



The Syrian War and the Foreign Fighters from the Muslim World

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Foreign fighting in Syria is not driven primarily by devotion to Islam, nor is it motivated mainly by socioeconomic grievances. Rather, foreign fighters join the Syrian civil war to defend their Muslim brethren. Framing the war as a threat to the Muslim (Sunni) community, transnational Islamist movements offer alternative identities and a sense of belonging for alienated people from across the Muslim world.

In recent years the conflict in Syria has become a lodestone for young Muslims who travel to join the fight. According to estimates from the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, and reports by The Soufan Group (TSG), foreign fighters from more than 90 countries have joined the Syrian civil war since its inception in 2011, and their numbers already exceed the rate of volunteers who went to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen or Somalia at any point in the last 20 years. While the actual figures of foreign fighters in these and other sources vary, and though we do not know how many of them actually engage in the fighting, there are consistent estimates of the numbers of volunteering fighters and the distribution of their countries of origin.

To be sure, volunteering fighters join various parties in the complex war, like *Hezbollah* combatants who fight for the Syrian army and foreigners who fight for the Kurdish YPG forces, yet, the concept of foreign fighters relates here to those volunteers joining jihadi movements, mainly the *Islamic State* and *Jabhat Fath al-Sham* (formerly known as *Jabhat al-Nusra*) organizations. Special attention is afforded to the growing stream of European Muslims to these jihadi groups in Syria, and their potential extremist actions

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upon return to their home countries. However, most foreign volunteers have come from Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The recruitment process is generally conducted on an individual basis. Taking place across the world, the recruitment relies largely on social media, with videos and appeals produced in a range of languages, describing the *caliphate* as a utopian political venture, and providing young men and women with an adventurous trip. Salafi mosques and associations also seem to take an active role in recruiting and trafficking volunteers to fight the Syrian war in the name of Islam.

Although by no means a new phenomenon, the causes of the widening spread of foreign fighting remain unclear. As most of these foreigners are utterly detached from the events in the countries to which they journey, and have little political and material benefit to gain from these wars, the opportunity to attain martyrdom in the next life appears to be a major appeal. Yet, Islam in and of itself is not the primary factor behind foreign fighters joining the jihad. Examination at the individual level indicates that many of those who choose to join extremist groups in Syria have only basic knowledge of Sharia. *Islamic State* entry forms leaked in early 2016, also demonstrate that while some characteristics of the volunteers (like age and marital status) can be traced, there are no discernible demographic and socioeconomic profiles of foreign fighters in Syria.

An inspection of the foreign fighters' countries of origin adds to this confusion, as the spate of volunteering warriors does not originate primarily in countries dominated by radical Islamist movements, nor is it confined to countries where economic and political conditions are the worst. Rather, foreign fighters join the Syrian civil war from countries with different profiles in terms of both the role of

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Islamism in socio-political life, and the political authority of the regime. Four countries are notable among the home countries of the foreign fighters in Syria: Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Jordan. Tunisia, where the “Arab Spring” revolt was initially ignited, has become the largest source of foreign fighters joining the jihadi groups in Syria, with roughly 3,000 Tunisian warriors recorded between 2011 and 2014; Saudi Arabia is next with estimates of 2,500 fighters during that period. On the other hand, countries like Egypt, Yemen and Sudan produced far fewer volunteering fighters.

The role of identity

Why then do foreign fighters travel from the Muslim world to fight in Syria? Foreign fighters are motivated by the quest for identity and belonging. Their recruitment is based on religious sentiments, sparked by Islamist movements striving to defend cultural and religious values of the Muslim community. Alienated individuals who seek alternative identities and a sense of belonging find them in their transnational communities. The combination of these factors has stimulated the shift from nationalist identities to pan-Islamist orientations, promoted through a fear-provoking discourse.

This process was coupled with the emergence of transnational jihadi networks, which carried out political activism aimed at defending the Muslim nation.

Recruitment of Muslim fighters thus relies on established messaging practices, by which the recruiting groups frame distant civil conflicts as posing a direct threat to the larger transnational community. Interestingly, these messages are most effective in countries like Tunisia and Saudi Arabia where major Islamist movements are co-opted, taking part in negotiated relations with the ruling elite vis-à-vis implementing Islamic norms in socio-political life. In these countries, legal or semi-legal Islamist movements embrace relatively moderate discourses of sectarian identity, remaining pragmatic and non-violent toward the state.

Under such restrained relationships, Islamist sentiments of alienated groups evolve into transnationalist inclinations.

Alienated individuals then aim their rage and frustration at external enemies. That is, restrained relations between the state and Islamist movements at the national level may well explain the relatively large number of foreign fighters recruited from subnational regions that are alienated from the state, as these fighters see transnational jihad as a way to vent socio-political rage and Islamic sentiments that find limited local opportunities for expression.

Possible solutions

To counter the appeal of transnationalist messages, home countries need to establish civic identities and offer competing national narratives. Governments should encourage the inclusion of alienated groups in national discourses and strengthen their sense of belonging to the state. To be sure, the establishment of civic identities is conditioned by state effectiveness and legitimacy — it can be achieved only if the state reconstitutes its position as an institution that provides the needs of its citizens.

Indeed, state ideology and policies also affect people's choice to join foreign fighting. Preferring to allow troublesome elements to leave the country, some governments turn a blind eye to efforts to recruit their citizens to join transnational wars. Some countries even encourage the phenomenon. Consider for example the dual policy vis-à-vis Islamism which is well-embodied in the Saudi stance toward foreign fighting in the Syrian civil war. While actively involved in the regime's domestic de-radicalization efforts, Saudi clerics offer contradicting messages about fighting jihad in foreign countries, with some of them openly calling upon the Muslim world to fight Bashar al-Assad's

supporters, including Syrian Alawites, Iran and *Hezbollah*. Egypt's clerics, on the other hand, promote clear anti-jihadist ideology, with multiple campaigns launched by Al-Azhar to renounce the radical ideas spread among young people by groups like *Islamic State*. Directed by Egyptian President al-Sisi, Al-Azhar leaders hold talks with religious leaders in other countries in the region to thwart *Islamic State* ideology and to diminish the phenomenon of foreign fighters' volunteering in the Syrian civil war.

The policy implication from the multifaceted causes of foreign fighting in Syria is that governments in the Muslim world should not only raise the constraints on going to Syria but also take preventive measures including information campaigns aimed at radicalized and alienated young people, offering opportunities for local expression of their socio-political needs and encouraging their sense of belonging to the state.

Image (cropped) credit: [Freedom House/Flickr](#).

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