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Foreign Jihadists in Syria: Tracking Recruitment Networks

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 Brief Analysis

Monitoring jihadist social-media networks reveals where fighters are coming from, where in Syria they are fighting, and how best to stem their continued recruitment in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Tunisia.

The clandestine nature of the various networks responsible for sending Sunni fighters into Syria makes it difficult to ascertain exactly how many foreigners have entered the war and from which countries. Yet social-media sources affiliated with jihadists often post death notices for slain fighters, providing a unique, though incomplete, picture of where they are being recruited and where in Syria they fought. Tracking and analyzing these notices can help broaden Washington's understanding of foreign recruitment networks, the largest of which appear to operate in Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Tunisia.

HOW MANY HAVE BEEN KILLED?

Since the Syrian uprising turned into an armed rebellion, jihadists have announced the deaths of more than 1,100 fighters on their Twitter and Facebook accounts and, to a lesser extent, on password-protected forums. Although other foreigners have been killed in Syria, their deaths were reported by non-jihadist rebels, Western media, or Arabic media and are not included in this assessment. The figures below also exclude foreigners who have fought on the Assad regime's side.

To be sure, the information gleaned from jihadist sources is self-reported, and some data might therefore be suppressed for political reasons, especially reports of Iraqi involvement. That said, it still offers a worthwhile snapshot of an otherwise murky world.

The most striking revelation in the latest data is the huge rise in overall death notices. Previously, jihadist sources had posted only 85 such notices as of February 2013, and only 280 as of June. In other words, the vast majority of the more than 1,100 notices have come in the past half year.

WHERE ARE THEY COMING FROM?

Arabs dominate the list of foreign jihadists who have died in Syria, and nine of the top ten countries represented are from the Arab world.

Country of Origin	Jihadist Death Notices
Saudi Arabia	267
Libya	201
Tunisia	182
Jordan	95
Egypt	79
Lebanon	48
Morocco	29
Palestinian territories	21
Kuwait	18
Chechnya	15

Death notices have mentioned fifty different nationalities in all, including twenty in Europe or elsewhere in the West. Yet Westerners make up only a miniscule amount of the total.

Country of Origin	Jihadist Death Notices
France	6
Australia	5
Ireland	4
Albania	3
Germany	3
United States	3
Bosnia	2
Britain	2
Canada	2
Denmark	2
Kosovo	2
Macedonia	2
Netherlands	2
Spain	2
Belgium	1
Italy	1
Luxembourg	1
Norway	1
Romania	1
Sweden	1

One of the most important trends in the past half-year is the rise in both the total number of Saudi foreign fighters and the number of Saudis killed (which far outpaces all other national groups). Only some 20 percent of the 1,100 death notices state group affiliation, so this data provides only a small window into which groups foreigners are joining. Of these, however, the vast majority name Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham -- the two militant opposition groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States. Other fighters were also reported to be members of Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, Katibat Suqur al-Izz, Liwa al-Umma, and Harakat Sham al-Islam, among others.

More than 60 percent of the notices offered more specific information about the fighter's town or province of origin,

providing insight into certain foreign networks. For instance, fifteen fighters were described as hailing from the Saudi province of al-Qassim, and it is possible that they came from the provincial capital of Buraydah, as the notices for twenty-two other fighters indicated. The largest network in this data set is from Riyadh, however, raising questions about whether the Saudi government is being duplicitous and/or looking the other way regarding significant jihadist activity in its capital.

Point of Origin	Jihadist Death Notices
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	43
Darnah, Libya	40
Tripoli, Libya	37
Benghazi, Libya	34
Tripoli, Lebanon	24
Buraydah, Saudi Arabia	22
Zarqa, Jordan	18
Tunis, Tunisia	17
Alexandria, Egypt	16
al-Qassim, Saudi Arabia	15

Unsurprisingly, the next three most-mentioned cities are in Libya, a key hub for many fighters en route to Syria. Groups such as Ansar al-Sharia in Libya have provided training for Libyans, Tunisians, and other North Africans. In addition, many Syrians have traveled to Libya for training, then returned home to use their new skills against the regime.

Fighters from Tunisia, the third-ranked source country, were more evenly distributed among a wider range of towns and provinces than Saudi and Libyan fighters, most of whom hailed from a handful of locations. This suggests that recruitment networks may have penetrated a wider swath of Tunisian territory, and more deeply. It also suggests that facilitation and logistics networks supporting Syria-bound fighters may have been grafted onto the existing rural and urban networks established by local jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia.

WHERE ARE THEY FIGHTING?

Some 760 of the death notices provided location of death. Foreign fighters have died in twelve of Syria's fourteen governorates; only Tartus and Quneitra were not represented. Some of the biggest losses came late this summer in the campaign called "Cleansing of the Coast," which was fought in Latakia, part of the regime's Alawite heartland. Of the eighty-eight foreign jihadists killed in that governorate during the war, fifty died in August alone. Overall, though, the largest death toll occurred in Aleppo governorate, a rebel stronghold and site of some of the war's fiercest fighting.

Syrian Governorate	Jihadist Death Notices
Aleppo	248
Homs	105
Damascus/Rif Damascus	96
Latakia	88
Idlib	69
Deraa	45
Deir al-Zour	42
Hama	24
al-Raqqqa	18
Hasaka	15
al-Suwayda	3

CONCLUSION

A survey of 1,500 media, government, and jihadist sources in multiple languages indicates that between 3,400 and 11,000 foreign fighters have entered Syria since the uprising turned into an armed rebellion. Some of them have been arrested, others killed, and others have returned home. Although more specific data beyond country of origin is not available for all of them, simply knowing the cities or provinces where many of them come from can provide a basic framework for stemming the overall flow, allowing local governments to be more precise in deterring or stopping individuals from going to Syria or to training locations in other countries. In particular, the United States should prod Turkey regarding the ease with which foreign fighters transit its territory.

Of course, any such efforts raise multiple challenges for Washington. In countries such as Lebanon, Libya, and Tunisia, for example, the local government may not have the means or capability to deal with the problem. And in countries like Saudi Arabia, officials might not have the political will to act given their government's particular interests in the Syrian conflict. Therefore, Washington should make sure to keep track of the problem itself even if other governments do not cooperate fully. This means taking note of where potential future threats might emanate from once foreign fighters return home, since not all of the jihadists recruited in the areas noted above will end up with their own death notices.

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