



PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE CONSORTIUM BACKGROUND PAPER

Sunni Foreign Fighters in Syria: Background, Facilitating Factors and Select Responses

PfPC Background Paper No. 1 | May 21, 2014 | www.pfpconsortium.com

Social media provides a powerful avenue to expose new individuals to violent radical ideas they might otherwise not come across. One innovative response involves funding a social media initiative aimed at deterring British citizens from travelling to Syria to fight.

Executive Summary

This background paper is based on a presentation during a partnership for Peace Consortium (PfPC) Combating Terrorism Workshop held in Brussels April 23-25, 2014 on the topic of foreign fighters. The paper discusses reasons driving the phenomenon and highlights some legal responses taken by Western European states to stem flow of foreign fighters to Syria and to reduce any potential disruptive activities upon return to their countries of departure. The current foreign fighter mobilization in Syria is unprecedented in the number of individuals, nations represented and the speed of the mobilization. Since foreigners flocked to Syria in late 2011 and early 2012, based on more than 1,700 primary and secondary sources in multiple languages that have been collated, one can estimate their numbers at 9,000 individuals who represent more than 80 nations. The bulk of these foreigners come from the Arab world and Western Europe with approximately 5,000 and 3,000 coming from each region respectively. The vast majority have joined designated terrorist organizations the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham as well as al-Qaeda's preferred branch Jabhat al-Nusra.

Compared with the two prior top foreign fighter mobilizations since it became a phenomenon in the 1980s, the numbers for Syria are much larger. They have occurred over a far shorter time span. From 1979-1992, it is believed that about 5,000 individuals went to Afghanistan for the anti-Soviet jihad. Additionally, during the last decade from 2003-2007, around 4,000 foreigners decided to take up the cause of jihad during the Iraq war. In both cases, the numbers are about half or a little less than half of what we have seen thus far in Syria. In Afghanistan the process spanned 13 years, while in Iraq four years, and in Syria, just two years.

WHY PEOPLE JOIN

Seven main factors contribute to why the Syrian conflict in particular has been able to sway such a large number of individuals to join the fight:

Ease of Travel: Unlike past foreign fighter mobilizations, it is relatively easy to get to Syria. Most individuals fly or drive from their locations to Turkey and then to Syria. Compared with Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, or Mali, going to

Placing the Syrian War's Sunni Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Historical Context

Turkey also does not necessarily raise any red flags since it is a huge tourist destination. Flights to Turkey – at least from Europe – are incredibly cheap and most countries have visa waiver deals with the Turkish government. This makes it easier, especially for those who might not be willing to risk going to more isolated locations.

Existence of seasoned grassroots support networks: In comparison with the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, today's foreign fighter networks are not starting from scratch. Rather, they are building off of past efforts and tapping into local grassroots movements and organizations already established. For example, in Western Europe there is al-Muhajirun in Britain, Sharia4Belgium in Belgium, Forsane Alizza in France, and Millatu Ibrahim in Germany to name a few. Also in North Africa, there is the Ansar al-Sharia network in Libya and Tunisia.

Social Media Facilitation: In many respects, Syria is the first large-scale socially mediated war. Unlike in the past when individuals had to go out and seek the password-protected jihadi forums to get information about the groups and ideologues and discuss things among peers of online jihadi activists, it is a lot easier to access Twitter and Facebook. One doesn't necessarily need to seek out these sites since they are relatively open systems online and, in the case of Twitter, groups can target certain audiences through hashtags, potentially exposing those who might not have been exposed previously to the ideas and plans of the global jihadi movement. Unintentionally, both Twitter and Facebook provide recommendations for other like-minded individuals to “follow” or “friend,” making such groups relatively easy to find through their algorithms.

Emotional Resonance of the “cause”: A major motivating factor for many foreign fighters is the reaction to the over-the-top brutality and massacres the Assad regime has repeatedly perpetrated against the majority Sunni Muslim Syrian population. It also does not help that the Assad regime is Alawite and is viewed as a

heretical sect within Islam. The movement is being assisted by the Shi'a Iranian government and non-state actors Lebanese Hezbollah and a number of Iraqi Shi'a militiamen. Additionally, widely disseminated images of brutality evoke visceral emotions to provide help, especially when added to the fact overt response to the tragedy -- whether by Western governments or Arab regimes – is limited. Many feel it is a duty upon themselves in solidarity with their fellow Sunni Muslim brothers and sisters in Syria to help out and fight the Assad regime.

5-Star Jihad Appeal: To many, the Syrian jihad is viewed as a “cool” and easy place to go and participate when compared with the mountains or deserts of Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, or Mali. In Syria, for example, many foreigners have lived in villas with pools and ones that have a video game room.

Religious- Historical and Millenarian Pull: The fact that the seat of the Caliphate was once based in Damascus provides a strong motivation for those who hope once again that the Caliphate will be resurrected. Additionally, Islamic eschatology on the end of times prophecies loom large since the key battles are located in the Levant, with some of the foreign fighters believing they are bringing about the Day of Judgment. It should also be noted that Jabhat al-Nusra's media outlet is named al-Manara al-Bayda (the White Minaret). This is in reference to minaret at the Grand Mosque in Damascus that Jesus is allegedly supposed to descend from to then take on the dajjal (the false messiah) to hasten God's judgment.

Anti-Shi'a Sentiment: Such sentiment has become more prevalent as the conflict has evolved due to two key dynamics: first, the assistance by the Shi'a foreign contingent of Iran's IRGC, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi militiamen for the Assad regime. The second factor is the radicalization of many fighting forces within the rebel ranks into Salafism, which is anti-Shi'a from the basics of its doctrine.

RETURNING HOME: WHAT NEXT?

Placing the Syrian War's Sunni Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Historical Context

Looking back at and comparing what occurred after the anti-Soviet jihad – which in many ways has similar ingredients to the current Syrian jihad may provide clues as to how better to respond to this phenomenon. It may also help us better understand how things could unfold as more foreigners begin to return to their home countries or move on to other insurgencies abroad.

Legacy of the “Afghan Arabs”: In the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s, veterans of the Afghan war began making their mark on society when they returned back home or on a global stage in the case of al-Qaeda. Local insurgencies were born in Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, Libya, Uzbekistan, and Yemen partially or fully as a direct consequence of the experiences gained on the ground in Afghanistan. This allowed many Islamists and jihadists to exchange notes on methodologies and best practices. Likewise, a number of national groups have been established inside of Syria. Similar to the groups that were formed or used Afghanistan as a training ground in the 1980s and 1990s, some in Syria are openly claiming they will use their new skills when they return home. Groupings include foreign fighters from Chechnya, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Tunisia, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan among others.

Factors Contributing to Disruptive Impact of Returning Fighters: As compared to the post Afghan-war growth in militancy and violence in the 1990s, the possibility exists that what comes out of Syria could be far worse. Contributing factors are:

**Mature Networks:* As noted earlier, these foreign fighter networks are not being created from scratch. Individuals do not need to establish nascent movements when they return home since there are already many such groups, especially in the Arab world and Western Europe.

**Other Insurgencies:* For some fighters can simply go back home and continue their fight in conflicts that are already raging instead of trying to spark new ones. For example, there are already opportunities that exist to do so on varying scales in Iraq, Libya, the Sinai/Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen.

**Weaker Governments:* Unlike in the 1990s when the Qadhafis, Ben Alis, and Mubaraks were in power and were able to crush the insurgents, these countries are far more fragile now (though no one should be lauding the tactics of these former regimes). Because of the vacuum in Libya, the delicate Tunisian political and security context, as well as Egypt's facade of stability, dealing with such issues now are more difficult tasks.

**Lack of Legal Frameworks:* A number of governments, especially in northern Europe, are new to dealing with a returning jihadi problem. As a consequence, few or limited legal impediments exist to deter or sanction those who join up with terrorist entities. This creates the potential for individuals when they come home to freely recruit or proselytize based on their new “cool” war stories.

**Existence of Truly Battle-Hardened Veterans:* Many joined up for the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad of the 1980s, but many who participated did not actually see combat or only had superficial training. Some of these foreign fighters just went to Peshawar, Pakistan to be a part of the sub-culture and/or travelled across the border into Afghanistan shortly for photo opportunities with weapons and saw no real combat action. In contrast in Syria, a large portion of those who have gone and returned have been trained in light weapons, bomb-making, and other lethal skills.

One already sees spillover fighter activity in Iraq and Lebanon as well as attacks in Egypt and Tunisia, along with plots in a number of European countries, and Saudis returning to Yemen to join up with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

RESPONSES

Due to the unprecedented number of individuals going to fight abroad in Syria and the concern that most Western European countries have about violence at home, there are a growing number of states are crafting targeted legal responses and initiatives to respond to the foreign fighter phenomenon. Some examples include:

United Kingdom: In some instances, the UK removed recruitment material from the Internet.

Placing the Syrian War's Sunni Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Historical Context

Additionally, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been putting money into a social-media program aimed at deterring British citizens from traveling to Syria to fight. Britain is also partnering with charitable organizations to begin a campaign to prevent young people from leaving and as well as meeting specifically with those who are feared to travel to Syria.

France: France launched a new counter-radicalization program in October 2013, and recently announced an expansion of the program with 20 additional measures, including a plan to stop minors from leaving France without parental consent; increased surveillance of Islamist websites that recruit fighters; and, a system to encourage parents to identify and report suspicious behavior in their children.

Germany: Germany has banned three different Salafi organizations for providing recruitment networks for groups fighting in Syria, and an official has proposed setting up a network of telephone hotlines and counseling centers to enable friends and relatives to report radicalized young men as an early warning system.

Netherlands: The Netherlands banned a number of specified fighters from returning home, used ankle bracelets to track those who have returned from Syria, and made preparing to travel to Syria to participate in jihad is a crime.

Additionally, countries like Australia have revoked individuals' passports to prevent citizens from going to fight in Syria or to prevent them from returning home. Some Arab countries have addressed the option of potential amnesty programs. Both ideas could be on the table in Western Europe, too.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian conflict has created a once-in-a-generation foreign fighter mobilization in the same vein as 1980s Afghanistan, but on a much larger scale. The developed nature of these networks and growth in numbers of individuals involved in these activities as well suggests that a new generation of battle-hardened jihadists will attempt to destabilize, play spoiler, or plan terrorist attacks in the Arab world and Western Europe. The time frame and the potency of such activities are unpredictable, but worrisome to decision makers.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information, please contact:

Aaron Y. Zelin -- Richard Borow, Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Rena and Sami David, Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence
Email: Azelin@washingtoninstitute.org
Phone: 1 (202) 452-0650

Combating Terrorism Working Group Co-Chairs

Richard Prosen, prosenr@state.gov

Dr. John Schindler, john.schindler@usnwc.edu

OR

The Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes Operations Staff:

pfpcconsortium@marshallcenter.org

For more, visit www.pfpcconsortium.com
On Twitter @pfpcconsortium