

Foreign Fighters in Their Own Words:

Using YouTube as a Source

Gaining more insight into the foreign fighting phenomenon can be difficult. Foreign fighters are often in hard-to-reach areas and war-torn countries which makes it dangerous for researchers to travel to these places. Social media platforms provide researchers with additional possibilities to gain knowledge of these fighters without any direct risks that normally exist when travelling to war zones. While Facebook and Twitter have proved to be useful in foreign fighter research, YouTube provides a different insight into the lives of foreign fighters. By analysing what is said in videos, answers to basic questions like: 'who are these foreign fighters?', 'why do these foreign fighters travel to Syria?' and 'where will they go next when the fight is over?', can add to thick descriptions in foreign fighter research. While the use of YouTube has its advantages, such as easy access to the thoughts and motives of foreign fighters, it also has its limitations. The reliability of their statements in the videos cannot be guaranteed and a small sample size can undermine the reliability.

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About the Authors

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Kim Mans completed her Master of Science in Crisis and Security Management at Leiden University in 2015. In their master thesis: 'Foreign fighters in their own words: who are they, why do they go and where are they going?' she and Ruben Tuitel used social media platforms like YouTube as a source to gain knowledge on the foreign fighting phenomenon in Syria. Kim also completed a Master of Science in Public Administration (direction Governance of Security) at the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam. In 2013, she obtained her bachelor degree in Public Administration and Organizational Science, this combined with a minor in International Security, also at the Vrije Universiteit. She is interested in terrorism, counter-terrorism, foreign fighting and the combination of these topics with social media and the use of information technology.

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Ruben Tuitel completed his Master of Science in Crisis and Security Management at Leiden University in 2015. His master thesis focused on foreign fighters who appear in YouTube videos, telling something about their lives and experiences in Syria. By answering three basic questions – who are they, why do they go and what will they do next – he and his project partner discovered new insights about foreign fighters. In 2014, Ruben graduated from Safety and Security Management Studies at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, obtaining a bachelor in Public Management. He is interested in terrorism and counter-terrorism, foreign fighters and cyber security.

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Introduction

With the recent attacks in Paris and Brussels in mind, the problem of (returning) foreign fighters is more urgent than ever. Many countries fear becoming targets of terrorist attacks since the so-called Islamic State (IS) has expanded its terrorist activities beyond the Middle East. Since the start of the Syrian civil war, this conflict has attracted many fighters from countries all over the world. These foreign fighters have joined armed forces in Syria including groups with jihadist agendas. As possibly the greatest post-war security threat that Europe has faced, it is of clear importance for governments to properly understand this phenomenon.

The foreign fighter phenomenon presents a difficult challenge to governments and law enforcement agencies, especially since so little is known about these individuals: who are they? why do they go? Some of them have witnessed or even committed serious war crimes, and these experiences in Syria can result in psychological problems, comparable to the post-traumatic stress syndrome many war veterans deal with, as well as further radicalisation.¹ However, more acutely, governments and security agencies are concerned that, on their return, foreign fighters will build on their experiences and engage in further recruitment and radicalisation, or, in the worst-case scenario, carry out terrorist attacks in their home countries.² In order for governments and security agencies to better understand the foreign fighter phenomenon, it is important to know who these foreign fighters are, what their motivations are and what they will do when their fight in Syria is over. The first step in this is to identify the best research approaches: this report argues for the benefits of research based on online videos of foreign fighters.

Gaining Knowledge of Foreign Fighters: a Need for 'Thick Descriptions'³

Academic literature on foreign fighting in the context of the current conflict in Syria/Iraq is still evolving. Recent research, such as Barrett (2014),⁴ Hegghammer (2014),⁵ Bakker & de Roy van Zuijdewijn (2014),⁶ Carter et al. (2014)⁷ and Bakker, Grol

¹ A.J. Gielen, "Antiradicalisering in België, Denemarken en Duitsland", *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Vraagstukken* 1 (2014), pp. 20-23, <http://www.agadvies.com/sites/default/files/Gielen%20Syrie-strijders%20TVSV01-20-23.pdf>.

² As mentioned, for instance, in D. Byman and J. Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq", Policy Paper No. 34, Brookings, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Be-Afraid-web.pdf>; K. van Houwelingen, "Angst over Syriëgangers na arrestatie Brusselse aanslag", *AD Nieuws*, 2 June 2014, <http://www.ad.nl/ad/nl/1013/Buitenland/article/detail/3665304/2014/06/02/Angst-over-Syriëgangers-na-arrestatie-Brusselse-aanslag.dhtml>.

³ Thick descriptions can be defined as "giving an elaborate image of circumstances, situations, mechanisms and other relevant subjects within the research by means of comprehensive and detailed descriptions", in: H. Boeije, *Analyseren in kwalitatief onderzoek; denken en doen* (Den Haag: Boom Onderwijs, 2005); own translation.

⁴ R. Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria", The Soufan Group, June 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>.

⁵ T. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting", *American Political Science Review* 7, no. 1 (2013), pp. 1-15.

⁶ E. Bakker and J. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, "Returning Western Foreign Fighters: The Case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 5, no. 2 (2014), <https://icct.nl/publication/returning-western-foreign-fighters-the-case-of-afghanistan-bosnia-and-somalia/>.

& Weggemans (2015),⁸ uses a variety of sources in order to gather data. Methodological approaches vary from interviewing family members of fighters in Syria, data or document studies to the use of social media, such as scanning Facebook accounts for useful information.⁹ However, one valuable resource that has not been widely exploited is YouTube video material posted of and by foreign fighters. Considering the difficulty of interviewing foreign fighters located in a war zone, this offers an alternative avenue for research based on primary source material.¹⁰ Similarly, whilst relatives of foreign fighters might be able to give insight into their motivations,¹¹ second-hand information is invariably less reliable.

Quite a few researchers and scholars in terrorism studies address the importance of primary sources: "A lack of research based on primary sources has been one of the major impediments to progress in the field of (counter-) terrorism studies. Although the difficulties involved in gaining access to such sources makes their scarcity understandable, efforts should be made both by academics and policy makers to address this deficiency".¹² While on-the-ground research or interviews with those close to foreign fighters is difficult for various reasons (security, time, resources, trust-building, access, availability of interviewees, etc.), social media use by foreign fighters provides an invaluable resource easily accessible to researchers. At the same time, following fighters on social media accounts like Twitter and Facebook can also have its limitations. Although information can be gleaned from text messages, photos and videos uploaded by foreign fighters to Facebook and Twitter, this information often presents merely moments captured in words or pictures. These forms lack so-called 'thick descriptions'. Schuurman and Sageman discuss the importance of thick descriptions as "primary sources-based accounts of terrorist groups and incidents that can function as a foundation on which to build and from which to test hypotheses empirically".¹³

These thick descriptions are hard to retrieve via regular ways since fighters often travel to Syria secretly or never return from Syria because they were killed or stay there. Therefore, the use of a 'new' source like YouTube provides a potential alternative research approach to achieve thick descriptions of foreign fighters. We argue that, by using YouTube as a source, a new dimension can be added to researching foreign fighters as a means to providing thick descriptions.

⁷ J.A. Carter, S. Maher and P.R. Neumann, "#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks". ICSR, April 2014, <http://icsr.info/wpcontent/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Influence-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf>.

⁸ D. Weggemans, E. Bakker and P. Grol, "Foreign fighters on Social Media: An analysis of 11 Facebook accounts", Leiden Safety and Security Blog, 19 January 2015, <http://leidenafetyandsecurityblog.nl/articles/foreign-fighters-on-social-media-an-analysis-of-11-facebook-accounts>.

⁹ D. Weggemans, E. Bakker and P. Grol, "De leefwereld en denkbeelden van Nederlandse en Belgische Syriëgangers", *Internationale Spectator* 68, no. 12 (2014), <http://www.internationalespectator.nl/article/de-leefwereld-en-denkbeelden-van-nederlandse-en-belgische-syri%C3%ABgangers>.

¹⁰ Roozbeh Kaboly from the Dutch television programme *Nieuwsuur* contacted the Dutch fighter Yilmaz through social media. It took him 8 months to earn the trust of Yilmaz, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWua3exa6rw>.

¹¹ D. Weggemans, E. Bakker and P. Grol, "Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (2014), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/365>.

¹² B. Schuurman and Q. Eijkman, "Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 4, no. 2 (2013), <https://icct.nl/publication/moving-terrorism-research-forward-the-crucial-role-of-primary-sources/>.

¹³ M. Sageman, "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 3 (2014), p. 8, quoted in B. Schuurman, "Using Primary Sources for Terrorism Research: Introducing Four Case Studies", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (2014).

Using YouTube as a Source

With more than one billion users and hundreds of millions of views a day, YouTube is the most popular online video community. The online multimedia platform established in 2005 upholds the slogan 'Broadcast yourself', pointing to the universal character of its platform: anyone can both post and watch content. Just like Twitter messages are spread to keep followers at home updated about the ongoing fight, so are videos, in which foreign fighters speak in front of a camera which can be used to inspire others or to spread a message. These videos are valuable sources in which information that may otherwise be hard to access, can be retrieved.

By entering simple search terms like 'foreign fighters in Syria' and 'British foreign fighters in Syria', relevant videos were shown. Once a YouTube user watches a particular video, a list of suggested videos appears on the right side of the screen. In this way, a certain 'snowball sampling method' can be used in order to find more relevant videos. We narrowed down our search to videos filmed by (western) media, the fighters or their media organisation(s) (both Islamic and Kurdish) themselves and limited to Syria. Videos that were excluded in our research are those in which foreign fighters were interviewed outside of Syria. As various types of videos can be uploaded, attention must be paid to the form and content of the videos. A distinction can be made concerning the types of videos in which foreign fighters are portrayed. Videos can be uploaded to YouTube by the foreign fighters themselves or their media organisations¹⁴ in which they speak themselves (self-told) or film and ask questions to a fellow foreign fighter (interview). In some videos, a narrator tells a story about a specific individual (narrated). It is also possible that multiple categories can be identified (combination). A video can also appear in the form of a news report.

In our research "Foreign fighters in their own words" we researched three main questions: 1) who are these foreign fighters? 2) why do these foreign fighters travel to Syria? and 3) where will they go next when the fight is over? As there is no agreed definition of foreign fighters, according to Carter et al. (2014)¹⁵, our focus was on fighters that are not from Syria who travelled to this country to fight in the armed conflict. After a selection process, a total of 37 videos was retrieved from YouTube in which 50 foreign fighters from Western countries were speaking right in front of a camera (see figure 1).

¹⁴ For instance, IS' Al-Hayat Media Center and Raqqa Media Center and Al-Qaeda's Al-Fajr Media Center.

¹⁵ Carter, J. A., Maher, S., & Neumann, P. R. (2014). # Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks. ISCR report

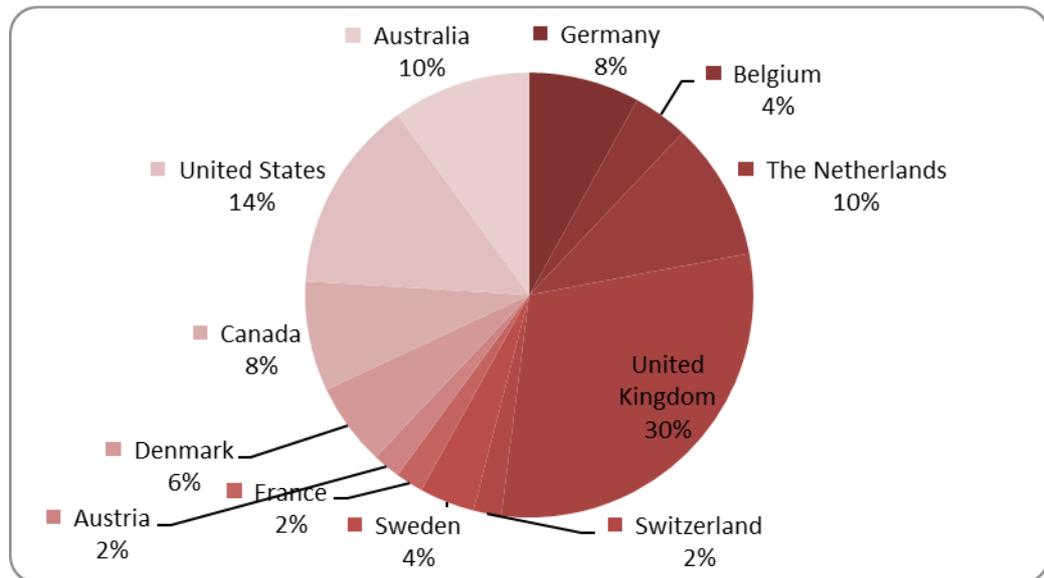


Figure 1. Western Foreign Fighters in Syria appearing in YouTube videos (N=50)

Findings

Our analysis of 37 YouTube videos produced a number of thick descriptions, some of which will be outlined before comparing our findings with existing knowledge on this topic. Subsequently, we will go into more detail about the methodological opportunities and limitations of using YouTube videos for research purposes.

Who Are They?

Our data suggests that most of the foreign fighters are male, with an average age of 26. Only a few are older than 30 and, in total, three women appear in the videos. The largest diversity among foreign fighters can be found in their educational and working backgrounds, as different jobs and activities were mentioned: one fighter was a former model who joined the YPG; another was a notorious drug dealer and gangster.

"Allah made me love His religion. Before that, I used to love everything that is prohibited".

Seven people had a military background and were employed in the defence forces of their country while others were living an ordinary life with their spouse and children:

"I'm British and a graduate, also self-employed, I have a wife; I have kids. And I'm quite contented with my normal life".

What stood out was the sequence of fighters in videos concerning chronological order: Western fighters who appeared in recent videos more often had joined the YPG as a response to other groups fighting, like, for example, IS, as this YPG fighter from the UK explains:

"[...] ISIS fighter holding up this head of a woman and grinning at the camera. When I saw that, I, although I did not know it was possible then to come here and make a contribution, I felt I had to".

As a reaction to groups fighting in Syria, new foreign fighters were attracted. A fighter from Austria stated:

"I want to help people. What ISIS is doing is very bad and the whole world is looking and nobody support. I think we have to stop them here before they come back to our homes in Europe."

This 'second' stream of fighters seems to be triggered by the behaviour of the 'first' wave. Hereby, the internet and (social) media seem to play an important role. A German fighter said:

"I was learning, about the civil war in Syria for six months on the internet. And when the terrorist Daesh attacked Rojava and start attacking the Kurds, I decided that I wanted to come and join them, and join the YPG in their fight."

Why Do They Go?

Most of the fighters joined the Syrian civil war for ideological or religious reasons, and they often had more than one reason for taking part in the war. Ideological reasons (such as helping the oppressed Syrian people) were mentioned as a reason thirty times, and religion was for twenty three fighters a reason to take part in the war.¹⁶ Their fight is against Bashar al-Assad and by joining militant groups they feel they can end the oppression. As an American fighter stated:

"We have come to kill anyone who comes in our way. (...). With these simple weapons we will free these lands and free these people".

A Dutch fighter states something similar:

"You cannot just watch hundreds and hundreds and thousands of people getting slaughtered. I feel sorry for the people getting slaughtered. I feel sorry for the people at home. That is my honest opinion. How can you be sitting at home?"

Other fighters joined for religious reasons, such as this Dutch fighter who joined the Jund-al Aqsa battalion:

"I am fighting in Syria first of all to put the law of Allah back that was wiped from the world before".

Sometimes, the religious dimension of the Syrian territory was mentioned, as this Danish fighter states:

"We have several narrations from our Prophet Muhammed about Sham. The Prophet used to praise people from Sham. In the last two years, actually more than that, there has been war in Sham. More than 100,000 brothers and sisters lost their life in Sham. We Muslims should know that we are like one body."

¹⁶ In our framework we listed several reasons as motives for travelling to Syria based on the literature. In the case of religion and ideology, however, it is often difficult to assess whether a person travels to Syria for religious or ideological motives.

An American jihadist said:

"I chose jihad bi sabillah because Allah has [...] ordered us to fight the kufar (unbelievers) to fight all the fitna (evil), to fight al the tahood [?] that fight Allah's light, his din (religion), his word, to make Allah's word superior over everyone's word, to make Allah's banner [...] rise and wave over all parts of his world that he's created. And to fight where all the din is for Allah's [...]."

Judgment day was mentioned as a reason to act now. Sometimes, the reason was to act upon mistakes made earlier in life, as in the case of this Danish fighter who had had a criminal career in the drugs scene:

"It is not good enough just praying with all the shit I have done. I have gotta try and make a difference. I think of Judgement Day, but at least I can say I went down and did what I could."

Another reason can be found in being a genuine Muslim, as this British jihadist fighter states:

"The duty of a Muslim is to love Jihad. One of the sayings of the Prophet peace be upon him, whoever does not go to jihad or does not even talk about it dies with a characteristic of hypocrisy [...] I am actually a Muslim following the way I should be."

Some of the fighters also expressed hatred towards the West, saying that the United States and its allies are directly responsible for killing Muslims. Therefore, in some cases we marked 'revenge' as a motive, as well. An American fighter, for instance, sought revenge for the actions of NATO and several Western countries in Iraq and other countries where Muslims were killed:

"...not just Bashar and his troops, America and their troops, the jehoo [?] and their troops, China and their troops, Russia, NATO, everyone, have gone into lands and killed many Muslims, your broth, and your sisters. So how can you say that the land where there are many people who have died..."

Disagreements with home country policies and society were also expressed, as this American jihadist states:

"I do not hate America, that is my home, that is where I grew up, but the government and their policies as far as the Muslim lands then ... That is another story."

A German fighter indicates:

"But know the lands of the Kuffar are not a place for the Muslims. And you can see it according the humiliation in which you are daily living, where your women daily live in. They are insulting the Prophet, they are insulting Islam, they are treating you like their slaves and dogs. Therefore, if you want to be free, look for your freedom."

Others expressed that they travelled to Syria to fight against IS; all these people joined the YPG. Their goal was to help and defend the Kurdish people against the violence of IS and other groups, as this Austrian fighter explains:

"I want to help people. What ISIS is doing is very bad and the whole world is looking and nobody supports. I think we have to stop them before they come back to our homes in Europe. And also it is very bad what happened here with Kurdish people and yeah, that is the reason why I come here."

An Australian fighter who died fighting against IS said:

"I volunteered to join the YPG to fight against Daesh (IS). I believe the Western world is not doing enough to help. The Kurdish people are lovely people, I have never met such a nice group of people".

An American fighter mentioned something similar:

"...I am here to do what I can, you know, to help Kurdistan, with everything that has been going on, it seemed like the right thing to do. Kobani, they put up a hell of a fight there, bit of a mess right now definitely they could use a lot of rebuilding and help there. I just wanna help the cause anyway I can".

There is no one single reason why foreign fighters might leave for Syria. However, most of the fighters felt some kind of duty to help with regard to religion and/or fellow Muslims or Kurdish people. In some instances, there is strong resentment towards Western nations, however, often in combination with motivations to help fellow Muslims. None of the fighters indicated that they wanted to go to Syria for 'adventure' or out of boredom. Thus it seems that these fighters are serious about their 'quests'. However, of course we must also consider that these fighters may be economical with the truth or even deliberately misleading for the purpose of propaganda. This needs to be remembered when evaluating the video as a source, but we must also bear in mind that these same issues similarly arise to different extents with all interviews.

What Do They Say About Future Plans?

Another important question while the war continues is what the fighters are considering for their future. Will they stay? Or continue the fight elsewhere? We found several answers among Western fighters. Some of them did not think about the future or their future plans. See for example this Danish fighter:

"I really do not know what is gonna happen. Maybe I am gonna die here ... So what?"

A fighter from the UK answered the following to the question as to the point at which his fight will end for him:

"When I die. I would rather fight in the path of Allah, protecting his religion, than be with my wife. It is, you know, I got unlimited time after I die to spend with my wife. I don't need to spend it right now."

A Dutch fighter stated he will not come back:

"No, I came to Syria for Syria only. I did not come to learn how to make bombs and go back. That is not the mentality that many of these fighters here have."

An American YPG fighter stated:

"This is my first time here, I've been here for a month in Rojava, I left America last month on the fourteenth. Arrived here on the sixteenth. And planning on staying here for two, three, four years."

Some referred to home country policies, like this British fighter:

"You know, the campaigns and the policies, for returning home. We come here we live in honour, why would we go back, to go to prison?"

Some of the fighters seemed to know that they are frequently perceived as a problem or security threat for their home countries, like this British fighter:

"They can be assured I do not plan to come back – so it is not a problem for them."

Here 'them' is probably related to the governments and prosecutors back in Great Britain.

Another fighter from the UK also referred to his home country, but assured a peaceful return:

"I fought in Afghanistan against the Northern Alliance, I've fought against the American Occupation and when I returned back to the UK straight after that, I was there for some time. And I was a law-obeying citizen in the UK. I did not threaten or was a security risk in the UK. I experienced some war. I am a fighter. [...] I am gonna go home after this whole ends, I am coming home to my wife and kids."

As we checked if the fighters are still alive or have been returned, we made use of secondary sources, including Facebook accounts. A German YPG fighter posted this:

"FYI (for your interest): I am not in Rojava anymore. After more than seven months I decided to take a break. Destination will not be published."

It seems that the future does not concern most of the foreign fighters and that they are living solely for their current goal, or otherwise have no intention to carry out attacks in their home countries. Out of fifty, only fourteen fighters said something about future plans. Five persons had the intention to stay in Syria, and one person explicitly stated to go home after the fight. However, it could also be that they try to deceive the viewer by lying, perhaps in order to prevent getting attention from security agencies. Yet, other fighters clearly stated that "we are coming for you", possibly indicating a future attack.

Limitations and Opportunities

A self evident limitation is the reliability of the foreign fighter's statements. A person might well be used for propaganda, disguised as a tough fighter who gave everything up for the 'cause'. It was not possible to check these videos for their reliability in that sense. Where possible, we used secondary sources, such as news reports, to confirm the information that was given in the videos. News agencies such as CNN and Reuters

reported on the death of a British foreign fighter. Another limitation is the sample size of 37 videos. A much larger sample would prove more insightful. Therefore, research in this area is still needed. A combination of empirical and theoretical research together with information from social media platforms such as YouTube might help fill in the gaps that policy makers find when trying to understand the motives of foreign fighters.

Our Findings in a Broader Perspective

Our findings are mostly in line with existing literature on the subject. First of all, we found interesting data about the personal experiences and thoughts of foreign fighters. Weggemans, Bakker and Grol interviewed family members and friends of foreign fighters who left for Syria to find out who they are and why they went to Syria. While their findings are much more detailed in certain aspects, for instance, their family situation and whether they are more a 'leader' or a 'follower' type,¹⁷ our research led to basic information about the fighters, such as age and gender but also their motives for travelling to Syria. Thereby, findings like the age mean and the ratio of males to females are the same findings as in, for example, the work of Barrett¹⁸ and Hegghammer.¹⁹ We found no profile of the 'typical' foreign fighter, the lack of which has been mentioned before in other foreign fighter studies.

Secondly, when looking at jihadi foreign fighters, Barrett²⁰ and Hegghammer²¹ explored reasons why fighters travel to Syria. Again, our research led to similar results. We found religion and duty as the most mentioned motives, but beside plain reasons, facts and numbers, we gained rich descriptions about these motives which can be useful and supportive in terrorism studies.

Our last research question – what do they say about future plans? – equally led to interesting information. Whilst other studies evaluated what fighters did when the fight already ended,²² we gained knowledge about what foreign fighters were planning to do when the fight in Syria was still ongoing. This allows policymakers and other affiliated institutions to act on information provided while it is still relevant. On the other hand, analysing foreign fighters' future plans does not provide us with the complete picture. Where De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker observed pathways,²³ we can only display potential future plans, which do not automatically lead to action. Hegghammer wrote about the possibilities of foreign fighters committing domestic

¹⁷ "The story of Daan shows the development of a somewhat uncertain teenager who converted to Islam. He could be described as a 'follower'. Driss' story is one about a popular, rather self-confident young man of Moroccan background with many friends in his neighbourhood. He is more a 'leader-like type.'" In: D. Weggemans, E. Bakker and P. Grol, "Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters" (2014), p. 104.

¹⁸ R. Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria" (2014).

¹⁹ T. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting" (2013), pp. 1-15.

²⁰ R. Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria" (2014).

²¹ T. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting" (2013), pp. 1-15.

²² See, for example, E. Bakker and J. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, "Returning Western Foreign Fighters: The Case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 5, no. 2 (2014), <https://icct.nl/publication/returning-western-foreign-fighters-the-case-of-afghanistan-bosnia-and-somalia/>.

²³ E. Bakker and J. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, "Returning Western Foreign Fighters: The Case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 5, no. 2 (2014), <https://icct.nl/publication/returning-western-foreign-fighters-the-case-of-afghanistan-bosnia-and-somalia/>.

attacks and supported his findings with statistics.²⁴ While our research also provided such statistical data, we gained information from fighters themselves about their immediate perceptions in the moment of fighting as well as about their plans of returning home.

YouTube can thus lead to comparable or even more relevant results than other methods in social science research or as provided by other studies on foreign fighters.

Conclusion

YouTube and other social media platforms can be used to gain knowledge of the world of foreign fighters. First of all, social media research provides additional insights that might not have been discovered otherwise. As interviews with subjects in Syria and Iraq are difficult, social media research is a way to retrieve important, primary source information. Secondly, the Syrian civil war is a quick and fast changing environment. By using YouTube as a source of information, quick changes can be observed almost at the same time, making YouTube or social media in general a quick and practical way to retrieve information in 'real time'. Thirdly, fighters talk in the videos about their future plans. This may shed light on the future whereabouts of a foreign fighter as well as his or her future intentions when it comes to violent behaviour in their home country. The information found on YouTube can help fill the gap between theoretical knowledge and conducting empirical research in Syria itself, which is also useful for policymakers. As this information is available, why not use it?

²⁴T. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting" (2013), pp. 1-15.

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Foreign Fighters in their own Words: Using YouTube as a Source

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