Who Are the Foreign Fighters in Syria?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.

Aaron Lund interviews the Institute's Richard Borow Fellow regarding the number, nature, and affiliations of the various foreigners who have joined Syria's conflict on one side or the other.

The Syrian war has attracted thousands of foreign volunteers who now fight on almost every front. Western attention is focused on groups like al-Qaeda, because of the danger these organizations could pose to Western countries, but that is just one side of the coin: foreign fighters are also backing the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

To better understand this issue, we've turned to Aaron Y. Zelin, who has studied the flow of foreign fighters to Syria during the past two years. He is a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the International Center for the Study of Radicalization as well as a PhD candidate at King's College of London. He also runs the website Jihadology, which collects jihadi source material.

How many foreign fighters are there in Syria, and from where are they coming?

On the side of the Sunni Arab rebels, a conservative estimate would place the number of foreigners at 5,000 individuals, while a more liberal estimate could be upward of 10,000. These totals are for the entire conflict, not necessarily how many are currently on the ground there. Many of them have been killed, arrested, or have since returned home. The speed of this mobilization is unprecedented, compared to for example the foreigners who fought against the United States in Iraq or the Soviets in Afghanistan.

The majority comes from the Arab world, with Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Tunisia in the lead -- although the number of Iraqis could be higher than what's publicly known. The second-largest grouping is Western Europeans, especially from the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Additionally, there are some from the Balkans, the Caucasus, and many other places. By my count, we've seen Sunni fighters from more than 60 countries.

There has also been an unprecedented number of foreigners coming in to fight for Assad's regime. While the Sunni jihadis are coming in through informal networks, most of the pro-Assad fighters are Shia Muslims who believe in the

teachings of Iran's former religious and political leader Ayatollah Khomeini and are directed through Iran's state-sponsored apparatuses.

The large majority has come from Lebanon and Iraq, but there are also Iranians and others. The total number is at most 10,000. Lebanon's Hezbollah has sent between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters in total, but the number at any given time is lower since they serve on rotating monthly tours. There could be between 3,500 and 4,000 Iraqi Shia fighters, and credible sources speak of 1,000 to 1,500 members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) from Iran.

In addition to the Sunni Arab rebels and the pro-regime Shia, there are also scattered reports that a number of Kurds from Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and the diaspora have gone to fight with their Syrian Kurdish brethren in the People's Protection Units militia, the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party.

Which groups are the foreigners joining in Syria?

Most Sunni foreign fighters join the hardline Islamist factions, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or the Nusra Front, and to a much lesser extent other Salafi groups like Ahrar al-Sham. There are also front groups and affiliates of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the Nusra Front, including the Muhajirin wa-Ansar Army, the Suqour al-Ezz Battalions, the Sham al-Islam Movement, the Green Battalion, the Umma Brigade, and Jund al-Sham.

On the side of the regime, the Iranians are going in on behalf of the IRGC, while the Lebanese are fighting with Hezbollah. The Iraqi scene is a bit more complicated. Iraqi groups like the Hezbollah Battalions, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Organization are funneling fighters to Syria but use different front groups. The most prominent among these newly formed groups is the Abu-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade. Others include the Sayyid al-Shuhada Battalions, the Zulfiqar Brigade, the Ammar ibn Yasser Brigade (associated with the Hezbollah Battalions and Asaib Ahl al-Haq), the Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba Brigade, the Martyr Mohamed Baqir al-Sadr Forces (associated with the Badr Organization), and the Khorasani Vanguard Company.

Do they affect the military balance in Syria?

Many of the foreign fighters on the side of the rebels come in with very little battle experience and are first put through training camps. Some might have been to the training programs that are organized for North Africans in Libya, by Ansar al-Sharia and other Islamist militias.

There are also veterans from places like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Yemen, and Libya. Many foreign and Syrian jihadis view Chechens as the most battle-hardened fighters, after twenty years of wars against Russia. That said, some Caucasus fighters are coming from the diaspora in Europe rather than straight from the wars in the Caucasus, so they also lack experience.

Those who have had prior involvement in fighting have mattered on the battlefield, in training, and in strategy. The foreigner-dominated Muhajirin wa-Ansar Army, which is linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, was decisive in the takeover of the Menagh Air Base in August 2013. Foreigners also fought zealously in Latakia this summer, where they were involved in cleansing Alawites from captured areas.

The foreigners are likely even more important for the regime. Those who have come into Syria at the behest of Iran are professional fighters. They have ample experience, either against Israel or against American forces in Iraq. Hezbollah's participation was key for taking back the border town of Qusayr from the rebels in May and June 2013. Iraqi Shia militiamen have been helping to cleanse and starve out Sunni enclaves in the Ghouta region surrounding Damascus.

Do they exert ideological influence?

On the rebel side, it is difficult to identify the main cause of radicalization over the past couple of years. There could be a number of causes beyond foreigners entering the conflict. For one, the sheer brutality of the Assad regime has

provided the conditions under which individuals may become more amenable to radical ideologies. The fact that jihadis have been better financed compared to more nationalist and secular actors has also pushed some closer to the jihadi elements.

Many foreigners do engage in dawa, or proselytism. Based on conversations with those close to the ground, Tunisian foreign fighters helped prepare a dawa program for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant based off their own experiences with Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia. These activities -- which include lectures, giving presents to children, and Quranic recitation competitions -- have been a way for the organization to ingratiate itself with the locals. They help dispel the negative view many have had of the group since the Iraq war. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is hoping to get individuals to first accept it, then to potentially be socialized into their worldview over time. This is why boys between eight and sixteen years of age are key targets of the dawa sessions.

It is even harder to measure what effect the IRGC, Hezbollah, or Iraqi militiamen have had on Assad's army. There are reports that in the past the Iranian regime has converted Alawites to their own Khomeinist interpretation of Twelver Shiism, the largest branch of Shia Islam. It would not be all that surprising if this were repeated now, especially in light of the religious narrative that these foreigners have been pushing since they entered the conflict, including that they're defending the Shia shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab near Damascus. ❖

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