

# Here We Come: The Evolution of Foreign Fighters' Flow to Syria and Iraq in 2013–2016

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## ABSTRACT

*The very phenomenon of foreign fighters has a long history and appears to be well known and explored to a certain extent. However, unlike previous conflicts with participation of jihadist foreign fighters, the current flow to Syria and Iraq is characterized by unprecedented growth dynamics and diversity of both origins (geographical and religious) and affiliations. The phenomenon of foreign fighters today has moved beyond the Middle East conflict and has turned into an international phenomenon, not least because of technological and communication developments. Foreign fighters pose great challenges to the international community, governments, security services and civil society.*

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
Notes on Methodology .....	6
The Evolution of the Foreign Fighters' Phenomenon: From Afghanistan to Syria and Iraq ..	7
Data Analysis.....	10
Sunni Jihadists.....	10
MENA Region .....	11
Western Countries.....	13
Russia and a Case Study of Chechen Foreign Fighters .....	15
Central Asia .....	18
Western Balkans .....	21
Southeast Asia.....	22
Shia Jihadists Sponsored by Iran.....	24
Kurds Supporters.....	26
The Flow of Foreign Fighters to Syria and Iraq .....	27
Rise and Golden Age .....	28
Decadence and Survival Stage .....	32
Trapped in the Network: A Case Study of Foreign Fighters from Germany .....	36
Conclusion .....	39
Bibliography .....	42

## Introduction

Since the Syrian conflict broke out in 2011, tens of thousands of foreign fighters from all over the globe have travelled to join militant groups thereat.

The very phenomenon of foreign fighters has a long history and appears to be well known and explored to a certain extent. However thus far there is no commonly accepted definition of the term “foreign fighter” – it seems ambiguous and is understood differently by different people.

For the purposes of this paper a definition provided by the UN Security Council will be used as a basis. The Council defines foreign fighters 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>1</sup> The definition seems to be comprehensive, but there are some caveats to be addressed. First of all, the diversity of the parties involved in the Syrian conflict, are a cause of adjustments in the definition: it seems correct to not limit the definition of foreign fighters only to those who join terrorist entities, since a significant number of foreign fighters participating in the Syrian conflict affiliate with government forces, or Kurdish groups. Secondly, the flow of foreign fighters in Syria brings to the ranks of various groups not exclusively combatants, but a wide range of civil professionals: doctors, engineers, technical experts, hackers, etc., as well as general workers who are engaged in all types of military and civil activities. Moreover, the definition does not cover the issue of motivation, which, according to researchers<sup>2</sup> is primarily based on ideology, religious affiliations, family or kinship links, and less on payments.

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<sup>1</sup> "Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts," *Security Council Resolutions*, September 24, 2014, accessed January 2, 2017. <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2014/shtml>

<sup>2</sup> See: David Malet, "Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts," *Oxford: University Press, 2013*, p. 9; Colgan and Hegghammer, "Islamic Foreign Fighters: Concept and Data". Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, Montreal, 2011, p. 6; Orla Hennessy, "The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in Europe," *ICCT Background Note*, July 2012, accessed January 2, 2017. <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Hennessy-Phenomenon-of-Foreign-Fighters-Europe-July-2012.pdf>; "Foreign Fighters under International Law," October 2014, accessed January 2, 2017.

Finally, it must be taken into consideration that the current flow of foreign fighters to Syria and contributing factors in future also may bring some new rectifications to the definition, taking into account the impact made by returning foreign fighters and an increasing number of terror attacks within the European Union and others countries of the Western world, committed by EU citizens. One of the questions that may be raised is if the citizens who act on the territory of another EU country can be defined as a foreign fighter, and if it is depends on distance between two countries, or on the technical differences of their status (such as Schengen membership and others). The present paper is not aimed at answering such questions, but their demonstration may help to rethink the definition of foreign fighters.

Based on the aforementioned definition given by the UN Council and following notes, for the purpose of this paper the following definition of foreign fighters will be applied: a foreign fighter is an individual who travelled or attempt to travel from the territory of his/ her residence or nationality to another State, for the purpose of participating in armed conflict on the territory of this State, motivated by primarily ideological, religious, humanitarian reasons, and/or family and kinship ties, affiliated with any part of the conflict either as a soldier or in other military or civil capacities.

The first foreign fighters started to arrive in Syria already in 2011, but the flow has become significant by the end of 2012 - beginning of 2013, when first reports from governments and international organization came to hand. Since that point and until very recent times the flow has undergone certain changes, the tracing of which may help to forecast its further development. Influencing factors include both external and internal ones: governmental actions (both enactments and security operations) to further limit and prevent the flow of foreign fighters from their countries; American-led and Russian (in alliance with Iran) military interventions in the Syrian war; the Syrian refugee crisis; changes in western media attentions and positions over the foreign fighters phenomenon; as well as alterations in the politics of jihadist groups and their propaganda.

This paper is aimed at specifying and analyzing such shifts, including highlighting probable directions the future evolution of the flow of foreign fighters from all over the world to Syria and Iraq, and considers both Sunni and Shiite foreign fighters. However, the paper's primary focus is on ISIS in Syria, as most of the foreign fighters serve in ISIS' ranks in Syria. The research starts with data analysis, followed by a discussion of specific features of recruits from various parts of the world, and continues with a year-by-year comparison based on the following points: general propaganda message from jihadist groups to foreign fighters; “trending” countries and regions of origin of foreign fighters; major occurrences which influenced the dynamic of the flow of foreign fighters; and the impact of international actions (including militant activities).

### Notes on Methodology

The methodology of the research relies on data, reports, media and propaganda analysis, and includes case studies. Statistics were gathered from various open sources and built on the total number of foreign fighters who joined one of the militant groups operating in Syria and/or Iraq and/or left their home country for combating in Syria and Iraq. While it is pertinent to count the number of foreign fighters per capita, total numbers provide clearer information. At the same time counting numbers of foreign fighters per capita of the Muslim population, as suggested by some researchers<sup>3</sup> seems to be hardly correct since not all the foreign fighters are of Muslim origin.

Gathered data is incomplete and imprecise due to obstacles officials and researchers meet while gathering the information. For example, the as lack of full reports from both security and border services on the number of citizens leaving the country for Syria and/ or Iraq, as there are few tools today to trace the final destination and intention of a particular traveler, which in turn is partly caused by gaps in sharing information on foreign fighters between security forces. It is also one of the reasons that submitted data starts from 2013 and not from 2011. On the other hand jihadist groups themselves obviously also do not provide any relevant information on their strength and members. However, the collected information allows tracing the general dynamics of travelers joining jihadist groups per year

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<sup>3</sup> Hristo Voynov, "ISIS and the Balkans," *Vostokian*, January 12, 2016, accessed January 2, 2017. <http://vostokian.com/isis-and-the-balkans/>

by region and, by adding these changes to other information, to specify distinctive characteristics of the flow of foreign fighters from a particular region.

## **The Evolution of the Foreign Fighters' Phenomenon: From Afghanistan to Syria and Iraq**

The presence of foreign fighters has been a salient feature in practically all conflicts in the Islamic world since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, where foreign fighters played a prominent role. Recent precedents include the first and second Afghan wars, Bosnia, Somalia, Chechnya, and Iraq. Given these contexts, the term “foreign fighter” started to connote radical Islam and jihadism. It is interesting to note, that the number of foreign fighters (and subsequently the impact they made) in each of these cases was comparatively low relative to the total number of fighters: most of the conflicts supply from 2 to 8 percent of the total number of fighters.<sup>4</sup>

<b>Afghanistan (1978 - 1992)</b>	8,000 – 20,000  (3 - 8%)
<b>Bosnia (1992 - 1995)</b>	300 – 6,000  (about 5.5%)
<b>Chechnya (1994 - 2009)</b>	500 – 700  (about 4%)
<b>Afghanistan (2001 - 2014)</b>	1,500  (about 2%)
<b>Iraq (2003 - 2014)</b>	4,000 – 5,000  (5-6%)
<b>Syria (2011 - present)</b>	27,000 - 40,000  (15-20%)

<sup>4</sup> All data is gathered from open sources

Furthermore, the geographic origin of these fighters was limited, as they mostly came to support their coreligionists or/ and congeners. Thus, almost all of these foreign fighters came from Arab and Islamic countries, including (but not limited to) Saudi Arabia (predominantly), Pakistan and Turkey. Finally, the foreign fighters who participated in the aforementioned conflicts did not pose serious threats to their home countries on their return, but instead tended to join another battlefield, and in some cases composed the leadership of new jihadist groups.<sup>5</sup>

However, both the war in Afghanistan as well as following armed conflicts featuring jihadist foreign fighters, which are mentioned above in the table, led to accumulation of jihadist experience, and were used by radical Islamic propaganda in order to produce and spread certain messages. The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan turned the call to help Muslims into a new form, and launched an ambivalent narrative, which was enhanced by Bosnian, Chechen, and other wars of that type: on the one hand all these conflicts were presented by jihadist propaganda as a string of victories over “infidels”, on the other - as unending attacks of the Western world against Muslims all over the globe. Such ambivalence allowed jihadist groups and organizations to play with the narrative and to use it, in whole or certain parts dependent on the situation, in their propaganda messages. Until recent times, spread of that narrative was limited due to modesty of technological development of communication tools, and therefore jihadists’ lack of practice of using such tools for propaganda purposes. However, it was spread mainly offline via mosques and personal communication, shaped up, and accumulated through the years, becoming an organic part of the worldview of many potential foreign fighters everywhere. The current Syrian conflict has changed the situation completely, and the use of social media by jihadists brought the narrative to light and prompted potential fighters to reconsider it, while discussing it online with others - an undeniable advantage of social media over other tools for spreading information is the multi-way communication.

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<sup>5</sup> "Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel," *Homeland Security Committee*, September 2015, accessed January 2, 2017. <https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/TaskForceFinalReport.pdf>



The current flow of foreign fighters involved in the Syrian and Iraqi sectarian conflicts, though, breaks these patterns and challenges security experts and researchers to develop new relevant theories and approaches. First of all, unlike previous episodes, the number of foreign fighters taking part in Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, as seen from the table, comprises 15-20% of total fighters.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the current flow is characterized by two main features: unprecedented growth dynamics and diversity of both origins (geographical and religious – while previous conflicts were exclusively Sunni, this one involves both Sunni and Shiite participants) and affiliations. Today, fighters come from more than 100 countries and join militant groups and wings on all sides of the conflict, often shifting from one group to another. In total, it is believed that there are approximately 1000 groups foreign fighters tend to join,<sup>7</sup> including (but not limited to): the Islamic State (ISIS), Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (former Jabhat al-Nusra), the Free Syrian Army, and other groups (some of which operate independently or join various fractions for short period of time). In general, there are three mainstream types of militant groups: those associated with Sunni jihadism, Shiite fighters affiliated with the Assad regime, and pro-Kurdish militants. Each of these types of groups has certain specifics in recruiting. It is necessary to question whether it is legitimate to call foreign militants fighting for the Assad regime (who are recruited and arrive to Syria in an orderly manner) or supporting the Kurds "foreign fighters". However for the purposes of this paper, in order to draw a broader picture of all belligerents, such actors are included in this analysis.

The broad geographic diversity of countries of origin, caused not least by technological and communications development and wider globalization processes, is one of the reasons why the very phenomenon of foreign fighters has moved beyond the Middle East conflict and has turned into an international phenomenon, especially considering the world-scale range of recruits. Another distinction from previous conflicts is the noticeable participation of western recruits, many of whom are teenagers, who are not of Muslim

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<sup>6</sup> According to Country Reports on Terrorism, released by US Department of State in June 2016 (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/06/258013.htm>), the number of foreign fighters to that date is considered to be up to 40,000.

<sup>7</sup> "Guide to the Syrian rebels," *BBC News*, December 13, 2013, accessed January 2, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>

origin, do not have previous military experience, and may be viewed as unobvious and unexpected candidates.

## Data Analysis

Data on strength and origin of foreign fighters gathered for this paper is divided into three blocks, according to the three aforementioned general types of groups: Sunni jihadist militants, Shiite fighters, and Kurdish militants (and their supporters).

### Sunni Jihadists

The table below<sup>8</sup> reflects dynamics of the flow of Sunni jihadist foreign fighters to Syria in the period between 2013 and 2015. The data is grouped by the foreign fighters' points of origin, and analysis of both dynamics of the flow per year and per region<sup>9</sup> may contribute to deeper understanding of the present phenomenon.

Table 1- Flow of Sunni Foreign Fighters to Syria 2013-2015

	<b>Top countries</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>
<b>MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region: over 16,000<sup>10</sup></b>	<b>Tunisia</b>	382 - 970	3,000	6,000 – 7,000
	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	386 - 1016	2,500	2,500
	<b>Jordan</b>	180 - 2089	1,500	2,000 – 2,500
	<b>Morocco</b>	77 - 91	1,500	1,200 – 1,500
<b>Turkey</b>		63 - 500	600	2,000 – 2,200
<b>Western Europe: 3,700-9,000</b>	<b>France</b>	63 - 412	1,200	1,700
	<b>Germany</b>	34 - 240	500 - 600	760
	<b>United Kingdom</b>	43 - 366	500 - 600	760
	<b>Belgium</b>	76 - 296	440	611
	<b>The Netherlands</b>	29 - 152	200 - 250	220
<b>North America: 400</b>	<b>USA</b>	17-60	70	150-250
	<b>Canada</b>	9-100	30	130

<sup>8</sup> Data for this table is gathered from open sources, including (but not limited to) reports published by The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), the Soufan Group (TSG), Munich Security Conference, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Each region is presented by countries with highest number of foreign fighters.

<sup>10</sup> These and following numbers of foreign fighters from each region are total, while year-by-year dynamics is shown for top 5 countries of the region.

<b>Australia</b>		23-205	250	120-255
<b>Russia</b>		200 - 1700	800 – 1,500	3,000-4,000
<b>Central Asia: 4,000-4,500</b>	<b>Kazakhstan</b>	14-150	250	300
	<b>Uzbekistan</b>		500	500
	<b>Turkmenistan</b>		360	360
	<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	9-30	100	500
	<b>Tajikistan</b>		190	386
<b>Western Balkans: 900 – 1,000</b>	<b>Albania</b>	83	90	100-200
	<b>Bosnia</b>	114	330	330
	<b>Kosovo</b>	123	142	232 - 314
	<b>Macedonia</b>	3-20	12	146
<b>Southeast Asia: 1,200 – 1,800 (including China)</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	30-60	60-200	700
	<b>Malaysia</b>		100	200
	<b>Philippines</b>	100	200	
	<b>China</b>	6-100	300	300

A recent leak of about 22,000 ISIS questionnaire forms, filled out by newly arrived foreign fighters allowed to profile the average foreign fighter in Syria. According to the analysis the average fighter is a single man in his mid-twenties (26 to 27 years old), with no previous jihadist experience, having completed secondary school and possibly studied at a university or has a degree, but at the same time has only basic knowledge of Islam. Before traveling to Syria he was a student or unskilled worker, or self-employed.<sup>11</sup> Such a profile may help to narrow the pool of potential foreign fighters, but it is no less important to emphasize distinctive features inherent to foreign fighters from particular regions.

## MENA Region

Foreign fighters from Middle East and North Africa countries were among the first who came to Syria and Iraq in order to join jihadist formations and amount a vast majority of total travelers. One of the specific features of the region is the simplicity of reaching Syria for those who want to join (especially for fighters from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and

<sup>11</sup> Lizzie Dearden, "Isis documents leak reveals profile of average militant as young, well-educated but with only 'basic' knowledge of Islamic law," *Independent*, April 22, 2016, accessed January 2, 2017. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-documents-leak-reveals-profile-of-average-militant-as-young-well-educated-but-with-only-basic-a6995111.html>

Jordan, while fighters from Morocco and Tunisia use Libya as a transit point), so they can travel either in groups or on individual basis. Profiles of the fighters vary, as do their motivations, so they do not form any monolithic group. Most of the fighters are young men (18-29 years old) originating from both marginalized and depressed urban areas and from small towns and villages, with various social levels and educational background. For example, reports note that Tunisian universities have become a fertile ground for jihadist recruiting and about 1,300 Tunisian students have joined ISIS and other Sunni jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq.<sup>12</sup> Among them there are first-time travelers with no combat experience, but also a number of jihadi veterans who had participated in previous conflicts. Most of the recruits do not have previous criminal records. The root motives of these journeys lie in ideologically-religious and socio-economic reasons: in the case of Moroccan fighters, according to experts, it is possible to trace a clear positive correlation between the recruitment and social marginalization of potential fighters, only quarter of whom represent the middle class.<sup>13</sup> Potential jihadist travelers receive strong support and are often inspired by local religious persons, which contribute to religious motivations. Hotbeds for radicalization and recruitment, which are presented throughout the region, also have an impact on the flow. Researches note, that foreign fighters from the MENA region, especially combatants from Libya, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, are used as suicide bombers<sup>14</sup> more frequently than fighters from other regions, which may be indicated as one of the specific features of foreign fighters from MENA.

Another feature is that until 2014, MENA governments either turned a blind eye to foreign fighters, or even supported them. The support for the fighters can be explained in one of two ways: on the one hand they have their particular geopolitical interests in Syria and Iraq, and on the other, in such a manner they attempted to get rid of radical jihadists and to reduce tensions in their own countries. However, since 2014, when ISIS declared a caliphate, governments adopted a new, more hardline, approach to foreign fighters, started

<sup>12</sup> Wagdy Sawahel, "Some 1,300 Tunisian students are jihadist fighters," *University World News*, June 5, 2015, accessed January 2, 2017. <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20150604105131208>

<sup>13</sup> Mohammed Masbah, "Moroccan Foreign Fighters," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, October 2015, accessed January 2, 2017. [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2015C46\\_msb.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2015C46_msb.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> "The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters from the Arab World in the Syrian Civil War," *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, May 13, 2014, accessed January 2, 2017. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20646>

to take preventive steps and track their movements, especially of returnees. Thus, the Saudi King, Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz, on 3 February 2014 issued a royal decree, which penalizes Saudi citizens with a term of imprisonment (from three to twenty years) for joining extremist organizations, participating in militant operations abroad with such organizations and supporting those organizations materially or through recruiting others to join them.<sup>15</sup> In September 2014 the Moroccan government also presented a new law intended to stem the flow of fighters leaving the country for Syria, criminalizing attending jihadist training camps (five to fifteen years in prison and fines).<sup>16</sup> Some other countries of the region (such as Tunisia, Jordan, Libya, UAE, etc.) started to review their legislation in order to tackle the foreign fighter phenomenon either by amending existing, or drafting new, legislation.

Concerns over returnees are caused, among other reasons (such as possible creation of new jihadist networks), by the high chances of them plotting and performing attacks in their countries of origin, especially considering the experience of the Arab Spring. Today, it is still unclear to what extent concrete steps launched by governments and security services are effective.

## Western Countries

Unprecedentedly high levels of involvement of western citizens in the current Syrian conflict attracted the close attention of governments, security services, experts, and media, who spotlighted individual cases of radicalization of western youths. There is no doubt that the phenomenon of western foreign fighters will contribute significantly to the global understanding of radicalization and deradicalization processes. It is interesting to note, that unlike other presented regions, Western countries historically did not face armed conflicts with a large-scale involvement of jihadists which, among other factors, could beget local experienced fighters with abilities to create jihadist networks and compose a core of fighters

<sup>15</sup> "عام / أمر ملكي : يعاقب بالسجن كل من شارك في أعمال قتالية خارج المملكة أو الانتماء للتيارات أو الجماعات الدينية والفكرية المتطرفة إضافة أولى", *Saudi Press Agency*, February 3, 2014, accessed January 2, 2017.

"عام / أمر ملكي : يعاقب بالسجن كل من شارك في أعمال قتالية خارج المملكة أو الانتماء للتيارات أو الجماعات الدينية والفكرية المتطرفة", *Saudi Press Agency*, February 3, 2014, accessed January 2, 2017. <http://www.spa.gov.sa/viewstory.php?lang=ar&newsid=1194734>

<sup>16</sup> The Associated Press, "Morocco expands laws against militant seekers," *Al-Arabiya*, September 19, 2014, accessed January 2, 2017. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/09/19/Morocco-expands-laws-against-militant-seekers.html>

leaving for Syria. As such, as a whole, western foreign fighters do not have any previous jihadist militant experience. As in previous cases, profiles and motivations of westerners joining radical groups in Syria and Iraq vary. Most of them are young men (18-29 years old) with a significant amount of teenagers, bringing their average age under 25.<sup>17</sup> There is also noticeable proportion of females (about 17%)<sup>18</sup>, young as well, traveling for jihad either alone or with groups/ families. Such significant presence of females among Western recruits is probably caused by the influence of Western cultural values over Muslim women's lifestyle, which pushes them to be more independent and self-responsible than in traditional Muslim societies. Their religious and social backgrounds range from second and third generation of Muslim immigrants to converts (who, according to an ICCT report on foreign fighters, compose from 6 to 23% of the total number of foreign fighters from EU member states),<sup>19</sup> and from marginalized inhabitants of disadvantaged urban districts to children of prosperous Muslim families as well as college and university students. Thus, there are nine medical students, who travelled to ISIS-controlled territories in Syria in 2015,<sup>20</sup> and a significant number of individual cases of (mainly undergraduate) students joining ISIS and other jihadist groups. In the same manner, their motivations are based on various grounds: ideological, religious, humanitarian, or personal, but unlike fighters from MENA region, Westerners do not travel to Syria to raise their economic status. The number of western foreign fighters rose dramatically since June 2014, when ISIS unfolded massive propaganda oriented towards the western audience. It is necessary to note the significant role of online radicalization and online propaganda (including the circumstantial role of western media in distributing the images of foreign fighters), especially in the context of young and converted fighters, and the impact of hotbeds of radicalization which are present across the Europe.

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<sup>17</sup> "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union," *International Centre for Counter-terrorism – The Hague*, April 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. [https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report\\_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU\\_1-April-2016\\_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf](https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Edwin Bakker, Seran de Leede, "European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic," *International Centre for Counter-terrorism – The Hague*, April 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. [https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Bakker-de-Leede-European-Female-Jihadists-In-Syria-Exploring-An-Under-Researched-Topic-April2015\(1\).pdf](https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Bakker-de-Leede-European-Female-Jihadists-In-Syria-Exploring-An-Under-Researched-Topic-April2015(1).pdf)

<sup>19</sup> "Converts and Islamist Terrorism," *International Centre for Counter-terrorism – The Hague*, June 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Schuurman-Grol-Flower-Converts-June-2016.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> "Report: 9 British Medical Students Traveled To ISIS-Controlled Syria," *The World Post*, March 23, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/21/british-medical-students-isis\\_n\\_6916820.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/21/british-medical-students-isis_n_6916820.html)

Regarding the impact made by online radicalization, a few notes should be made. On the one hand, one of the specific features of the young generation of Western Muslims (both immigrants and converts) in general, and radicalized ones in particular, is the search for identity and a feeling of frustration in cases when the identity is hard to be found. This frustration is one of the factors helping jihadist groups to recruit Western Muslim youth. On the other hand, being frustrated and lacking the identity, those youths transmit certain cultural and behavioral features, and widespread internet use is one of them. Online communication, social media, video games, etc. provided propagandists with effective tools for spreading the message, promoting jihadist values and recruiting. However, case studies of foreign fighters from France, Belgium and Germany show that offline networks, personal knowledge, and social bonds are equally, if not more, important than online communication in the radicalization process.

Most of the fighters (due to absence of combat experience) are used by jihadist groups according to their skills and knowledges (propagandists, hackers, civilian professionals, guards, etc.), or in propaganda purposes as poster fighters. In these capacities they also perform brutal executions, which are translated and distributed online for propaganda purposes.

## **Russia and a Case Study of Chechen Foreign Fighters**

Foreign fighters coming to Syria and Iraq from Russia should not be considered as a coherent whole, but rather as separated groups based on their ethnic and religious background. Such a situation results from the heterogeneity of the Russian Muslim world, which include various disparate communities: Chechens, Dagestanis and other North Caucasians, Tatars and Bashkirs, ethnic Russians, work migrants from Central Asia, etc. Each of these groups contributes to foreign fighters flow, and has different profiles. In order to confront and prevent the flow, in July 2016 the Russian government implemented a new package of anti-terror laws (the so-called Yarovaya law), which has received negative expert and public opinions. At the same there is lack of relevant and efficient programs in Russia aimed at deradicalization and integration of former jihadists.

Chechens, who started to join battle activities in Syria since 2011-2012, compose the majority of Russian nationals combating in Syria (primarily) and pose an exception to other groups of foreign fighters for a score of characteristics. The overwhelming majority of Chechen fighters are men. While their average age is unclear, it can be presumed that it is slightly higher than in previous cases and may range between 18 and 35 years old, since among them there is strong core of jihadists with military experience gained from two Chechen wars, and followed continuing guerilla strife. Their social level is diverse, but most of them come from small towns and isolated villages, as well as from diasporas abroad. Educational background is also varied, from elementary classes of village school to university students. Given the fact that Chechens set a high value upon Islamic education and send their sons to universities in Arab countries (like al-Azhar) to study religion, this kind of education is turned to another root of radicalization, when Chechen (and North Caucasian in general) students travel from these university directly to Syria and join jihadist groups as foreign fighters.

In general, the recruitment process is mostly personal in nature with hotbeds for recruitment and distributing jihadist messages playing a significant role. These hotbeds are often situated in small towns and villages in Chechnya, as well as in Chechen diasporas (for example the Pankisi Gorge – a Georgian valley, the birthplace of Omar al-Shishani). Amongst this population, the motives lying behind the decision to join Jihad in Syria or Iraq are always religious and ideological; along with intentions to assist coreligionists, Chechen fighters are driven by a strong sense of revenge against Russia, especially since the Russian military intervention in Syria.

Another specific feature of Chechens is that they usually act as monolithic units formed by kinsmen or countrymen and prefer not to blend with other recruits. Most of them serve in the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS, or build independent groups or units such as Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar. At the same time, as mentioned above, in contrast to many other fighters, Chechens have strong outstanding field experience gained in two Chechen–Russian wars, and are highly valued for their combat skills. Thus, one of Chechen fighters, Abu Omar al-Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili), after leaving Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar



became “minister of war” in ISIS and served as military commander until his death in July 2016.

Due to traditionally solid kin relationships, Chechens keep contact with each other even while in emigration, which makes an impact on the origin of Chechen fighters in Syria: up to 30%<sup>21</sup> of them come from diasporas in Western Europe established during the Chechen wars with the Russian government. Representatives of diasporas also provide significant financial support for fighters. It is interesting to note, that (similar to cases in MENA region) many of the Chechens from the North Caucasus were allegedly urged to leave for Syria by Russian security forces, who aimed to alleviate the terror threat in Russia.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the flow of militants from Chechnya to Syria did not improve the state of affairs, as since 2014 the North Caucasus became an object of close interest for ISIS, when the group decided to expand its influence in this region. North Caucasian potential and actual fighters, and Chechens in particular, are the primary audience of ISIS Russian-language propaganda, which capitalizes on their antagonism against Russia and the pro-Russian administration in Chechnya and motivates them to establish local jihadist networks and carry out attacks in the North Caucasus and Russia. In addition to plotting attacks (according to FSB, since 2014 jihadists have carried out seven attacks against Russians, and an unspecified number of attacks were prevented), Chechen fighters actively spread jihadist messages in Russia among work migrants from Central Asia and provide them with necessary equipment and technical information. These migrants seem to be the perfect group for radicalization due to their extremely low economic status, social marginalization and deprivation of rights. These activities have already borne fruit: in May 2016 security forces prevented a major terror attack in Moscow plotted by four migrant workers from Tajikistan, who were inspired by ISIS Chechen operatives.<sup>23</sup> It seems that there are two

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<sup>21</sup> Jean-Baptiste Naudet, "SYRIE. La nouvelle épopée sanglante des tchéchènes," *L'OBS*, October 19, 2014, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20141017.OBS2472/syrie-la-nouvelle-epopee-sanglante-des-tchetchenes.html>

<sup>22</sup> Paul Goble, "Novaya Gazeta – FSB Helps Islamists from Russia Go to Syria, Only Worried When They Come Back," *The Interpreter*, July 31, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.interpretermag.com/novaya-gazeta-fsb-helps-islamists-from-russia-go-to-syria-only-worried-when-they-come-back/>

<sup>23</sup> Елена Васильченко, "Подробности сорванного теракта в Москве: хотели расстрелять "Бессмертный полк"," *Московский Комсомолец*, May 4, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.mk.ru/incident/2016/05/04/podrobnosti-sorvannogo-terakta-v-moskve-khoteli-rasstrelyat-bessmertny-polok.html>

main trends posing a threat to Russian security: Chechen returnees forming new, and extending existing, jihadist networks as well as plotting attacks in the North Caucasus and Russia, and Chechen jihadist proselytizers oriented towards migrant workers from Central Asia.

While Chechens compose the majority of foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict, and a phenomenon of foreign fighters emerging from Central Asian labor migrants community is incipient, other groups of Russian Muslims, which were mentioned above, are not represented *en masse*, but as individual cases. Thus, ethnic Russian jihadist foreign fighters could be divided into two main groups: females and former skinheads. The females were either lured by righteous Islamic marriage prospects (e.g. Barbara Karaulova, a philosophy student from Moscow State University) or joined the ranks of jihadist groups and traveled to Syria for preparing terror attacks in Russia, such as ex-skinhead Maria Pogorelova, who left for ISIS in 2014 and started to spread online jihadist propaganda messages in Russian from Syria, simultaneously unveiling her plans to learn to drive a truck and return to Russia.<sup>24</sup> The second noticeable group is composed of former skinheads and far-right radicals, who drastically switched sides and joined jihadist Islamic groups – these cases demand more detailed attention.

Finally, Volga-Ural Muslims (Tatars and Bashkirs mainly), who constitute the majority of Russian Muslims, provide few foreign fighters for jihadist groups, and their motivation in most cases is grounded in nationalism as well political and religious freedom from the Russian government. It is worth noting that Russian security services have discovered a number of jihadist hotbeds in Tatarian and Bashkirian settlements, such as the Tatarian village Belozerie.<sup>25</sup>

## Central Asia

It is difficult to give a relevant assessment of the flow of foreign fighters from Central Asian countries, mostly due to a lack of detailed reports and data from both official

<sup>24</sup> Евгений Вышенков, "Эволюция протеста: от skinhead-girl до «белой» шахидки," *Фонтанка*, April 15, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.fontanka.ru/2015/04/15/119/>

<sup>25</sup> Владислав Мальцев "Мордовский «халифат»," *НГ Религии*, April 1, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. [http://www.ng.ru/ng\\_religii/2015-04-01/2\\_halifat.html](http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2015-04-01/2_halifat.html)

and unofficial sources. From the information obtained by governments it may be concluded that the flow is low and increase slightly. However, other sources estimate the number of foreign fighters (without providing distribution by countries) as ranging from 4,000 (International Crisis Group)<sup>26</sup> to 4,500 (Sergey Afanasiev, the General Staff, Russia).<sup>27</sup> Presumably, the majority of fighters come from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (including Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan). Very little is known about fighters from Turkmenistan, due to the closed nature of its regime. Another source for recruiting Central Asian combatants is migrant workers living in Russia, as mentioned above. Most of the fighters are men of the same average age as in previous cases – ranging from 18 to 30. It is not certain, but based on propaganda videos (mentioned below) distributed by ISIS, where a large number of Kazakh children are shown going through training camps in Syria and participating in executions of prisoners, it may be concluded that there is a noticeable proportion of families of jihadists who traveled to Syria. The social levels and educational backgrounds of the fighters are unclear, but from the perspective of known cases they might be ranged from low (country towns with corresponding level of schools) to middle (urban areas and university students, or middle class). These conclusions cannot be applied to the case of labor migrants from Central Asia recruited in Russia, even more so as the issue is under-researched due to certain obstacles, such as the novelty of the phenomenon, an extremely high number of illegal immigrants, and more.

Motivation for traveling is rooted in both economic and social deprivation as well as ideology, and many of fighters consider jihadist groups as worthy alternatives to regimes of former Soviet republics. Some experts even define Central Asian jihad as a “form of labor migration”,<sup>28</sup> while other insist on the predominantly ideological character of their motives, pointing out that after wage reductions most of the ISIS fighters from the region did not return home, but rather moved to Libya, Pakistan or Afghanistan. In some cases in which

<sup>26</sup> Deirdre Tynan, "Thousands from Central Asia joining 'Islamic State': Report," *Deutsche Welle*, January 21, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.dw.com/en/thousands-from-central-asia-joining-islamic-state-report/a-18203785>

<sup>27</sup> Артур Аваков, "В Центральной Азии насчитали 4 500 боевиков ИГИЛ," *Московский Комсомолец*, April 27, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2016/04/27/v-centralnoy-azii-naschitali-4-500-boevikov-igil.html>

<sup>28</sup> Наталья Юрьева, "ИГ задолжало боевикам," *Утро*, July 7, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.utro.ru/articles/2016/07/07/1289320.shtml>

the fighters returned, they are likely to continue their jihadist activities,<sup>29</sup> which might influence the formation of the next generation of experienced jihadists.

The prevalent tool for recruitment, unlike Western countries, is propaganda in mosques and praying rooms, with the Internet playing a relatively small role, mostly in the form of social media. While in Syria foreign fighters from Central Asia tend to establish connections with jihadists from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. Recently, these foreign fighters have appeared in ISIS propaganda videos. It is worth noting that since 2015 ISIS propaganda has started to put much attention on Central Asia: two recent videos (“How Kazakh children execute enemies of Islam” and “Addressing to the people of Kyrgyzstan”) call fighters to immigrate to Syria and join ISIS not just for fighting, but also for building a new society, thus manipulating the grievances against the existing conditions of societies in Central Asia. Such calls are opposite to ones directed at western fighters, who are urged to stay in their home countries in order to carry out terror attacks.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned, in 2014, ISIS released a series of videos, showing Kazakh children undergoing military training in ISIS camps and executing prisoners. Another “bargaining chip” which ISIS uses for propaganda in the region is video messages by Gulmurod Khalimov, a Lieutenant Colonel and former Tajikistan's Special Forces chief, who joined ISIS in protest at Tajikistan's policy towards religion, and recently replaced Abu Omar al-Shishani as a militant commander of ISIS. His appeal to labor migrants working in Russia concerned both Russian and Central Asian governments, not least due to the weight of his rank, and showed significant lacks in officials’ command of the situation.

These characteristics of the Central Asian foreign fighters are caused by the situations in their home countries. Poor security on borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, which lead to an unhampered flow of jihadist propagandists and combatants; autocratic regimes; corruption; conflicts between ethnic groups within countries - all these have their impact on speed and intensity of radicalization processes in the region. Moreover, almost all of these countries were already affected by radical Islamic organizations, such as the

<sup>29</sup> Виталий Волков, "Опасная миграция: боевики из Центральной Азии ищут альтернативу ИГ," *Deutsche Welle*, July 6, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://dw.com/p/1JK2y>

<sup>30</sup> Uran Botobekov, "ISIS and Central Asia: A Shifting Recruiting Strategy," *The Diplomat*, May 17, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/isis-and-central-asia-a-shifting-recruiting-strategy/>

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which eventually defected to ISIS, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the Taliban, which has since 1990, in one way or another, tried to replace local governance with ruling of Shariah law. Today, given poor legal and security preparedness of Central Asian governments to the return of the fighters from Syria and Iraq to their home countries, and considering the recent death of Islam Karimov, who was the head of Uzbekistan continuously for the last 25 years, it is possible to presume that the region (and Russia as well, due to of its geographic location) is about to face new challenges in fighting terrorism and dealing with foreign fighters.

## Western Balkans

As seen from Table 1, the number of foreign fighters originating from Western Balkans is relatively small and estimated to be between 900 and 1,000, with the majority coming from Bosnia and Kosovo. Despite the fact that according to experts the flow almost completely stopped by early 2016,<sup>31</sup> both security forces and authorities have become concerned about the phenomenon for certain reasons. Some countries of the region (mainly Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania) have become places of origin for jihadist fighters not least due to the Bosnian war, which provided Islamic radicals with military experience. The flow of Balkanian foreign fighters to Syria possesses some specific features. As in most other groups of foreign fighters (described above) the majority of fighters are young men between 18 and 30. With that being said, a high proportion of whole families was also observed: among 200 Albanians there are about 13-20 women and more than 50 children, while among 330 Bosnian fighters about 60 women and 80 children are estimated.<sup>32</sup> Most of the fighters are members of local Salafist groups, and their social status is marked by a large percentage of unemployment, which affected the entire region, while their average educational level is unknown. Many of the driving factors are common for many regions, such as the afore-mentioned high level of unemployment, stagnate economies, social insecurity, and grievances against the governments. However, there is also a complicated

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<sup>31</sup> Vlado Azinović, Muhamed Jusić, "THE NEW LURE OF THE SYRIAN WAR - THE FOREIGN FIGHTERS' BOSNIAN CONTINGENT," *Atlantic Initiative*, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. [http://www.atlanticinitiative.org/images/The\\_New\\_Lure\\_of\\_the\\_Syrian\\_War\\_The\\_Foreign\\_Fighters\\_Bosnian\\_Contingent.pdf](http://www.atlanticinitiative.org/images/The_New_Lure_of_the_Syrian_War_The_Foreign_Fighters_Bosnian_Contingent.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> "Balkan Jihadists. The Radicalisation and Recruitment of Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, March 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/file/show/Balkan-Jihadists.pdf>

religious diversity which plays a role in pushing Muslims to fight in Syria and Iraq: the multiplexing of Muslims and Christians (both Orthodox and Roman Catholics), loaded with the consequences of the Bosnian war and never-ending latent quarrels, may also encourage Balkanian citizens to seek simple and clear answers, despite the fact that in historical perspective few of the Balkanian fighters participated in jihadist conflicts abroad. According to estimates, since the beginning of the Syrian war, the majority of Balkanians (about 83%) joined Jabhat al-Nusra, and only 10% of them preferred ISIS. However, since the launching the propaganda oriented to the region (both recruitment videos, such as “Honour is in Jihad”, and magazines), ISIS managed to shift the trend.<sup>33</sup> The ISIS fighters from the region have formed a so-called Balkans Battalion.<sup>34</sup> Not just the flow of foreign fighters poses the threat to the Balkans, but also other factors. According to reports, jihadist recruits carry out terror attacks also within the region, attacking policemen and calling for others to follow their lead.<sup>35</sup> The region has also become a transit route for fighters travelling to the Middle East, and for Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe, which attracts the attention of Western European countries trying to help local governments in stabilizing the situation.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, some observers express their concerns that local governments do not spend enough efforts to develop the competency for countering the radicalization and impeding the flow of potential recruits,<sup>37</sup> despite the fact that most of the authorities have, since 2014, implemented stricter laws against foreign fighters.<sup>38</sup>

## Southeast Asia

Initially, Southeast Asian countries were not in the focus of jihadist propaganda, which, along with the vast geographical distance of the region from Middle East, causes

<sup>33</sup> Timothy Holman, "FOREIGN FIGHTERS FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS IN SYRIA," *Combating Terrorism Center*, June 30, 2014, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/foreign-fighters-from-the-western-balkans-in-syria>

<sup>34</sup> Luke Coffey, "Trouble is brewing in the Balkans," *AlJazeera*, February 4, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/02/trouble-brewing-balkans-150204111930474.html>

<sup>35</sup> "Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans," *Austrian National Defence Academy*, September 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. [http://www.bundesheer.at/pdf\\_pool/publikationen/pfpc\\_31st\\_rssee\\_policy.pdf](http://www.bundesheer.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/pfpc_31st_rssee_policy.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Sabina Lange, "The Western Balkans: back in the EU spotlight," *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, March 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. [http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief-9\\_Western\\_Balkans.pdf](http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief-9_Western_Balkans.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Brown, "ISIL recruits in the Balkans," *AlJazeera*, January 13, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/01/isil-recruits-balkans-160112081705099.html>

<sup>38</sup> "Balkan Jihadists. The Radicalisation and Recruitment of Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, March 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/file/show/Balkan-Jihadists.pdf>

comparatively low numbers of foreign fighters originating from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. However, in 2015, some Southeast Asian intelligence organizations place the total number of Southeast Asians who have made the trip to ISIS' territory (without providing details by countries) as between 1,200 and 1,800.<sup>39</sup> It can be suggested (based on both available data and other factors such as the total number of Muslim population) that among other Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia provides the majority of foreign fighters. Profiles of the fighters are generally similar to the previous cases: they are young men from various areas in the origin countries, with diverse social levels and educational backgrounds. It is interesting to note also that there is a substantial proportion of families among the travelers: they make up as many as 40-45% of Indonesians who have traveled to join ISIS in Syria.<sup>40</sup> According to a poll released by the Pew Research Center, 4% of Indonesians and 11% of Malaysians support ISIS (as of November 2015),<sup>41</sup> an important fact given that Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. Despite this, the region has faced the jihadist threat since the late 1990s, when a lot of Indonesians turned to militancy, after being inspired by Al-Qaeda, and formed local jihadist groups (such as Jemaah Islamiyah). Today there is noticeable number of local groups linked to ISIS (among them are Abu Sayyaf, Bangasamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, Mujahideen Indonesia Timor, etc.).<sup>42</sup> The motivation for the current flow of foreign fighters is rooted (among other reasons) in the lack of political freedom, democracy and repressiveness of governments, along with governments' failure (as in the case of the Philippines) to confront and control Muslim insurgencies, which often leads to a weak rule of law. It comes as no surprise that the southern Philippines along with Indonesian Poso appear to be epicenters of jihadist activities. Besides training camps for foreign fighters revealed in these areas,<sup>43</sup> Southeast

<sup>39</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, "The Rise of ISIS in Southeast Asia," *Defence One*, February 5, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2016/02/rise-isis-southeast-asia/125719/>

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Chinyong Liow, "ISIS reaches Indonesia: The terrorist group's prospects in Southeast Asia," *Brookings*, February 8, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/isis-reaches-indonesia-the-terrorist-groups-prospects-in-southeast-asia/>

<sup>41</sup> Jacob Poushter, "In nations with significant Muslim populations, much disdain for ISIS," *Pew Research Center*, November 17, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis/>

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Koruth Samuel, "RADICALISATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A SELECTED CASE STUDY OF DAESH IN INDONESIA, MALAYSIA AND THE PHILIPPINES," *The Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017.

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2016/Radicalisation\\_SEA\\_2016.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2016/Radicalisation_SEA_2016.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Conor Cronin, Phuong Nguyen, "Recalibrating the Islamic State Threat in Southeast Asia," *Center for Strategic and*

Asian countries also face an escalation of violence on the part of local jihadists and jihadist groups who pledged their allegiance to ISIS. Thus, dozens of members of Mujahidin Indonesia Timur group (as well as others) were arrested in February 2016 by Indonesian police after attacks carried out by jihadists (both returnees and locals) against policemen and civilians, and funded by ISIS.<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to note, that among the militants there are Uyghurs from China, who also join ISIS' ranks.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, regional governments have to deal not just with the flow of foreign fighters traveling to Syria, but also with the greater challenges of local jihadist networks linked to ISIS and other radical groups, which (among other factors because of the vast geographical distance from Syria and obstacles in reaching there) accumulate militants in training camps and direct their attacks to the region.

### Shia Jihadists Sponsored by Iran

While most of the media, public, and expert attention is attracted to Sunni jihadists traveling to Syria and Iraq, the phenomenon of Shiite foreign fighters remains in the shade.

Shiite militants who get involved in the Syrian war typically combat for Bashar Assad's regime and are primarily inspired and mobilized with the help of Iran who, along with Russia, provides strong support for the Syrian government.

From the table below<sup>46</sup> it is seen that there are five main countries giving rise to Shiite fighters: Lebanon with Hezbollah as a main source of combatants; Iran itself who sends both members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard (the IRGC) and paramilitary volunteers; Afghanistan whose fighters provided the largest supply of non-Arab foreign fighters who are also recruited by Iran and compose the Fatimiyun Brigade; and Pakistan who sends fighters serving in their own unit known as Zaynabiyun Brigade. Additionally, according to International Business Times, around 30,000 Indian Shiites expressed their commitment to

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*International Studies*, July 7, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/recalibrating-islamic-state-threat-southeast-asia>

<sup>44</sup> "Islamic State - Indonesia and Malaysia," *Global Security*, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/isil-indonesia.htm>

<sup>45</sup> "Indonesia turns to China as ethnic Uighurs join would-be militants," *The Straits Times*, January 6, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-turns-to-china-as-ethnic-uighurs-join-would-be-militants>

<sup>46</sup> Despite there are Iraqis Shiite militants backed by Iran and fighting in Syria, it is hard if not impossible to quantify and separate the number of Iraqis fighting in Iraq from ones combating in Syria.



leave for Syria and Iraq in order to defend Shiite holy places and even submitted their passports.<sup>47</sup> There are also at least 200 Yemeni Houthis fighting for the Assad regime in Syria.<sup>48</sup> In Iraq there are several Shiite militias, composed of foreign fighters from Iran, including the “Badr Brigade”, the "Mahdi Army", the "League of the Righteous", the "Chosen Army", etc.<sup>49</sup>

The table also demonstrates a large spread of data, as, given the circumstances, very little is known about the fighters and it is impossible to gauge accurately the number of Shiite fighters operating in Syria and Iraq. Thus, according to US officials up to 100,000 Shiite fighters, backed by Iran, are indicated in the region.<sup>50</sup>

**Table 2 – Flow of Shia Foreign Fighters to Syria and Iraq 2013-2015**

<b>Lebanon (Hezbollah)</b>	6,000 – 8,000 <sup>51</sup>
<b>Iran</b>	3,000 <sup>52</sup> - 7,000 <sup>53</sup>
<b>Afghanistan</b>	3,000 <sup>54</sup> - 20,000 <sup>55</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Jijo Jacob, "30,000 Indian Shia Muslims Ready to Fight Isis 'Bare Handed' in Iraq." *International Business Times*, June 27, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/30000-indian-muslims-ready-fight-isis-bare-handed-iraq-1454415>

<sup>48</sup> Ariel Ben Solomon, "Report: Yemen Houthis fighting for Assad in Syria," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 31, 2013, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-Yemen-Houthis-fighting-for-Assad-in-Syria-315005>

<sup>49</sup> "أبرز المليشيات الشيعية المسلحة في العراق" *AlJazeera*, August 9, 2014, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2014/9/8/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82>

<sup>50</sup> Lucas Tomlinson, "US officials: Up to 100,000 Iran-backed fighters now in Iraq," *FOX News*, August 16, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/08/16/us-officials-up-to-100000-iran-backed-fighters-now-in-iraq.html>

<sup>51</sup> Dan De Luce, "Syrian War Takes Rising Toll on Hezbollah," *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/09/syrian-war-takes-rising-toll-on-hezbollah/>

<sup>52</sup> David Blair, "Almost 700 Iranian troops and militia fighters 'killed in Syria' to preserve Bashar al-Assad," *The Telegraph*, May 10, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/10/almost-700-iranian-troops-killed-in-syria-to-preserve-bashar-al/>

<sup>53</sup> Sam Dagher, "Iran Expands Role in Syria in Conjunction With Russia's," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-expands-role-in-syria-in-conjunction-with-russias-airstrikes-1443811030>

<sup>54</sup> Amir Toumaj, "IRGC commander discusses Afghan militia, 'Shia liberation army,' and Syria," *Long War Journal*, August 24, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/ircg-commander-discusses-afghan-militia-shia-liberation-army-and-syria.php>

<sup>55</sup> Hashmatallah Moslih, "Iran 'foreign legion' leans on Afghan Shia in Syria war," *AlJazeera*, January 22, 2016,

<b>Pakistan</b>	1,000 <sup>56</sup>
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A distinctive feature of Shiite militants is their previous significant combat experience (against American forces, Israel, or other troops and countries), making them professional fighters. They are also more organized than their Sunni antagonists, and recruited in a systematic way. The factors which serve as motives for the Shiite foreign fighters vary but mostly mirror those of Sunni foreign fighters. Iran, who deliberately sends its troops to Syria, obviously pursues its own geopolitical interests, while for example Afghan fighters who originate both from Afghanistan as well as from refugee camps in Iran are driven by compensations promised by Iran more than by ideology.<sup>57</sup> At the same time Shi'ites from India, as mentioned above, are clearly motivated by religious feelings.

### Kurds Supporters

In addition to Sunni and Shia radicals coming to Syria and Iraq, there are fighters who joined Kurdish militant groups, mainly the People's Protection Units militia (YPG), the combat wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria. The exact number of these fighters is unknown, but they may be considered as relatively low, from a few dozen<sup>58</sup> to a few hundred.<sup>59</sup> According to sparse reports, the fighters mostly come from Kurdish diasporas all over the world, though there are cases of non-Kurdish Westerners coming to help them in their struggle. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that over 100 Western fighters in total have joined the Kurds in Syria and among them are American, French, Australian, British, Spanish and Dutch nationalities.<sup>60</sup> Some of these incidents gain broad media attention, and it is worth noting that Kurds receive a lot of

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accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/iran-foreign-legion-leans-afghan-shia-syria-war-160122130355206.html>

<sup>56</sup> Farhan Zahid, "The Zainabiyoun Brigade: A Pakistani Shiite Militia Amid the Syrian Conflict," *The Jamestown Foundation*, May, 27, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017.

[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45479&cHash=b1fd0cdae422cab2030811f564ed606a](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45479&cHash=b1fd0cdae422cab2030811f564ed606a)

<sup>57</sup> Ari Heistein, James West, "Syria's Other Foreign Fighters: Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Mercenaries," *The National Interest*, November 20, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syrias-other-foreign-fighters-irans-afghan-pakistani-14400?page=2>

<sup>58</sup> Amre Sarhan, "Dozens of foreign fighters joined Kurdish YPG to fight ISIS," *Iraqi News*, November 24, 2014, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/dozens-foreign-fighters-joined-kurdish-ypg-fight-isis/>

<sup>59</sup> "400 FOREIGN FIGHTERS JOIN YPG," Telesur, June 12, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/400-Foreign-Fighters-Join-Syrias-YPG-20150612-0015.html>

<sup>60</sup> Tom Perry, Sylvia Westall, "German woman killed fighting Islamic State in Syria," *Reuters*, March 9, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-germany-idUSKBN0M516T20150309>

sympathy from Westerners in social media.<sup>61</sup> This is most likely because of the secular nature of their ideology, or because of widely promoted images and stories depicting Kurdish fighters (especially the female fighters) in a positive light. In any case, future research should examine this phenomenon more in depth.

## The Flow of Foreign Fighters to Syria and Iraq

The data and analysis of characteristics of combatants from different regions illustrates the global nature of the phenomenon of foreign fighters combating in the Middle East. The flow started in 2011 - 2012 (with information available as of 2013), evolved and underwent certain changes affected by both external and internal circumstances. Table 3 below<sup>62</sup> shows the six-month dynamics of the flow, from 2013 to 2016, arranged both by approximate total number of fighters and by number of countries of origin.<sup>63</sup> As seen, the flow has gone through increase and decrease periods, with a peak in the arrival of foreign fighters during the second half of 2014 - first half of 2015. The intensity of flow in general is caused by certain interdependent trends, such as the military situation in Syria and Iraq, the changing reaction of the international community to that situation, which in turn generated minor trends, such as the spread of propaganda messages, terror attacks in Western countries, etc.

Table 3 – Dynamics of the Flow of Foreign Fighters to Syria and Iraq

Time period	1 half of 2013	2 half of 2013	1 half of 2014	2 half of 2014	1 half of 2015	2 half of 2015	1 half of 2016
Number of foreign fighters	2,500-7,000	6,000-11,000	12,000	20,000	25,000	30,000	30,000-40,000 <sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> "The Lions of Rojava," accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/TheLionsOfRojavaOfficial/>

<sup>62</sup> All the data is gathered from the open sources.

<sup>63</sup> The data includes all foreign fighters arrived to Syria and Iraq, without regard to those, who died or left.

<sup>64</sup> According to Justin Siberell, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism, US. See: "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015", accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/06/258013.htm>

<b>Number of countries</b>	60	74	81	90	100	104	Over 100
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## Rise and Golden Age

The Syrian conflict began in 2011 as a secular revolt against authoritarian Assad's regime, two years later the conflict began to develop into a war of all against all, with significant presence of Islamists infiltrated into the opposition. In February 2012 Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, called for Sunni Muslims from Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq to support the struggle against the Syrian government.<sup>65</sup> During 2012, between 700 and 1,400 foreign fighters<sup>66</sup> (most of them affiliated with al-Qaeda) came forward and left their home countries for Syria. Factors, which explain the growth of number foreign fighters include *internal* (such as the growth of Islamization within Syria), *external* (geopolitical and ideological interests Saudi Arabia and other Arab and Muslim countries have in Syria) and *international* ones (al-Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood and other jihadist organizations and their affiliates who find certain opportunities in increasing militarization of the conflict). As a result, by the second half of 2012 al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra was considered to have the best trained and most experienced fighters among the Syrian rebels.

In the first half of 2013, in response to military successes inside the region, as such as the capture of Raqqa by Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, and continuing propaganda, the number of foreign fighters increased significantly. This tendency was maintained during the second half of the year, sustained by the growing strength of Jabhat al-Nusra and by the appearance of ISIS as an independent player, having split from al-Qaeda and seized control of Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in Iraq. During that period, the number of foreign fighters more than doubled, and their geographic origins extended.

<sup>65</sup> Ulrike Putz, "Jihadists Declare Holy War Against Assad Regime," *Spiegel Online*, March 30, 2012, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/foreign-jihadists-declare-war-on-syria-s-assad-a-824875.html>

<sup>66</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Foreign Fighters Trickle into the Syrian Rebellion," *The Washington Institute*, June 11, 2012, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/foreign-fighters-trickle-into-the-syrian-rebellion>

As seen from the table, in 2014 the flow of foreign fighters continued to increase and reached approximately 20,000 persons from 90 countries all over the world, which was almost twice as many as in 2013. Among primary factors attracting foreign fighters that year was the noticeable rise of ISIS and the proclamation of the caliphate. Since the beginning of 2014, ISIS started to capture Syrian territories and proclaimed Raqqa its unofficial capital, and seized much of northern and western Iraq, including Mosul. Moreover, in November 2014 a branch of the group was formed in Libya, which significantly grew in 2015. The groundbreaking military successes allowed ISIS to establish and arrange a financial system and become the richest and most prosperous jihadist group.<sup>67</sup> The system included oil exports from the seized fields (such as Syria's largest oil field – al-Omar), control of local banks, taxation, kidnapping for ransom, online fundraising, illegal drug trade, sales of antiques, etc. As a result, a dynamic circle has been formed:

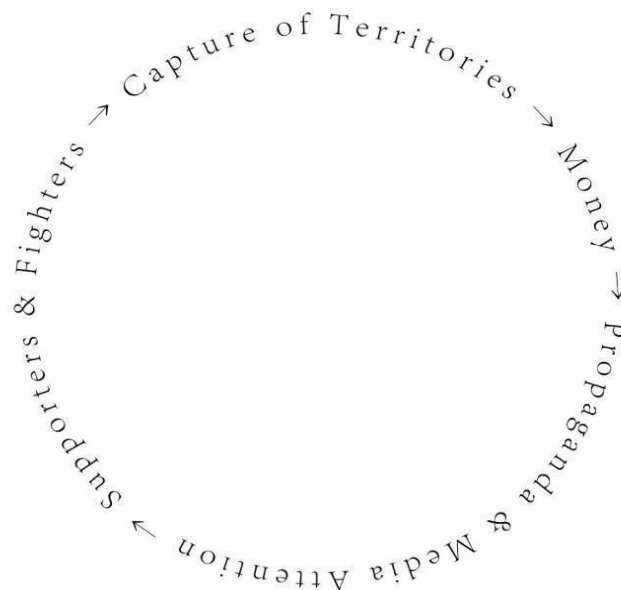


Figure 1 – ISIS' Life-circle in Syria in 2014

Impressive growth of profits and the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014 enabled ISIS to expand and take its propaganda products to a new high level.

<sup>67</sup> Jack Moore, "Mosul Seized: Jihadists Loot \$429m from City's Central Bank to Make Isis World's Richest Terror Force," *International Business Time*, June 11, 2014, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/mosul-seized-jihadis-loot-429m-citys-central-bank-make-isis-worlds-richest-terror-force-1452190>

First of all, it is necessary to note the critical difference between the messages spread by Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS: while the former calls for the fight against the Assad regime, the latter does not narrow its call with Syrian borders and encourages to battle against the whole world, thus broadening the message and allowing ISIS to attract more followers and foreign fighters. Moreover, in contrast to the propaganda messages distributed by al-Qaeda, which were recorded in Arabic and uploaded mainly on jihadist forums and websites, ISIS launched unprecedented multi-language and multi-format outreach campaigns, bringing into play social media, printed, audio, and video materials, using Western foreign fighters as “poster boys and girls” and oftentimes broadcasting brutal killings (using in some cases Westerners as executioners) in order to attract more public attention.

ISIS put into practice narrowcasting, approaching various types of audiences with specific messages. Potential fighters were promised military glory while civil professionals, who do not want to fight, were given the opportunity to become a valuable and important member of the new society and take an active part in its building, rather than attempting to build themselves in existing western societies with tough professional competition. Women were lured with both opportunities for proper marriages and self-fulfillment in various fields, while families with kids were offered a decent life and appropriate Muslim education.

The flow of foreign fighters during 2013 and beginning of 2014 was marked by certain features. The dominance of fighters from MENA region continued, though it included a sizable amount of potential fighters without military experience, who were used, as mentioned previously, as suicide bombers. At the same time the rise of Western foreign fighters gave cause for serious concerns for Western governments and organizations, urging them to trace the flow and gauge its potential threat. The intensity of the flow of fighters was caused, among other factors, by the easiness of reaching Syria and Iraq. Travelers preferred not to reveal their intentions, but there were little obstacles on their way to battlefields. According to witnesses, in 2013 one could easily come to Syria, even being dressed up in jihadist manner: “It’s so easy... For example, someone comes from Tunisia.

He flies to the international airport wearing jihadi clothes and a jihadi beard and he has jihadi songs on his mobile”.<sup>68</sup>

During 2013 the international community aimed to comprehend the potential threats from foreign fighters and especially to elaborate new patterns of response to the emergent phenomenon of Westerners leaving for combat in Syria, rather than acting proactively. However, in 2014 as a significant part of Syrian territory was claimed by ISIS and the threat of foreign fighters became more substantial, a number of Western and other countries participated in direct military actions against the group. In September 2014, the United States and five Arab countries (Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) launched air strikes around Aleppo and Raqqa targeting ISIS, al-Nusra and the Khorasan Group. Other Western countries contributing to the campaign include Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

At the same period of time most local governments and the international community, affected by the flow of foreign fighters, improved existing legislation and adopted new laws, aimed to prevent their citizens from traveling to Syria, and punish those who have traveled.

Partially as a response to the strikes, in September 2014 ISIS started to distribute new messages calling Western fighters to attack objectives in their home countries and throughout the Western world. As a result, a total eight terror attacks, which have clear connections with the Syrian conflict, were carried out in Western countries, including France, Canada, Australia and U.S. In three cases the attacker used firearms, in three of the attacks they used bladed weapons, and in two cases - vehicles. Though security services, governments and experts have put much of their attention to threats from returnees, only one of the eight attackers, Mehdi Nemmouche, a gunman who opened fire at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels on 24 May 2014 and killed four people, is believed to have spent over a year in Syria, while the seven others were lone wolf terrorists (both native Muslims and converters) inspired either by returnees or by online propaganda. 2014 therefore became an opening year for a new type of Islamist terror attacks, when locals,

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "Syria's Foreign Fighters," *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2013, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/09/syrias-foreign-fighters/>

who have no any previous connections to foreign fighting, being inspired online, carry out attacks often by improvised means.

Despite the fact that there is no precise date or time period during which there was a peak of the flow, it is possible to assume, that the “golden age” for the flow of foreign fighters was during the end of 2014 - first half of 2015, when ISIS maintained control of previously captured territories, enhancing control over the civil society in Syria and Iraq, and to seize (or recapture) new ones, such as Ramadi in Iraq, or Palmyra in Syria. During that period, ISIS proceeded to expand its presence and influence across Libya and in February seized the city of Sirte, using it as a base for further expansion. Moreover, in June 2015 the majority of Caucasus Emirate commanders and members in the North Caucasus pledged their allegiance to ISIS, which allowed the group to declare a governorate and gather even more support from North Caucasian fighters. Because of military activity and due to media attention on ISIS after numerous mass public executions, recorded and distributed by its propaganda machine, in the first half of 2015 the number of foreign fighters steadily increased, albeit not so drastically as in 2014.

## Decadence and Survival Stage

As of the second half of 2015, ISIS' life-circle (Figure 1) which had formed in 2014, started to collapse. It became increasingly difficult for ISIS to maintain control of conquered territories, since the money gained from captured banks and sold antiques was spent, while their oil fields came under air strikes, and simultaneously oil prices in the global markets began falling. By the end of the year ISIS started to lose its territories in Syria and Iraq due to intensified strikes by the US-led coalition, and due to an increase of Turkish activities. Since September 2015 Russia, pursuing its own geopolitical goals, joined the military actions against jihadists.

During the first half of 2016 ISIS lost about 20% of its territories in Syria and 40% in Iraq as a result of continuing coalition airstrikes.<sup>69</sup> Secondly, the shrinking of their

<sup>69</sup> Lizzie Dearden, "Isis 'loses 40% of Iraq territory and 20% in Syria' as international air strikes support ground operations," *Independent*, January 5, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-loses-40-of-iraq-territory-and-20-in-syria-as-international-air-strikes-support-ground-a6797486.html>



territories came amid reduction of income (from \$80 million a month in mid-2015 to \$56 million a month by March 2016), which in turn forced the group to raise taxes, as ISIS does not have enough revenue to fund its operations.<sup>70</sup> These heavy losses caused a dramatic fall of the flow of foreign fighters from 2,000 persons per month at a peak to almost 50,<sup>71</sup> and led to a noticeable number of returnees. Such slackening of ISIS positions in Syria and Iraq inevitably led to noticeable shifts in groups' tactics and operations.

Experts and observers note that ISIS in 2016 puts much of its attention toward the African continent, and toward Libya in particular, not least because of political instability in the country. Thus, the group attempted to maintain its positions in Libya against coalition's strikes and to build there their new haven and simultaneously recruit fighters from Africa's impoverished countries, as Chad, Mali, and Sudan, offering them up to \$1,000 sign-up bonuses.<sup>72</sup> So far they are believed to have 2,000 to 3,000 fighters with 70% of this number made up of foreign fighters.<sup>73</sup> Despite the organization's attempts, on 5 December 2016 ISIS lost control of the Libyan city of Sirte, as a result of U.S. airstrikes.<sup>74</sup>

Concurrently, since early 2016 ISIS had increased cooperation with Boko Haram in Nigeria, which pledged its allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2015 and at the same year was ranked as the world's deadliest terror group.<sup>75</sup> However, in August 2016 ISIS appointed Abu-Musab al-Barnawi as a new leader of Boko Haram, though the current leader – Abubakar Shekau refused to accept this change. By coincidence a few days later Shekau was reportedly killed during one of the strikes. As such, the situation with the group and

<sup>70</sup> "Islamic State has lost grip on 12% of territory in six months – study," *The Guardian*, July 11, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/11/islamic-state-has-lost-grip-on-12-of-territory-in-six-months-study>

<sup>71</sup> Griff Witte, Sudarsan Raghavan, James McAuley, "Flow of foreign fighters plummets as Islamic State loses its edge," *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/flow-of-foreign-fighters-plummets-as-isis-loses-its-edge/2016/09/09/ed3e0dda-751b-11e6-9781-49e591781754\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/flow-of-foreign-fighters-plummets-as-isis-loses-its-edge/2016/09/09/ed3e0dda-751b-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html)

<sup>72</sup> Colin Freeman, "Isil recruiting migrant 'army of the poor' with \$1,000 sign-up bonuses," *The Telegraph*, February 1, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/12134806/Isil-recruiting-migrant-army-of-the-poor-with-1000-sign-up-bonuses.html>

<sup>73</sup> "Libya is a massive safe haven for ISIS now, U.N. warns," *CBS News*, December 1, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/libya-safe-haven-isis-3000-fighters-un-warns/>

<sup>74</sup> Patrick Wintour, "Isis loses control of Libyan city of Sirte," *The Guardian*, December 5, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/05/isis-loses-control-of-libyan-city-of-sirte>

<sup>75</sup> "Global Terrorism Index 2015," *Institute for Economic and Peace*, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>

potential flow of foreign fighters to Nigeria remains under question. Another split caused by ISIS divided members of al-Shabaab, a jihadist group operating in Somalia. In October 2015 some of al-Shabaab senior commanders pledged their allegiance to ISIS, while others refused and confirmed their allegiance to al-Qaeda (which was established in 2012). Today, according to reports, ISIS provides military and financial supplies to their allies in Somalia from Yemen, establishes training camps and recruits new fighters, whose number for today is about a few hundreds.<sup>76</sup> Other countries for ISIS' potential expansion in Africa include Kenya, where authorities have recently uncovered a cell of jihadists plotting to carry out a biological attack in East Africa on behalf of ISIS,<sup>77</sup> and Morocco, which is becoming more vulnerable as ISIS looks to control the “doorstep” to Europe.<sup>78</sup>

Due to the partial collapse of the life-circle formed by ISIS in 2014 (mentioned above), territorial losses, and lowering of media attention to the group, certain shifts in the group's propaganda messages appeared. Western fighters were increasingly encouraged to stay home and attack if they cannot travel to Syria. Simultaneously, 2015 and 2016 were marked by shifts in propaganda oriented to Central Asian and Balkanian fighters: they, on the contrary, were called to leave for Syria. Such changes in patterns may have various roots. On the one hand, ISIS appreciated a potency of lone wolf attacks both from the standpoints of expenses and psychologic effects. The effects were enhanced by the European refugee crisis and a considerable increase in the number of refugees and migrants - around one million migrants and refugees arrived in Europe by 21 December 2015, three to four times more than in 2014,<sup>79</sup> and by fears and concerns, driven by the crisis and presumable connections between refugees and possible terror attacks on Western soil. Thus, some of the actors in the November Paris attacks entered the country among the flow of

<sup>76</sup> Harun Maruf, "Intelligence Official: Islamic State Growing in Somalia," *VOA News*, May 5, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.voanews.com/a/intelligence-official-islamic-state-growing-in-somalia/3316326.html>

<sup>77</sup> Morgan Winsor, "ISIS In Kenya: Police Foil Alleged Anthrax Attack By Islamic State Group-Linked Medics," *International Business Times*, May 3, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-kenya-police-foil-alleged-anthrax-attack-islamic-state-group-linked-medics-2363511>

<sup>78</sup> Morgan Winsor, "As ISIS Expands In North Africa, Morocco Faces Rising Threat Of Islamic State Group Terrorism," *International Business Times*, January 14, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-expands-north-africa-morocco-faces-rising-threat-islamic-state-group-terrorism-2263641>

<sup>79</sup> Tom Miles, "EU gets one million migrants in 2015, smugglers seen making \$1 billion," *Reuters*, December 22, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-idUSKBN0U50WI20151222>

refugees and migrants.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, Central Asian and Balkanian fighters who aimed to replace Westerners are probably less costly and more effective, since there were recent militant conflicts in these regions. In addition, ISIS turned to the groups which previously were not much in focus - women, children, criminals, etc.

Shifts in ISIS' propaganda messages led, in 2015, to total of 16 Syria-related terror incidents against Western countries (France, Denmark, USA, and UK), including the Russian civil plane crash in Sinai in October 2015. The overwhelming majority of attacks used firearms and bombs, with a lesser percent of bladed weapons. Most of the perpetrators were ISIS-inspired lone wolf terrorists or small groups, while such prominent attacks as mass shooting and bombing in France in November 2015 were partly carried out by returnees. 2016 as well was marked by a drastic rise of terror attacks connected to Syria in Western countries: by December 2016 a total of 40 incidents (compared to 16 in 2015) occurred, including 10 attacks in France, 10 in Germany, 7 in USA, 4 in Belgium, 3 in Russia, 2 in Australia, and 1 in Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands and United Kingdom each. The vast majority of these attacks were carried out by using arme blanche (27 incidents), while the minority was performed by means of firearms, bombs and vehicles. Most of the actors were online-inspired lone wolves of various origins, including immigrants and permanent residents. This rise clearly shows the emergence of a new trend in terrorism, which poses a challenge to governments and security services, since most of these attacks (not least because of the weapons used) are extremely hard to be prevented due to their spontaneous nature and lack of preparatory stage.

In 2015-2016, governments concerned with the foreign fighters problem significantly increased the level of inter-cooperation and inter-coordination in preventing potential fighters from leaving their home countries, tracking returnees, etc. Some of the governments, alongside with tightening the legislation against foreign fighters, launched rehabilitation programs aimed to deradicalize returning foreign fighters and those who did not get a chance to reach Syria. The most known of them is the Aarhus program operating

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<sup>80</sup> Patrick J. McDonnell, Alexandra Zavis, "Slain Paris plotter's Europe ties facilitated travel from Syria," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-paris-attacks-mastermind-20151119-story.html>

in Denmark.<sup>81</sup> It includes mentoring and psychological work with jihadists, support for their families, and community outreach. To date, it is impossible to estimate the level of efficiency of such programs. Consequently, the deceleration of the flow of foreign fighters in 2015 and 2016 was caused, among other reasons, by obstacles the travelers met on their way to Syria or Iraq. The trip itself became more complicated for potential fighters, due to greater attention of Western security forces to those who fly to Syria as well as strengthening of border control between Turkey and Syria. It forced travelers to construct sophisticated paths with stops in third European countries before heading to Turkey, and avoid police and security inside the country. It is an additional reason for potential fighters to stay and home and attack local targets with lower risk to get caught at the early stage.

## **Trapped in the Network: A Case Study of Foreign Fighters from Germany**

Similarly to other countries worldwide and the West particularly, since the beginning of current Syrian conflict Germany has faced the problem of foreign fighters leaving the country for Syria and joining various jihadist groups (mainly ISIS). Germany, on the one hand, can serve as an illustration for profiles of Western foreign fighters, examined above, and on the other, can demonstrate the threats Europe and whole world in general can possibly face from the phenomenon of foreign fighters.

According to the *Bundeskriminalamt* (the Federal Criminal Police Office of Germany), as of November 2016 more than 800 Germans joined ISIS and other groups in Syria since early 2012.<sup>82</sup> The *Verfassungsschutz* (Germany's domestic intelligence service) claims that the number had nearly doubled between June 2014 and June 2015 - from 378<sup>83</sup> to 680<sup>84</sup> persons, which corresponds with the flourish of ISIS in Syria and the peak of the

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<sup>81</sup> "Antiradikaliseringssindsats," *City of Aarhus*, accessed January 4, 2017.

[https://www.aarhus.dk/sitecore/content/Subsites/Antiradikaliseringssindsats/Home.aspx?sc\\_lang=en](https://www.aarhus.dk/sitecore/content/Subsites/Antiradikaliseringssindsats/Home.aspx?sc_lang=en)

<sup>82</sup> Ruth Bender, "Germany Bans Group Accused of Recruiting Jihadist," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 15, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/germany-bans-group-accused-of-recruiting-jihadists-1479206555>

<sup>83</sup> "Analyse der den deutschen Sicherheitsbehörden vorliegenden Informationen über die Radikalisierungshintergründe und -verläufe der Personen, die aus islamistischer Motivation aus Deutschland in Richtung Syrien ausgereist sind," *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, Bundeskriminalamt*, December 1, 2014, accessed January 4, 2017.

[http://www.innenministerkonferenz.de/IMK/DE/termine/to-beschluesse/14-12-11\\_12/anlage-analyse.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=2](http://www.innenministerkonferenz.de/IMK/DE/termine/to-beschluesse/14-12-11_12/anlage-analyse.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2)

<sup>84</sup> "Lageanalyse: Ausreisen von Personen aus dem islamistischen Spektrum in Berlin nach Syrien / Irak,"

flow of foreign fighters in general. The *Bundeskriminalamt* report also notes that as of December 2016 about a third of those 800 people have returned to Germany.

*Verfassungsschutz* reports from 2014 and 2015 provide detailed statistics on German foreign fighters, which allows setting up an average profile of foreign fighter.

Thus, more than 80% of them are male, with about 20% of females. The average age of male recruits is 26.5 while females are notably younger - 21-22 years old. More than 60% of foreign fighters were born in Germany, and the others are first-generation immigrants. Along with that, an overwhelming majority came from urban areas (about 90%). About 18% of total numbers are converted. The educational level of foreign fighters is diverse, but in general is slightly lower than the average level of German society.

The processes of radicalization and recruitment merit more detailed consideration. The reports highlight that the majority of foreign fighters (about 70%) had certain connections to German Salafist organizations prior to their trips to Syria and Iraq. At the same time, a recent governmental report, published by the German newspaper *Die Welt* claims that 54% of foreign fighters were radicalized and recruited through social bonds: family, friends, etc., while 48% of them through Salafi mosques, and 44% online.<sup>85</sup> On the contrary, a federal *Verfassungsschutz* report notes that despite that the Internet appears to be an important factor of radicalization in significant number of cases, the reports show, that less than 10% of foreign fighters were radicalized *exclusively* online through communication in social media. Another feature of the radicalization process is its speed: about half (42%) of foreign fighters were radicalized within a year, and some isolated cases, examined in the reports, provide examples of extremely fast radicalization processes - about three months. While in most cases the way to Syria is unknown, the existing information allows concluding that usually German foreign fighters come to the region via Turkey, as do most of the other European jihadists.

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*Senatsverwaltung für Inneres und Sport*, June 2015, accessed January 4, 2017.

<https://www.berlin.de/sen/inneres/verfassungsschutz/publikationen/lage-und-wahlanalysen/>

<sup>85</sup> Manuel Bewarder, Florian Flade, "Manche kommen zurück, „um sich zu erholen“,“ *Welt*, November 28, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article159797782/Manche-kommen-zurueck-um-sich-zu-erholen.html>

The Salafist movement in Germany is an umbrella phenomenon and is divided to two general streams: political Salafism which fights to gain an influence in local society, and jihadist Salafism which calls to violent actions against the Western world. According to the *Bundeskriminalamt*, the number of members of Salafi organizations has drastically grown since the beginning of the Syrian conflict: from 3,800 in 2011 to 7,500 in 2015.<sup>86</sup>

There are two main Salafi organizations which are believed to send recruits to Syria and Iraq: *Millatu Ibrahim* (was banned by German government in 2012) and the recently banned *The True Religion*. The latter is reportedly responsible for the recruitment of at least 140 persons to Syria and Iraq:<sup>87</sup> the members organized the *LIES!* Campaign (imperative form of German verb “read”), distributing free samples of the Quran along with calls for joining jihadist movements.

The two groups, *Millatu Ibrahim* and *The True Religion*, act both online (websites, social media) and offline (street preaching and propaganda).

One of the specific features of the flow of foreign fighters from Germany is the Chechen diaspora. After the two Chechen wars, Germany accepted a significant number of Chechen refugees, and as of now the Chechen diaspora in Germany includes approximately 12,000 members. As mentioned above, Chechens from diasporas play important roles in contributing to the flow of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq both with money and personnel. Since 2014, German authorities have expressed their concerns about the influence of Chechen leaders in Syria on local jihadists and the Chechen diaspora in general on the one hand, and about the flow and its impact on the other.<sup>88</sup>

At the same time, Germany has accepted more refugees than any other EU country during the current European refugee crisis: thus, as of mid-2016, about 1,320,000 refugees

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<sup>86</sup> "Salafistische Bestrebungen," *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/arbeitsfelder/af-islamismus-und-islamistischer-terrorismus/was-ist-islamismus/salafistische-bestrebungen>

<sup>87</sup> Tré Goins-Phillips, "Germany raids mosques, bans Muslim group for allegedly recruiting jihadists," *The Blaze*, November 15, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/11/15/germany-raids-mosques-bans-muslim-group-for-allegedly-recruiting-jihadists/>

<sup>88</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, "Germany Reportedly Concerned About Radicalization of Chechen Diaspora," *Radio Free Europe*, December 8, 2014, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-germany-worried-chechen-diaspora-radicalization/26732038.html>

were registered in the country.<sup>89</sup> Among other problems Germany faced in connection to this flow, there is a threat of jihadist fighters entering the country within the flow and provided with fake passports, among which could be returning foreign fighters. Thus, at the end of December 2016 Italian intelligence services provided a report positing that one of the ISIS' generals - Lavdrim Muhaxheri (*nomme de guerre* Abu Abdullah al Kosova) has entered Kosovo along with approximate 400 fighters, disguising themselves as refugees, and plotted to attack several objects in Kosovo, including an Israeli soccer team and Serbian Orthodox Church sites.<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion

Any research on foreign fighters is inevitably limited by the lack of reliable open-sourced data. However, it may be concluded that the phenomenon of foreign fighters, and Muslim foreign fighters in particular, combating in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts has undergone significant changes since 2011 and, moreover, drastically differs from previous insurgencies involving foreign fighters, particularly because of its global nature, diversity of regions of origin and the unprecedentedly high number of foreign fighters involved in the conflict.

As of today, it is possible to highlight some key points of current flow of foreign fighters and mark out possible trends:

- The string of armed jihadist conflicts which included the participation of foreign fighters, starting from the Afghan-Soviet war has created certain narratives, which were developed, distributed and accumulated into the belief system of at least two generations of Muslims and created fertile ground for radicalization
- So far, up to 40,000 Sunni jihadist foreign fighters from more than 100 countries have joined and formed militants groups in Syria and Iraq, creating constant motions of the powers, which is more than in previous cases

<sup>89</sup> "SYRISCHE FLÜCHTLINGE," *Medien Dienst Integration*, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://mediendienst-integration.de/migration/flucht-asy1/syrISChe-fluechtlinge.html>

<sup>90</sup> Anthony Bond, "ISIS general who decapitated man and blew another up with a rocket 'back in Europe with 400 soldiers'," *Mirror*, December 29, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/isis-general-who-decapitated-man-9530860>

- The noticeable flow of foreign fighters from the Western world is another differential characteristic of the current phenomenon and has issued a great challenge to Western governments and security services
- The rise of ISIS and their novelty propaganda had a significant impact on the flow of foreign fighters. Both the very messages, which are much more broad and global than previous ones, and changes in technologies, including the development of tools for online communication, allowed jihadist propaganda to target potential foreign fighters all over the world
- Many of the foreign fighters have returned to their home countries, in the EU alone about 30% of total foreign fighters have returned.<sup>91</sup> The threat of foreign fighters coming back from Syria and Iraq to their home countries (or neighbor ones) is one of the greatest one for governments and security services all around the globe, and for Europe in particular. First of all, there is a threat of terror attacks, carried out, prepared or inspired by jihadists, who received combat experience in Syria and Iraq. Thus, among the attackers in Paris on November 2015 and in Brussels on March 2016, were those, who returned from Syrian battlefields. They apparently have built a network within Europe, helping to coordinate and carry out terror attacks, which brings to light another threat of returnees, especially considering that, according to a report published by *Die Welt*, 48% of returnees stay committed to jihadist ideology and keep contacts with fighters in Syria and Iraq.<sup>92</sup> On the other hand, refugees, who find themselves lost in new conditions, could be easily targeted by jihadist propagandists, including returning foreign fighters, who can use their experience to inspire and prepare refugees for committing terror attacks, as happens with labor migrants from Central Asia, recruited by Chechen foreign fighters. A combination of these factors undoubtedly make governments face another challenge to develop more effective tools for preventing and combating radicalization, as well as rehabilitation and integration programs for returning foreign fighters

<sup>91</sup> "One-third of EU fighters in Syria returned home: Study," *Al-Jazeera*, April 2, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/eu-fighters-syria-retuned-home-study-160402064502331.html>

<sup>92</sup> Manuel Bewarder, Florian Flade, "Manche kommen zurück, „um sich zu erholen“," *Welt*, November 28, 2016, accessed January 4, 2017. <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article159797782/Manche-kommen-zurueck-um-sich-zu-erholen.html>



- Due to obstacles jihadists face in Syria and Iraq, radical groups started to look for new territories to develop their activities, such as the African continent (and Libya, in particular) and South East Asia

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