also either joined extremist groups or formed their own units that fight alongside them.²⁷ Some younger foreigners also arrive with basic training. For example there are reports of a training camp in Libya under the local branch of Ansar al-Sharia that provides rudimentary skills to volunteers from Tunisia and Libya. On the Government side, Hezbollah fighters are well trained before they arrive, as are the members of the al-Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and their Iraqi protégées.

As well as being new to war, a significant number of rebel recruits from Western countries are also new to Islam. For example, on average 6% of foreign fighters from EU countries

²⁴ The estimate for EU member states is 18% of the total.

²⁵ <http://www.channel4.com/news/syria-rebels-jihad-british-foreign-assad>.

²⁶ Information from Saudi officials, May 2014.

²⁷ For example, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, Jund ur-Sham and Seyfuddin Uzbek Jamaat, a group of central Asians linked with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

are converts.²⁸ Many fighters from Western countries are second or third generation immigrants, but by no means all.²⁹ Very few have any prior connection with Syria.

While less noticeable and less noticed than those who have joined the more extremist groups, foreigners have also joined constituent parts of the Free Syrian Army. For example, Fernando Reinares, who has studied the flow of fighters from Spain, notes that about 25 had joined the FSA compared to 20 who had joined extremist groups, by November 2013.³⁰ One fighter from Switzerland, an ex-Sergeant in the Swiss army, is reported to have joined a Christian militia.³¹

Often foreigners may join a group merely because they have a contact there or have heard of it in a positive way. For example, there are plenty of people like the Dutch ‘jihadist’, Yilmaz, who post updates about their activities and respond to questions about what it is like to fight in Syria via Kik, Tumblr and ask.fm.³² The image portrayed is welcoming and reassuring and addresses the fear of the unfamiliar, for example there are many postings of fighters with pet kittens. And although there are plenty of clips available that show fighters with extremist groups, some of them foreigners, committing appalling acts of murder and repression, the general picture provided by foreign fighters of their lives in Syria suggests camaraderie, good morale and purposeful activity, all mixed in with a sense of understated heroism, designed to attract their friends as well as to boost their own self-esteem.

A typically reassuring posting of life fighting in Syria



²⁸ Briefing on 29 April 2014.

²⁹ For example, 80% of the known fighters from Belgium are of Moroccan descent.

³⁰ CTC Sentinel, January 2014. <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-spanish-foreign-fighter-contingent-in-syria>

³¹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/syria-syriacs-assyrians-kurds-pyd.html>.

³² See: Mackey, R. (2014) 'A Dutch Jihadist in Syria Speaks, and Blogs' http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/29/a-dutch-jihadist-in-syria-speaks-and-blogs/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_php=true&_type=blogs&_php=true&_type=blogs&partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=2.

As an illustration of one country's experience, the French authorities estimate that over 700 people had travelled from France to fight in Syria by mid 2014. This compares with less than 20 who went to Afghanistan throughout the whole period between the Soviet invasion of 1979 and the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, and a similar number who have gone to fight in the Sahel. The French volunteers have no cultural or ethnic links to Syria; they are mainly young (18-28), urban, have no previous record of involvement with extremism, and no significant record of criminal or other anti-social behavior. About 25% are converts to Islam.³³ In a similar vein, Moroccan authorities reported in February 2014 that over 80% of their nationals who were now known to have gone to Syria had not previously come to official attention.³⁴

WHY

The French authorities also categorize volunteers from France as disaffected, aimless and lacking a sense of identity or belonging. This appears to be common across most nationalities and fits with the high number of converts, presumably people who are seeking a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. Indeed, the Islamist narrative of Syria as a land of 'jihad' features prominently in the propaganda of extremist groups on both sides of the war, just as it does in the social media comments of their foreign recruits.³⁵ The opportunity and desire to witness and take part in a battle prophesized 1,400 years earlier is a strong motivator. And for some, so too is the opportunity to die as a 'martyr',³⁶ with extremist sheikhs and other self-appointed religious pundits declaring that anyone who dies fighting the 'infidel' enemy, whoever that may be, will be particularly favored in the afterlife.³⁷

Also associated with the 'jihadist' motivation is the individual obligation to help a Muslim community that is under attack, which has constituted the central narrative of Islamist extremism since the earliest days of al-Qaeda in the 1990s. There is no shortage of first-hand reports posted by fighters of atrocities committed by the other side, or of other stories of the civil war, and potential foreign fighters rely to a remarkable degree on social media platforms to get their news of what is happening. In devouring these posts, it is noticeable how strongly people react to news from Syria, not just by sending them on to others but also by commenting on their content and context.

³³ Briefing to OSCE participating states, April 2014.

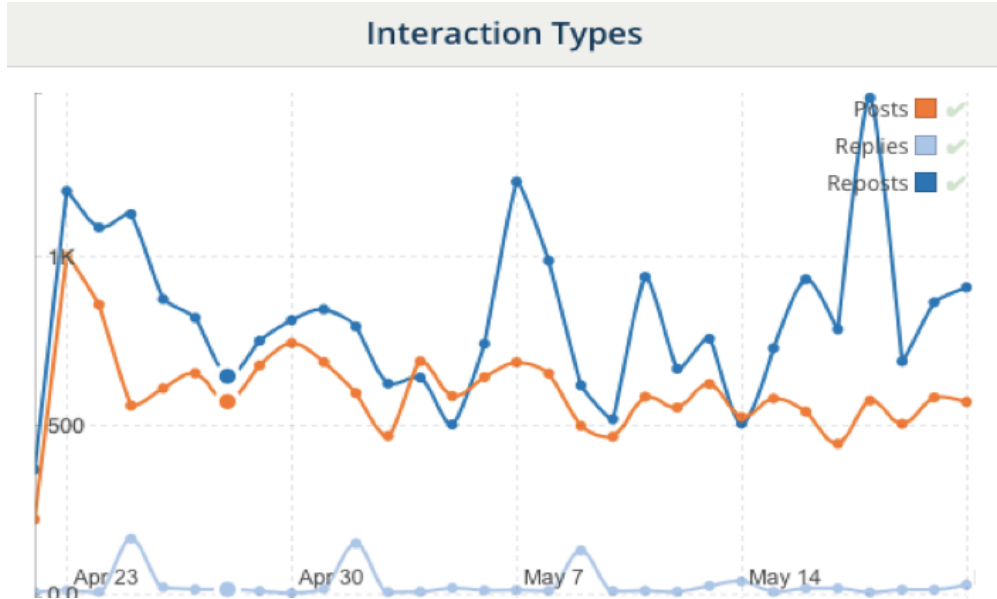
³⁴ http://www.thegctf.org/documents/95472/0/14Mar19_Summary_Opening+Meeting+of+FTF+Initiative_19-20+Feb+2014+The+Hague.pdf.

³⁵ Several hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions) refer to Syria as the land of Jihad where an epic battle between Muslim armies will take place, leading to the end of times.

³⁶ Relatively high numbers of foreign fighters have died in Syria, for example according to official estimates as at May 2014: 50-60 Algerians, 13 Dutch, 15 Spaniards, 100 Turks.

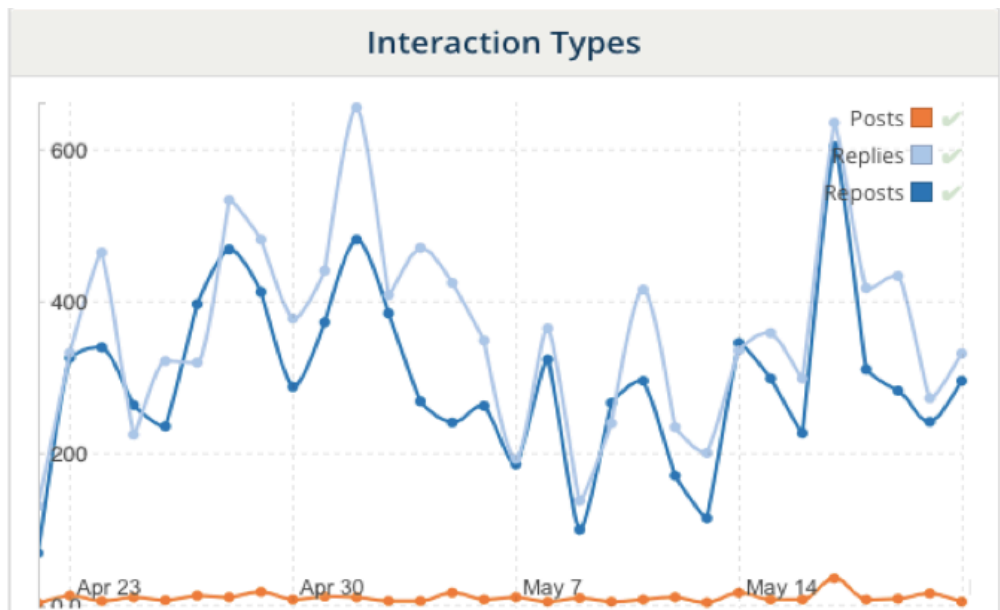
³⁷ In a cynical exploitation of impressionable supporters, extremist groups post photographs of dead fighters apparently smiling to reinforce the idea that they entered paradise even as they died.

For the purposes of comparison, an analysis of 44,000 tweets about issues in the Gulf, including Middle East politics, sports, cyber attacks, and energy concerns, between 22 April and 22 May 2014 shows the typical ratio of original content (posts or tweets) to re-tweets or re-posts and comments.



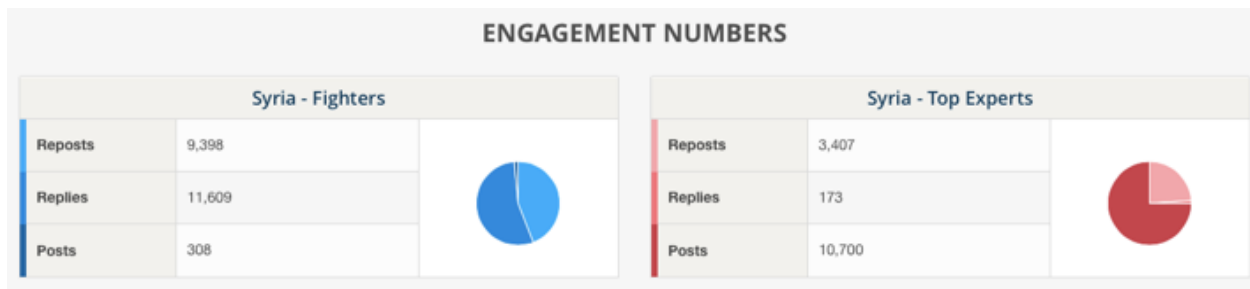
As can be seen, users rarely reply to one another, even though they may pass on what they receive.

By comparison, an analysis of 22,000 tweets during the same period related to the Syrian Civil War, particularly on the activities of foreign fighters, show a level of direct replies that actually exceeds posts and re-posts, an indication of an unusual degree of interest and engagement.



Tweets of the Syrian war appear therefore to do two things: first, to generate a sense of personal involvement – and passion – that can translate quite readily into action; and second, to create an information bubble that excludes outside voices.

A further diagram compares discussion of the war in Syria on Twitter among experts on 28 May 2014,³⁸ with discussion of the war over the same time frame by followers of posters popular with foreign fighters and their sympathizers, and related hashtags.³⁹ This shows two things: first, the huge divergence in the number of replies, and second the vast discrepancy in interest generated by the posts. Fighters comment extensively on posts and send them on to many others, while experts produce far more material but very rarely comment on or disseminate other people’s work. This shows the way in which the war has created a close-knit community of supporters of extremist rebel groups that is self-reinforcing and deaf to alternative influences; potential fighters - and top experts – just communicate among themselves.



Another attraction of the Syrian war to Islamists is the opportunity to live in a place where rules and behavior are supposedly fully and solely in accordance with the teachings of Islam. Many of the younger recruits from Northern Europe have troubled pasts and difficult relationships in their families, and they react well to agreed rules and consistency in their application. Their knowledge of religion is often rudimentary and so they do not question the authority of their leaders and believe what they are told. It is only the more mature among them who realize that the reality of life under an extremist group falls far short of any religious ideal, and this is one reason that some foreign fighters return home or move on elsewhere, sometimes after minimal exposure.⁴⁰

³⁸ Based on key words (in Arabic): jihad, struggle, religious obligation, protection of Muslim women and children, chance to fight, duty, Syria.

³⁹ Such as, @khorasani_, @abu_qaqa_, @shamiwitness, @korkutbhdr, @abumuadh0, @abuhafsak, and #greenbirds, #jihadfitness.

⁴⁰ Though not the sole reason for disillusionment or return, the Danish Security Service (PET) reports that some fighters leave Syria after just a day or two.

The less committed may have any one - or a mix - of several other motivations. Some may just see the war as an opportunity for adventure and an escape from where they are, with plenty of justification available for going and few arguments against. Many may be unable to articulate clearly why they have decided to take part. Few will have much knowledge, understanding, or even interest in the political positions put forward by either side in the war.

A British foreign fighter known as Abu Muhadjar is probably typical of many in describing his motivation:

There's many reasons made me leave my life and come here. The first is religious reasons - due to the fact that it's upon every single Muslim to protect Muslim lands and blood of Muslims if it's been transgressed upon. The second is humanitarian reasons - alongside of my fighting I tend to do aid work as well.⁴¹

THE THREAT

The progression from foreign fighter to terrorist is not a linear one, nor is it inevitable, and the majority of people who return from the fighting in Syria may pose no terrorist threat. But the difficulty remains how to distinguish those who will from those who won't. Increasingly, foreign fighters are exposed to a radical view that casts anyone who opposes their concept of Islam as an enemy that should be eliminated. The death in May 2014 of an American citizen who was a member of al-Nusra in a suicide bombing against regime forces in Syria, and the attack later that month by a returned fighter who was a member of ISIS at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium, are just two examples of the degree to which foreign fighters may become radicalized. The leaders of the most extreme groups have shown no hesitation in threatening terrorist attacks in both Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries, and there is no reason to doubt their ability to do so or to downplay their declared intention.⁴²

By no means all those who fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan became terrorists subsequently, but the circumstances there were rather different. When people went to Afghanistan, even during the Taliban period, they had no developed understanding of al-Qaeda's narrative, nor of the concept of global rather than local terrorism. It was only after they arrived that fighters were exposed to Usama bin Laden's arguments in favor of attacking the 'far enemy'.⁴³ By contrast, foreign fighters going to Syria are well aware of what

⁴¹ Cuffe, J. (2013) 'Who are the British Jihadists in Syria?'. BBC News 15 October [Online]. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-24520762>.

⁴² In mid May 2014 the rebel groups comprising the Islamic Front, including Ahrar al-Sham, and four other Islamist alliances signed a 'Revolutionary Covenant' that inter alia said that they had no intention of attacking targets outside Syria, and included ISIS as a target inside. Jabhat al-Nusra was not consulted and refused to sign.

⁴³ The defining message of al-Qaeda was that 'jihadist' groups should not mount separate campaigns against local rulers (the near enemy) but rather join one combined campaign against the United States (the far enemy), without which the local rulers would collapse.

al-Qaeda is and know very well what the extremist groups there stand for, so although they may go solely with the intention of fighting the regime, they are more likely to be predisposed to accept the doctrine of al-Qaeda and related groups than their predecessors were in Afghanistan.

Even assuming that some fighters go to Syria without having thought through the possible consequences of joining an extremist group, the question then arises of why they stay.⁴⁴ Some groups, ISIS being one, have made an example of deserters by killing them. But people have managed to leave, and those that have stayed must be presumed at least worth a close look by the authorities when and if they go home. It is not possible to spend time with ideologically motivated fighters, sharing with them the range of wartime experience, from utter tedium to the most intense excitement, without picking up some of their ideas. This is perhaps still more true for those recruits whose original motivation was to achieve a sense of belonging and purpose. Once trapped in the group, it is easy to get trapped in the narrative.

The Syrian war is therefore likely to be an incubator for a new generation of terrorists. As such, it raises questions about the effectiveness of the work that has gone into undermining the appeal of terrorism since 2001, and the general understanding of its causes. The lack of any effective policy to end the war, and the lack of coherent policies towards returning fighters, as well as the failure of counter-narratives designed to dissuade volunteers from traveling to Syria in the first place, all suggest continuing international and national confusion about the problems posed by religious extremism.

Many foreign fighters say that they have no intention of returning home or even of leaving Syria, and there are plenty of clips of them burning their passports in a symbolic rejection of their former lives.⁴⁵ But although some of these foreigners are marrying local Syrians and establishing a life there, many seem more determined to die fighting than to build a brave new world.⁴⁶ For some, this has already meant dying outside Syria.⁴⁷

The three groups that have attracted the most foreign fighters, Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, were all founded by people who at that time were members of al-Qaeda, and it is reasonable to suppose that if not now, they may at some point in the future follow al-Qaeda objectives by mounting attacks elsewhere.⁴⁸ In March 2014, two incidents in Turkey, one in the South and one in Istanbul, in which the police clashed with armed members of ISIS, may suggest that ISIS is already setting up branches outside the Levant.

⁴⁴ Some who go home then return and may do this regularly.

⁴⁵ For example <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRqJHq1MjSw>, which includes a Russian burning his passport.

⁴⁶ In 2013 there were around 53 suicide bombings in Syria, and of the 30 individuals identified as suicide bombers, 23 were non-Syrian, 13 of them from Saudi Arabia. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20622>.

⁴⁷ At least six foreign fighters who joined ISIS in Syria, from The Netherlands, Denmark and France, and possibly others from Morocco and Saudi Arabia, have died in suicide attacks in Iraq. See also http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/05/isis_names_danish_fr.php.

⁴⁸ James Clapper, US Director of National Intelligence, has already speculated that some foreign fighters are being prepared to return home and conduct attacks.

The al-Qaeda leadership has also taken a close interest in Syria, seeing it as an opportunity to recover from the hammering it has suffered since 2001, and it has sent senior operatives there to work with and influence affiliated groups.⁴⁹ Although the authority, legitimacy and relevance of al-Qaeda have been sharply challenged by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, the leadership is probably in a better position now than at anytime since October 2001. If things go well for al-Zawahiri, the instability in both Iraq and Syria will carry on long enough for Jabhat al-Nusra and other al-Qaeda affiliates to control territory, establish camps, capture headlines, and rebuild an international network of supporters. Given their accessibility and resources, Iraq and Syria have multiple attractions in this respect over Yemen or Somalia.

One consequence of the well-publicized brutality and extremism of ISIS is that other groups that are in many ways identical in their objectives and methodology look moderate by comparison. Jabhat al-Nusra has followed al-Zawahiri's advice to avoid revealing itself fully until it has established a stronger base. Although al-Zawahiri has endorsed the killing of Shia, he has urged his supporters not to attack mosques and market places, or other obviously civilian targets. Not because he objects in principle, but because he sees a need to build public support. Despite being a recognized branch of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra has therefore avoided talking about future plans to attack Western targets outside Syria, stressing that the immediate task is to overthrow the Assad regime; it has treated the local population in areas under its control carefully, avoiding public executions and other shocking and unsympathetic penalties for real or imagined crimes as practiced by ISIS, and despite being a hard-line takfiri group, it has tried to present itself as a conciliator.⁵⁰

A teacher from Latakia commented:

Foreign fighters in my area are mostly Moroccans and Chechens. And they are welcomed. They do not intervene in our life or try to impose anything. They help in cleaning streets and removing garbage. They pay teachers in local schools after the government stopped paying them. The problems we had, like everywhere else, were with ISIS. Thankfully they left and I am not sure why; maybe because people could not stand them anymore. In my area people held a general strike for few days to push them out.

An activist in the North made a similar observation:

Jabhat al-Nusra has no recorded incident of executing people or enforcing Sharia punishment. They may have a long-term project but we are talking about facts. Jabhat al-Nusra is very unlike ISIS, which had very harmful practices.

⁴⁹ In mid-May 2014, the US Department of Treasury designated two al-Qaeda leaders who had been sent from the Pakistan/Afghanistan border area to liaise with Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra and to plan external operations. <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2396.aspx>.

⁵⁰ Takfirism, or the arrogation of the right to declare a fellow Muslim apostate for not agreeing to the same interpretation of Islam, is the hallmark of al-Qaeda related groups.

Thus the behavior of ISIS has had the effect of legitimizing other groups, even those most closely aligned with al-Qaeda.

A group's shift of emphasis from the local enemy to a broader one will be the most important trigger that may turn a foreign fighter into a domestic terrorist, and the smoother the elision from one to the other, the greater the number of people who may translate their sense of belonging to the group to a sense of commitment to the cause. If the narrative that the West has done little to support the Syrian people from the Assad regime, which is already a frequent subject of discussion among extremists, is reinforced by an international settlement that allows him to remain in power, even if temporarily, this transition may be relatively easy. Even more so if the increasing concern expressed by Western and other States at the rise of extremist groups in Syria translates into direct attacks against them, empowers rival groups to fight them, or, as part of a post-war deal, join forces against the extremists with the Syrian government.

Leaving aside what may happen in Syria, if al-Qaeda can maintain a network of even a small number of returnees, or recruit fighters to its terrorist agenda while they are still in Syria, it may once more pose a significant global threat. A further possibility is that a number of foreign and Syrian fighters will not end their campaign when the war stops; they will move on to make another conflict area worse as a peripatetic army of diehard extremists, offering further opportunity to terrorist groups to extend their reach.⁵¹

It is disturbing that as the war drags on, more foreign fighters are shifting their allegiance from mainline rebel groups to the extremists, especially ISIS. An interviewee from Ahrar al-Sham said:

When ISIS was formed⁵² 40% [of the foreign fighters] joined them. 60% to 70% of the fighters who were members of Jabhat al-Nusra joined ISIS and between 30% and 40% of our foreign fighters in Ahrar al-Sham joined ISIS.

A brigade commander fighting in Aleppo said much the same:

Some of [the foreign fighters] joined my brigade. When Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS grew stronger, most of the foreign fighters joined them. I think ISIS is misleading them. In the last battle against ISIS in Aleppo we captured two foreign fighters who thought that we were regime forces. One of them was German and the other was Moroccan or Algerian.

As ISIS objectives become more and more focused on building an Islamic State rather than on defeating the regime, the objectives of its foreign fighters may undergo a similar change. But the situation is dynamic; fighters, regardless of their nationality or motivation and

⁵¹ See also, Jenkins, B. M. (2014) 'The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War', Perspective, Rand Corporation. Available at: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND_PE115.pdf.

⁵² He refers to the group's decision in April 2013 to change its name from the Islamic State of Iraq to the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria.

ideology, move from group to group, or unit to unit, depending on immediate circumstances. In some cases, a particular insurgent group or unit will appeal because of its resources (weapons, amount of ground controlled and so on) rather than its ideology; or because it has a charismatic leader; or because it contains fellow nationals or new friends. It follows that there are many individual foreign fighters who do not actually support their group's ideology but stay with it for other reasons.

Whatever the trend towards or away from membership of ISIS, and the reasons that people switch, it is still the extremist groups that attract the most foreign fighters, despite their infighting. They tend to be more inclusive, better organized and better financed than their more moderate counterparts. They also tend to be more assertive and have more of an impact on the battlefield, and so enjoy greater local standing, which makes them still more attractive to foreign fighters looking to make their own impact. Also, most extremist groups are concentrated in the North of the country, and so are the first that many foreigners meet when they cross the Turkish border, or in the East, where they are particularly accessible to Iraqi and some Saudi recruits. The strong ideological outlook of the extremist groups is also attractive to some foreigners who arrive in Syria unable to articulate clearly why they are there. Extremist groups are particularly helpful in providing foreign arrivals with the justification for their decision to fight and turning their vague understanding of defensive 'jihad' into an ardent belief that they are doing God's work.

A further indicator of a possible external threat is the growth of networks established to transfer fighters to Syria. In the first half of 2014, the police in Algeria, Belgium, France, Malaysia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Spain, and Turkey, among others, reported that they had broken up recruitment and mobilization networks, and if others exist or take their place, it is reasonable to suppose that they may ferry fighters out of Syria as well as in. The head of a battalion of Ahrar al-Sham, operating in the northern suburbs of Hama, interviewed for this paper, recounted a trip he had made to Egypt to meet the leaders of Islamist groups that are involved in helping individuals who wish to join the fight:

There is a certain committee to arrange this. There are contacts here in Syria who ask for a certain number of Sharia scholars, fighters or people ready to carry out suicide attacks. They come here through these circles and I think it is the case everywhere.

Another interviewee, a journalist operating in Syria, noted that many foreign fighters seem to have been members of an organization prior to arriving in Syria, having approached 'networks' that have assisted their travel.

MITIGATING THE THREAT

Clearly, the most effective way for the international community to address the growing threat from returning foreign fighters would be to do everything possible to stop the war; but as global tensions increase, this remains an unpopular option. However, there is no doubt that

the longer the war goes on, the greater its consequences will be. Not only will more foreign fighters pass through Syria, but also the networks that recruit and send them there will become more significant and more capable of feeding them back home or elsewhere. As Syria becomes more permanently divided, extremist groups will put down deeper roots and establish safe havens. Furthermore, an additional danger grows in the countries that play host to Syrian refugees. The longer young people spend in refugee camps or otherwise displaced from home and school, the more vulnerable they will be to sectarian or other terrorist recruiters.

The treatment of returning foreign fighters by the authorities of their home States will have an important impact on their future behavior. Returnees who have been motivated to go to Syria by humanitarian concerns and have done no fighting, may be radicalized and alienated if treated roughly on their arrival home. Nonetheless, it will be difficult for governments to know what any individual did in Syria, and why he went. Some returnees will merit careful investigation and monitoring, if not prosecution for active participation with ISIS or other extremist groups. Not all will be identified before they come back.

Although most states lack the resources to identify and monitor more than a few returning fighters, most fighters are unlikely to hide. They are more likely to talk about their exploits than to conceal them, unless the authorities threaten dire punishment. This means that their communities will know who they are, be able to judge the impact of their experience on their political views and social stability, and monitor their behavior in the future. Even the ones that have fallen for an extremist narrative may not find it easy to operate without coming to attention if their experience and training in Syria has not included the clandestine skills required of a successful terrorist,⁵³ and security services are increasingly adept at uncovering links and associations. However, resources are limited, and the credibility that comes with being a veteran of the Syrian war will give the returnees particular influence over others tempted towards violent extremism.

Even countries with relatively large resources to devote to returning fighters from Syria face difficulties. For example, by the end of April 2014, the French authorities were almost overwhelmed. The counter terrorist prosecution service in Paris was handling 50 cases of conspiracy with a further 26 individuals in pre-trial detention. The number of people under surveillance was growing, and the security services were feeling the strain.⁵⁴

It will be important therefore that authorities in countries of origin have a good understanding of why a returning foreign fighter went to Syria, what he did and what happened to him while there, and why he returned. The answer to these three questions will help place the returnee on a sliding scale of threat and enable the security and law enforcement agencies to deploy their resources accordingly. Getting the answers will be hard

⁵³ For further evaluation of the potential for al-Qaeda or unaffiliated groups to attack in Western countries, see for example: Hegghammer, T. (2013) 'The Future of Anti-Western Jihadism', Global al-Qaeda Affiliates, Objectives, and Future Challenges 18 July. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade. <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20130718/101155/HHRG-113-FA18-20130718-SD001.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Briefing on 29 April 2014.

enough, understanding what they mean in terms of likely future behavior may be harder still, but it is an important first step.

WHAT IS BEING DONE

Broadly speaking, there are two approaches to deterring people from fighting in Syria or dealing with them when they come back. One is to stigmatize all participation and to threaten those who go with legal or administrative consequences, confiscating passports or even revoking nationality. The other is to do everything possible to help returnees to reintegrate. In some countries these two policies exist side by side.

Several European States, for example, have or are considering criminalizing unauthorized participation in a foreign war, and most already have laws that penalize membership of a designated group, such as ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra. But the collection of reliable evidence in the latter case is difficult, especially in countries where the prosecution must also demonstrate that the group intends harm to national interests.⁵⁵ The Russian Federation adopted a law towards the end of 2013 that criminalizes involvement in an armed group abroad contradictory to Russian policy;⁵⁶ but such laws do not act as a deterrent and are broadly framed, complicating mutual legal assistance between States. They may also discourage fighters from returning who have become disillusioned or even disgusted by what they have seen, or feel they have done what they set out to do and just want to go home.

A Jabhat al-Nusra coordinator has been quoted as saying in mid-March 2014:

Since the second week of January until now ... hundreds, if not more than two thousand (foreign fighters), went back to their home countries.⁵⁷

A senior commander in Ahrar al-Sham gave a similar report:

Most foreign fighters arrive with good intentions and often recoil when they witness wrongdoing or brutal tactics by the groups they join. This can spur them to join other groups, or simply to return to their home countries disenchanted.

These returnees are unlikely to pose a threat, particularly in the short term. But the problem remains of how to sift out those who may just return to their old lives or perhaps need some help to reintegrate, from those who pose a risk to society.

⁵⁵ For example, Switzerland.

⁵⁶ Federal Law of 2 November 2013.

⁵⁷ See: Solomon, E., Jones, S. (2014) 'Disillusioned Foreign Fighters Abandon Rebel Ranks in Syria', Financial Times, 18 March. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a26ffc5c-adfc-11e3-bc07-00144feab7de.html#axzz2xXFrYQ1E>.

Saudi Arabia has tried to both prevent people from leaving to fight and to encourage those who are already there to return by enacting a new law, and offering a period of amnesty before it took effect. A rare royal decree of 3 February 2014 stipulates penalties for anyone who

'participates in hostilities outside the Kingdom, in any way, or who belongs to a radical religious or ideological movement or group, or one classified as a terrorist organization domestically or internationally, or who supports or adopts its ideology or approach in any way, or expresses sympathy with it by any means, or provides any financial or moral support for it, orally or in writing'

Saudi citizens will know what this means and will see the decree as a significant political statement as well as authorizing the authorities to take action across a wide front. However, the more that Saudi Arabian involvement in Syria switches from supporting groups that oppose the Government to supporting groups that are fighting extremists, the more likely that fighters from Saudi Arabia will see their Government as part of the enemy.

For those who do return, Saudi Arabia offers help. Since the King issued his decree, at least 300 Saudi fighters have gone home and entered the well-established 'counseling and care' program for people who have been caught up in radical groups. Few countries will be able to provide the facilities that exist in Saudi Arabia, but many other States with fighters in Syria benefit from some sort of reintegration program, whether run at a national or at a community level. These programs should also take into account the possibility that returning fighters will have received psychological damage and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders. Furthermore, as more women participate in the fighting, States will have to decide whether they need to adapt existing programs or introduce new ones to meet this new requirement.

An initiative undertaken by Algeria, which has a long experience of dealing with violent extremism dating back to the start of the 1990s, is to engage the family of a fighter from Algeria as soon as it is known that he is in Syria. Families are almost always shocked to find that one of their members has gone to fight and are ready therefore to discuss with the authorities why he might have gone and what should be done when he returns. This allows an opportunity both to weigh the likely threat and to work out a viable response.

There is also a focus on family support structures in the development of reintegration programs in Europe, including on issues concerning de-radicalization and healthcare, as well as on countering radical influences from outside. Such programs exist despite the stern and retributive language emerging from government spokesmen, but they do depend on the willingness of the family and the returnee to participate and assume a degree of family cohesion that is often not present in the families of foreign fighters. Other countries are looking at these programs to see if they should introduce them as well.

The international community is united in recognizing the need to collect and exchange information about foreign fighters, but the mechanisms for doing so are not well developed. Turkey has complained that it was not informed about two of the three ISIS members who

killed two police officers and a gendarme in Southern Turkey in March 2014,⁵⁸ although the countries of residence knew that they had gone to Syria.⁵⁹ In another incident, Turkey learnt through Interpol that a foreigner had travelled to Turkey with the presumed intention of crossing into Syria to fight almost exactly one year after the event.⁶⁰ Having said that however, Turkey had a watch list of 3,800 names of possible foreign fighters as provided by other governments as at the end of April 2014.⁶¹

WHAT MORE COULD BE DONE

As increasingly reflected in existing programs, the role of the community is important, both for the successful reintegration of returning fighters and for identifying them and sorting out which of them may pose the greatest threat. State authorities are unlikely to be able to do this on their own. They will also need the help of the community in any long-term monitoring of the attitudes and actions of those returning fighters who are seen as a potential problem. Several European countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom have started down this road, and France has set up a call centre for families to report concerns about the radicalization of their members. The Radicalization Awareness Network, a group of practitioners, researchers and NGOs established in October 2011 by the European Commission, has published a useful compendium of good practices in this area.⁶²

Raising awareness of the realities in Syria, and removing the image of ‘jihadi cool’ associated with the war, as perpetuated through social media, is also an important way to increase the resilience of vulnerable communities. However, as with any strategic communications campaign, it is important to know how a target audience receives its news. The reliance of potential foreign fighters on individual posts from Syria to understand what is going on there makes them largely immune to and unimpressed by this sort of broad outreach. Media and policy makers sometimes overlook this fact, and underestimate the impact of what is happening in these other bubbles even as they overestimate the impact of their own.

Much has been made of the proselytizing power of social media such as Twitter or Facebook as it relates to violent extremist ideology in general and foreign fighters in Syria in particular, and suggestions are often made to prevent extremists from exploiting this access. Many private sector service providers are ready to take down inappropriate content when notified by the authorities or the public, but there are legal implications in their doing so, and

⁵⁸ The attack took place in Nigde on 20 March 2014.

⁵⁹ OSCE meeting on current terrorist challenges, April 2014.

⁶⁰ OSCE meeting on current terrorist challenges, April 2014.

⁶¹ And had deported over 700 people to their home countries (briefing April 2014).

⁶² The RAN Declaration of Good Practices for Engagement with Foreign Fighters for Prevention, Outreach, Rehabilitation and Reintegration. Available at <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/RAN-Declaration-Good-Practices-for-Engagement-with-Foreign-Fighters.pdf>.

it is not always clear where to draw the line between incitement to violence and freedom of expression. Furthermore, extremist groups are technically capable of ensuring that their systems are robust enough to avoid such counter action, or to limit its impact.

It would be better to encourage the use of social media to undermine the appeal of extremists and to exacerbate divisions between them, as exist between ISIS and other extremist groups. In this context it is useful to see where the extremist groups look for support. For example, while Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda tend to use Arabic on Twitter and Facebook, ISIS posts in multiple languages to extend its reach. It is equally useful to note that Facebook is the dominant social medium in the Levant, while Twitter rules in the Gulf.

Any counter-radical campaign will need to understand and leverage these factors and find ways to penetrate the closed communication circles of potential fighters. Once there, it may be effective to advertise the political discord and competition within the extremist groups. ISIS for example is far more focused on controlling territory in Iraq and Syria than on overthrowing Assad. Indeed, other groups accuse it of being in league with the Government because it so rarely engages in fighting it. The attempt by al-Baghdadi to set himself up as the leader of the faithful not only challenges the authority of al-Zawahiri, but also of the reclusive, titular head of the movement, Mullah Omar. Many foreign fighters have died in clashes between extremist groups in Syria, and the exploitation of their vulnerabilities by the group leaders is fairly easily demonstrated. The style is manipulative and authoritarian rather than respectful and empowering.

Returning fighters themselves could play a significant role in helping the State or their community to understand these issues and so mitigate the threat, and this also argues for careful treatment of each returnee on a case-by-case basis. A returning fighter will have a great deal of credibility in radical circles at home, and if he argues against participation in the war, and against the al-Qaeda narrative more generally, this is likely to be more effective than anything a government can do.

Some governments recognize that their nationals may go to Syria out of genuine concern for the people there, and try to offer them an alternative to fighting. For example, the European Union is planning a web-portal that informs people of the humanitarian organizations that are involved in providing relief to Syria.⁶³ More could be done along these lines to highlight the alternatives to violence and so help re-channel the energies of the well intentioned away from fighting.

Some system of registration for people involved with humanitarian agencies or NGOs active in Syria would help in sorting out the fighters from the rest. Collecting accurate data about foreign fighters and their activities in Syria has proved difficult and States could make more effort to interview, either directly or through appropriate community contacts, returnees about their experiences. This would help provide context against which to judge the significance of what a foreign fighter reports or is reported to have done. Without knowing

⁶³ The European Union had provided \$2.6 billion in humanitarian assistance to Syria by May 2014. The contribution from the United States exceeded \$1.7 billion.

what it meant to be a member of a particular group in a particular place at a particular time, it is hard to estimate the radicalizing influences that a foreign fighter is likely to have encountered. Not all returnees would cooperate with such a program, but over time, and if information were shared between States, a significant database would result.

The consideration of the threat posed by returning foreign fighters, and policies for dealing with them, might also benefit from a study of fighters who have returned from similar campaigns, for example in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Iraq, Mali, Somalia and Yemen. Although Syria has characteristics that set it apart, it is likely that useful lessons would emerge.

In all cases, the challenge requires a ‘whole of government’ approach that includes law enforcement and security services working with social services and local authorities, as well as with communities, the private sector and individuals. Policies have to emerge from an understanding of the principal motivators that send foreign fighters to Syria, the dynamics of the whole phenomenon of being there, and the social pressures they create.

CONCLUSION

With over 12,000 foreign fighters already traveling to Syria, it is easy to imagine that the world will face years of terrorism as a result. By the end of May 2014, two plots had been uncovered in Western countries involving ex-fighters, but in neither case is it clear that their experience in Syria was a determining factor.⁶⁴ A shooting in Belgium in May also allegedly involved a returnee. It is expected that other fighters will return so radicalized, traumatized or both that they will pose a danger, and even if the number is far less than the one-in-nine ratio identified by Thomas Hegghammer for the transition of Western foreign fighters into domestic terrorists between 1990 and 2010,⁶⁵ it will still be significant.

How the international community deals with this threat will determine the trajectory of terrorism over the coming years. It will never be possible to eliminate all terrorism, but its appeal as a political tool will shrink more certainly if resilience against violence grows within the communities from which terrorists come. Governments can and should address the conditions conducive to terrorism, but communities are best placed to prevent it. It is important therefore that both sectors of society work together to address the challenges posed by foreign fighters in Syria, and that they do so with some urgency.

⁶⁴ One, in France, involved a foreign fighter who had had extensive terrorist contacts before he went to Syria, and the other, in the United Kingdom, appears to have been only tangentially connected with the civil war.

⁶⁵ Hegghammer found that 107 of 945 returning foreign fighters had been involved in terrorist plots during this period. http://hegghammer.com/files/Hegghammer_-_Should_I_stay_or_should_I_go.pdf

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