



Foreign Fighter Motivations

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Syria (and now Iraq) has seen an unprecedented number of Sunni foreign fighters join up with a number of groups, including designated terrorist organizations The Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra. According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, it is believed that up to 20,000 individuals have come since the conflict began in summer 2011. Among this cadre, 4,000 are believed to be Western foreign fighters. The rapidity and size of this mobilization is far quicker and larger than even the famous case of Afghanistan in the 1980s during the Soviet occupation.

Historically, if one looks at returning Western foreign fighters from these battle zones, according to Norwegian academic Thomas Hegghammer, between 1990-2010, at most, 1/9 individuals were then involved in a domestic terrorism plot. Each conflict though has provided different percentages, which Hegghammer attributes to whether the key organization in the particular safe haven is interested in conducting external operations as its main prior, illustrating differences between al-Qaeda Central and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula on the one hand and al-Qaeda in Iraq or Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin on the other. Within Syria, there is at least one group, Jabhat al-Nusra, that seeks to conduct directed external operations. Questions still remain about The Islamic State's interest beyond trying to inspire homegrown to do-it-yourself attacks.

Syria still remains an open conflict meaning that new individuals continue to be motivated to go, which then subsequently suggests that there will potentially be more individuals that could be involved in a returnee terrorist attack. In the same study on Western Muslim foreign fighters, Hegghammer noted that compared to a self-starter with no training abroad, returnee plots are deadlier and more sophisticated. It should be caveated though that the 4,000 number is a bit deceiving. For one, it includes how many people have gone since 2011, not necessarily how many people are there currently. It's impossible to get that type of census. Further, among that number in the early parts of the conflict individuals did not fight with jihadi organizations. Additionally, it doesn't account or subtract from it those that have been killed or arrested, which probably is 15-30% of them. Nor does it factor in that some governments include wives and children that are not fighting, which does not necessarily mean they wouldn't be in a plot, but decreases the likelihood. And lastly, some governmental figures include those who are believed to be in transit and/or thinking about going. As a result, while the numbers remain unprecedented however one analyzes it, it is not nearly as dire as how it can be portrayed in the media, especially if the trend of 1/9 remains.

That said, due to the unprecedented nature, many Western European countries' intelligence and law enforcement agencies are stretched thin on resources, which is why it is such a concern even if one parses the numbers. The recent case of the attacks in Paris only further illustrates the issue since assets were refocused on the foreign fighter problem in Syria instead of old returnees from the Yemen jihad. The fact that the Syrian (and Iraqi) conflict continues will only make this overextension of resources even more difficult. The reality is, no matter how many counterterrorism measures are done, so long as there is an appeal for individuals to go to Syria, they will likely continue to go. Therefore, it's important to understand some of the structural and motivational factors for why individuals go and it has been successful. With that knowledge, one can try and target certain aspects of these issues. So what has caused this enormous flow of foreign fighters to Syria and then subsequently Iraq?

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 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.

Action Plan: information sharing, revoking passports, deporting non-citizens, sting operations, targeting logistics and facilitation networks.

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. Unlike now where Turkey as seen as the base of logistics and facilitation, last decade during the Iraq war, Syria played that role, therefore, there were already assets ready to fill any new mobilizing structure. Additionally, 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.

Action Plan: banning local jihadi organizations that have known ties to terrorism and therefore not allowing them to organize or proselytize, targeting logistics and facilitation networks, and provide opportunity for individuals to repent.

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 liked-minded individuals to “follow” or “friend,” making such groups relatively easy to find through their algorithms. Social media has also created a home and space for social cohesion amongst online jihadis that cement relationships and push one another for the cause as well as motivating for some to actually go to Syria.

Action Plan: take down accounts, gather information, sharing updated list of key players, counter messaging, build a troll army in multiple languages, flooding hashtags, building relations with technology companies

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. While this remains an important element, over time as the conflict has evolved it has become less of a motivating factor at least with the jihadis.

Action Plan: Not much can be done here unless the Assad regime falls

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 rooms. Therefore, life doesn't seem so bad and provides a level of adventure.

Action Plan: telling stories of disillusioned fighters in the media and counter messaging with how life truly is living under jihadi governance from multiple past cases (Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Mali, and Syria)/highlighting how much better life is to live in one's home country.

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.

Action Plan: cede ground to mainstream Muslim actors to deal with these arguments

Anti-Shi'a Sentiment: Such sentiment has become more prevalent as the conflict has evolved due to two key main 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.

Action Plan: Not much can be done here unless the Assad regime falls and/or Iran/Hizballah/Iraqi Shia militias decide to stop, which is inconceivable.

Caliphate Project: Since the Islamic State announced itself as a Caliphate in June 2014, it has been able to recruit a wider diversity of individuals. Part of this is because it is now interested in a state-building project, which needs more than just fighters. As a result, in its messaging it has called for administrators, doctors, engineers, computer science, and graphic design, among others to help build up its proto-state. As a result, this has widened the potential pool of recruits since those that might have been apprehensive about being fighters

and were fine with being online grassroots activists and cheerleaders now felt that they had a role. Moreover, because this was about creating a state and putting down roots it also encouraged families and individuals that had girlfriends or wives to join up and as a result altered what it necessarily meant to be a foreign fighter since not all of these individuals were fighting at all, but rather taking part in the daily maintenance and life of society within the Islamic State's territory.

Action Plan: contract the territory of the Islamic State, compare life in the Islamic State versus home countries, making sure youth are engaged at home economically, socially, and politically, and living up to our liberal value.

Of course, not all of these plans are feasible and some might not be politically or legally possible depending on each country's history and system. There could also be second and third order consequences to some of these measures as well. There is not one silver bullet though and even if everything worked perfectly, there would still likely be a jihadi movement and individuals interested in going abroad to fight. Therefore, expectations of completely solving this issue should not be too great or ambitious. Rather, one should focus on chipping away at low hanging fruit and slowly moving from there onto some of the more challenging aspects, which hopefully by then things will have worked, then creating more momentum and potential buy-in. This challenge will likely remain a vexing issue in the years if not decade or so to come.