

# Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS:

## A European Perspective

This Research Paper by Dr. Alex P. Schmid opens with a brief exposition of the foreign (terrorist) fighter (FTF) phenomenon, concentrating on Salafist jihadists and their astonishing growth after the Caliphate was proclaimed in mid-2014. The author then discusses various definitions of FTFs. Subsequently, Dr. Schmid seeks to bring structure and order into the widely diverging estimates of the numbers of foreign fighters. He then identifies problems posed by foreign fighters for European democracies with Muslim diasporas, focusing on the range of motivations driving vulnerable young men and women - mainly second generation immigrants and recent converts to Islam - to join the so-called "Islamic State". Having identified push and pull as well as resilience factors that facilitate or inhibit young Muslims joining ISIS, he argues that stopping them from departing to Syria is not enough; political solutions have to be sought. The principal compiler of the bibliography is Dr. Judith Tinnes. An earlier version of the first part of this Research Report has been published as an ICCT Policy Brief in October 2015.

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## About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

## Summary

This Research Paper (68 pp., incl. eighteen tables and 198 notes) is based on a broad range of open source materials as well as grey literature. Chapter I (Introduction, pp. 5 - 11) opens with a brief exposition of the foreign fighter (FF/FTF) phenomenon, concentrating on Islamist jihadists and their astonishing growth in numbers from less than 1,200 in 2011 to more than 3,500 in 2012, more than 8,500 in 2013, more than 18,000 in 2014 to more than 25,000 by September 2015. About thousand foreign fighters per month have joined the so-called “Islamic State” (IS a.k.a. ISIL/ISIS, Daesh or Da’ash) since the declaration of the Caliphate in late June 2014. By late December 2015, up to 30,000 militants from more than 100 countries had gone to Syria, as foreign fighters but battlefield casualties and returnees must have reduced that number considerably. The Research Paper then proceeds (in Chapter II, pp. 11 - 15) to a discussion of various definitions of FTFs, disaggregating the “foreign”, “terrorist” and “fighters” elements of the UN Security Council definition in its resolution 2178 (2014).

Chapter III (pp. 15 - 27) seeks to bring some structure and order into the widely diverging estimates of the numbers of foreign fighters, with tables presenting estimates of the numbers and origin of foreign fighters on the side of the regime of Bashar al Assad as well as estimates, based on various sources, of those fighting for IS. UN estimates on foreign fighters on the insurgent side (mainly IS) are juxtaposed with third party estimates. Subsequently, estimates of FFs originated from the European Union and those coming from various other regions are presented. The ratio of FFs to IS own manpower show a high (but disputed) proportion of foreigners in its ranks – perhaps some 40 percent, and more if the Iraqi fighters in Syria are included. In Chapter IV (pp. 28 – 34) some problems posed by foreign fighters for European democracies with Muslim diasporas are identified; one worrisome feature being the high level of sympathy for IS among some young European Muslims. More than thousand out of some 5,000 foreign fighters originating from the European Union have already returned home. The threats emanating from them are discussed as well as the one posed by those who wanted to join IS but where prevented from leaving their country of residence or citizenship.

Much attention is given in Chapter V (pp. 34 - 40) to the range of motivations driving vulnerable young men and women to join the self-proclaimed Islamic State. From the existing studies on radicalisation, terrorism, violent extremism and foreign fighters, five push factors, seven pull factors promoting, and ten resilience factors preventing, radicalisation are identified. Chapter VI (pp. 40 - 47) addresses the problem of what to do with returning foreign fighters. It suggests that the voices of disillusioned returnees should be utilized more fully in counter-narratives. It then proceeds to lists the steps currently taken by various governments to stop the outflow of young Muslim religious rebels to the lands of jihad. Recommendations of the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF) on FTF are presented and discussed. The Research

Paper takes issue with the suggestion that the FTF phenomenon and violent extremism can be dissociated from religion, arguing that jihad is as much part of the history of Islam as the crusades are part of Christian heritage (some striking parallels to substantiate this point are offered in various footnotes).

The final Chapter VII (pp. 48 - 50) argues that stopping foreign fighters is not enough; solutions have to be found by taking into account the wider picture, including the refugee flows produced by IS and the infiltration of IS sleepers into Europe through Libya and Turkey. The search for micro-solutions on the level of obstructing the exit and transit of foreign fighters to Syria is a reflection of a lack of real political will to challenge the totalitarian Islamic proto-state more forcefully. Breaking IS' aura of military invincibility and developing effective counter-narratives based on what foreign fighters (and jihadi wannabe brides) really face when living under the caliphate are deemed to be more promising ways to reduce the flow of foreign fighters than efforts focusing mainly on border and travel control. The text is followed (pp. 51 - 68) by a bibliography on FFs, the principal compiler of which is Dr. Judith Tinnes. An earlier version of the first part of this Research Report has been published as an ICCT Policy Brief in October 2015.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighter-Estimates-Conceptual-and-Data-Issues-October20152.pdf>.

# Part I

*"...we will conquer Europe one day. It is not a question of if we will conquer Europe, just a matter of when that will happen. But it is certain....For us, there is no such thing as borders. There are only front lines. Our expansion will be perpetual....And the Europeans need to know that when we come, it will not be in a nice way. It will be with our weapons. And those who do not convert to Islam or pay the Islamic tax will be killed". – "Abu Qatada" (Christian Emde), German Foreign Fighter in Syria (2014).<sup>2</sup>*

*"We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah". – Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani al-Shami, Deputy of Al-Baghdadi, in IS propaganda video in Italian language.<sup>3</sup>*

- *"We cannot lose this war because it is fundamentally a war of civilization. It is our society, our civilization that we are defending." - French Prime Minister Manuel Valls.<sup>4</sup>*

## 1. Introduction

West European citizens and residents, often with a second generation immigration background, have, in the recent past, become foreign fighters (FFs) in at least nine countries - Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Chechnya, in Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Mali and, since 2011, in Syria and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> They are part of a stream of mainly Salafist jihadist foreign fighters that has grown since the early 1980s, with some of them moving from one jihad war theatre to the next. Foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> However, the present stream of foreign jihadist fighters to the Levant is unprecedented – unless one wants to go back to the crusades some 900

<sup>2</sup> J. Todenhöfer, *Meine 10 Tage im "Islamischen Staat"* (München: Bertelsmann, 2015), <http://juergentodenhoefer.de/meine-10-tage-im-islamischen-staat/>; translation by J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ. Jihadist Foreign Fighters from A to Z. 200 Essential Facts You Need to Know about Jihadist Expeditionary Warfare in the Middle East* (Baku: Teknur, 2015), p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> T. Hegghammer and P. Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (August 2015), p.16.

<sup>4</sup> S. Kern, "Sex Slaves, Beheadings and Twitter Terrorism: One Month of Islam in Europe: June 2015", *The Gatestone Institute*, 8 August 2015, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/6226/beheadings-twitter-terrorism>.

<sup>5</sup> L. Vidino, "European Foreign Fighters in Syria: Dynamics and Responses", *The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies*, 18 December 2014, p. 1; Eastern Europe has, with the exception of Russia, hardly produced any foreign fighters due to the small number of Muslims, the absence of mosques tolerating jihadist preachers and the lack of non-monitored Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods. – J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.92.

<sup>6</sup> David Malet, author of a monograph on foreign fighters in historical perspective, concludes: "Historically, we can document foreign fighters in close to 100 civil wars since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. We don't have precise data in even the biggest and best documented cases like the Spanish Civil War – which drew, in under three years, double the number that have recently gone to Syria and Iraq – but we can make a conservative estimate that there have been 100,000 foreign fighters worldwide over the past 250 years." D. Malet, "What Does the Evidence Tell Us about the Impact of Foreign Fighters on Home-grown Radicalisation?", *Radicalisation Research Briefing*, <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/malet-foreign-fighters-home-grown-radicalization/>; D. Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 27, no.3 (2015), pp. 455 – 473. Malet puts the number of the International Brigades in the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) at between 30,000 and 60,000 (Ibid., p. 463).

years ago.<sup>7</sup> Up to at least August 2015, between 850 and 1,250 new jihadist volunteers have been travelling to Syria and Iraq from abroad month after month.<sup>8</sup> In the twelve months up to late September 2015, the number of foreign fighters nearly doubled, according to the US Assistant Attorney General, John P. Carlin.<sup>9</sup>

Before the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, some 30,000 Muslim foreign fighters had already taken part in eighteen different conflicts, ranging from Bosnia to Kashmir and the Philippines.<sup>10</sup> Since 2011, more than 25,000 foreign recruits from more than one hundred countries (including, for instance, countries as far away as Argentina, Honduras, Cambodia and South Korea) have been drawn into the conflict in Syria and Iraq alone, notwithstanding the absence of ethnic, cultural or language links with many of them.<sup>11</sup> In December 2015, the Soufan Group in New York came up with an estimate of between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The first crusade of 1096, triggered by a call for military assistance against the Turks to Pope Urban II from the Roman emperor in Byzantium (Constantinople, now: Istanbul) in 1095, managed to rally around 100,000 foreign fighters who took Jerusalem in July 1099. – C. Tyerman, *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), pp.211-212. –The Christian crusades 900 years ago and the Islamist jihad of today have some things in common. While the Christian crusades have sometimes been depicted as an early form of European colonialism, the spirit behind them was in some way comparable to the one that seems to drive many of present-day jihadists. Here is what Thomas Madden, a historian of the Middle Ages, concluded with regard to the Crusades: "...scholars...have exploded the old myth that crusaders were Europe's second sons, landless men leaving home to seek profit and wealth wherever it could be found or plundered. On the contrary, we now know that the costs of crusading were staggering. This has led many historians to the conclusion that the overriding motivation for crusaders to the East was not greed but pious idealism. Crusaders truly believed that in endeavouring to expel Muslim conquerors from formerly Christian lands, they were doing God's will. Crusading was, for them, an act of charity and love through which they sought to do penance for their sins and thereby merit eternal life."- T.F. Madden, ed., *Crusade* (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2008), p.11 - Madden, Director of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Saint Louis University, synthesizing newer literature on the Crusades. – There are parallels between the jihadist foreign fighters phenomenon and the crusades, which were lasting longer and were more costly than what we have seen so far since the collapse of the Arab Spring. The first crusade alone saw about one hundred thousand foreign fighters heading for the holy land and the fourth (but not last) crusade ended with the slaughter of thousands of Christians in Acra in Western Galilee. There were other crusades like the Shepherds' crusade and the Children's crusade. As far as returnees were concerned, the two Children's crusades saw fewest of them coming home since they were only "armed" with their innocence. The information about these crusades is poor but some sources indicate that out of 20,000 German children who tried to reach the Holy Land in 1212 only 200 returned. The French Children's crusade saw even bigger tragedy: only one out of 30,000 children was returning home, the rest of them had been sold into slavery or perished under way without ever reaching Jerusalem. Among the returning adults of other crusades, some had seen enough violence to refrain from it for the rest of their lives. One of those returning "foreign fighters" from the fifth crusade who turned into an advocate of peace and understanding was Francis of Assisi (1181/82 -1226) – J. Schäfer, *Ökumenisches Heiligenlexikon. Lemma Franziskus von Assisi* (Stuttgart: Eigenverlag, n.d.), [https://www.heiligenlexikon.de/BiographienF/Franziskus\\_von\\_Assisi.htm](https://www.heiligenlexikon.de/BiographienF/Franziskus_von_Assisi.htm); He engaged in good deeds when back in Italy and became a saint. The current pope is named after him.

<sup>8</sup> R. Hall, "The U.S. Has Been Bombing the Islamic State for a Year. What Has Been Achieved?", *Global Post*, <http://theweek.com/articles/571084/been-bombing-islamic-state-year-what-been-achieved> – US efforts to create an army of moderates have so far been unsuccessful. As Richard Hall writes "Most moderate rebel groups in Syria have been forced out by better-funded and more extremist factions as the war has dragged on. A \$500 million US program to train and equip Sunni Syrian rebels to fight IS has vetted a grand total of 60 fighters. Many of them have already been captured or killed" (ibid.).

<sup>9</sup> National Security Division, "Assistant Attorney General John P. Carlin Delivers Remarks at the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law's Event on More Effective Responses to the Foreign Terrorist Fighter Threat", *Department of Justice*, 28 September 2015, [http://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/assistant-attorney-general-john-p-carlin-delivers-remarks-international-institute-justice?utm\\_source=%20Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm\\_term=%252ASituati on%20Report](http://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/assistant-attorney-general-john-p-carlin-delivers-remarks-international-institute-justice?utm_source=%20Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%252ASituati on%20Report).

<sup>10</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> I. Daniels, ed., *Dealing with Muslim Radicalisation. An Analysis of the Strategies of Belgium, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom*. The Hague: CTC Theses, 13 January 2015, p. 17; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 254; US Congress, *Homeland Security Committee Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel*, Washington, D.C.: Bi-partisan Congressional Committee, 29 September 2019, p.12; J.E. Arasli, op. cit., p. 254; E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts", *New York Times*, 26 September 2015.

<sup>12</sup> The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters. An Update: Intel Brief* (New York: The Soufan Group, 7 December 2015).

In its short existence, the so-called “Islamic State” (IS a.k.a. ISIL/ISIS, Daesh or Da'ash) claims to have won the adherence of jihadist groups of various sizes in more than ten countries where IS claims to be establishing 36 provinces (*wilayat*).<sup>13</sup> More than half of all countries - Muslim-majority countries and non-Muslim countries -today generate foreign fighters for jihad war zones<sup>14</sup>. Western foreign fighters are said to account for nearly one fifth of all foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Since the proclamation of the Caliphate (*khilafa* - which had been annulled by the Turkish republic of Kemal Ataturk in 1924) on the first day of Ramadan, 29 June 2014, by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (a.k.a. Caliph Ibrahim al-Qureishi), the flow of foreign fighters has increased over the next nine months by 70 percent, according to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon.<sup>16</sup> Despite more than a year of mainly aerial attacks on targets in Syria and Iraq by ten states (8,289 by November 19, 2015 of which 6,471 by U.S. air force and the remainder by the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and others) out of a loose Global Coalition to counter IS, consisting of more than 60 anti-IS states and partner organisations<sup>17</sup>, and despite the reported loss of 10-15,000 IS fighters, the self-proclaimed rogue state has, according to American intelligence sources, not become visibly weakened compared to a year ago.<sup>18</sup> It now controls part of northern Iraq and about half of Syria to various extends, ruling over at least six million people. Credible estimates of IS' military fighters' size have more than doubled; with one estimate putting the number at least 70,000.<sup>19</sup> The well-informed Palestinian journalist Abdel

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, “The Mystery of ISIS”, *The New York Review of Books*, 13 August 2015; C. Lister, “A Long Way from Success: Assessing the War on the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p.3. Beyond Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State is said to have a foothold in Afghanistan, the Gaza stroke, the Golan Heights, Egypt (Sinai), India, Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Afghanistan, Algeria, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, The Philippines, Russia (North Caucasus), Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, the West Bank and Yemen. – For a list of groups pledging allegiance and/or support to IS, see S. Unwin, *Overview – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*, 15 August 2015, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/overview-islamic-state-iraq-levant-isil-syria-isis-steve-unwin-msc?trk=hp-feed-article-title-publish>.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations, (S/2015/358) *Analysis and Recommendations with Regard to the Global Threat from Foreign Terrorist Fighters (Report prepared by the 1267 Committee)*, 19 May 2015, p. 3, [www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1508457\\_EN.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1508457_EN.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> ICRS data as quoted in S. Sharma, “Map: How the Flow of Foreign Fighters to Iraq and Syria Has Surged Since October”, *The Washington Post*, 27 January 2015,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/01/27/map-how-the-flow-of-foreign-fighters-to-iraq-and-syria-has-surged-since-october/>; C. McCauley, “Western Muslims Volunteering to Fight in Syria and Iraq: Why Do They Go, and What Should We Do?”, *Freedom From Fear Magazine*, no. 11 (2015), <http://ff3magazine.unicri.it/?p=1073>.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, *Secretary-General's Remarks to Security Council Meeting on Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts (Foreign Terrorist Fighters)*, New York, 2015, [http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments\\_full.asp?statID=2632#.Vi9WPmeFOig](http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments_full.asp?statID=2632#.Vi9WPmeFOig).

<sup>17</sup> For a brief record of achievement, see: K.J. McInnes, “Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State”, *Congressional Research Service Report 7-5700*, 4 August 2015,

<https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44135.pdf>. Participants in the coalition include: Albania, the Arab League, Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, the European Union, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Oman, Panama, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Somalia, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States. (Ibid., p. 1). The lead states for addressing the FTF are the Netherlands and Turkey. The Netherlands is also the 3<sup>rd</sup> most active country in the air war against IS, fielding 250 personnel, 6 F-16 aircrafts plus two reserve aircrafts (Ibid., p. 4). – F. Lambert, “Pentagon Sending Additional Special Operation Forces to Iraq”, *UPI*, 1 December 2015.

<sup>18</sup> “We have seen no meaningful degradation in their numbers”, a US defence official noted, citing intelligence estimates that put the strength of IS at between 20,000 and 30,000, like in August 2014. Report by Sarah A. Carter, reporter at the American Media Institute: S.A. Carter, “Despite Bombing, Islamic State is no Weaker than a Year Ago”, *USA Today*, 31 July 2015, [www.todayonline.com/world/middle-east/despite-bombing-islamic-state-no-weaker-year-ago?singlepage=true](http://www.todayonline.com/world/middle-east/despite-bombing-islamic-state-no-weaker-year-ago?singlepage=true).

<sup>19</sup> “The Propaganda War”, *The Economist*, 15 August 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21660989-terrorists-vicious-message-surprisingly-hard-rebut-propaganda-war?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/ThePropagandaWar> – In June 2015, the CIA had put the number of IS fighters at “as many as 7-10,000” [sic]. – A.B. Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi, 2015), p.127,

Bari Atwan, who visited the Islamic State in late 2014 holds that the number of jihadists in the region is “significantly larger” than 100,000 with more than one third of them being foreigners. He also labelled “around 30,000 foreign fighter” a “modest estimate”.<sup>20</sup> While in the early phase of the conflict most foreign fighter joined the Al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra front, it is thought that up to 80 percent of foreign fighters are now part of IS since IS moved into Syria in May 2013.<sup>21</sup>

The Islamic State is an intensely ‘ideological project’, aggressive and transnational in character, fed by an extremist jihadist movement that has declared war on the non-Muslim world and large sections of the Muslim world (e.g. Shiites) too.<sup>22</sup> As a Salafist movement it is pan-Islamic in orientation and seeks to unite the *ummah*, the imagined community of Muslims, using some of the same practices as the pious ancestors (*salafi*) who in the golden age of Islam engaged in the great conquest (*Fatah al-Futuh*) that expanded Islam’s rule to India in the east and Spain in the west.<sup>23</sup> The goal of IS is revolutionary and apocalyptic at the same time in that it seeks nothing less than to overthrow the existing world order in order to bring about *al-Malhama* (i.e. Armageddon, the final battle against the False Messiah [*Dajjal* – the eschatological Deceiver, the Muslim equivalent of anti-Christ]).<sup>24</sup> In its own words, the Islamic State seeks to “...take[s] over the entire world and behead[s] every last person that rebels against Allah”<sup>25</sup>. IS does not mince its words. IS top spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, encouraged Muslims in the West in September 2014 in a fatwa-like pronouncement:

“The best thing you can do is to make an effort to kill an infidel, French, American, or any other of their allies....Smash his head with a rock, slaughter him with a knife, run him over with a car throw him from a high place, choke him or poison him”.<sup>26</sup>

One would think that such a megalomaniacal genocidal program of a totalitarian proto-state would meet massive resistance from the entire civilized world and that IS has few supporters. However, neither the former nor the latter is true. Too many people in the West do not take the imperialist program of IS seriously - something

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<http://www.guardian.com/world/2014/jun/16>.

<sup>20</sup> A.B. Atwan, *Islamic State*, p.168.

<sup>21</sup> G. Steinberg, *Kalifat des Schreckens: IS und die Bedrohung Durch den Islamitischen Terror* (München: Knaur, 2015), p.151.

<sup>22</sup> A. Kissler, “Der IS Köpft, Der Westen Schweigt”, *Cicero Magazin für politische Kultur*, 11 August 2015, [www.cicero.de/weltbuehne/terror-und-verteidigung-hat-der-westen-vor-dem-islamischen-staat-kapituliert/59694](http://www.cicero.de/weltbuehne/terror-und-verteidigung-hat-der-westen-vor-dem-islamischen-staat-kapituliert/59694).

<sup>23</sup> A. Waldeck, *The Ideology of ISIS: A Motivation for Europeans to Become Foreign Fighters?*, Tre Kroner Roskilde: Roskilde University Master Thesis, 2015, p. 11, <http://rudar.ruc.dk/bitstream/1800/23885/1/Master%20thesis%20Annika%20Waldeck.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> J.M. Berger, “The Metronome of Apocalyptic Time: Social Media as Carrier Wave for Millenarian Contagion”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> The quote is from a 32 pages long Urdu document found in Pakistan, which is titled “A Brief History of the Islamic State Caliphate (ISC), The Caliphate According to the Prophet”. The exact quote in translation is: “Accept the fact that this caliphate will survive and prosper until it takes over the entire world and beheads every last person that rebels against Allah. This is the bitter truth, swallow it”. The document says that “preparations” for an attack in India are underway and predicts that an attack will provoke an apocalyptic confrontation with America: “Even is the U.S. tries to attack with all its allies, which undoubtedly it will, the ummah will be united, resulting in the final battle”. – Islamic State document reveals plan to bring ‘end of the world’, by I.H. Staff, *ISRAEL HAYOM*, 31 July 2015, [www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter\\_article.php?id=27255](http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=27255).

<sup>26</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 84 & p.132.

that was probably also true for many of those more than six million people who did (or could) not flee when IS advanced in Syria and Iraq, people who now have been subjugated by this ultraorthodox, puritanical organization that is ruling with an iron fist. Surprisingly large sectors of the public in the West, especially young people, are supportive of IS:

“In August 2014 at least 15% of the roughly 1,000 French polled on the topic responded favorably to the IS harsh tactic towards their adversaries (other figures indicated even higher level of support from young French – 27%). 14% of Brits aged between eighteen and 24 had a degree of affinity or positive attitude towards the IS, according to a poll conducted in the UK in October. In comparison only 12 % of the 25-34 age groups expressed support for IS”. (...) Another illustration is results of a survey conducted by the *Motivaction* group in Amsterdam in November 2014: 80 % of 300 polled young Dutch Turks saw nothing wrong in jihad; 90 % thought of IS’ fighters as “heroes”.<sup>27</sup>

The attraction of IS for foreign fighters has not visibly diminished - despite IS’ record of crimes against humanity, war crimes and attempted genocide. The motto of IS is “remaining and expanding” (*baqiya wa tatamaddad*) and so far it has lived up to this: by June 2015 it controlled an area some 82,940 square kilometres<sup>28</sup>, inhabited originally by up to ten million people (of which hundreds of thousands fled). Christians, who traditionally constituted almost 15 percent of the population in the Middle East, have been persecuted, killed or driven away by IS and similar jihadist movements in the past and now constitute less than 5 percent.<sup>29</sup> In Syria, one third of its Christians, about 600,000, had to escape when the Al-Qaeda linked al-Nusra and IS extended their territorial control into their traditional strongholds.<sup>30</sup> While there exists, on paper, a coalition of more than sixty anti-IS states, only ten of them have gone much beyond rhetoric. Yet their military reaction – consisting mainly of aerial bombardments – has not had much impact so far, producing at best a kind of stalemate.<sup>31</sup> The recent arrival of the Russian air force and Iranian ground forces have, by December 2015, not brought a significant reversal on the battlefield but the regime has regained the initiative in some parts of the country, with its roughly

<sup>27</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.114 & p.132. While the methodology of some of these opinion polls can be questioned, the fact remains that sizeable parts of Muslim diaspora youth in the West are sympathetic to the idea of a caliphate and the idea of defending it.

<sup>28</sup> R. Hall, “The U.S. Has Been Bombing the Islamic State for a Year. What Has Been Achieved?”, *Global Post*, <http://theweek.com/articles/571084/been-bombing-islamic-state-year-what-been-achieved>.

However, lately IS has lost part of the territories it controlled in Iraq at one time. On the other hand, it conquered several new cities in Syria and continues to stage suicide bombings even in Iraq’s capital. IS has also expanded abroad, as local militant groups changed sides from Al-Qaeda to IS.

<sup>29</sup> B.J. Grim, T.M. Johnson, V. Skirbekk and G.A. Zurlo, “Fourfold Drop in Middle East Christian Population, Finds New Demographic Study”, *The Weekly Number*, 8 August 2015, <http://theweeklynumber.com/1/post/2015/08/fourfold-drop-in-middle-east-christian-population-finds-new-demographic-study.html>. This concerns an interview with Gina A. Zurlo, Editor of the Yearbook of International Religious Demography (Leiden: Brill, 2015). In Syria, one third of its Christians, about 600,000, had to escape when the Al-Qaeda linked al-Nusra and IS extended their territorial control into their traditional strongholds. – E. Griswold, “Is this the End of Christianity in the Middle East?”, *The New York Times Magazine*, 22 July 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html?_r=0).

<sup>30</sup> E. Griswold, “Is this the End of Christianity in the Middle East?”, *The New York Times Magazine*, 22 July 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html?_r=0).

<sup>31</sup> J. Wing, “How is the War against the Islamic State Going? 10 Expert Opinions”, *Musings on Iraq*, 19 August 2015, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08/how-is-war-against-islamic-state-going.html>.

100,000 regular troops and as many irregular fighters of local militias collaborating with it.<sup>32</sup> Strange enough, the regime of Assad and IS are not fighting each other – both are fighting the other militant armed groups between them.

A major reason for the success so far of IS have been its foreign fighters – some of them battle-hardened like the between 2,000 and 5,000 Chechens<sup>33</sup> Others, with no battlefield experience, are eager to sacrifice themselves by means of martyrdom operations (suicide attacks), that, as they are told, will allow them the pleasures of paradise (*jannah*) if not the spoils of war on earth. Many foreign fighters are driven by “an apocalyptic end-of-days strategic vision<sup>34</sup>. Such a millenarian fanaticism is not without historical precedents; it could also be found in the Europe of the late Middle Ages and the Reformation.<sup>35</sup> The Salafist-jihadist ideology of IS has a coherence and plausibility that is attractive for many young Muslims who search for identity and meaning in life or want to break with a past characterized by petty crime or drug use. It provides some of those unsure about their place in Western society with a simple belief system and clear rules while promising them an active role as part of a victorious revival of what they are told is original Islam. Feeling excluded from the demanding complex European societies, they are offered the prospect of welcome and acceptance in a state-building community in Syria and Iraq.<sup>36</sup> (More about that later in this Research Paper).

Foreign fighters volunteering to fight in someone else’s war are nothing new but the sheer numbers of those attracted to go to Syria and Iraq is astonishing, even when compared to the numbers of foreign fighters who went to Afghanistan in the 1980s to oppose the Soviet intervention. The figures below are already dated as far as Syria and Iraq are concerned.<sup>37</sup> Once the Caliphate was declared in mid-2014, the figures shot up: 6,000 new recruits were recorded in August 2014 alone, and in subsequent months about thousand foreigners joined IS month after month.<sup>38</sup> Migration (*hijrah*) to the re-established caliphate was declared obligatory by IS and said to forgive all sins. According to IS’ propaganda: “There is no life without jihad and there is no jihad without hijrah”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Figures from Charles Lister, in video on ‘The Syrian Jihad. The Evolution of an Insurgency, <http://t.co/ppQHwQkma>.

<sup>33</sup> The term “Chechens” is often used generically for jihadists from the Northern Caucasus, and includes, in this context, Dagestanis and fighters from Ingushetia. The brutal repression of the originally ethno-nationalist struggle for independence in Chechnya led to an Islamisation of the struggle and to the wish to confront Russia on other fronts like Syria and, more recently, in the eastern Ukraine.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dempsey; S. Ackerman, “Apocalyptic Isis Beyond Anything We’ve Seen, Say US Defense Chiefs”, *The Guardian*, 21 August 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/21/isis-us-military-iraq-strikes-threat-apocalyptic>.

<sup>35</sup> N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revolutionary Messianism in the Middle Ages and Its Bearings on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (London: Mercury Books, 1962).

<sup>36</sup> A. Waldeck, *The Ideology of ISIS: A Motivation for Europeans to Become Foreign Fighters?*, Trekrone Roskilde: Roskilde University Master Thesis, 2015, p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> B. Peeters, *Choosing Battles: A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilizations (1980-2014)*. Utrecht: University Master Thesis, August 2014, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.119; E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, “Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts”, *New York Times*, 26 September 2015.

<sup>39</sup> A. Waldeck, *The Ideology of ISIS: A Motivation for Europeans to Become Foreign Fighters?*, Trekrone Roskilde: Roskilde University Master Thesis, 2015, pp. 57 - 59.

Conflict	Number of Foreign Fighters
Afghanistan (1978 – 1992)	5,000 - 10,000
Bosnia (1992- 1995)	1,000 - 3,000
Somalia (1993 – 2014)	250 - 450
Chechnya (1994 – 2009)	200 - 700
Afghanistan (2001-2014)	1,000 - 1,500
Iraq (2003-2014)	4,000 - 6,000
Syria (2011 – 2014)	10,000

**Table 1:** Number of Foreign Fighters in Various Conflicts in the Recent Past

Usually foreign fighters are a minority in a civil war. However, in the case of IS in Syria they constitute, perhaps 40 percent if not more of all IS fighters, which is unique.<sup>40</sup> Many people under the rule of IS in Syria have begun to see them as an occupation force, enjoying privileges way above those granted to the local population.

## 2. Definitions of Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters

What is a “foreign fighter” and who are the men who want to take this path? The term deserves a moment of reflection. David Malet, author of a monograph on foreign fighters, defines them as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict”.<sup>41</sup> Such a “dry” definition makes one wonder why would young men (and some women too) – most of whom have never held a gun in their hands - risk their lives for a country that is not theirs and of which they often do not even understand the language and culture. After all, it is hard enough to die for one’s own country, let alone a foreign one. What makes them tick? We will turn to answer this question in the second half of this Research Paper. First we have to come to grips with the concept of “foreign fighters”. We will do so with a focus on jihadist foreign fighters in Syria, leaving aside those who have joined the Alawite regime in Damascus or the Kurds in the north of the country.

To begin with, we have to realise that the cause these “foreign fighters” purport to fight for might not be so “foreign” after all. If most foreign fighters are Muslims: does that make them “foreign” in a conflict that is supposedly about key Muslim concerns? Only if we take Western-origin state citizenship as reference framework, we create “foreigners”. While one third or more of IS’ fighters are foreign born (that is, they are not Syrian or Iraqis)<sup>42</sup> about 70 percent of them are Muslims from the Arab Middle East and North Africa’s Maghreb region. Another 20 percent of the foreign fighters are

<sup>40</sup> C. McCauley, “Western Muslims Volunteering to Fight in Syria and Iraq: Why Do They Go, and What Should We Do?” (2015). The 40 percent estimate refers to 2013 when IS military formations were estimated to consist of only 4-5,000 fighters. At the level of leadership the number of foreigners in IS in Syria was double – 80 percent - most of them Iraqis, often led by officers from the Baath regime of Saddam Hussein – J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 118.

<sup>41</sup> D. Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts* (Oxford: University Press, 2013), p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> CNN, “How Foreign Fighters are Swelling ISIS Ranks in Startling Numbers”, *Kiii-TV*, <http://www.kiiitv.com/story/26519130/how-foreign-fighters-are-swelling-isis-ranks-in-startling-numbers>.

the sons of immigrants to Europe coming from Muslim countries as far apart as Central Asia and Morocco.<sup>43</sup> Against this backdrop, a definition proposed by Jahangir Arasli, an Azerbaijani intelligence analyst, makes more sense than the one of David Malet:

“A foreign Islamist fighter is a volunteer combatant actor with no apparent link to the area of the ongoing armed conflict yet bound to it by his sense of the perceived Muslim religious duty”<sup>44</sup>

The Geneva-based Academy of International Law and Human Rights, in turn, defines a foreign fighter as an “individual who leaves his or her country of origin or habitual residence to join a non-state armed group in an armed conflict abroad and who is primarily motivated by ideology, religion and/or kinship”.<sup>45</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, a Norwegian scholar, on the other hand, defines the foreign fighter as “an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organisation; and (4) is unpaid”.<sup>46</sup> EUROPOL, the The Hague-based regional police organisation, defines foreign fighters as “individuals motivated by religion, who leave their country of origin in order to train, fights or perform extremist activities in war zones”.<sup>47</sup>

From these definitions it would seem that foreign fighters are mainly *religious* fighters. Yet that emphasis is, perhaps due to the voting strength of Muslim states in the United Nations’ General Assembly, considered “politically incorrect”. Rather than speaking about foreign *religious* or foreign *Islamist* fighters, in September 2014, the UN Security Council chose to describe foreign fighters - or at least some of them - as “Foreign *Terrorist* Fighters”. The Security Council defined them in its resolution 2178 in a rather convoluted way as

“.... nationals who travel or attempt to travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, and other individuals who travel or attempt to travel from their territories to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts, or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict”.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> S. Mullins, “Foreign Fighters in Syria”, *per Concordiam*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2014), p.36,

[http://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/MCDOcs/files/College/F\\_Publications/perConcordiam/pC\\_V5N3\\_en.pdf](http://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/MCDOcs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordiam/pC_V5N3_en.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 69.

<sup>45</sup> Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, *Academy Briefing No. 7: Foreign Fighters Under International Law* (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2014), p. 7,

<http://www.geneva-academy.ch/docs/publications/Briefings%20and%20In%20breifs/Foreign%20Fighters%20Under%20International%20Law%20Briefing%20no7.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> T. Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters”, *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2010/2011), pp. 57 - 58; S. Gates and S. Podder, “Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p. 107.

<sup>47</sup> V. Azinovic and M. Jusic, *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters’ Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: The Atlantic Initiative, 2015), p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2178 (2014): Adopted by the Security Council at its 7272<sup>nd</sup> meeting, on 24 September 2014, S/RES/2178 (2014)*, [www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2014/shtml](http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2014/shtml).

Since the UN General Assembly never arrived at a universally accepted legal definition of terrorism<sup>49</sup>, there is also ambiguity about the “terrorist” element in foreign *terrorist* fighters.<sup>50</sup> After all, certain types of violence by non-state actors are legal in internationalized armed conflicts, as in resistance against foreign occupation - as long as the rules of international humanitarian law are observed.<sup>51</sup> Arguably, a distinction ought to be made between a legitimate ‘Foreign Fighter’ and an illegitimate Foreign *Terrorist Fighter*, but the Security Council chose not to do so.<sup>52</sup>

It should also be kept in mind that not all who go to Syria are *fighters*, as some of them are women with children following their husband or they are wannabe brides in search of a hero warrior husband “till martyrdom do them part”. (According to estimates from February 2015, there were at least 550 Muslimas from the West living in territories controlled by IS)<sup>53</sup>. However, more realistic estimates put the number of women at no less than 10 percent of foreigners - which would mean that up to 2,500 women went, sometimes with husband and children, to Syria.<sup>54</sup> According to Abdel Bari Atwan, who visited the Islamic State in late 2014 “At least 10 per cent of recruits from abroad are young women who wish to marry jihadist fighters”.<sup>55</sup> A study of the New America Foundation, published in November 2015, found that out of 474 Western militants who had gone to Syria every seventh was a woman, with many of them having familial ties with fighters there.<sup>56</sup> Apart from very rare participation in suicide operations and in acts of self-defense, women are not meant to fight but are

<sup>49</sup> The definition issue has been debated since 1972 in the Ad Hoc Committee on Terrorism of the General Assembly, to no avail. The definition utilised by the 15 member states of the Security Council in the 2004 resolution 1640 lacks the legitimacy, which one coming from the General Assembly with its 193 members would have. While it has no legal standing, the Security Council’s definition is more adequate than the draft definition currently discussed in the General Assembly’s Ad Hoc Committee on Terrorism. The Security Council used this description of terrorism in 2004: “... criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act, and all other acts which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature...”. - Security Council Resolution 1540, 28 September 2004; for a discussion of the UN struggle to find a legal definition, see: A.P. Schmid, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, pp. 50 - 60. New York and London: Routledge, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross noted: “...the term ‘terrorist act’ should be used, in the context of armed conflict, only in relation to the few acts specifically designated as such under the treaties of IHL. It should not be used to describe acts that are lawful or not prohibited by IHL. While there is clearly an overlap in terms of the prohibition of attacks against civilians and civilian objects under both IHL and domestic law, it is believed that, overall, there are more disadvantages than advantages to additionally designating such acts as ‘terrorist’ when committed in situations of armed conflict (whether under the relevant international legal framework or under domestic law). Thus, with the exception of the few specific acts of terrorism that may take place in armed conflict, it is submitted that the term ‘act of terrorism’ should be reserved for acts of violence committed outside of armed conflict”. International Committee of the Red Cross, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts Report*, Geneva, October 2011, EN 31IC/11/5.1.2, p. 51.

<sup>51</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *International Humanitarian Law and Other Rules Relating to the Conduct of Hostilities: Collection of Treaties and Other Instruments*, Geneva, International Committee of the Red Cross, 1989. War Crimes are, of course, illegal in any type of conflict and since (some) acts of terrorism can be considered “peacetime equivalents of war crimes”, that also applies to terrorism.

<sup>52</sup> One reason for the choice of FTF terminology might be the increasing use of private corporations and mercenaries by governments. See: S. McFate, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order* (Oxford: University Press, 2014).

<sup>53</sup> K. Adam, “Report: Western Women Are Attracted to Islamic State for Complex Reasons”, *Washington Post*, 28 May 2015.

<sup>54</sup> A.B. Atwan, *Islamic State*, p.185; In the case of Germany, for instance, there are an estimated 100 women among the 750 Germans who joined IS, a percentage of 13.3%. “13-jarige Duitser Wilde naar IS”, *Telegraaf*, 29 July 2015.

<sup>55</sup> A.B. Atwan, *Islamic State*, p. 182.

<sup>56</sup> P. Bergen, C. Schuster, and D. Sterman, “ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism” (2015), p.3.

meant to be subservient to men, serving the sexual needs of jihadists, get pregnant, produce “cubs of the Caliphate” and, more generally, act as “cheerleaders” of the Syrian jihad, as Jahangir Arasli put it.<sup>57</sup> The stream of unaccompanied girls and young women to Syria is especially puzzling for nothing better awaits many of them than having to cover their whole bodies (including their eyes) in black, being largely confined to the house (they can only leave with a husband or guardian) and serve the sexual needs of often multiple males. Only those who serve in the morality police and those who man the social media desks where they are tasked to lure more Western women to the Caliphate enjoy a bit more freedom.

Another group that comes from abroad are those Syrian citizens who had left Syria, for instance, as students, before 2012 and later returned to participate in the insurgency in their home country – an insurgency against the Assad regime conducted by well over 100,000 Syrian men who fight in more than hundred factions other than IS – some of whom are linked to al-Qaida while many others are unaffiliated Islamists.<sup>58</sup> Only a small minority of these groups are “secular”, “moderate” and “democratic” as Western powers would wish them as partners in the fight against the ruthless Assad regime and the even more ruthless Islamic State. Some of the Syrian returnees may or may not turn “terrorist”. In other words, question marks can be raised with regard to all three elements of the Security Council’s conceptualisation of “Foreign Terrorist Fighters” (FTFs): “foreign”, “terrorist” “fighters”. This issue is also related to the way the conflict is categorised.

Is it primarily a Sunni-Shiite armed conflict<sup>59</sup> comparable in some ways to the Catholic-Protestant conflict that cost some four million lives in Western Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and lasted thirty years (1618-1648)? Or should we compare it with the Crusades that lasted two centuries (1095 – 1291), costing between one and three million lives?<sup>60</sup> Some analysts think that the current conflict in Syria and beyond is something new, fed strongly by a Salafist-jihadist Islamist movement in Muslim-majority countries and in Western Muslim diasporas, brought together by the power of the same Internet that had also unleashed the Arab Spring.<sup>61</sup> What makes the Syrian insurgency and its repression unique is the almost genocidal scale of destruction and displacement: half of the population – almost twelve out of 23 million – has been driven from their homes, over four million as external refugees and 7.6 million internally displaced (often several times), with 12,2 million people in need of

<sup>57</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 313.

<sup>58</sup> The “well over 100,000” figure is from C. Lister, “The West is Walking into the Abyss on Syria”, *Brookings*, 28 September 2015.

<sup>59</sup> The origins of the Shia-Sunni divide, originally linked to the question of rightful succession after the Prophet’s death in 632, has poisoned intra-Muslim relations for more than 1,300 years, with both sides considering the other as heretics. D. Nicolle, *Historical Atlas of the Islamic World* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2003), p. 37.

<sup>60</sup> T.F. Madden, ed., *Crusade* (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2008), p.11 & 214. Some historians put the end of the crusades not at the date of the fall of Acra in 1291 but look at other crusades not only those focused on the recovery of the holy land. – Cf. C. Tyerman, *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), pp. 211 – 217.

<sup>61</sup> A paper of the Partnership for Peace Consortium referred to this conflict in these terms: “In many respects, Syria is the first large-scale socially mediated war”. – Partnership for Peace Consortium. Sunni Foreign Fighters in Syria: Background, Facilitating Factors and Selected Responses. Partnership for Peace Consortium, *Combating Terrorism Working Group Background Paper No.1*, 21 May 2014, p.2, [www.pfp-consortium.org](http://www.pfp-consortium.org).

humanitarian assistance and a million injured and at least 250,000 people killed, 111,000 of them civilians. Another 600,000 people are starving in siege situations and 80 percent of the people have been impoverished<sup>62</sup>.

### 3. Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters – Estimates of Magnitudes of FFs

An American Congressional bi-partisan report, released in late September 2015, concluded that: “There is currently no comprehensive global database of foreign fighter names. Instead, countries including the U.S. rely on a weak, patchwork system for swapping individual extremist identities “.<sup>63</sup> The information coming out of Syria is often controlled, partisan information. News has become a weapon of psychological warfare. The civil war in Syria has a physical and a virtual reality and the two intersect and interact. Each side in the conflict tends to produce its own “facts” and tries to deny, discredit or distorts information from selected other parties. This is also reflected when it comes to the number of foreign fighters. Estimates vary enormously, sometime the lowest and highest estimates for those originating from one country differing by a factor of 25.<sup>64</sup> The UN Monitoring Team (UN Res. 1267) had already reported in November 2014 that “accurate and reliable data” on FTFs were impossible to obtain but estimated the number as between 15,000 and 20,000 with most of them travelling to join IS. Yet it admitted already then that the number of FTFs could be as high as 30,000.<sup>65</sup>

In the following we shall try to bring some order into this, presenting various data we could find. These are often conflicting and confusing, for instance, when it comes to the ratio between foreign fighters and the non-foreign fighters in IS. Partly this has to do with the fact that the core of IS consists of Iraqi followers of the late Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006) and former Baathist army and intelligence officers of the regime of Saddam Hussein. Strictly speaking they are “foreign fighters” in Syria but not in Iraq.

The current Western focus on foreign fighters in Syria is somewhat blind on one eye, as those Shia and Alawite Muslims and Christians who have gone and continue to go to Syria to support the Bashar al-Assad regime or the Kurdish separatists in the north

<sup>62</sup> Figures from ReliefWeb, *Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O’ Brien – Statement to the Security Council on Yemen, 28 July 2015*, <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-stephen-0> and Mercy Corps, *Quick Facts: What You Need to Know About the Syria Crisis*, 20 July 2015, <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/turkey-iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis> and from “Security Council: Syria ‘largest humanitarian crisis in the world’”, *Al-Monitor*, 24 August 2015; Figure on civilian deaths from C. Lister. “The West is walking into the abyss on Syria”. According to Lister, 95 percent of civilian deaths were caused by the Assad regime.

<sup>63</sup> E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, “Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts”, *New York Times*, 26 September 2015.

<sup>64</sup> E.g. in the case of Italy in tables reproduced by S. Mullins, “Foreign Fighters in Syria”, *per Concordiam*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2014), p. 38, [http://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/MCDocs/files/College/F\\_Publications/perConcordiam/pC\\_V5N3\\_en.pdf](http://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/MCDocs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordiam/pC_V5N3_en.pdf) (S. Mullins used ICRS high and low estimates).

<sup>65</sup> UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, *Action Against Threat of Foreign Terrorist Fighters Must Be Ramped Up, Security Council Urges in High-Level Meeting*, 29 May 2015, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11912.doc.htm>; UN is to publish two more reports, based on the reporting of other than the 21 states covered in its first report.

of the country remain largely uncounted. They are apparently not the primary subject to Western concerns. Presumably this has to do with the fact that they are not deemed a danger when returning to their countries of origin. We only have very rough and dated estimates on the foreign fighters on the Syrian's regime or Kurdish side.<sup>66</sup>

Origin of Foreign Fighters	Number of Foreign Fighters
Iranian	1-2,000 thousand from Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), mostly advisers, instructors, military specialists and "controllers"
Lebanese	5-8,000 Hezbollah fighters (of whom ca. 1,300 killed)
Iraqi	Some 2-3,000 (of whom the majority left; replaced by Afghani Shias of the "Fatemiyoun Brigade" of Hazaras)
Palestinians	Several hundreds (many from the Popular Front of Liberation of Palestine-General Command)
Russian*	Slavic Corps (private military company of 267 members); since late September 2015 also ca. 4,000 Russian military advisors, & air force personnel and troops protecting naval and airbases troops <sup>67</sup>

**Table 2:** Foreign Fighters and Foreign Military Forces on the Side of the Assad Regime

From the above it would appear that the number of foreign fighters who joined the Shia or anti-Assad side of the struggle is smaller than the number of those who joined the Sunni side.<sup>68</sup> However, since the fall of 2015, hundreds of Iranian troops have joined the fight to strengthen Syrian government defences around Damascus since the Assad regime seems to lack enough manpower due to battlefield losses and defections. By the end of August 2015, the regime controlled only seventeen percent of Syria's territory.<sup>69</sup> Since then the Russian intervention allowed it to retake some strategic positions.

<sup>66</sup> Rough estimates from an Israeli colleague, mid-July 2015; M. Levitt, "Waking up the Neighbours. How Regional Intervention is Transforming Hezbollah", *Foreign Affairs*, 23 July 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2015-07-23/waking-neighbors>; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, pp. 228 - 229; F. Tastekin, "Russia's Expanding Military Presence in Syria", *Al-Monitor*, 15 September 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/turkey-syria-russia-changing-rules-game-middle-east.html>.

<sup>67</sup> A figure of 2,000 Russian military was cited by C. Lister, "The West is Walking into the abyss on Syria"; since then Russian military presence has at least doubled. By contrast: the United States had, as of late September 2015, some 3,500 American advisers, trainers and other military personnel in Iraq. – M.R. Gordon, "Russia Surprises U.S. With Accord on Battling ISIS", *New York Times*, 27 September 2015.

<sup>68</sup> A. Lund, "Who are the Foreign Fighters in Syria? An Interview with A. Y. Zelin", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53811>; Wikipedia, *Foreign Rebel Fighters in the Syrian Civil War*, 25 October 2015,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign\\_rebel\\_fighters\\_in\\_the\\_Syrian\\_Civil\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_rebel_fighters_in_the_Syrian_Civil_War). Zelin came to an estimate of not more than 10,000 foreign fighters on the Shia side. However, the well-informed Azerbaijani security and defense analyst J. E. Arasli puts their number at 30-40,000. – J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.229. However, the number of Shia militias from Lebanon involved in the struggle in Syria has been put as high as 25-30,000 (presumably mainly Hezbollah) by Charles Lister. – Figures from Charles Lister in video on "The Syrian Jihad. The Evolution of an Insurgency", <http://t.co/ppQHwQkma>.

<sup>69</sup> According to Agence France Press, as quoted by T. Beemsterboer, "De Toekomst Heeft er Sinds Tijden Niet zo Slecht Uitgezien voor Assad", *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 July 2015 (updated 8 June 2015); IHS Jane's 360 Intelligence Review: <http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country> as quoted in P. McLeary and A. Rawnsley, "Situation Report", *Foreign Policy*, 25 August 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/25/situation->

The Arab Spring-inspired revolt against the repressive Assad regime turned into a sectarian civil war in Syria but also became a proxy war, with Iran and Russia involved on the side of the Syrian government and a number of other states, including Turkey,<sup>70</sup> Saudi Arabia and Qatar<sup>71</sup> being involved more or less directly in one way or the other on the other side. The Iranian involvement, indirectly through Hezbollah and directly through its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with its elite expeditionary Quds Force, is somewhat better documented than the limited involvement of Russian government personnel which, at least until late until September 2015, had no fighting role. Today Russian citizens are involved on both sides: as highly valued “Chechen” foreign fighters (around 2,200 according to a recent Russian estimate)<sup>72</sup> and, on the other hand, on the official side, as arms suppliers for the Alawite regime of Assad, and, since late September 2015 by lending air support to the regime. For what looks like Machiavellian reasons, the government of President Putin actually appeared, for a while, to have encourage militant Islamist of the Northern Caucasus to leave for Syria.<sup>73</sup>

According to an estimate of the United Nations, there are more than 25,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries active, of which an estimated 22,000 are involved in the conflict zone between Syria and Iraq.<sup>74</sup> The Syrian government, (whose armed forces of 325,000 men have been more than halved due to more than 80,000 casualties in its ranks and due to more than 70,000 desertions) has put that figure much higher than the UN estimates (which generally tend to be on the cautious side).

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[report-f-22s-headed-for-europe-new-truce-between-the-koreas-syrians-say-they-were-sold-out-by-the-turks-special-ops-under-investigation-and-lots-more/](#).

<sup>70</sup> Ali Daglar, Turkey fails to prosecute two Chechens for beheading three priests in Syria. *Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 July 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/>; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 295 & 362; N. Bertrand, “Senior Western Official: Links Between Turkey and ISIS Are Now Undeniable”, *Business Insider*, 28 July 2015, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/links-between-turkey-and-isis-are-now-undeniable-2015-7?r=US&IR=T>.

<sup>71</sup> Bram Peeters noted: Saudi Arabia and Qatar appeared to have at least tacitly encouraged and supported some of these same organisations in their efforts. The potential to overthrow Assad, Iran’s most important Arab ally, represented for Saudi Arabia ‘the best chance in a decade (...) to roll back Iranian power. According to reports dated April 2012, the Saudi Kingdom offered death row inmates a full pardon and financial payment in exchange for their commitment to fight jihad in Syria. At the same time, the Saudi government has remarkably tried to be proactive in preventing violence once these fighters returned home. – B. Peeters, *Choosing Battles: A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilizations (1980-2014)*. Utrecht: University Master Thesis, August 2014, p. 99, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl:8080/handle/1874/298875> - Ironically, later Russian authorities would justify their intervention in Syria by the presence of these Caucasian mujahideen.

<sup>72</sup> Figure provided by top Russian official at an international conference in June 2015.

<sup>73</sup> V. Dzutsev, “Investigative Report Suggests Russian Security Services Pushing North Caucasus Militants to Flee to Middle East”, *The Jamestown Foundation North Caucasus Weekly*, vol. 16, no. 16 (2015). - The rationale behind it is, according to Dzutsev: “By allowing and promoting the emigration of Islamists, Russian authorities achieve several aims. They clear the volatile North Caucasus of Islamists and reduce violence in the country. The export of militants to the Middle East also serves Russian foreign policy goals, most principally to cause as much volatility in the Middle East as possible in order to drive up oil prices. High oil prices are practically the only way for the current Russian regime to survive in the long run. What appears to be a widespread practice in Russia, “agent agreements” signed between the Russian security services and Islamist recruits amounts to the Russian state recruiting militants for militant organisations in the Middle East.” See also: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/23/russia-s-playing-a-double-game-with-islamic-terror.html> . Ironically, since late September 2015 their presence in Syria has, on the other hand, served as a rationalization for intervening in Syria.

<sup>74</sup> United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Background Note: Special Meeting of the Counter-Terrorism Committee with Member States and Relevant International and Regional Organisations on “Stemming the Flow of Foreign Terrorist Fighters”*, Madrid, 27–28 July 2015, p. 1; T.S. Kaidanow, *Al-Qaida, the Islamic State, and the Future of the Global Jihad Movement*, Remarks at Brookings Institution, 16 September 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/rm/246983.htm>; H. El Said, “Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?”, in S. Zeiger and A. Aly, eds., *Countering Violent Extremism. Developing an Evidence-base for Policy and Practice*, p. 22. Abu Dhabi: Hedayah, 2015, p. 22, <http://www.hedayah.ae/pdf/cve-edited-volume.pdf>.

The Assad government, on the other hand, tends to exaggerate. One report of a Syrian military research centre put the number already in September 2013 at 54,000 foreign combatants from 87 different countries<sup>75</sup>:

Origin of Foreign Fighters	Number of Foreign Fighters
Saudis	12,000 (of whom 3,872 killed and 2,689 “disappeared”)
“Chechens”	14,000 (of whom 3,691 killed)
Lebanese	9,000 (of whom 2,904 killed)
84 other countries	19,000

**Table 3:** Syrian Military Estimates of Number of Foreign Fighters

This grand total of 50,000 fighters might or might not include smaller contingents like the 50 – 60 mainly right-wing fighters from Sweden, Finland, Croatia, Serbia, Greece, Canada and United States, siding mainly with Kurds in the north.<sup>76</sup>

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), at least 8,000 IS members have been killed<sup>77</sup> while US estimates speak of some 15,000 IS fatalities.<sup>78</sup> Casualty rates among un- and ill-trained Western foreign fighters are higher than among local Arabs as these volunteers tend to be used in the frontline as cannon-fodder and kamikaze style suicide (car-) bombers.<sup>79</sup> One American study of 474 Western militants going to Syria found that “Almost half of the male foreign fighters and 6 percent of female militants have been killed”.<sup>80</sup> A number of the foreign (i.e. non-Iraqi) fighters have been allowed to rise in the hierarchy of IS to middle levels. A few, like the Chechen Abu Omar al Shishani, even rose to top level, becoming, in his case, the second in command of IS operations in Syria.<sup>81</sup>

The United Nations also collects data. UN estimates are, as indicated before, usually conservative estimates. Partly this has to do with the fact that some member states

<sup>75</sup> M. Hashim, “Iraq and Syria: Who are the foreign fighter?”, *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, 3 September 2014, [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29043331](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29043331). The report was first published by the Tunisian daily *al-Chourouk*.

<sup>76</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.42.

<sup>77</sup> AFP, “ISIS Executes Over 3,000 in Syria in a Year-Long ‘Caliphate’”, *Al Arabia News*, 29 June-2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/06/28/ISIS-executes-over-3-000-in-Syria-in-year-long-caliphate-.html>.

<sup>78</sup> “10,000 according to US Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken, as noted in B. Johnson, “Deputy Sec State: Don’t Take Our Estimate of ISIS We’ve Taken Out So Literally”, *PJ Tatler*, 4 June 2015, <http://pjmedia.com/tatler/2015/06/04/deputy-secstate-dont-take-our-estimate-of-isis-weve-taken-out-so-literally/>; 15,000 according to R. Hall, “The U.S. Has Been Bombing the Islamic State for a Year. What Has Been Achieved?”, *Global Post*, <http://theweek.com/articles/571084/been-bombing-islamic-state-year-what-been-achieved>.

<sup>79</sup> To cite Scott Gates and Sukanya Podder, quoting General Ali al-Wazir from the Iraqi army: “We often see the foreign fighters in the first wave of attacks and then the Arab fighters will come in after an area is cleared”. They add: “Suicide bombers, who play a critical role in IS attacks appear to be dominated by foreign fighters. Given these tactic, foreign fighters probably suffer disproportionate casualties”. S. Gates and S. Podder, “Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State” (2015), p.111. A. Waldeck notes on this point: “Fighters who arrive in Syria are obliged to attend a course before they are allowed to participate in the battle. They are isolated from the other members, their passports are taken away and they attend meetings in which they are brainwashed. A German returnee calls it “to be persuaded to ISIS” .... (...) In those meetings they can choose between being a martyr or fighter. Brainwashed and without the passport it is difficult to leave ISIS again, even if some fighters would like to do so”. A. Waldeck, *The Ideology of ISIS*, p. 66.

<sup>80</sup> P. Bergen, C. Schuster, and D. Sterman, “ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism” (2015). p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> T. H. Tonnessen, “Heirs of Zaraqawi or Saddam? The relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p.54; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 42.

provide no data or provide them too late to be included in a report. According to the mandatory (i.e. under Chapter VII of UN Charter) Security Council resolution 2178 of 24 September 2014, Member States are obliged to report to the UN progress in their efforts to stop foreign fighters. In its key passage, SC Resolution 2178 urges all member states to prevent and suppress recruiting, organising, transporting, and equipping FTFs, and the financing of FTF travel and activities. It also requires all states to prevent the entry or transit of individuals believed to be traveling for terrorism-related purposes.<sup>82</sup>

In this context, the Security Council has asked UN member states to report on their efforts to stem the flow. So far, the level and quality of their reporting has been rather disappointing. The UN issued, in May 2015 the reported results for a first group of 21 states – out of a total of 67 states said to be most affected “by the acute and growing threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters”.<sup>83</sup> What is striking, is how little information some of the most involved states could or would provide to the United Nations Security Council. Here are some of the officially reported numbers of foreign terrorist fighters who recently travelled to Iraq and/or the Syrian Arab Republic.<sup>84</sup> For comparison, I have added unofficial third party estimates collected by J. E. Arasli between brackets<sup>85</sup>:

UN Member State	UN Member State Non-Estimate	Third Party Estimate
Egypt	“State does not possess accurate information”	1,000
Jordan	“State does not possess accurate information”	1,500 – 2,500
Libya	“State does not possess accurate information”	700 – 6,000
Afghanistan	“Insufficient information”	25
Lebanon	“Insufficient information”	900+
Saudi Arabia	“Insufficient information”	2,500 – 8,000

**Table 4:** United Nations Member States’ Non-Estimates and Third Party Estimates

Those states that did report to the UN on “their” foreign fighters either reported zero foreign fighters (Pakistan, Qatar, Philippines) or numbers that were, in most cases, lower estimates than those of third party observers.<sup>86</sup> I added, again, the third party estimates brought together by J.E. Arasli.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>82</sup> See: United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2178 (2014): Adopted by the Security Council at its 7272<sup>nd</sup> meeting, on 24 September 2014, S/RES/2178 (2014), [www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2014/shtml](http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2014/shtml).*

<sup>83</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 13 May 2015 From the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1373 (2001) Concerning Counter-terrorism Addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2015/338, [http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1514129\\_EN.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1514129_EN.pdf), p. 2.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>85</sup> Egypt, data for summer 2014: J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 56; Jordan, data for December 2013, p.161; Libya, data for 2012, p.173; Afghanistan data, August 2014, p. 17; Lebanon data, August 02014, p.171; Saudi Arabia, data for August 2014, p. 258. N.B.: In July 2015 the Saudi government provided 2,000 names to Interpol, bringing the total number of known individuals of Interpol to about 5,800 foreign fighters by November 2015.

<sup>86</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Annex: Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) by States Affected by Foreign Terrorist Fighters”, in *Letter Dated 13 May 2015 From the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1373 (2001) Concerning Counter-terrorism Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, 14 May 2015, S/2015/338, p.10. The 3<sup>rd</sup> party estimates are those collected from open sources by J.E. Arasli, an internationally respected defence and security analyst and practitioner with a background in Soviet, and later,

UN Member State	UN Member State Non-Estimate	Third Party Estimate
Egypt	"State does not possess accurate information"	1,000
Jordan	"State does not possess accurate information"	1,500 – 2,500
Libya	"State does not possess accurate information"	700 – 6,000
Afghanistan	"Insufficient information"	25
Lebanon	"Insufficient information"	900+
Saudi Arabia	"Insufficient information"	2,500 – 8,000

**Table 5:** United Nations Estimates Compared to Third Party Estimates

According to a Europol assessment of January 2015, up to 5,000 Europeans have joined the jihad in Syria and Iraq.<sup>88</sup> That is a much higher number than the one for the United States where some 250 wannabe foreign fighters tried to make it to Syria.<sup>89</sup> That could put the number of European foreign fighters at about one fifth or twenty percent of the total number of IS fighters.<sup>90</sup> The trend is still upwards. In April 2015, a European official put the number at 6,000 foreign fighters<sup>91</sup> while French Prime Minister Manuel Valls estimated that as many as 10,000 Europeans could be fighting in jihadi groups by the end of 2015.<sup>92</sup> The foreign fighters who joined IS and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq make up a significant part of the jihadist militants in Syria and Iraq but the figures available diverge. In 2013, when IS in Syria was much smaller, consisting of only 4,000 – 5,000 fighters, 40 percent were said to be foreigners and at the higher level just under the Iraqi leadership, foreigners even accounted for 80 percent (including Iraqis who then were foreigners to Syria before IS created its new border-crossing Islamic State). By September 2014, two month after the proclamation of the caliphate, the CIA estimate of the number of IS fighters jumped to 20,000 – 31,500 fighters, with 15,000 of them believed to be foreigners,

Azerbaijani national security (J. E. Arasli is, like the present author, a member of the Combating Terrorism Working Group at the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes).

<sup>87</sup> Tunisia, data for March 2015; J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 288; Turkey, data for mid-2014L Ibid., p.290 (however, this seems to be an underestimate as "more than 1,000". Turkish Kurds (Sic) were fighting with IS: "Turkey's Demirtas: 'Erdogan is Capable of Setting Country on Fire': Interview conducted by Hasnain Kazim", *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, 31 July 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/kurdish-leader-demirtas-calls-for-ceasefire-with-turkey-a-1046263.html>; for Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, data from R. Gunaratna, "2 Singaporeans Detained for Planning to Join ISIS", *Asia One*, 30 September 2015, <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/2-singaporeans-detained-planning-join-isis>; Moroccan data combine 1,000 from Morocco itself and 2,000 foreign fighters of Moroccan origin from Spain and other European countries; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 194; Data for Maldives from July 2014: Ibid., p.178; the undated Algerian figure does not include 800 Algerians from Europe: Ibid., p.20; Malaysia, undated, ibid., p.178; Indonesia, undated data: Ibid., p.98 Pakistan, data undated: Ibid., p.214; Qatar data undated: Ibid., p.230; Philippines data undated: Ibid., p.217.

<sup>88</sup> P. Teffer, "Up to 5,000 Europeans Joined the Jihad, Europol Chief Says", *Euroobserver*, 16 January 2015. "Estimates vary from 3,000 – 5,000. The database of Europol contains about 2,500 names of suspects" (Ibid.) who have gone to Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones. The US government is said to have 15,000 listed: J. Queally, "US Adding Names to Foreign Fighter Watchlist 'Like a Ticking Odometer'", *Common Dreams*, 30 December 2015, [www.commondreams.org/news/2014/12/30](http://www.commondreams.org/news/2014/12/30).

<sup>89</sup> US Congress Homeland Security Committee, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* (2015).

<sup>90</sup> For other figures, see: B.M. Jenkins, "When Jihadis Come Marching Home: The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq", *RAND*, 2014, pp. 1 & 5; According to yet another estimate, 4,500 Westerners, including 250, have gone to Syria. - P. Bergen, C. Schuster, and D. Sterman, "ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism" (2015). p.15.

<sup>91</sup> P. Gonzales, "Vera Jourova: Près de 6.000 Européens Sont Partis Faire le Jihad", *Le Figaro*, 13 April 2015, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2015/04/12/01003-20150412ARTFIG00128-vera-jourova-pres-de-6000-europeens-sont-partis-faire-le-djihad.php>.

<sup>92</sup> RFI, "10,000 Europeans Could Be Fighting in Jihadi Groups by Year End, Valls", *RFI English*, 8 March 2015, <http://www.english.rfi.fr/france/20150308-10000-europeans-could-be-fighting-jihadi-groups-year-end-valls>. Quoted by Brian M. Jenkins (RAND) in presentation where author was present in July 2015.

mostly Muslims from North Africa and the Near and Middle East (a year later US intelligence estimate doubled that figure to nearly 30,000 foreign recruits for IS)<sup>93</sup>. In this case, the Western foreign fighters were estimated to be a minority of perhaps 13 percent.<sup>94</sup> According to an analyst from Singapore, all foreign fighters together constitute half of foreign fighters in Syria and many more if one also counts the Iraqi IS fighters in Syria.<sup>95</sup>

Table 6 provides a breakdown of figures for selected European states, as well as Canada, Russia and the United States, mainly, but not exclusively, based on the open source monitoring of Jahangir E. Arasli (The figures are always the latest available ones, mainly from early 2015).<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup> E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts" (2015).

<sup>94</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, pp. 118 - 119.

<sup>95</sup> According to Rohan Gunaratna, FTF in Syria & Iraq constitute half of IS's strength. R. Gunaratna, *Lecture at the 15<sup>th</sup> World Congress on Counter-Terrorism*, Herzliya: Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 9 September 2015 (lecture notes by A.P. Schmid).

<sup>96</sup> The estimates between brackets are from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR): P.R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighters Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 19080s", ICSR, 26 January 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-19080s>. See also "How Many People Have Gone to Syria to Fight?" *BBC*, 2 August 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33715636>. See also <http://www.intelcenter.com/reports-charts.html>. Some of the more recent figures are from Luisa Loveluck. "Islamic State: Where Do Its Fighters Come From", *The Telegraph* (UK), 8 June 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11660487/Islamic-State-one-year-on-Where-do-its-fighters-come-from.html>. A number of estimates are based on the author's conversations with officials from relevant countries. Others are based on sources like, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina: V. Azinovic and M. Jusic, *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent* (2015), p.7. In the case of France, the figures are from "La commission d'enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes, Rapport fait au nom de la commission d'enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes," (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, June 2, 2015), as quoted in: T. Holman, "The French Jihadists 'Foreign Fighters' Legion in Syria and Iraq", *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, 24 July, 2015; for Belgium the figures are from Alain Grignard in interview with P. Cruickshank, "A View From the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Alain Grignard, Brussels Federal Police", *CTC Sentinel*, 21 August 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/?p=35826>; for the United Kingdom, the figure is from B.M. Jenkins, "When Jihadis Come Marching Home. The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq" (2014), p. 19; Dutch estimates from August 2015 are from NCTV, as quoted in P. van den Dool, "Jihadisten Blijven Uitreizen naar Syrie en Irak – Voorname Dreiging voor Nederland", *NRC-Handelsblad*, 1 September 2015, [http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/09/01/jihadisten-blijven-naar-syrie-en-irak-reizen-voornamen-dreiging-voor-nederland/?utm\\_source=email&utm\\_campaign=nieuwsbrief-20150901&utm\\_content=Binnenland&utm\\_term=artikel1](http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/09/01/jihadisten-blijven-naar-syrie-en-irak-reizen-voornamen-dreiging-voor-nederland/?utm_source=email&utm_campaign=nieuwsbrief-20150901&utm_content=Binnenland&utm_term=artikel1); as well as A. Bunnik and T. de Zoete, "The Gloves Come Off: The Dutch Response to Jihadists in Syria and Iraq", *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 13, no. 19 (2015), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=44383&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=26&cHash=95fa899b1ec0381f6](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44383&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=26&cHash=95fa899b1ec0381f6); figure for Italy from R. Pinotti, Minister of Defence, as cited in Redazione ANSA, "Isis: Pinotti, 87 Foreign Fighters Passati dall'Italia", *ANSA*, 20 September 2015, [http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2015/09/20/isis-pinotti-87-foreign-fighters-italiani\\_a50298c5-7de4-457a-87ad-1e86d9c7ef30.html](http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2015/09/20/isis-pinotti-87-foreign-fighters-italiani_a50298c5-7de4-457a-87ad-1e86d9c7ef30.html); E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts" (2015); Chinese estimate from H. Saul, "Chinese Uighurs 'Join ISIS Overseas and Return to Take Part in Terror Plots', Officials Claim", *The Independent*, 11 March 2015; US Congress Homeland Security Committee, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* (2015), p.6.

State	Number of Anti-Assad Foreign Fighters
Albania	100-200
Austria	233 (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 100-150)
Australia	255 (of whom 155 have returned)
Belgium	440 (of whom at least 100 have returned)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	217 (of whom 51 returned)
Canada	130-500 (of whom 80 returned to Canada)
China	up to 300
Denmark:	100 – 150 (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 100-150)
Finland	70-100 (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 50-70)
France	883 (of whom 271 returned) (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 1,200)
Germany	ca. 700 (ca. 1/3 returned) (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 500-600)
Italy	at least 87
Netherlands	210 (of whom 35 returned and at least 32 died)
Norway	60 (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 60)
Portugal	12 (incl. 2 women)
Russia	2,200 (from North Caucasus)
Serbia	several dozen
Sweden	300 (mainly Kurds) (ICSR, Jan. 2014: 150-180)
Spain	250
Switzerland	40
United Kingdom	700 (of whom ca. 250 returned) (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 500-600)
United States	more than 250 (including those who were stopped while trying to leave for Syria)

**Table 6:** Foreign Fighters from Western States, Russia and China, 2015 (& 2014)

It would be interesting to compare these numbers with those of IS itself. The closest we can perhaps get to that is via the London-based Palestinian journalist Abdel Bari Atwan who visited the Caliphate in late 2014. According to him the foreign (i.e. non-Syrian and non-Iraqi fighters) fighters constitute at least 30,000 or about one third of the more than 100,000 fighters of the Islamic State.<sup>97</sup> However, he does not provide his own national breakdown, citing instead the following American percentages (here also translated into numbers) of foreign fighters (FFs), although he disagrees with some estimates of the Washington Institute, e.g. the low one for Turkey.

<sup>97</sup> A. B. Atwan, *Islamic State*, p.168.

Origin of Foreign Fighters	Percentage of Foreign Fighters from Source	
Libyans	21 percent	(6,300 FFs)
Tunisians	15.7 percent	(4,800 FFs)
Saudis	15.7 percent	(4,800 FFs)
Jordanians	11.4 percent	(3,300 FFs)
Egyptians	9.6 percent	(3,000 FFs)
Lebanese	7.86 percent	(2,400 FFs)
French Brigades*	6 percent	(1,800 FFs)
British	4.5 percent	(1,350 FFs)
Turkish	3 percent	(900 FFs)
Other	17.5 percent	(5,250 FFs)

**Table 7:** Percentages of Foreign Fighters, according to Washington Institute<sup>98</sup>

\* Composed mainly of French and Belgians of North African descent

In terms of regional origin, a survey produced in October 2014 came up with the following breakdown (column one).<sup>99</sup> These figures are contrasted with those one year later, released by The Soufan Group in early December 2015.<sup>100</sup>

Regional Origin	Number of Foreign Fighters	
	Fall 2014	Fall 2015
Middle East	6,141	8,240
North Africa (Maghreb)	5,660	8,000
Western Europe	2,770	5,000
Former Soviet Union	1,585	4,700
Asia-Pacific	468	-
(Western) Balkans	442	875
South Asia	385	-
South East Asia	-	900
Sub-Saharan Africa	170	-
North America	42	280

**Table 8:** Regional Background of Foreign Fighters

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/convoy-of-martyrs-in-the-levant>; A. B. Atwan, *Islamic State*, p.168-169. Atwan held that the number of Turkish FFs is much higher, "at least 2,000" (Ibid., p.168).

<sup>99</sup> Blog Across the Green Mountain, as cited in J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.213, since October 2014. Many of these estimates are on the low side. Central Asia (part of former Soviet Union), for instance, has fielded 3,000 foreign fighters – in addition of 2,400 originating from Russia, according to an estimate of the Soufan Group from September 2015: "TSG IntelBrief: Putin's Syrian Gamble", *The Soufan Group*, 22 September 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-putins-syrian-gamble/>.

<sup>100</sup> The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York: The Soufan Group), p. 5, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate1.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate1.pdf).

In terms of countries of origin, six out of ten countries producing most foreign fighters are Muslim-majority countries but there are also three West European countries among the top ten providers of foreign fighters:

Country of Origin	Number of Foreign Fighters	
	US Congressional Homeland Security Committee Estimate	National Government Estimate
Tunisia	5,000	ca. 3,000 (Official figure, April 2014)
Saudi Arabia	2,275	ca. 2,500 (Official estimate, May 2014)
Jordan	2,000	no data
Russia	1,700	(FSB, April 2014)
France	1,550	over 700 (Official figure, April 2014)
Turkey	1,400	about 400 (Official estimate, April 2014)
Morocco	1,200	about 1,500 (Official figure, April 2014)
Lebanon	900	no data
Germany	700	about 300 (BfV, March 2014)
United Kingdom	700	about 400 (Official est., March 2014)

**Table 9:** Origin of Foreign Fighters – Top Ten Countries\*

\* Estimates from September 2015 by bi-partisan US Congressional Homeland Security Committee and from 2014 by national governments.<sup>101</sup>

To conclude these lists, here is a final one, which draws its information from three different sources: the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), The Soufan Group, the New America Foundation and RFE/RL. It covers more countries than most others, suffering, however, from many of the same shortcomings as others – different moments in time, lack of information about how many of the FFs have been killed or returned, etc.

<sup>101</sup> US Congress Homeland Security Committee, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* (2011), p. 11.

Country of Origin	Number of FFs	Country of Origin	Number of FFs
Afghanistan	50	Malaysia	100
Albania	90	Maldives	200
Algeria	250	Montenegro	30
Austria	300	Morocco	1,200
Australia	250	Netherlands	250
Azerbaijan	104+	New Zealand	6
Bahrain	12	Norway	80+
Belgium	470	Pakistan	500
Bosnia	330	Philippines	100
Brazil	3	Portugal	12
Bulgaria	1-2	Qatar	15
Canada	130	Romania	1+
China	300	Russia	2,400
Denmark	125	Saudi Arabia	2,500
Egypt	600+	Serbia:	70
Finland	70	Singapore	2
France	1700	South Africa	1+
Germany	760	Somalia	70
India	23	Spain	133
Indonesia	700	Sudan	100
Iraq	247	Sweden	300
Ireland	30	Switzerland	57
Israel	40-50	Tajikistan	386
Italy	87	Trinidad	50
Japan	9	Tunisia	6,000
Jordan	2,089	Turkey	2,100
Kazakhstan	300	Turkmenistan	360
Kosovo	232	U.A.E	15
Kuwait	71	Ukraine	50
Kyrgyzstan	100	United Kingdom	760
Lebanon	900	United States	150
Libya	600	Uzbekistan	500
Macedonia	146	Yemen	110
Madagascar	3+	<b>Total</b>	29,000+

**Table 10:** Number of Foreign Fighters (FFs) in Syria and Iraq\*

\* Latest available estimates for 67 countries, based on estimates from The Soufan Group,<sup>102</sup> the New America Foundation<sup>103</sup> and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty<sup>104</sup> NB: Small numbers of fighters are also reported to have come from other countries, e.g. Bangladesh, Chile, Eritrea, Ivory Coast, Senegal. In total more than 100 countries have seen foreign fighters departing for Syria and Iraq.

<sup>102</sup> *The Washington Post*, November 2015; L. Loveluck, "Islamic State: Where Do Its Fighters Come From?", *The Telegraph*, 8 June 2015; The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, p. 5.

<sup>103</sup> P. Bergen, C. Schuster, and D. Sterman, "ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism" (2015). p.15; The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>104</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria: Where Do They Come From?*, 10 December 2015 URL: <http://www.rferl.org/content/infographics/foreign-fighters-syria-iraq-is-isis-isil-infographic/26584940.html>.

Over time, the total share of foreign fighters in the Islamic State might decline as IS has been aggressive in forcefully recruiting young men and even children<sup>105</sup> from the territories it controls (containing up to six - ten million people). At the same time, Turkey has begun to get more determined in obstructing the passage of would-be foreign fighters crossing its border with Syria.

The figures of FFs presented above in various tables vary greatly, depending when estimates were made and by whom they were made. Some put the number of foreign fighters almost as high as some of the supposed total strength estimates of IS – around 31,000. On the other extreme, a BBC report implies that “as many as 20,000 foreign fighters” in the Middle East, constitute only “around 10% of ISIS”.<sup>106</sup> That would put the number of IS fighters at 200,000 – double of the figure (“more than 100,000”) provided by Abdel Bari Atwan. A figure of 200,000 IS fighters was, however, also provided by a Kurdish leader in November 2014.<sup>107</sup> Some defectors from IS have confirmed this figure could be about right.<sup>108</sup> A figure of “more than 100,000” was already suggested back in August 2014 by the Iraqi expert Hisham al-Hashimi.<sup>109</sup> Since the declaration of the caliphate, there has been a growing influx of fighters that has probably more than compensated battlefield losses and desertions. The high estimates of 100,000 to 200,000 IS fighters probably result from inclusion of large numbers of local Sunni fighters from Iraqi and Syrian tribal groups whose loyalty to IS is partly opportunistic.

## Conclusion to Part I

In conclusion, a word of caution is in place: most estimates are of dubious reliability. They refer to different periods in time since 2011, some are cumulative, some not, some estimates deduct casualties (killed and injured) suffered while others do not. Some seem to include Iraqis in Syria too while others exclude those. Some might include Syrians living abroad who returned to their country of origin while others exclude nationals. Some estimates seem to include (some) foreign fighters in other jihadist theatres of war than Syria and Iraq (e.g. Libya) while others do not. Some include and others exclude already returned foreign fighters. Some estimates include all foreign fighters in the conflict zone while others count only those fighting, disregarding those with al-Nusra or the Kurdish Peshmerga. Some estimates include

<sup>105</sup> According to research conducted by John Horgan and Mia Bloom. *Small Arms – Children and Terrorism*: C. Bartlau, “Der IS Züchtet die Nächste Generation Heran: Diese Kinder Werden zu Drohnen Gemacht”, *Web.de*, 21 July 2015, <http://web.de/magazine/politik/Kampf-Islamischer-Staat-IS/is-zuechtet-naechste-generation-heran-kinder-drohnen-30779166>.

<sup>106</sup> More Or Less, “Counting Foreign Fighters”, *BBC Radio 4*, [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02yh0lx](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02yh0lx).

<sup>107</sup> P. Cockburn, “War With Isis: Islamic Militants Have Army of 200,000, Claims Senior Kurdish Leader”, *The Independent*, 16 November 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-islamic-militantshave-army-of-200000-claims-kurdish-leader-9863418.html>.

<sup>108</sup> A. Speckhard and A. S. Yayla, “Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Islamic State Defectors: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 4, no. 6 (2015).

<sup>109</sup> R. Mohammed, “Islamic State Expands: Up to 100,000 People Have Joined, Experts Say”, *Mashable*, 26 August 2014, <http://mashable.com/2014/08/26/100000-people-join-islamic-state>; C. Lister, “A Long Way from Success: Assessing the War on the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015) p.11.

not only foreign fighters but also those in support functions like jihadi brides. In other words: the situation remains complex and opaque. This is also true in the new provinces IS claims to have founded in other countries - like Libya (where IS claims 5,000 followers in Sirte (and surroundings), Afghanistan or the Egyptian Sinai. Only when the archives of IS (a very bureaucratic organisation) fall into the hands of its adversaries, will we get more accurate figures.

Despite these shortcomings in the data situation, by looking at the problem of foreign (terrorist) fighters from several angles, this Research Paper has managed to establish greater clarity on at least some figures. We can be reasonable sure about four of the following five estimates:

1. More than 29,000 foreign fighters joined the fight against the Assad regime since 2011- not counting Iraqi Sunni IS cadres in Syria - but heavy battlefield losses and returnees have reduced these numbers significantly;
2. The regime of Bashar al-Assad had, at least until September 2015, fewer than that number of foreign fighters - mainly from Hezbollah - on its side; since then some 4,000 Russians, hundreds of Iranians, and Shia from Afghanistan brought in by Iran have joined the fight on the side of the regime.
3. The foreign fighters from Europe (mainly second generation diaspora Muslims and recent converts to Islam) and other Western democracies who departed for Syria number between 5,000 and 7,000. Battlefield losses and returnees have lowered that number.
4. Some 70 percent if not more of the foreign fighters opposing the Assad regime (and opposing other non IS groups) are from Arab and other Muslim-majority countries.
5. Foreign fighters might constitute one third to two fifth of the total of number of IS' fighters - and more if Iraqis in Syria are included.

However, the last of these estimates depends heavily on the estimate of the total number of fighters IS can field in Syria and Iraq. These estimates vary enormously, from as low as some 30,000 militants to as high as some 200,000 fighters. The latter figure would include many Sunni tribal groups in Syria and Iraq whose loyalty to IS is partly opportunistic.

*Part II of this Research Papers now turns to more qualitative issues of the foreign (terrorist) fighter phenomenon problem, with a focus on Europe.*

## Part II

### 4. Foreign Fighters as a Problem for European Democracies with Muslim Diasporas

Given the fact that there are some twenty million Muslims in the 28 member states of the Europe Union (out of more than 500 million EU citizens and residents), 5,000 European foreign fighters is a very small portion (one FF per 4,000 Muslims or one per 100,000 Europeans). However, if we can believe some opinion polls, sympathy for jihadist movements in general and presumably also for IS is far from negligible in Europe - and even more so in the Arab world.

According to an opinion poll conducted by the *Daily Mail* (n = 2,016) in mid-2015, 1.5 million people in the United Kingdom (nine percent) were estimated to be in some way supportive of the Islamic State. An international public opinion analysis based on four polls indicated, according the Clarion Project, that the Islamic State had an estimated minimum of 8.5 million supporters across the Middle East, while more than 42.5 million across the region were viewing the group positively or somewhat positively.<sup>110</sup> While support for IS in individual countries varied from two percent to thirteen percent and clearly reflects a minority opinion, that is still a worrying large number of people who feel sympathetic to IS<sup>111</sup>. Much of that might be simply a kind of youth rebellion and protest vote against corrupt, authoritarian sitting regimes and those outside governments who support their repressive policies. Yet it is a worrying phenomenon for those who think that the demonstrative atrocities of IS themselves are enough to discredit the appeal of its message among young Muslims and Western converts to Salafist Islamism.

There is much worry about “blowback”, that is, about battle-hardened and ideologically indoctrinated foreign fighters who return bringing the conflict back to Europe.<sup>112</sup> However, many of those who go to Syria and Iraq will not return because they will die there, either killed by the Assad regime, by inter-jihadi fighting (which has already cost more than 4,000 lives in just three months)<sup>113</sup> or by IS when it becomes known that they are disillusioned and want to escape. Most have their passports taken away while others have publicly burned their passports, suggesting that they

<sup>110</sup> R. Mauro, “ISIS Has Up to 42 Million Supporters in the Arab World”, *The Clarion Project*, 28 June 2015, <http://counterjihadreport.com/2015/06/28/isis-has-up-to-42-million-supporters-in-the-arab-world/>.

As Clarion explained: “The estimate is based on a March 2015 poll by the Iraqi-based Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies; a November 2014 poll by Zogby Research Services; another November 2014 poll by the Doha-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and an October 2014 poll by the Fikra Forum commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy”.

<sup>111</sup> “UK Opinion Poll Shows Up to 1.5 Million ISIS Supporters in Britain”, *The Clarion Project*, 8 July 2015, [www.mail.google.com/mail/u/0/h/20uqtzw75k0b/?&th=14732476d99663d&q=clarion&v=c&s=q](http://www.mail.google.com/mail/u/0/h/20uqtzw75k0b/?&th=14732476d99663d&q=clarion&v=c&s=q).

<sup>112</sup> See: ICCT Paper on Foreign Fighters Pathways: [http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Reed-De-Roy-Van-Zuidewijn-Bakker-Pathways-Of-Foreign-Fighters-Policy-Options-And-Their-Un-Intended-Consequences-April2015\(1\).pdf](http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Reed-De-Roy-Van-Zuidewijn-Bakker-Pathways-Of-Foreign-Fighters-Policy-Options-And-Their-Un-Intended-Consequences-April2015(1).pdf)

<sup>113</sup> B. Peeters, *Choosing Battles*, p. 104.

want to spend their lives in the new Caliphate. Some of them might eventually move on to a new war zone outside Europe to wage jihad against new enemies as happened with many Afghan veterans who were not allowed to return home once the Soviet Union had withdrawn its intervention force in the late 1980s.<sup>114</sup> Among those who return, many might be traumatized nervous wrecks, either unwilling or unable to engage in conspiratorial activities to bring the jihad to Western Europe. A number of those returning to their country have been identified by intelligence and security services and have been arrested.<sup>115</sup> Others are being under close observation though the large number of those who warrant being watched is vastly overstressing the capacities of European domestic intelligence services. In addition, among the stream of refugees and asylum seekers who enter Europe from Libya, an unknown (but probably low) number of infiltrators from IS might be hiding.<sup>116</sup>

Between 20 and 30 percent of the foreign fighters who went to Syria and Iraq are estimated to have returned to the country they came from.<sup>117</sup> The total number of known foreign fighter returnees to Western Europe surpasses thousand. The six countries listed below already produced more than 800 returned foreign fighters (and women)<sup>118</sup>:

Origin of Foreign Fighters	Number of Returnees
France	217 (out of 854 who departed)
Germany	260 (out of 700 who departed)
United Kingdom	250 by March 2014, 400 by June 2014 (out of 700+ who departed); of these 165 arrested
Netherlands	30 (out of up to 250 who departed)
Austria	70+ (out of 233 who departed)
Bosnia & Herzegovina	51 (out of 217 who departed); of these 166 arrested

**Table 11:** Returning Foreign Fighters from Seven European Countries

To get a clearer picture of their identities and whereabouts is a major concern of intelligence services. In the case of France, for instance, it has been estimated that out of 843 who went to Syria and Iraq, 217 have returned to France while 61 went to a third country. Those identified face long prison sentences. 119 French nationals or

<sup>114</sup> According to a recent study of the Brookings Institution, some 20 percent of the foreign fighters die in combat and some 20 percent do not want to return to the country of origin where they came from. – D. Byman and J. Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq* (Washington, D.C; The Brookings Institution), Policy Paper No. 34, November 2014, p. 20. Fatality rates among foreign fighters have been much higher than 20 percent according to P. Bergen, C. Schuster, and D. Sterman, “ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism” (2015).

<sup>115</sup> Since September 2014, aspiring and returning foreign fighters have been arrested in 34 countries. E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, “Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts”, *New York Times*, 26 September 2015.

<sup>116</sup> “ISIS Fighters Hiding Among Migrants Bound for Europe, Libyan Advisor Says”, *CBC News*, 17 May 2015, [www.cbc.ca/news/world/isis-fighters-hiding-among-migrants-bound-for-europe-libyan-adviser-says-1.3077626](http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/isis-fighters-hiding-among-migrants-bound-for-europe-libyan-adviser-says-1.3077626).

<sup>117</sup> The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, p. 4.

<sup>118</sup> T. Holman, “The French Jihadists ‘Foreign Fighters’ Legion in Syria and Iraq” (2015). (based on: *La commission d’enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes, Rapport fait au nom de la commission d’enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes*, (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, June 2, 2015); V. Azinovic and M. Jusic, *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters’ Bosnian Contingent* (2015), p.7; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.155.

residents are believed to have died in Syria or Iraq.<sup>119</sup> In the case of Germany's estimated 700 Salafist foreign fighters, one third returned while ca. hundred were killed (seven of them as suicide bombers).<sup>120</sup> In the case of the Netherlands, up to 250 young people – the majority of them with a Moroccan immigrant background – went to Syria and Iraq. Nineteen of them have reportedly been killed while 30 of them returned to the Netherlands.<sup>121</sup> In the case of Great Britain, the number of returnees has been put as high as 400 – more than half of the total estimate of those who went to Syria in the first place.<sup>122</sup> Austria saw an estimated 233 departures with most of them Chechen refugees and, to a lesser extent sons and daughters of Bosnian refugees from the conflict of the 1990s.<sup>123</sup> Open sources tell us little about the number of arrests among returnees for most countries. The only figures that could be found in the ICCT database was, for these countries, sixteen for Bosnia and 165 for the United Kingdom.<sup>124</sup>

The worry is that returning foreign fighters might become sleepers or are “domestic terrorists in the making” as many analysts, especially in the United States, assume.<sup>125</sup> ICCT researcher Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdwijn found that about one in five (5 out of 26) plots in Europe involved former foreign fighters while about one third (eight out of 26) had a link to someone from the West having attended a training camp in a conflict zone.<sup>126</sup> They might not necessarily have gone to Syria with the intention to carry out attacks at home. At least that is what emerged from an older survey of jihadists from other jihads than the one in Syria by Thomas Hegghammer (table 12).<sup>127</sup>

Declared Purpose	Number	Proportion
Train for domestic operation	2	2 %
Join foreign insurgency	45	42 %
Unknown	60	56 %
Total	107	100 %

**Table 12:** Declared Purpose of Returned Foreign Fighters from Previous Conflicts

<sup>119</sup> T. Holman, “The French Jihadists ‘Foreign Fighters’ Legion in Syria and Iraq” (2015); D. Byman and J. Shapiro, *Be Afraid, Be a Little Afraid*, p.10.

<sup>120</sup> “Rund 100 Deutsche IS-Kämpfer in Syrien und Irak Getötet” (dpa). *Focus online*, 23 August 2015, [http://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/terrorismus-rund-100-deutsche-is-kaempfer-in-syrien-und-irak-getoetet\\_id\\_4897378.html](http://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/terrorismus-rund-100-deutsche-is-kaempfer-in-syrien-und-irak-getoetet_id_4897378.html); T. Holman, “The French Jihadists ‘Foreign Fighters’ Legion in Syria and Iraq” (2015); B.M. Jenkins, “When Jihadis Come Marching Home. The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq” (2014), p. 19; P. Bergen, C. Schuster, and D. Sterman, “ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism” (2015), p.10.

<sup>121</sup> Samenwerkingsverband van Marokkaanse Nederlanders (SMN), *Hulplijn Radicalisering* (Utrecht: SMN, 2015), [www.smn.nl](http://www.smn.nl); for an analysis of Dutch Foreign Fighters, see: J. L. de Bie, C. J. de Poot and J. P. van der Leun, “Shifting Modus Operandi of Jihadist Foreign Fighters From the Netherlands Between 2000 and 2013: A Crime Script Analysis”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 27, no. 3 (July – August 2015), pp. 416 - 440.

<sup>122</sup> B.M. Jenkins, “When Jihadis Come Marching Home. The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq” (2014), p. 19; the London-based ICSR estimates that between 10% and 30% - up to 7,000 fighters – have already returned to their home countries while 5-10 percent have been killed. - “How Many People Have Gone to Syria to Fight?”, *BBC*, 2 August 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33715636>.

<sup>123</sup> Personal communication from Austrian official.

<sup>124</sup> ICCT, The Hague, Foreign Fighters database.

<sup>125</sup> T. Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters” (2010/2011), p. 6.

<sup>126</sup> B.M. Jenkins, “When Jihadis Come Marching Home. The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq” (2014), p. 20.

<sup>127</sup> T. Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters” (2010/2011), p. 7 (Table 4).

A new dataset by Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, covering jihadist attacks and serious plots in the West found, for the period January 2011 – June 2015, a total of 69 plots (37 in Europe, 25 in North America, two in Australia) of which 30 were linked to IS<sup>128</sup>. Nineteen of these 69 plots came to execution (twelve in Europe, five in North America and two in Australia). In the period since the proclamation of the caliphate (July 2014 – June 2015), 79 percent (26 out of 33 plots) had an IS connection. Regarding the participation of foreign fighters, the study of Hegghammer and Nesser found almost one in four - sixteen of the 69 - plots involved at least one foreign fighter:

“Of these 16 plots, nine involved foreign fighters (11 individuals) who had been to Syria (the remaining seven plots had links to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen). Of these nine Syria-linked foreign fighter plots, six included people (eight individuals) who had trained with IS. Of the other three plots, two were linked to Jabhat al-Nusra and one to an unspecified group. Our data thus suggest that the blowback rate – the proportion of outgoing fighters who return and plot attacks on their home region – from Syria is thus far very low indeed: 11 plotting returnees from an outgoing contingent of around 4,000 makes for a blowback rate in the order of 1 to 360. Even if our underreporting is very significant – let us say we have missed two thirds of the cases and the real number of plotting Syria returnees is around 30 – the blowback rate is still lower than one in hundred. It is likely that this rate will increase over time....”.

So far, we have seen a number of attacks in Western Europe linked to returning foreign fighters, while more having been prevented. Here is, as a reminder, a sample of attempted and completed attacks (table 13).<sup>129</sup>

<sup>128</sup> A US Congress report, published on 29 September 2015 refers to nearly 60 plots or attacks inspired or directed by IS against Western countries, including 15 against the United States, partly the work of returning foreign fighters, partly masterminded by foreign fighters based in Syria and partly conducted by homegrown terrorists. – US Congress. Homeland Security Committee Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel. Washington, D.C.: Bipartisan Congressional Committee, 29 September 2019, p.8.

<sup>129</sup> J. Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), pp. 94 - 95; T. Hegghammer and P. Nesser, “Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 23 - 24; “US-Soldaten Überwältigen Schützen in Belgischem Schnellzug”, *Der Standard* (Austria), 22 August 2015, <http://derstandard.at/2000021104284/Drei-Verletzte-bei-Angriff-in-Zug-von-Amsterdam-nach-Paris>. For a much more extensive list of incidents, failed, foiled and completed, see: J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, pp. 78 – 82.

Date	Attempted or Completed Attack
March 2012	23 year old Mohammad Merah who had trained with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan killed four Jewish civilians (incl. three Jewish children and three soldiers in Toulouse and Montauban, south of France)
March 2014	Swiss authorities prevent explosives and gas attack plot by three IS recruits
May 2014	Attack in front of Jewish Museum Brussels by Mehdi Nemmouche, a 29 year old French citizen of Algerian origin who was trained in Syria by IS: four killed in Kalashnikov attack
October 2014	Mertkan G., a 14 year old boy of Turkish-Austrian origin was promised US \$ 25,000 by IS online if he managed to bomb Vienna's Westbahnhof
January 2015	Attack on Charlie Hebdo and Jewish kosher market in Paris by Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly: seventeen killed, 20+ wounded
January 2015	Plot in Belgium by jihadists of Moroccan origin trained by IS to attack police foiled in Verviers.
February 2015	A Danish-Palestinian supporter of IS, Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein, opened fire in Copenhagen, killing two people and injuring five more
June 2015	Attack by a 35 year old with links to IS near Lyon on a industrial gas production plant; blowing up the plant failed but the boss of the perpetrator was decapitated
July 2015	French authorities prevent plot by the Islamists linked to IS to behead naval officer at Port Vendres, killing two and arresting thirteen plotters, several of whom had been trained in Syria by IS.
August 2015	Ayoub El Kahzzani, a 26-year-old young Muslim of Moroccan origin recently returned from Syria tried to create a massacre in the Thalys high-speed train from Amsterdam to Paris with an AK-47 assault rifle and, nine magazines of ammunition. He was wrestled down by some of the more than 500 passengers in the train
November 2015	Three teams of IS- linked terrorists with suicide vests and assault rifles and explosives staged six attacks in Paris and the suburb of Saint-Denis. The perpetrators were partly from Molenbeek, a Brussels suburb. They killed 130 people and injuring 368. Seven of the nine perpetrators died, partly by exploding their suicide belts, partly by police fire. Some of the attackers had been foreign fighters in Yemen and Syria.

**Table 13:** Attempted and Completed Attacks Involving Returned Foreign Fighters

Such plots, including a larger number of others which failed or could be prevented by security forces, intensified after the airstrikes against ISI had begun in the summer of

2014, largely in response to IS' genocidal attack on the Yazidis.<sup>130</sup> On 21 September 2014, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the IS spokesperson, had called on individual IS supporters anywhere in the world to attack citizens of those countries belonging to the anti-IS coalition<sup>131</sup>:

“Do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be. You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the [unbelievers]. (...) If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be”.<sup>132</sup>

Such a call has inspired young Muslim “lone wolves” as well as people directly linked to IS in Algeria, Australia, Canada, France, Switzerland, the United States and in other countries to plot the murder of innocent citizens as well as military men in non-combat situations.<sup>133</sup> It should be noted that a number of these plots are linked not to returning foreign fighters but rather to those who were prevented from leaving to Syria in the first place. This was, for instance, the case with a Libyan-Canadian convert who had tried to renew his passport; a request that was denied. Michael Zehaf-Bibeau subsequently tried to storm the Canadian Parliament building after he had killed a sentry at Ottawa’s Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on 22 October 2014. IS has encouraged “lone wolf” attacks by those who cannot make it to the new caliphate for one reason or another. This poses a dilemma for some authorities in countries of origin and there are even voices that argue it is better to let them go in the hope that they will never return.<sup>134</sup>

While the “blowback” rate had, until the massive attacks of 13 November 2015 in Paris, been limited, this should not be cause for optimism. A few more successful attacks by returning foreign fighters might trigger right-wing reactions in the form of attacks on mosques, greater government surveillance of Muslim neighbourhoods and Islamophobia among larger segments of society. This, in turn, could drive more Muslims into the arms of terrorist organisations, which is probably what jihadist groups hope for anyway. Growing polarisation in Western democracies might bring right-wing parties to power, resulting in left vs. right and Muslim vs. non-Muslim antagonisms. Immigration and integration of growing numbers of refugees, partly the

<sup>130</sup> According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), US-led coalition airstrikes killed at least 3,043 members of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra between 23 September 2014 and 23 July 2015, wounding hundreds of others, mostly extremists; SOHR. US-led coalition airstrikes kill 3,216 people, including 173 civilians in the past 10 months, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/07/us-led-coalition-airstrikes-kill-3216-people-including-173-syrian-civilians-in-the-past-10-months/>; accessed 25 July 2015.

<sup>131</sup> J. Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, p. 95.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97 - 98.

<sup>133</sup> For an enumeration of some of these plots, see J. Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, pp. 95 - 98 and J. E. Arasli, Archipelago SYRAQ, pp. 78 - 82.

<sup>134</sup> Moroccan-origin mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb; in “Burgermeester Rotterdam: ‘Als Het Je Hier Niet Bevalt, Rot Dan Op’”, *HLN.BE*, 8 January 2015, [www.hln.be/hln/nl/32542/Aanslag](http://www.hln.be/hln/nl/32542/Aanslag).

result of IS atrocities, might become harder as fortress Europe erects higher walls (like Hungary and other countries on the Balkan route fencing their border).<sup>135</sup>

In the end, defensive measures alone will not diminish the offensive thrust of the present generation of jihadists. What matters is to de-motivate those who volunteer to fight in a foreign country for a foreign cause. To achieve that we first have to understand better what motivates and radicalises them.

## 5. Motivations of European Foreign Fighters Travelling to Syria and/or Iraq

*“Radicalisation is a youth revolt against society, articulated on an Islamic religious narrative of jihad. It is not the uprising of a Muslim community victim of poverty and racism: only young people join, including converts who did not share the “sufferings” of Muslims in Europe. These rebels without a cause find in jihad a “noble” and global cause, and are consequently instrumentalised by a radical organisation (Al Qaeda, ISIS), that has a strategic agenda.”(...) The main motivation of young men for joining jihad seems to be the fascination for a narrative: “the small brotherhood of super-heroes who avenge the Muslim Ummah”<sup>136</sup>*

– Olivier Roy, Nov. 2015.

What are the motives of those wishing to go to Syria? It has often been said that there is no clear profile of individual foreign fighters, there being too large a diversity. However, most of those who go to fight with the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and now predominantly with IS (the two groups split in February 2014) have all one thing in common: they are either second generation children of Muslim immigrants or recent converts to Salafist Islam (six percent in one sample, twenty percent in another).<sup>137</sup> The majority of them in Europe have an immigration background or come from ethnically mixed marriages, with at least one of the parents being Muslim. The specific motivations behind the individual departures may vary, ranging from genuine, though often naïve, altruism to egotistical narcissism, which has little to do with religion. However, the role of religion should not be underestimated. Will McCant, author of *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* has noted that “References to the End Times fill Islamic State propaganda. It’s a big selling point with foreign fighters, who want to travel to the lands where the final

<sup>135</sup> “Migrants Journey to Europe Halted By Fence on Hungary Border”, *The Telegraph (UK)*, 28 September 2015.

<sup>136</sup> O. Roy, *What Is the Driving Force Behind Jihadist Terrorism? – A Scientific Perspective on the Causes/Circumstances of Joining the Scene*, BKA Autumn Conference, 18-19 November 2015, pp. 4-5 & p. 10, <https://life.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/OLIVIER-ROY-what-is-a-radical-islamist.pdf>.

<sup>137</sup> R. Ahmed and D. Pisoiu, *Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Existing Research and a Comparative Study of British and German Foreign Fighters* (Hamburg: Zeus/IFSH, December 2014), Working Paper No. 8, p. 6; T. Holman, “The French Jihadists ‘Foreign Fighters’ Legion in Syria and Iraq” (2015); O. Roy, *What Is the Driving Force Behind Jihadist Terrorism?*, p. 5: “The majority of the radicals come from second generation Muslims born in Europe, the others are converts; almost none came as a young adult or as a teenager to Europe from the Middle East. Apart from that, there is no common sociological background....”.

battles of the apocalypse will take place. The civil wars raging in those countries today lend credibility to the prophecies.”<sup>138</sup> Often the motives of those who are recruited as fighters appear to be mixed and, strangely enough, sometimes (traumatised) returnees can, when looking back at their experience, not even tell what exactly triggered their decision to go to Syria in the first place.<sup>139</sup>

However, some things stand out: the decision to leave for Syria is usually a small group decision rather than an individual one. Such a “bunch of guys” of three to five (sometimes more) young males might have been formed in a neighbourhood, a mosque, a school, a sports club, a martial arts training centre or a prison.<sup>140</sup> Some of them might first have met in social media on the Internet before meeting offline. The literature on the foreign fighters lists a broad array of motivations, partly depending on the countries of origin of foreign fighters. The motives of those who join IS from Tunisia, Libya or Egypt might partly be different from those who originate from Western Europe. The focus here is on the latter group.

There is now a fast-growing literature on what drives them. Here are some of the common themes. The majority of those who left for Syria and Iraq to fight Assad or fight for IS are single males, usually between 16 and 29 years old and almost none of them have had military training or experience in their home country when they left.<sup>141</sup> Most of them depart in company of like-minded others. Beyond the obvious characteristics – Muslim, young, sons of immigrants – the picture becomes more diverse. Some are status-seekers, others are identity-seekers and yet others zealots – or a combination of all three. Most come from a lower-class background but some have middle-class parents. Levels of education vary; these are, for instance, higher in the United Kingdom (where many foreign fighters are students and sons of Pakistani immigrants) than in Germany (where the level of education among those with a Moroccan and Turkish background is less high). Males are the large majority; women with or without children form a minority. However, in one sample of 474 foreign fighters from the 25 Western countries one in seven of the militants were girls or women<sup>142</sup>. Quite a large number of young Muslims from Europe who became foreign fighters have a criminal record in their home country (35 percent in Germany and seventeen percent in the UK in two samples)<sup>143</sup>. Some have been taking illicit narcotic

<sup>138</sup> W. McCants, *How ISIS is Out-Terrorizing Bin Laden*, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/isis-jihad-121525.html#.VdWYHiyqBd>. The author offers other reasons as well: “The Islamic State also replenished its foot soldiers with thousands of foreigners...by using a propaganda mix of apocalypticism, puritanism, sectarianism, ultraviolence and promises of a caliphate” (Ibid.).

<sup>139</sup> R. Coolsaet, *What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian Case* (Brussels: Egmont, 2015), Updated version; Brussels: Egmont Paper No. 75, p. 10.

<sup>140</sup> O. Roy, *What Is the Driving Force Behind Jihadist Terrorism?*, p. 8.

<sup>141</sup> J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 222.

<sup>142</sup> T. Holman, “The French Jihadists ‘Foreign Fighters’ Legion in Syria and Iraq” (2015). Women are not supposed to be engaged as fighters except for self-defense or the occasional suicide bombing. P. Bergen, C. Schuster, and D. Sterman, “ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism” (2015).

<sup>143</sup> R. Ahmed and D. PISOIU, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 12. A recent German study found an even higher degree of pre-departure criminality: out of 670 jihadists (average age: 25.9 years) who had left Germany for Syria and Iraq by June 2015, more than half had a criminal record (assault, theft, drugs and, less often, sexual offences). 234 of the 670 had returned to Germany by June 2015, with 23 of them placed in jail. The study was conducted by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the Federal Criminal Office (BKA) and the Hessen Information and Competence Center against Extremism (HKE). *Deutsche Welle*, “Who are Germany’s Islamists?” 24 September 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/who-are-germanys-islamists/a-18737894>.

drugs and they wish to leave a bad past behind, hoping to be “reborn” and wanting to restart a “clean” life abroad among the puritanical members of the caliphate.<sup>144</sup> The wish to gain a more positive self-esteem than is possible at home where they consider upward social mobility a hopeless dream appears to drive many. Outcasts, misfits and drifters are not unusual among wannabe foreign fighters.<sup>145</sup>

Some of them are sons and daughters of refugees from previous conflict zones (e.g. in the case of Austria: Bosnia, Chechnya) or have themselves already had a jihad tour in a previous conflict. Some of those who left early in 2012 and 2013 for Syria had a genuine altruistic humanitarian impulse to assist Muslims in need but they were soon forced to fight not the Assad regime but rival jihadist organisations.<sup>146</sup> That humanitarian motive appears to have declined since the proclamation of the caliphate. Now many appear to depart with the wish to live in what they were made to believe is a “true Islamic society” and they wish to assist in state-building and in being part of a great Islamic revival. They have been told that it is the individual duty of every Muslim to defend Muslims and fight infidels. Some believe in the Prophet’s often-cited *hadith* that it is their duty to go to fight in Syria.<sup>147</sup> Yet many simply appear to seek excitement and adventure looking for a thrilling adrenalin rush of extreme experiences. Some want to impress their friends back home, progressing from being a zero to become a hero, as Rik Coolsaet put it<sup>148</sup>. Some others might be troubled souls haunted by mental health problems, depressed and suicidal, who want to die - but gloriously.<sup>149</sup> Yet others are attracted by the opportunity of acting out aggressive, sexual and/or criminal macho impulses with a weapon in hand. For some it is the prospect of camaraderie and bonding in a kind of warrior brotherhood. For yet others it is the willingness to fight and die for a ‘good cause’, driven also by desire to earn both earthly (spoils of war) and heavenly rewards (paradise).<sup>150</sup> Jahangir Arasli, in the most thorough study on jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (“Syraq”) so far, has summarized a number of characteristics of European-origin jihadists:

<sup>144</sup> P. Grol and E. Bakker, *Beweegredenen en Afwegingen van Potentiele Syriëgangers* (The Hague: The Hague: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2014), p. 23.

<sup>145</sup> J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.222 - 223.

<sup>146</sup> S. Gates and S. Podder, “Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State” (2015), p.109.

<sup>147</sup> Hadiths (or *ahadith* as the Arab plural goes) are reports of what the Prophet allegedly said or did, as recalled by some of his contemporaries but recorded only much later. They fill dozens of volumes and one or another hadiths can be found to fit and justify almost any desired course of action.

<sup>148</sup> R. Coolsaet, *What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?*, p. 20.

<sup>149</sup> D. Byman and J. Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid*, p.11-15.

<sup>150</sup> B.M. Jenkins, “When Jihadis Come Marching Home. The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq” (2014), p.7. - The diversity of motives is confirmed by other authors, e.g. Gates and Podder who write: “The profile of foreign fighters is diverse, and can change from ignorant novices who view joining as a rite of passage to diehard militants looking for combat and martyrdom, while individuals that go for humanitarian reasons are often kidnapped or forced to fight. The motivations informing the decisions to leave are numerous and they vary and interact in complex ways we probably do not yet fully understand. Motivations may include the prospect of adventure, a desire to impress the local community or opposite sex, a search for identity, feelings of revenge, the search for camaraderie, the desire to make history, and much more. Some also appear motivated by the millennial-apocalyptic promises of IS, as well as by the opportunity to die as a martyr and go to heaven. While some western born recruit are alienated and disaffected youth, many are not. As a group, European foreign fighters tend to end as being socio-economic underperformers – a study of 378 German foreign fighters, for example, found that only a quarter had finished high school and a third had criminal convictions – but there are many exceptions, especially in the UK, where foreign fighters for some reason come from somewhat more affluent background than their comrades in other European countries.” - S. Gates and S. Podder, “Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State” (2015), p.109.

“By 2014 it became apparent that European intelligence services are simply overwhelmed by the number of potential terrorist targets – furious young men and women eager to wage jihad in SYRAQ, since it is not possible at home. In terms of profile, these individuals fit most perfectly to an almost universal model: angry young losers, drug users and petty criminals, coming from broken families, known in their community for their troublemaking, having no bright life perspectives, caught by grievances or a sense of retribution. Many have psychopathic and/or sociopathic inclinations and have demonstrated a propensity to violence even before they travelled to Syria. (...)The jihadist sub-culture and credo were born in the shadow of European cities.”<sup>151</sup>

While this is a generalization, there is a great deal of truth in this observation. In many individual cases, however, we simply do not know what exactly got these misguided young people ideologically radicalised and mobilised to take up arms - which push or pull factors primarily shaped their motivation. The Internet plays an important (self-)recruiting role, but by itself is rarely the only factor.<sup>152</sup>

There are a number of models of radicalisation and there are now many individual cases of radicalisation that have been analysed<sup>153</sup>. From these a general picture of political socialisation and mobilisation to terrorist and jihadist violence has emerged. It has proven useful to distinguish between push and pull factors<sup>154</sup>. Here are the main **push factors** surfacing again and again in the relevant literature on radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism<sup>155</sup>:

<sup>151</sup> J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, pp. 224 - 225. – This view is echoed by the Palestinian journalist Abdel Bari Atwan who wrote: “Rejection of the West, democracy, liberalism and secularism is hardwired into the extremist vocabulary and has produced a small but significant urban youth culture. Extremist youths I have spoken to in London refer to the dominance of gang loyalty and the prevalence of Islamophobia – the two combined have produced a mentality where jihadist credentials are akin to gang membership, providing a sense of brotherhood, shared aims, ‘respect’, kudos, and a group of friends who are ‘handy in a fight’. In a significant proportion of cases, this translates into more drastic action as the young person prepares to travel to the Islamic State, either alone or in a group”. – A. B. Atwan, *Islamic State*, p. 177.

<sup>152</sup> A.P. Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 4, no. 2 (2013), p. 34. A recent Germany study found that in 30 percent of 670 cases of German jihadists going to Syria, the Internet played an initial role in the radicalization process. Friends (37 percent) and contacts in the mosques (33 percent) were, however, more significant than the web. Recruitment in prison only played a role in less than two percent of the cases (9:670). - The study was conducted by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the Federal Criminal Office (BKA) and the Hessen Information and Competence Center against Extremism (HKE). *Deutsche Welle*, “Who are Germany’s Islamists?” (2015).

<sup>153</sup> K. Christmann, *Preventing Religious Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence* (London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2012); K. Barrelle, *Pro-Integration: Disengagement From and Life After Violent Extremism* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2014), p. 235. – Among the studies on radicalisation, a German one involving, more than 300 Islamists, noted that – in the summary by J. E. Arasli – “...of the 378 German Islamists who have headed to Syria since mid-2012 till September 2014 just one in four finished high school. Six percent finished post-school training and only two percent entered university education. The average age has [been] estimated at 26.5. One in five was registered as unemployed; just 12 percent had a full-time job, others were mainly employed in low-income jobs. About 60 percent were born in Germany....Of the mentioned 378, 233 had a German passport. While most (80% - 85%) were born as Muslim, 54 were converts to Islam. Almost a third (117) had criminal convictions before they were radicalised, mainly for violence and drug related offences. 89% are males. About half of them were married and 104 have children”. – J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.75.

<sup>154</sup> I. Daniels, ed., *Dealing with Muslim Radicalisation*, p.282.

<sup>155</sup> Based on Appendices 4.1. and 4.2, in A.P. Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, 272-279; in addition to R. Coolsaet, *What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?*, pp. 10-14; J. Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, pp. 82-83; A. Speckhard, “Talking to Terrorists: What Drives Young People to Become Foreign Fighters for ISIS and Other Terrorist Groups And What Can Be Done in Response”, *Freedom from Fear Magazine*, vol. 11 (2015), <http://f3magazine.unicri.it?p=1080>.

Push Factors Behind Radicalisation, Violent Extremism and Terrorism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reaction to (vicarious) traumatic experiences of violence</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anger and individual or collective desire for (vicarious) revenge, based on humiliation and/or experience of discrimination and injustice</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Estrangement from mainstream society by uprooted migrants in refugee camps and diasporas, aggravated by socio-economic marginalisation, relative deprivation and/or political exclusion</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal identity crisis; individual search for meaning and purpose in life; frustrated aspirations; lack of future perspectives at home and desire to escape; seeking redemption</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unresolved political conflicts and perceived absence of solutions by state actors</li> </ul>

**Table 14:** Push Factors Behind Radicalisation, Violent Extremism and Terrorism

Push factors alone are rarely decisive in themselves. They usually act in combination with pull factors on vulnerable young Muslims and recent converts to Islam. The following are frequently identified major **pull factors** that emerge from the existing literature<sup>156</sup>:

Pull Factors Behind Radicalisation, Violent Extremism and Terrorism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existence of extremist ideology that provides justifications for attacks against out-group members (e.g. non-believers)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence of charismatic leader who translates grievances into incentives to engage in jihad</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existence of like-minded militant local peer-group that reinforces individual inclination to become foreign fighter</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lure of adventure, fed by images of 'heroism' of jihadi fighters on social media</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imitation (contagion effect) of publicised and seemingly successful terrorist mode of operation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal recognition: prospect of recognition as valiant fighter for a good cause and opportunity to boost one's (self-)image from near "zero [in own country] to hero" [in the land of jihad]</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promise of rewards on earth and in afterlife (paradise)</li> </ul>

**Table 15:** Pull Factors Behind Radicalisation, Violent Extremism and Terrorism

The presence of some of these twelve push and pull factors can be found among many young disenfranchised and/or dissatisfied Muslims in Western diasporas. Yet few of them (about one in 4,000 as we saw above) give in to the jihadist temptation. Among those affected by the jihadist lure, signs of radicalisation are often clearly

<sup>156</sup> Based on Appendices 4.1 and 4.2, in A.P. Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, pp. 272-279; in addition to R. Coolsaet, *What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?*, pp. 10-14; J. Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, pp. 82-83; A. Speckhard, "Talking to Terrorists: What Drives Young People to become Foreign Fighters for ISIS and other Terrorist Groups and What Can be Done in Response" (2015).

visible (although some families deny to have noticed any signs of radicalisation of their sons and daughters until they were suddenly gone). Some of these outward signs of radicalisation are, according to French authorities<sup>157</sup>:

Signs of Radicalisation
• They stop listening to music
• Stop watching TV and going to the cinema
• Dramatically change eating habit
• Stop all sport activities
• Change the way they dress
• Severe relations with old friends
• Reject members of their own family

**Table 16:** Signs of Radicalisation, according to French Authorities

Once they are well on the road to full radicalisation, they are enlisted by on- or offline recruiters and other entrepreneurs of global jihad and guided to facilitators and fixers who assist them in the transfer to jihadist conflict zones where they are activated for their fighting task after having undergone some weeks of ideological brain-washing portrayed as religious (re-) instruction.<sup>158</sup>

What is difficult to understand is why only a few are pulled and pushed while many others in similar circumstances are not. According to one study looking at Kenyan and Ugandan recruits to four militant organisations, sons who were not the oldest and not the youngest in the family – those in the middle – were more likely (54 percent) to join than the first (15 percent) or last born (31percent).<sup>159</sup> This is an intriguing finding but also one, we cannot do very much with in policy terms. The biggest lacuna in the research on foreign fighters originating from Western Europe is that we do not really know what holds the large majority of young Muslims and converts to Islam in similar situations back from joining IS. This is especially puzzling in the light of the many expressions of sympathy for IS found in young Muslim diaspora population as revealed in opinion polls.<sup>160</sup>

<sup>157</sup> J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 231. The list was released to the public to help parents recognize signs of radicalisation in their children. – Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>159</sup> A. Botha, *Radicalisation From a Political Socialization Perspective in Kenya and Uganda*. (Bloemfontein: University of Free State, 2014), PhD Thesis, p. 248.

<sup>160</sup> For instance, a Dutch opinion poll, conducted in May 2013 on behalf of the TV program *Altijd Wat*, found that almost 75 percent of Dutch Muslims asked (n=370) consider youth travelling to Syria to fight against Assad’s regime to be heroes. On the other hand, 70% of the native Dutch population said that they were not heroes (n=570). *Euro-Islam.info*, “Dutch Muslims Polled for Support of Youth Fighting in Syria”, May 29, 2013, [www.euro-islam.info/2013/06/07/dutch-muslims-polled-for-support-of-youth-fighting-in-syria/](http://www.euro-islam.info/2013/06/07/dutch-muslims-polled-for-support-of-youth-fighting-in-syria/).

At this stage we can only hypothesize that some of the following negative or positive **resilience factors** may play a role in withholding young Muslims in European diasporas from becoming foreign fighters<sup>161</sup>:

Pull Factors Behind Radicalisation, Violent Extremism and Terrorism	
<b>Negative</b>	
No family breakdown, with positive father figure	
No previous involvement and exposure to violence	
No violent friends or criminal gang or drug scene involvement	
No signs of mental disorders	
No fascination with weapons and martial arts	
<b>Positive</b>	
Ability to think and act for themselves rather than accept ideological slogans	
Decent employment, with prospect of upward social mobility	
Successful integration in immigrants' host society	
Acceptance of democracy, freedom and gender equality	
Acceptance of information from non-Salafist sources	

**Table 17:** Likely Resilience Factors Preventing Radicalisation on the Level of the Individual

These resilience factors are likely to be cumulative – the more of them apply, the less likely is radicalisation to violent extremism and terrorism. The list is, however, not rigorously tested. However, it reflects – as mirror image - factors that have been found. in ethnographic and other studies of vulnerable young men and women radicalised.

## 6. Addressing the Problem of Returning Foreign Fighters

While between 25 and 40 percent of European foreign fighters have already returned home,<sup>162</sup> not enough is known about them. Regarding policies towards returnees, an expert round table of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), concluded in April 2015 that “Little empirical evidence exists when it comes to returnees (...) There is a need for a thorough diagnosis of returnees”.<sup>163</sup> This is a real knowledge gap. Among the returnees an unknown (but low) percentage have been arrested and subsequently brought to court. Others remain undetected but are often disillusioned, burned out and even broken. Yet an unknown number of others have become even

<sup>161</sup> Author's own checklist; but informed by other sources, including R. Cohen, “Why ISIS Trumps Freedom”, *The New York Times*, 13 August 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/opinion/roger-cohen-why-isis-trumps-freedom.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/opinion/roger-cohen-why-isis-trumps-freedom.html?_r=1); accessed 14 August 2015; J.M. Berger, “The Metronome of Apocalyptic Time: Social Media as Carrier Wave for Millenarian Contagion”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p. 65.

<sup>162</sup> K. De Freytas-Tamura, “ISIS Defectors Reveal Disillusionment”, *New York Times*, 20 September 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/world/europe/isis-defectors-reveal-disillusionment.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/world/europe/isis-defectors-reveal-disillusionment.html?_r=1).

<sup>163</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), *Returning Foreign Fighters: Typologies and Engagement Options. Meeting Report. Closed Expert Roundtable 13 April 2015*, p. 2.

more radicalised while fighting abroad and pose a real danger when returning home in that they can radicalise others and facilitate their transfer as well as money and material equipment to the combat zone, or worse, prepare terrorist attacks in their home country or act as sleepers.<sup>164</sup>

In order to reduce the foreign fighter problem prevention is essential. The **push factors** that drive estranged angry young Muslims from their own countries need to be reduced. This is a difficult task at a time of scarce public resources and when large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from Muslim-majority countries, come to Europe. Governments face xenophobic reactions from populist politicians and under-privileged native citizens. Investing more in integrating young Muslims in Europe at a time of low economic growth and government austerity policies is challenging. Integration is something that has to occur on the community level but when Muslims in Western diasporas notice the counter-terrorist policy intentions behind integration efforts, many of them might become suspicious. Ideally, the Muslim communities in Europe should by themselves be able to identify and neutralise jihadist troublemakers in their midst. However, it would appear that moderate Muslims are often too divided, too unorganised, too afraid and often also too poor to take the initiative. While community work is essential for prevention and the first line of defense, it cannot be done by Muslim civil society in European diasporas alone.

The **pull factors** that attract vulnerable young Muslims to join IS need to be diminished. This can be done on several levels. Military losses and defeats of IS in battles reduce the attraction to join IS which seeks to portray itself as an unstoppable force guided by Allah, rushing from one victory to the other. Whether breaking the myth of invincibility can be achieved by airstrikes alone is questionable. An alternative method of reducing the pull of IS is to challenge its narrative.<sup>165</sup> Those best suited to do so are Muslims who alone possess the necessary cultural affinity. However, many mainstream Muslims have not been very vocal in that regards. The credibility of traditional imams in Western diasporas - who are often paid by foreign governments (esp. from Turkey or Saudi Arabia) - is often absent among those who are potential foreign fighters. However, there is at least one group that has high credibility: returning foreign fighters who have become disenchanted with what they have seen of IS: defectors.<sup>166</sup>

Finally, the **resilience factors** need to be cultivated. One way of doing this is through education about what is really going on in Syria, explaining how foreign fighters make the humanitarian situation worse rather than better and that IS is not fighting the Assad regime but those who want to overthrow Assad. In order to reduce the risk of

<sup>164</sup> S. Mullins, "Foreign Fighters in Syria" (2014), p. 39.

<sup>165</sup> A.P. Schmid, "Challenging the Narrative of the 'Islamic State'", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 6, no. 5 (2015).

<sup>166</sup> The other group that has a chance to be listened to are the mothers of the foreign fighters. J. Ioffe, "Mothers of ISIS: Their Children Abandoned Them to Join the Worst Terror Organisation on Earth. Now All They Have Is Each Other", *The Huffington Post*, 12 August 2015, <http://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/mothers-of-isis/>.

more young Muslims from European diasporas departing for Syria, it makes sense to identify returnees who are willing and able to speak out against IS and other groups engaged in terrorism. If the voices of those who are disenchanted are amplified, that is bound to reduce the appeal of terrorist on- and offline recruiters. Such voices might encourage others who are disillusioned to stand up and add their voice to those who already speak out against violent extremism. The reasons given by returnees about what made them change their mind, however, vary greatly: while some mention disgust about the wanton violence of IS others mention trivial and even bizarre reasons like the inability to quit smoking (punished with 30 lashes by IS) or because the iPad was broken.<sup>167</sup>

The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence has suggested that 30 – 50 the British jihadis in Syria would like to get out and go home, but feel trapped because they fear that they will be locked up for a long time when arrested.<sup>168</sup> Hundreds of jihadists have returned, many of them disenchanted with what they saw in the new promised Salafist homeland. Many did not make it. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) IS has executed 116 foreign fighters since November 2014 in the Syrian provinces Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Hashkeh who tried to escape.<sup>169</sup> They were killed for fear that they might disclose uncomfortable truths about the reality of life under IS. To prevent defections, IS has set up special hunting teams to search deserters and, for the same purpose, also impose nighttime curfews and set up roadblocks. Those who get caught trying to escape are imprisoned but more often directly killed, with at least one of the execution of a group of deserters video-taped for deterrence.<sup>170</sup>

Ex-jihadists who make it back home, have a degree of credibility that cannot easily be matched by any other groups – whether victims, government officials, academic researchers, investigative journalists or social workers. Disillusioned returning foreign fighters willing to talk are a great asset in counter-narratives<sup>171</sup>; they can contrast the romantic image of an allegedly comfortable “jihad”<sup>172</sup> with the terrifying reality of being constantly in life-death situations and having to witness spectacular atrocities often performed for no other purpose than to keep everybody terror-struck.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 153.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>169</sup> C. Watts, “Let Them Rot: The Challenges and Opportunities of Containing rather than Countering the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p.163; for higher figures, see “ISIS Executes Over 3,000 in Syria in a Year-Long ‘Caliphate’”, *Agence France Press*, 28 June 2015.

<sup>170</sup> S. Gates and S. Podder, “Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State” (2015), p. 113; B. Tufft, “Isis Executes up to 200 Fighters for Trying to Flee Jihad and Return Home”, *The Independent*, 29 December 2014.

<sup>171</sup> R. Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria* (New York: The Soufan Group, 2014), p.30.

<sup>172</sup> The idea of jihadi fighters in Syria living in villas with swimming pools and relaxing in luxury between trips to the front was propagated by Ifthekar Jaman, a British-Bangladeshi jihadist from Portsmouth in online postings that went viral. – S. Wright and I. Bains, “The British Muslims Waging ‘Five-star Jihad’ for Al Qaeda: At Least 17 Extremists Post Messages About Experiences in War-torn Syria”, *Daily Mail*, 21 November 2014, [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-251153/British-Muslims-wage-star-jihad-Al-Qaeda-war-torn-Syria.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-251153/British-Muslims-wage-star-jihad-Al-Qaeda-war-torn-Syria.html).

<sup>173</sup> To be fair, IS also uses “carrots” in addition to “sticks” to control the population to win the population’s hearts and minds, distributing sweets to children or land and services to people. This appears to go beyond tokenism and propaganda stunts. – L. Alkhouri and A. Kassirer, “Governing the Caliphate: The Islamic State Picture”, *CTC Sentinel*, 21 August 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/?p=35830>.

One of those who managed to escape and was recently facing trial in Germany is the 26-year-old Ebrahim H.B. He went to Syria in the summer of 2014 as part of a group of at least 20 Muslims from Wolfsburg. He claimed that a planned marriage had been cancelled by the bride's Tunisian family and that he therefore felt humiliated and wanted to escape and ended up going to Syria because his friends went there too.<sup>174</sup> He soon found that what he had been promised - women and a car - was not quite what he got. He had to hand in his passport, his mobile phone and other personal belongings when he arrived in the camp for new arrivals. He was told that "All disbelievers have to be slaughtered". The choice he was given was to be a frontline fighter in Syria or a suicide bomber in Iraq. That was not the "five star jihad" he had envisioned. From his Wolfsburg peers about one third had already been killed in less than twelve weeks. Ebrahim himself managed to escape after three months. He was willing to talk but said many returnees were not, adding "Who likes to admit that he has been misled".<sup>175</sup> He said that prison in Germany was "preferable to freedom in Syria". In Syria, IS had placed him in a blood-stained prison cell from which he had to witness the beheading of a suspected traitor next door. Then the headless body was thrown into his cell. He was imprisoned because he was, as a former member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), suspected of "believing in democracy" (both democracy and freedom are concepts rejected by the Islamic State). Only the assurances of his former recruiter from the Ditib mosque in Wolfsburg, Yassin Oussaifi, who had in the meantime become a high sharia judge with IS, got him out of his death cell.<sup>176</sup>

Testimonies like the one of Ebrahim H.B. ought to be collected and widely disseminated, the more so that number of foreign fighters (from the stock of an estimated 7,000 Salafists) leaving Germany are not decreasing.<sup>177</sup> There must be dozens if not hundreds like Ebrahim. Recently the ICSR has collected 58 testimonies of disillusioned foreign fighters and the picture that emerged is one, which underlines the potential of their narratives to open the eyes of those who still see an utopia in the making in the Islamic State. Its author, Peter Neumann, found that their narratives of disillusionment were fed by four realisations:

- 1) 'IS is more interested in fighting fellow (Sunni) Muslims than the Assad government.'
- 2) 'IS is involved in brutality and atrocities against (Sunni) Muslims.'
- 3) 'IS is corrupt and un-Islamic.'
- 4) 'Life under IS is harsh and disappointing.'<sup>178</sup>

<sup>174</sup> "Nach Geplatzer Hochzeit Zum IS", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 August 2015,

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/terrorismus-prozess-nach-geplatzer-hochzeit-zum-is-1.2602636>.

<sup>175</sup> "Ehemaliger Wolfsburger IS-Kämpfer Packt Vor Prozessbeginn Aus", *FOCUS Online*, 17 July 2015, [www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/terrorismus-ehemaliger-wolfsburger-is-kaempfer-packt-vor-prozessbeginn-aus\\_id\\_4822856.html](http://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/terrorismus-ehemaliger-wolfsburger-is-kaempfer-packt-vor-prozessbeginn-aus_id_4822856.html).

<sup>176</sup> H. Leyendecker & G. Mascolo, "Deutscher IS-Rückkehrer Prangert Terrormiliz An", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 July 2015, [https://blendle.com/i/sueddeutsche-zeitung/deutscher-is-rueckkehrer-prangert-terrormiliz-an/bnl-sueddeutschezeitung-20150717-1\\_5](https://blendle.com/i/sueddeutsche-zeitung/deutscher-is-rueckkehrer-prangert-terrormiliz-an/bnl-sueddeutschezeitung-20150717-1_5); "Islamischer Staat: 'Du Bist Entweder Tot Oder Tot'", *Die Zeit*, 17 July 2015.

<sup>177</sup> Assessment based on conversations with intelligence officials.

<sup>178</sup> P. R. Neumann, "Victims, Perpetrators: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors", *ICSR*, p. 1. <http://icsr.info/2015/09/icsr-report-narratives-islamic-state-defectors/>.

A new study by Anne Speckhard and Ahmet Yayla, based on first-hand testimonies from defectors about life inside the Islamic State contains such shocking materials on the moral depravity of IS cadres that anybody in his right mind who has read and fully absorbed it should have second thoughts about joining IS.<sup>179</sup>

Former fighters who talk honestly and openly should be offered reduced sentences (like in the Italian *pentiti* program or in the case of the Irish *supergrass* turncoats) and assisted with re-integration or starting a new life elsewhere.<sup>180</sup> Disenchanted returnees are arguably the most effective weapon against further radicalisation and can more than counteract the few who return with their ideology of violence still intact. However, escape and return from the claws of IS is not easy – anyone trying to desert is likely to be killed.<sup>181</sup> If they manage to reach their home countries, most risk prosecution and imprisonment rather than rehabilitation and reintegration.

Dealing effectively with returning foreign fighters is only a second-best solution. The goals should be prevention. A number of governments have taken a series of steps, including the following, to deal with the (returning) foreign fighters threat (table 18).<sup>182</sup>

<sup>179</sup> A. Speckhard and A. S. Yayla, "Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Islamic State Defectors: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit" (2015).

<sup>180</sup> In her dissertation, Kate Barrelle identified five crucial domains: 'Social Relations', 'Coping', 'Identity', 'Ideology', and 'Action Orientation'. She explained: "The term 'pro-integration' is used to capture the full potential of societal engagement across these five domains. Proactive self-development across the domains moves a person towards a state of connectedness and wellbeing as indicated by the presence of: a range of supportive and meaningful relationships in the community; psychological and physical health; the personal/social resources to participate in life; a stable sense of self; a range of social identities; a coherent set of ideas and beliefs that enable peaceful cohabitation; and nonviolent action orientation such that the individual can participate in their own life, or wider community life to the full extent that they wish without hurting others. Actual departure from an extremist group is just the beginning of the next phase in a person's life". - K. Barrelle, *Pro-Integration: Disengagement From and Life After Violent Extremism*, p. 183.

<sup>181</sup> V. Mironova, A. Mhidi and S. Whitt, "The Jihadi Who Came in From the Cold", *Foreign Policy*, 10 August 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/10/the-jihadi-who-came-in-from-the-cold-islamic-state/>.

<sup>182</sup> ICCT Foreign Fighters database; J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, pp. 239 - 243.

Steps Taken by Governments to Counter Foreign Fighters
• Preventive detention
• Disruption of recruitment
• Disruption of fund-raising
• Confiscation of travel documents/passports
• Revocation of citizenship
• Enhanced border controls
• Deportation (of non-national extremist imams and hate preachers and jihad veterans)
• Surveillance of suspects;
• Criminalization of participation in armed struggle
• Criminal prosecution
• Counselling and theological instruction
• Establishment of Early Warning hot- and help-lines for worried citizens and families;
• Distribution of leaflets, informing vulnerable youth about situation in Syria
• Preventative talks with young people considering departing for Syria
• Monitoring of online behaviour of vulnerable youth
• Arrest and prosecution of returnees
• Participation in mandatory de-radicalisation courses for returnees

**Table 18:** Steps Taken by Governments to Counter Foreign Fighters

Yet better than such defensive measures would be more structural prevention, based, in part, on some of the main push, pull and stop factors identified above.

In this context, some of the suggestions of the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum deserve to be highlighted. In mid-December 2014, members of the Global Counter-Terrorist Forum (GCTF), an association of 30 like-minded states and the EU, met in Marrakech under the joint chairmanship of Morocco and the Netherlands. They emphasised at the inaugural meeting of a newly established working group some key steps that need to be taken to implement Security Council Resolution 2178 of September 2014. These address (i) radicalisation to violent extremism; (ii) recruitment and facilitation; (iii) travel and fighting; and (iv) return and reintegration. The GCTF identified nineteen good practices (GP) deemed to allow a more effective response to the foreign fighters phenomenon<sup>183</sup>. These recommendations - for they are not yet standard good practices in most countries, but aspirational non-repressive goals - include several proposals that are long-term investments in countering violent extremism, for instance:

- GP No.1: Invest in the long-term cultivation of trusted relationships with communities susceptible to recruitment, considering the broader issues and concerns affecting the community;

<sup>183</sup> Global Counterterrorism Forum, "Foreign Terrorist fighters" (FTF) Initiative. *The Hague-Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon*, 2014, [https://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/159879/14Sept19\\_The+Hague-Marrakech+FTF+Memorandum.pdf](https://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/159879/14Sept19_The+Hague-Marrakech+FTF+Memorandum.pdf).

- GP No.2: Develop a wide range of proactive, positive counter-narratives and alternative activities, offering non-violent, productive alternatives to help those in need, as well as means to channel frustration, anger, and concerns without turning to violence;
- GP No. 3: Bring together social media, analytic experts, and technology innovators to develop and produce compelling counter-narrative content;
- GP No.4: Empower those who are best-placed to affect change, including youth, families, women, and civil society, to take ownership in the development and messaging of positive counter-narratives to the violent extremist agenda.

More controversial is a fifth recommendation: Prevent the identification of the FTF phenomenon or violent extremism with any religion, culture, ethnic group, nationality or race. This particular recommendation from GCTF's list of nineteen good practices contains the problematical request not to associate the foreign fighters phenomenon one variant of Islam – Salafism. However, fact is that the overwhelming majority of foreign fighters currently claim to be Muslims and enjoy - according to opinion surveys - at least the passive support of millions of other non-extremist Muslims. The fact that the current wave of terrorism in which some 70 percent of all attacks worldwide have an Islamist background<sup>184</sup> must be faced rather than avoided out of fear of being blamed of Islamophobia. It would be equally absurd if the West would claim that the crusades had nothing to do with Christianity. The crusades were not just a fringe phenomenon but a major part of Christian history. The same is true for the role of jihad in Muslim history<sup>185</sup>. In this context it is worth recalling that some of the appeals of Christian clerics inviting young Christians in the Middle Ages to go on a crusade were rather similar to those of IS.<sup>186</sup> The Qur'an mentions jihad in 23 verses and there are numerous hadiths developing the notion of holy war.<sup>187</sup> That is not to say that jihad should be automatically equated with terrorism for there are just war

<sup>184</sup> Based on US government WITS data from 2011.

<sup>185</sup> To quote the Oxford historian Christopher Tyerman: "Since Pope Urban II (1088-99) in 1095 answered a call for military help from the Byzantine emperor Alexius I Comnenus (1081-1118), by summoning a vast army to fight in the name of God to liberate eastern Christianity and recover the Holy City of Jerusalem, there have been few periods when the consequences of this act have not gripped minds and imaginations... (...) Spread over five hundred years and across three continents, the Crusades may not have defined medieval Christian Europe, yet they provide a most extraordinary feature that retains the power to excite, appal, and disturb". - C. Tyerman, *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), pp. vii-viii. In a similar way to Urban II's call to arms, the most influential contemporary Muslim cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood [who has – or until recently had - an audience of tens of millions, with his weekly al-Jazeera TV show and could be considered, according to Thomas Hegghammer, to be the closest the Muslim world had to the pope] called, in May 2013, on Sunni Muslims worldwide to fight against the regime of Assad, declaring jihad in Syria a duty for all adults and able Muslim men. – B. Peeters, *Choosing Battles*, p. 98.

<sup>186</sup> One Dominican priest, Humbert of Romans, admonished in 13<sup>th</sup> century France Christians in a treatise to join a crusade with these words: "Hurry while the Kingdom of Heaven is cheap. Very few people get this chance! You just have to make one effort, albeit a big one, and if you sincerely repent you'll be fully pardoned and go to the Kingdom of Heaven". M. A. Berdy, *Propaganda Lessons From an Old – a Very Old – Master*, [www.themoscowtimes.com/arts\\_n\\_ideas/article/propaganda-lessons-from-an-old--avert-old--master/52714.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/arts_n_ideas/article/propaganda-lessons-from-an-old--avert-old--master/52714.html). Compare this to ISIS' use of the following Qur'an quote: "Indeed, Allah has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for that they will have Paradise. They fight in the cause of Allah (God), so they kill and are killed. [It is] a true promise [binding] upon Him in the Torah and the Gospel and the Quran. And who is truer to this covenant than Allah? So rejoice in your transaction which you have contracted. And it is that which is the great success" (Quran 9:111)". – "ISIS. How to Survive in the West", <http://www.blazingcatfur.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ISIS-How-to-survive-in-the-west.pdf>. For the original quote, see *The Holy Qur'an. Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), p.156.

<sup>187</sup> J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, pp. 144 -145.

notions also present in the Muslim holy war doctrine. However, the equation of Salafist-jihadism with terrorism is at least largely true for IS' rule by terror.

Returning to the good practices (GP) of the GCTF, there are some more that reflect an enlightened approach, e.g. GP No. 6: "Reach out to communities to develop awareness of the FTF threat and build resilience to violent extremist messages" or GP No. 7: "Collect and fuse detailed information from government agencies, front line workers, communities, and social media to detect recruitment and facilitation while respecting the rule of law and human rights." The GCTF document also proposes, in its last recommendation (GP No. 19) "Develop comprehensive reintegration programs for returning FTFs."

These are noble and reasonable recommendations but these too need to be based on better evidence than is currently available. Many countries are still at an early stage of implementation. Since September 2014 when Security Council resolution 1278 was passed, only a small number of such measures have been taken by many countries facing the foreign fighters phenomenon - despite the mandatory nature of the Security Council decision. Have they had much effect? The crucial front is the 822 kilometres long border between Turkey and Syria of which so far some 150 kilometres have been fortified. Crossing it is how 60 percent of all foreign fighters entered Syria.<sup>188</sup> By mid-2015, Turkey has become more determined serious in taking measures to prevent such border crossings. It claimed to have barred the entry of some 14,000 foreign citizens while detaining hundreds of IS suspects.<sup>189</sup> However, the overall effect of Turkey's efforts have so far been limited if the price that needs to be paid to local smugglers who are prepared to smuggle foreign fighters into Syria is an indication.<sup>190</sup> After the Suruc suicide bombing of 21 July 2015, in which IS killed 32 people and wounded many more, Turkey finally took more energetic measures, both in terms of border control and in retaliating against IS. However, so far Turkey appears to have used the occasion mainly to target Kurdish positions in Syria and Iraq in order to prevent a Kurdish proto-state from emerging. In Syria itself Turkish support has reportedly switched from IS to the al-Nusra and the Ahrar al-Sham front (which it already supported before), since these appear to be more interested in overthrowing the Assad regime than IS.<sup>191</sup>

<sup>188</sup> A. Hackensberger, "Wie die Geheime Allianz mit dem IS zu Bruch ging", *Die Welt*, 24 July 2015 [www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article/144423834/Wie-die-geheime-Allianz-mit-dem-IS-zu-Bruch-ging.html](http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article/144423834/Wie-die-geheime-Allianz-mit-dem-IS-zu-Bruch-ging.html).

<sup>189</sup> Y. Paksoy, "EU Minister Bozkir in Germany, Explains Details of Safe Zone in Syria", *Daily Sabah*, 17 August 2015, <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/08/18/eu-minister-bozkir-in-germany-explains-details-of-safe-zone-in-syria>.

<sup>190</sup> P. Cockburn, "Isis: The Real Power in Iraq Tells its Neighbours to Close Borders to Foreign Fighters", *The Independent*, 19 July 2015, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-the-power-in-iraq-speaks--and-tells-iraqs-neighbours-to-close-borders-to-foreign-fighters-10397945.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-the-power-in-iraq-speaks--and-tells-iraqs-neighbours-to-close-borders-to-foreign-fighters-10397945.html).

<sup>191</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.19; A. Hackensberger, "Wie die Geheime Allianz mit dem IS zu Bruch ging" (2015). – IS and the Assad regime tend to avoid each other, with both of them opposing the more nationalist armed resistance forces between them.

## 7. What is To Be Done? – Stopping Those Wanting to Be Foreign Fighters Is Not Enough

The international community has not been willing to live up to its ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P)<sup>192</sup> the Syrian population which so far has seen more than 250,000 people killed and more than four times as many wounded while 600,000 other men, women and children are trapped in siege situations facing starvation.<sup>193</sup> Partly out of disappointment about the inaction of Western democracies (beyond aerial bombardments which began only in the third year of the conflict), non-state militant activism and radicalisation in the form of foreign fighters took off. The proclamation of the caliphate in Iraq’s second city Mosul in mid-2014 changed both the framework and the dynamics of the foreign fighter flow as it tied the Iraqi and Syrian wars together in a fateful combination. Many of the foreign fighters that now converge on IS are not primarily interested in overthrowing the regime of Bashar al-Assad but dream about life under an expanding caliphate. IS has grand designs: it not only want to restructure Syria and Iraq but has plans for the entire region and ultimately world domination. While most Syrian refugees are caused by the military policies of the government of Bashir Assad, part of IS’ strategy apparently also involves creating additional refugees to destabilize third countries. There have also been reports that IS profits financially from the outflow. The Libyan section of IS has reportedly forced organised crime groups to share their trafficking profits earned by from shipping refugees into Europe from ports around Derna and Sirte.<sup>194</sup>

The Muslim foreign fighter stream from Western Europe to Syria and the Muslim refugee stream from Syria to Western Europe via Libya are part of the same drama - the result of Western military action in Libya in March 2011 and West’s (initial) military inaction in the case of the popular uprising in Syria after March 2011. It is a tragic and cruel irony that thousands of angry young Muslims have left and continue to leave Europe to fight in Syria while Sunni Muslims (and Christians) from the Middle East come to the West as refugees to seek shelter from the internecine struggle in Syria fuelled by the arrival of foreign fighters, with IS profiting at both ends.

<sup>192</sup> ICISS, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa: ICISS, 2001).

<sup>193</sup> F. C. Hof, “The West Must Realize It Cannot Beat ISIS Without Also Beating Assad”, *The World Post*, 13 August 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ambassador-frederic-c-hof/west-beat-isis-beat-assad\\_b\\_7972092.html?ncid=fbklnkushpimg00000014](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ambassador-frederic-c-hof/west-beat-isis-beat-assad_b_7972092.html?ncid=fbklnkushpimg00000014).

<sup>194</sup> “The movement of migrant across the Middle East and Africa towards Europe has generated up to \$323 million for the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and other jihadist groups, a new report has revealed”. – V. Walt, “ISIS Makes a Fortune From Smuggling Migrants Says Report”, *TIME Magazine*, 13 May 2015, <http://time.com/3857121/isis-smuggling/>. The author adds: “The report suggests ISIS has recently driven Syrians and Iraqis from their homes in a deliberate attempt to increase their control over smuggling routes, and to drive up the numbers of those trying to cross the Mediterranean. Syrians now comprise the largest number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean.... The surge in Syrian refugees crossing the Mediterranean since last year appeared to follow ISIS attacks on refugee camps.(...) “The purpose was to drive refugees out”. Many of those refugees made their way to Libya to take dangerous boats to Europe”. The report cited is: The Global Initiative against International Organised Crime, *Libya: Criminal Economies and Terrorist Financing in the Trans-Sahara*, [www.globalinitiative.net/libya-criminal-economies-and-terrorist-financing-in-the-trans-sahara/](http://www.globalinitiative.net/libya-criminal-economies-and-terrorist-financing-in-the-trans-sahara/).

As long as the international community is not directly coming to the protection of the Syrian population, e.g. in the form of establishing safe havens and no-fly zones and local cease fires (“freeze zones”) while hitting IS hard enough to shatter its aura of invincibility, foreign fighters are likely to continue to be attracted to Syria and Iraq. Stopping them as they exit or transit other countries or are about to enter Syria will not address the larger problem – the vortex of sectarian violence and religious fanaticism fed by the rivalries of Iran and Saudi Arabia, Russia and the United States and the Turkish and Saudi strong desire to get rid of Assad. After more than four years of civil war – if that is the right term for the complex conflict in Syria – no end is in sight. The Syrian conflict has nearly reached the average length of a civil war (4.5 years)<sup>195</sup> but that is an average – the civil war one in nearby Lebanon lasted almost three times that long – from the late 1970s to the early 1990s – and only came to an end when all outside powers agreed to stop supplying the fighting factions with arms and money. Since August 2015 diplomatic initiatives to stop the slaughter in Syria have been resumed, involving Russia, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States as more foreign powers began to realize that a meltdown of the Assad regime might only play into the hands of IS.<sup>196</sup> The Russian military intervention in the fall of 2015 has complicated the finding of a solution, and the more recent entry of France – has brought the conflict to Europe in the form of the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015. With Great Britain entering the armed conflict in December 2015, escalation rather than de-escalation might be in the making.

A possible (partial) solution to the foreign fighters problem will probably depend as much on the eventual outcome of diplomatic initiatives than on micro-level measures taken individually or collectively by exit and transit countries en route to Syria. Over the past decades Salafist jihadism and the related foreign fighter problem has been allowed to grow in Muslim majority countries as well as in Western Muslim diasporas. For too long it went almost unnoticed and largely unchallenged as governments looked away while a highly ideological totalitarian proto-state was in the making. Why? One of the best answers to this question comes from one of the most astute observers of the Syrian-Iraqi (SYRAQ) debacle, Jahangir E. Arasli, whom we quoted repeatedly in this Research Paper. He deserves both our sincere thanks and the final word:

“The legitimate question which needed to be asked is really – how has the world missed such an emerging threat when jihadists have been so visible and outspoken in their intentions? It is hard to believe that the intelligence and security agencies, diplomatic services and think tanks of so many states have failed in providing actionable, relevant and realistic assessments and prognoses’ on how and in what direction the trends were developing in previous years. And here is the essence of the problem. The burden of guilt does not lie with

<sup>195</sup> The average duration of 108 civil wars in the Correlates of War Project was 1,665 days. – P. T. Brandt, T. D. Mason, M. Gurus, N. Petrovsky and D. Radin, *When and How the Fighting Stops: Explaining the Duration and Outcome of Civil Wars*, p.3, [http://www.utdallas.edu/~pbrandt/Patrick\\_Brandts\\_Website/Research\\_files/CWDurations-26.pdf](http://www.utdallas.edu/~pbrandt/Patrick_Brandts_Website/Research_files/CWDurations-26.pdf).

<sup>196</sup> B. Kendall, “Syria Crisis: What’s Behind the Fresh Diplomatic Push?”, *BBC*, 16 August 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33939806>.

specialists, analysts and experts but rather politicians and state institution. In the fog of bureaucracy, ignorance, political correctness, wishful thinking, media spin and peanut politics, almost all warnings got lost in translation. Unless this can be overcome through real political will and recovered capabilities to fight real war(s), the West will not regain its footing against the SYRAQ threat, and combating jihadists will remain a futile enterprise. And the SYRAC sarcoma will continue to develop and spread out...."<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 331.

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# Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective

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