

THE MIDDLE EAST CHANNEL

Syria's Foreign Fighters

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Sometime in the spring or summer of 2013, history was made in Syria. That was when the number of foreign fighters exceeded that of any previous conflict in the modern history of the Muslim world. There are now **over 5,000** Sunni foreign fighters in the war-torn country, including **more than a thousand** from the West. The previous record-holder — the 1980s Afghanistan war — also attracted large numbers overall, but there **seems** never to have been more than 3,000 to 4,000 foreign fighters *at any one time* in Afghanistan. This influx of war volunteers will have a number of undesirable consequences, from strengthening the most uncompromising elements of the Syrian insurgency to reinvigorating radical communities in the foreign fighters' home countries. Not all of these fighters can be considered jihadists, of course, but many can, and more will be radicalized as they spend time in the trenches with al Qaeda-linked groups. At this rate, the foreign fighter flow into Syria looks set to extend the life of the jihadi movement by a generation.

But why is Syria attracting so many war volunteers? How could this happen only two years after the Arab spring and the death of Osama bin Laden prompted many to predict the decline of jihadism? The short answer is that *it's easy to get there*. Not since the early days of the Bosnia war has it been less complicated for Islamists to make it to a war zone. This was stated in a recent *Washington Post* **interview** with a Syrian facilitator:

"It's so easy," said a Syrian living in Kilis who smuggles travelers into Syria through the nearby olive groves and asked to be identified by only his first name, Mohammed. He claims he has escorted dozens of foreigners across the border in the past 18 months, including Chechens, Sudanese, Tunisians and a Canadian. "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,' Mohammed said. 'If the Turkish government wants to prevent them coming into the country, it would do so, but they don't.'"

The obstacles facing Syria volunteers today are smaller than those faced by most other foreign fighters in the past two decades. A Saudi showing up at Islamabad airport in 2002 humming jihadi *anashid* would be on the next plane to Guantanamo, and woe to the Arab caught in combat gear on the Chechen border. It is not just the border crossing which is less complicated; the risk of legal sanctions at home also seems lower, thus far at least, for Syria-farers than for their predecessors. A European Islamist with al Qaeda in Yemen would face almost certain prosecution on his return. The United States has been even less forgiving, sending several Somali-Americans to prison for merely **trying** to join al-Shabab. Thus far, few if any European countries seem to be systematically prosecuting foreign fighters returning from Syria, although some E.U. officials have **called for** stricter legislation.

There are two fundamental reasons for this situation. The first is that many states, including in the West, support the same side of the conflict that the Sunni foreign fighters are joining. This geopolitical configuration makes it politically difficult for both departure and transit countries to stem the flow with repressive means. In most previous conflicts, such as post-9/11 Afghanistan, Iraq, or Somalia, foreign fighters were joining the "wrong" side. Now they are on the "right" side, as they also were — guess when? — in 1980s Afghanistan. Popular support for foreign fighting in Syria is especially strong in the Sunni Muslim world, where mainstream clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi have been allowed by their governments to **publicly urge** people to go and fight in Syria.

The second reason for the ease of access is that Syrian rebels control territory along the northern border, which means nobody on the Syrian side is systematically preventing foreign fighters from entering. The job of policing the border for infiltrators is effectively left to one country — Turkey — instead of two. This is in contrast to many previous foreign fighter destinations, where international borders were at least nominally controlled by the incumbent regime or some other force hostile to foreign fighters.

The low constraints on war volunteering for Syria have a number of striking effects aside from the sheer numbers of people making it there. One is that there are foreign fighters moving in and out of the country at regular intervals, effectively commuting to jihad. Some European recruits, for example, are reportedly going into Syria for a few months, then back to Europe for a few months (presumably to recruit others or to recuperate) and then back to Syria again. Islamist foreign fighters have not enjoyed this freedom of movement since perhaps the Afghanistan war in the 1980s.

Another effect is the unusual demographic diversity we are seeing in the foreign fighter population. The bulk of the volunteers are of course young men in their early 20s, as in other militant populations, but in the Syrian case there are relatively more **very young**, **very old**, and **women**. These are all groups that would arguably not have made it to the war zone, at least not in the same numbers, had the obstacles been higher. It is no coincidence that the last time there was equally strong representation from the margins of the population pyramid was in 1980s Afghanistan, when young teenagers, older men, and even older women were joining the fight against the Russians. It is worth noting, however, that the number of women foreign fighters from Europe is so high — perhaps over 100 — that it cannot be explained by constraints alone; there may also be a normative shift among European Islamists regarding the participation of women in war.

The presence of these unusual population segments reflects another crucial feature of Syria as a foreign fighter destination, namely the relatively low in-theater risk that outsiders face once they get there. Given that rebels control large portions of territory, especially in the north, it is entirely possible to take part in the jihad while avoiding both combat and deadly enemy raids. Jihad in Syria is by no means risk-free, but it is less dangerous for foreign fighters than many previous conflicts. In post 9/11 Afghanistan and post 2003 Iraq, for example, foreign volunteers had no real safe haven and faced the formidable war machine of the U.S. military. Syria, by contrast, offers foreign fighters the option of taking risk or avoiding it. Here again Syria resembles the 1980s Afghan jihad, where risk-averse volunteers could hang out in Peshawar, stick their toe into Afghanistan, and then go home claiming to have waged jihad. This allows Syria to attract not only extreme risk-seekers but also the relatively risk-averse, thus drawing from a larger pool of recruits.

Of course, ease of access and low risk alone cannot account for the size of the foreign fighter contingent in Syria. There must be factors on the motivation side that make so many young people want to go there in the first place. The most obvious is the extreme brutality of the Syrian regime and the resulting images of unspeakable civilian suffering, which prompt many — not just Muslims — to want to do something about it.

To understand why so many Muslims — as opposed to young people in general — *act* on their outrage, it is necessary to look to the intra-Sunni solidarity norm that has long been present in many Sunni communities, not least among Islamists. The norm creates a general inclination to support "fellow Muslims in need" and helps explain many aspects of Muslim politics, from the large size of the Muslim charitable sector to the near-universal support for the Palestinian cause. In the 1980s, radical ideologues such as Abdullah Azzam **began interpreting** this solidarity norm in martial terms, arguing that Muslims should also help each other militarily. Azzam's message became an inspiration and justification for the foreign fighter phenomenon that has manifested itself in so many conflicts in the Muslim world since 1990. In other words, the young men and women who go to Syria

see its people as their own and feel a moral and religious obligation to defend them. Like foreign fighters before them, they see themselves as providing a militarized form of humanitarian assistance — i.e., as aid workers with Kalashnikovs.

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It is worth noting, however, that the Syrian war differs from previous foreign fighter destinations in that the conflict schism follows sectarian rather than interreligious lines. **In the past**, most foreign fighters tended to join conflicts pitting local Sunnis against a non-Muslim enemy. Conflicts with a sectarian structure, such as the Iran-Iraq war or the Sunni-Shiite infighting in Pakistan, never attracted many foreign volunteers, nor did intra-Sunni conflicts such as the Algerian civil war. This preference is also reflected in two decades of foreign fighter recruitment propaganda, virtually all of which stresses the fight against infidel invaders, not that against Shiites or Arab regimes. It is not clear why there is now a break with that pattern in Syria, but the Iraq conflict in the 2000s, with its combined interreligious and sectarian features, may have helped prepare the ground for the ideological shift. In any case, the Syria case suggests that the foreign fighter doctrine is more about who you help than who you fight.

Some have suggested that Syria attracts more foreign fighters not despite, but *because* of its sectarian features. This seems implausible, for the simple reason that foreign fighters didn't care that much about sectarian conflicts in the past. Iraq post 2003 would constitute a possible exception, were it not for the declared motivations of foreign fighters going there which **suggest** that anti-Americanism was a much more important motivator than anti-Shiism. Moreover, the foreign fighter flow to Iraq all but stopped after the U.S. military withdrew, even though sectarian violence continued. More likely than not, the anti-Shiite rhetoric coming from Syrian foreign fighters and their recruiters today is a post facto rationalization of a military project undertaken for other reasons, such as the desire to protect a suffering Sunni population or to build an Islamic state. To be sure, it is easier for Sunni Islamists to legitimize jihad against an Alawite regime than against a Sunni one, but it is too early to conclude that anti-Shiism is a stronger motivator than, say, hostility to Western military interventions in Muslim countries.

Another explanation in the commentary on foreign fighters in Syria is the **theological significance** of the territory. Syria holds a special place in both Islamic history (as the first territory conquered by Muslims outside the Arabian Peninsula) and in Islamic eschatology (as the venue for the second coming of Jesus). This is indeed something that **features** in recruitment propaganda for Syria, and foreign fighters sometimes bring it up in interviews. However, here again this is probably a post facto rationalization. Why? Because many other foreign fighter destinations in the past have also been presented by recruiters as having a special significance in the Islamic tradition. Afghanistan was the place from which the "black banners of Khorasan" would return to the Middle East to re-establish Islamic rule; Yemen (or more precisely Aden and Abyan) was the place where an "Army of Twelve Thousand" would emerge and "give victory to Islam and his Prophet," while Iraq was a symbol of Muslim power as the seat of the Abbasid caliphate for five centuries. Islamic history and eschatology are so rich that, to some extent, there is a story for every territory. Moreover, if Syria really was that significant, there would have been more efforts by non-Syrians to liberate it in the past. This is not to say that the symbolism of Syria does not help recruitment, only that it cannot alone explain the very large numbers of foreign fighters.

Among what the recruits are saying about why they go to Syria there are several of the abovementioned arguments, but there are also heartfelt expressions of belief in afterlife rewards for the individual. Many say they go because jihad is a duty whose shirking invites divine punishment and whose fulfillment pleases God. Many express a wish to die in Syria, so as to become a martyr with all the afterlife benefits that this supposedly entails. Some talk more about divine rewards than anything else, as if the future of Syria or even that of the Islamist movement were secondary. However, this religious individualism is not unique to the foreign fighters in Syria; it has been present in all militant Islamist groups for decades. Thus, even if these testimonies are taken seriously — which they should be — belief in afterlife rewards cannot explain why Syria in particular, at this exact point in time, should attract such large numbers of fighters.

The same is true of more mundane "proximate incentives" for participation, such as the pleasure of agency, the thrill of adventurism, and the joys of camaraderie that come with war volunteering. Although active fighters rarely emphasize such motivations, ex-militants often admit they were paramount to their initial involvement. There is plenty of circumstantial

evidence that such factors are also behind many decisions to go to Syria. However, they do not explain why recruits choose Syria over other destinations or foreign fighting over other forms of high-risk activism.

What about the Internet and social media? Clearly this plays an important role, and it may well help explain the scale and speed of the mobilization. Syria is probably the most "socially mediated" conflict in modern history, and the Internet is **chock full** of propaganda from Syrian jihadi groups as well as practical travel advice for budding foreign fighters. However, this does not mean that social media in and of itself drives recruitment, for the Internet is a double-edge sword for rebels. When poorly policed, the web is a very powerful instrument of mobilization, because it transmits information (such as propaganda or practical advice) fast, far, and cheaply. H

owever, when targeted by security agencies, digital communication can be a liability, because it allows governments to locate and detain its users. In the Syrian case, social media helps foreign fighter recruitment precisely because repression is low. If Western governments targeted online recruitment to Syria with the same intensity that they target online recruitment to "high-value" organizations such as al Qaeda Central, then social media would be much less useful. There is a reason why there are several **blogs** with travel advice for Islamists interested in going to Syria, but none for those wanting to join al Qaeda in Waziristan or Yemen.

The bottom line is that record numbers of foreign fighters are going to Syria because they can. There is little to suggest that Syria generated a uniquely great supply of militants; it merely tapped into a supply of inclined activists that existed before the war in Islamist communities around the world. In fact, a case could be made that the global Sunni outrage, and hence the latent supply of foreign fighters, was greater during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 than it was over the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011. The difference is that Iraq was hard to reach because the United States and its allies treated prospective foreign fighters as terrorists. It is true that Syria at the time allowed many foreign fighters into Iraq (oh the irony), but Syria was a less hospitable and accessible transit country than Turkey is today.

In the two years that have passed since 2011, the foreign fighter movement to Syria has gained critical mass, and the bandwagon effect has ensured a rapid increase in the flow of volunteers. The number of Europeans in Syria, for example, has roughly doubled in the past six months. This is not to say that the increase will continue indefinitely, for the pool of individuals willing to risk their lives for someone else's war is probably limited, especially in the West. However, where that limit is, is unknown.

The policy implication of all this is quite simple, at least in principle: If governments want to stem the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, they must raise the constraints on participation. Exactly how this should be done is a much more complex matter. Aggressive prosecution of all foreign fighters is probably not the way to go, for it is impractical, politically difficult, and potentially counterproductive. There are, however, many other things states can do. Transit countries such as Turkey should of course do their best to police the border, and they should share intelligence on suspected foreign fighters with supplier countries. Departure countries, on their end, should consider a range of preventive, obstructive, and selective penal measures.

Preventive measures may include information campaigns aimed at families of at-risk youth, targeted outreach to prospective recruits, and the blocking of particularly obvious "travel advice" websites. Obstructive measures may include requiring parental consent for foreign travel for people under a certain age, or the confiscation of passports of people returning from Syria with documented links to the most radical groups. Penal measures may include the withholding of social security benefits for people known to have gone to Syria, the prosecution of recruiters and facilitators within supplier countries, and the prosecution of people who return from Syria having committed unlawful acts of violence. These are but some suggestions; there may be many other possible measures. Anything that makes it more difficult for prospective recruits to reach Syria — short of general criminalization — should be considered.

The massive accumulation of foreign fighters in Syria is not a good thing by any stretch of the imagination. Leaving aside its consequences for the future of international terrorism, it is bad for the future of Syria. Even if one believes (as I personally happen to do) that the Syrian rebel cause is just and that some of the foreign fighters leave with noble intentions, it is in nobody's interest to have an international army of private war volunteers in Syria. The only actors who will benefit are the extremist Islamist groups, who hardly represent the Syrian people, and who may have sinister things in store for Syria, the region, and the West.

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