

Chapter 2

Foreign Fighters in the Syria and Iraq Conflict: Statistics and Characteristics of a Rapidly Growing Phenomenon

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Abstract This chapter focuses on the statistics and characteristics of foreign fighters of all sides of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, and the reasons for this phenomenon as well as some general policy responses in the countries from which these fighters originate. First, the authors provide a short historical background of foreign fighters and a definition of the term, which is used throughout this book. Next, it describes the rapidly growing numbers and characteristics of these fighters in Syria and Iraq. Finally, adding up the various assessments, the authors arrive at a combined estimate of a total number of more than 30,000 foreign fighters of all sorts for the entire conflict in Syria and Iraq since 2011.

Keywords Statistics • Characteristics • Foreign Fighters • Historical background • Proxy war • Trends • Country of origin • Definitions • Islamic State • Terrorism • Transit country • Transnational threat

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2.1 Introduction

The foreign fighters phenomenon is not new. However, today's record numbers are having a profound impact, both in countries of origin and countries of destination. Developments in Syria and Iraq in particular have turned it into a global phenomenon, threatening national and international security. In both countries, citizens from all continents have joined various groups and fractions on all sides of the conflict, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State,¹ Jabhat al Nusra,² the Free Syrian Army,³ Kurdish groups, and groups and militias fighting on the side of the Assad regime have also attracted foreign fighters, primarily Shias from Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. What started as a local political, sectarian and ethnic conflict, has now morphed into one with security implications for many countries across the globe.

This chapter focuses on the statistics and characteristics of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, and the explanations and reactions to this phenomenon in the countries from which these fighters originate. First, the chapter provides a short historical background of foreign fighters and a definition of the term. Next, it describes the rapidly growing numbers and characteristics of these fighters in Syria and Iraq. Finally, adding up the various assessments, the authors arrive at a combined estimate of a total number of more than 30,000 foreign fighters of all sorts for the entire conflict in Syria and Iraq since 2011.

2.2 Background and Definition

In the first decennium of the 21st Century, the number of foreign fighters was limited in size and these fighters were seen as a relatively isolated phenomenon. Most of them were fighting under the banner of jihadi Salafism, described by Stern and

¹The group that is calling itself Islamic State is also frequently referred to as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) or as Da'esh, a term based on its Arabic acronym.

²Jabhat al Nusra is also referred to as the al Nusra Front, or *Jabhat an Nuṣrah li Ahli ash Shām*, meaning 'The Support Front for the People of al Sham'. It is a branch of al Qaeda operating in Syria and Lebanon.

³The Free Syrian Army started as a group of defected Syrian Armed Forces officers and soldiers. It is regarded a 'moderate' rebel group and is not listed as a terrorist organisation as opposed to Islamic State and Jabhat al Nusra that are on the UN list of designated terrorist organisations.

Berger as ‘a branch of Salafism that believes that any government that does not rule through Sharia is an illegitimate infidel regime. Jihadi Salafism embraces the use of violence to overthrow these regimes’.⁴ With the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in the summer of 2011 the picture changed significantly. The jihadist Salafist movement became larger, more visible and very active. Since 2011, thousands of foreign jihadist fighters have left their home country to become involved in the armed struggles in Syria and Iraq, and elsewhere. Other groups followed, including Shias and the Kurdish diaspora, to defend their brethren in need.

Over the course of history, there have been several examples of ‘foreign fighters’, ranging from relatively large and organised groups to individual cases.⁵ They include the group of Catholic youngsters who gave heed to the call of the Pope Pius IX to assist him in his struggle against the Italian Unificationists in the 1860s.⁶ Thousands of so-called Zouaves left for Italy to fight, amongst others, against troops led by Giuseppe Garibaldi and Victor Emmanuel. During the Spanish civil war, many foreign citizens joined the International Brigades to fight alongside the Republican government against the Nationalists led by General Franco. In the seventies, some individuals took part in training camps of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, although only few played an active role in the organisation’s violent activities. Other liberation movements, such as the African National Congress, attracted limited numbers of persons aiming to join their struggle.

What these examples have in common is what David Malet calls a transnational identity that connected them to foreign communities and the perceived need to support fellow members of that community under threat.⁷ The ideological background of this identity ranged from communism and left-wing activism, to Catholicism and ethno-nationalism. The latest transnational identity that has produced foreign fighters is that of the Ummah—the community of Muslim believers—and the ideology or belief in the so-called violent jihad.⁸

Until recently, this particular form of jihad was primarily associated with the fight of so-called mujahedeen⁹ in Afghanistan, first against the Red Army of the Soviet Union, and afterwards against a wide range of other warring parties. The civil war in Afghanistan attracted about 20,000¹⁰ from across the globe, especially from Arab countries whose fighters were known as ‘Afghan Arabs’. They were led by

⁴Stern and Berger 2014 p. xii.

⁵For more information, see Chap. 3 by Flores in this volume.

⁶B.S. Exton, ‘The Pope’s Legion: the multinational fighting force that defended the Vatican’, *Catholic News Agency*, 12 September 2008. <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column.php?n=435>. Accessed 16 June 2015.

⁷Malet 2013.

⁸Following Stern and Berger (p. xi), the authors use the term jihad to refer a broad range of actions, from spiritual struggles to armed conflict.

⁹Following Stern and Berger (p. xii), the authors use the term mujahid (plural mujahideen) to refer to a Muslim fighter waging military jihad.

¹⁰Neumann 2015.

Abdullah Yussuf Azzam who preached both defensive jihad and offensive jihad by Muslims to help the Afghan mujahedeen. His militant ideology and paramilitary manuals were promoted through print and the Internet. His most relevant manifesto was 'Join the Caravan' (1987)¹¹ in which he called upon Muslims to rally in defence of Muslim victims of aggression, to restore Muslim lands from foreign domination, and to uphold the Muslim faith. By the turn of the century, however, the jihadist movement had petered out. Many veterans returned home or found asylum in Western countries. Some moved on to other battlefields, such as Pakistan and Kashmir, Bosnia and the Philippines. New conflicts that attracted jihadist foreign fighters included, amongst others, Chechnya, Iraq (in the period after the US-led invasion in 2003), Somalia and Mali. However, their numbers were relatively small until the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the current civil war in Syria and Iraq. Today, according to Nick Rasmussen, director of the US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), the rate of foreign fighter travel to Syria is without precedent, exceeding the rate of foreigners who went to wage jihad in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen or Somalia at any other point in the past 20 years.¹²

Terminology used to describe those that left their country to fight with one of the insurgent and terrorist groups in the civil war in Syria and Iraq varies from foreign fighters, foreign rebel fighters and foreign terrorist fighters to foreign jihadist fighters. Other terms that have been used to describe this phenomenon and that primarily focus on the insurgency element include 'transnational insurgent' or 'global insurgent'.¹³ Often, adjectives are added to indicate certain types of groups, tactics or ideologies, such as 'rebel', 'insurgent', 'terrorist' or 'jihadist'. Some are highly subjective or sensitive, for instance 'terrorist' and 'jihadist'. In this chapter, the authors focus on the general phenomenon of persons that join a fight abroad and use the following short and neutral definition of foreign fighters as 'individuals, driven mainly by ideology, religion and/or kinship, who leave their country of origin or their country of habitual residence to join a party engaged in an armed conflict.' As mentioned earlier, this chapter focuses on the current situation in Syria and Iraq that has put the issue of foreign fighters high on the international agenda. This is notwithstanding a reported 5,000 individuals who have flocked to Libya, including many who first fought in Syria/Iraq and are now supporting the Libyan 'province' established by the Islamic State.¹⁴

¹¹Azzam 1987.

¹²'20,000 Foreign Fighters Flock To Syria, Iraq', *Huffington Post*, 2 February 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/10/foreign-fighters-syria-iraq_n_6656114.html. Accessed 16 June 2015; Brian Murphy, 'Official: Over 20,000 foreign fighters lured by militant factions in Syria', *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/official-over-20000-foreign-fighters-lured-by-militant-factions-in-syria/2015/02/11/8f12eaa0-b212-11e4-827f-93f454140e2b_story.html. Accessed 16 June 2015.

¹³Salehyan 2009; Mackinlay 2002.

¹⁴J. Moore, '5,000 Foreign Fighters Flock to Libya as ISIS Call for Jihadists [sic]', *Newsweek*, 3 March 2015. www.europe.newsweek.com/5000-foreign-fighters-flock-libya-isis-call-jihadists-310948. Accessed 16 June 2015.

2.3 Numbers and Characteristics of Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq

Iraq has been confronted with foreigners joining rebel or terrorist groups ever since the US-led invasion in 2003. However, the current wave of citizens and residents that have flocked to Iraq to fight in the insurgency is very much linked to the civil war in Syria that started in 2011. From the outset, that conflict has attracted both many and many different foreign fighters from around the globe, joining a wide range of groups and fractions.

Today, both conflicts are closely connected, especially since the rise of the group called Islamic State and its proclamation of the establishment of a caliphate in the summer of 2014. This development has complicated the analysis of foreign fighters in both countries. Initially, the numbers of foreign fighters in Syria only referred to persons operating within the boundaries of that country. Today, assessments of the number of foreign fighters in Syria sometimes include persons that have joined Islamic State, regardless of whether they fight in Syria or Iraq. Increasingly, estimates of the number of foreign fighters combine all fighters that have joined any of the jihadist or terrorist rebel groups in Syria and Iraq. Those that joined Kurdish groups are not included in these estimates. Those that joined the ranks of regular troops or militias siding with the governments in Damascus and Baghdad are a separate category of which very little is known. A final difficulty when discussing the data on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is the inconsistent use of definitions.

2.3.1 *Growing Numbers, Diverse Background*

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties in counting foreign fighters and analysing their characteristics, it is clear that their numbers, both in Syria and Iraq, have grown to levels not seen before. The first estimates are from 2012. In that year, foreign fighters were beginning to play a role, albeit a small one, in the fight against the forces of Assad's regime.¹⁵ A policy analysis of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy by Aaron Zelin described how 'Foreign Fighters trickled into the Syrian Rebellion'. The analysis suggests that between 700 and 1,400 foreign fighters had entered or attempted to enter the country in 2012, making up about four to seven per cent of a total number of 18,000 rebel fighters.¹⁶

Early 2013 it became clear that the initial trickle had evolved into a steady stream of persons from around the world joining one of the fighting factions in Syria. In April 2013, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and

¹⁵Zelin 2012.

¹⁶Idem.

Political Violence (ICSR) provided an empirical assessment of how many Europeans had joined rebel groups in Syria between 2011 and early 2013. It estimated their number to be between 135 and 590, representing 7–11 per cent of the total foreign fighter population of between 2,000 and 5,500 persons.¹⁷

The second half of 2013 saw a huge increase in the number of foreign fighters, especially from Europe. According to a Brookings report by Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, this period witnessed the fastest mobilisation of foreign fighters in the history of the modern jihadist movement.¹⁸ By mid-December 2013, ICSR estimated there were up to 11,000 fighters from more than 70 countries that had joined the struggle in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad. Compared to their earlier report, the number of individuals coming from Western Europe had tripled to up to 1,900 and included up to 366 (high estimate) from Britain. The number reported from France had quadrupled while Belgium had the highest share per 1000 inhabitants. Most foreign fighters came from Jordan (2,089), Saudi Arabia (1,016), and Tunisia (970). Arabs and Europeans made up the bulk of foreign fighters; up to 80 per cent. Militants from Southeast Asia and China, North America, Africa, Australia, the Balkans and countries of the former Soviet Union accounted for the rest. According to ICSR, residents and citizens from at least 74 countries had joined militant opposition groups in Syria by December 2013.¹⁹

2014 saw the rapid rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the proclamation of its caliphate on Syrian and Iraqi territory on 29 June 2014. Despite the atrocities committed while ISIS was taking control over large parts of both countries, the number of persons flocking to Syria continued to grow and now expanded into Iraq, most of whom joined Islamic State.

The June 2014 report on foreign fighters in Syria by the Soufan Group's vice president Richard Barrett, based on data gathered just before the rise of Islamic State, registered 12,000 foreign fighters since the start of the conflict from at least 81 countries from all parts of the world. This number included over 2,000 persons from both Jordan and Saudi Arabia, approximately 3,000 from Tunisia, and 3,000 foreign fighters from Western countries.²⁰ By September 2014, the Obama administration estimated that as many as 12,000 to 15,000 foreign fighters had gone to Syria and Iraq.²¹

¹⁷Zelin 2013.

¹⁸Byman and Shapiro 2014.

¹⁹Zelin 2013.

²⁰Barrett 2014.

²¹Justin Sink, 'WH: Radicalized Americans back in US', *The Hill*, 22 September 2014. <http://thehill.com/policy/international/218494-white-house-radicalized-americans-back-in-us>. Accessed 16 June 2015.

Table 2.1 Twenty countries with the most foreign fighters

1.	Tunisia	(1,500–3,000)
2.	Saudi-Arabia	(1,500–2,500)
3.	Jordan	(1,500)
4.	Morocco	(1,500)
5.	France	(1,200)
6.	Russia	(800–1,500)
7.	Lebanon	(900)
8.	Turkey	(600)
9.	Libya	(600)
10.	Germany	(500–600)
11.	United Kingdom	(500–600)
12.	Uzbekistan	(500)
13.	Pakistan	(500)
14.	Belgium	(440)
15.	Turkmenistan	(360)
16.	Egypt	(360)
17.	Bosnia	(330)
18.	China	(300)
19.	Netherlands	(200–250)
20.	Australia	(100–250)

Source Peter Neumann. Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s, 26 January 2015

2.3.2 Latest ICSR Report

The growth in numbers, now both in Syria and Iraq, continued during the remainder of 2014. The February 2015 estimate of the ICSR—based on data from the second half of 2014 and referring to the total number of foreign fighters that joined Sunni rebel groups/militant organisations in Syria and Iraq—speaks of 20,730 foreign fighters. Among them are approximately 4,000 citizens and residents from Western Europe. Similar numbers were provided by Nick Rasmussen in a report for a testimony for the United States House Homeland Security Committee on 11 February 2015. Described as ‘foreign fighters’, the NCTC’s director estimated their number at 20,000, including thousands from the West.²²

Table 2.1 presents the statistics of the ICSR published in February 2015.²³ Its assessment includes estimates for fifty countries for which sufficient data and/or

²²‘20,000 Foreign Fighters Flock To Syria, Iraq’, *Huffington Post*. Brian Murphy, ‘Official: Over 20,000 foreign fighters’.

²³Neumann 2015.

reliable government estimates were available.²⁴ It illustrates the global nature of the phenomenon. Whereas most foreign fighters originate from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, there are smaller numbers of fighters from all other parts of the world: from Canada to New Zealand and from China to Somalia. With about 11,000 foreign fighters, countries in the MENA region account for 53 per cent of the total number of foreign fighters which is estimated at 20,730. Second come Western countries with about 4,000 foreign fighters or about twenty per cent of the total number. The third most important group of countries are those of the former Soviet Union with 3,000 persons.²⁵

Similar to the June 2014 estimates of the Soufan Group, the top three of the ICSR list of countries of origin with most foreign fighters include Tunisia (with 1,500–3,000 foreign fighters) followed by Saudi-Arabia (1,500–2,500) and Jordan (1,500).²⁶ Among the group of Western countries, France has seen the highest numbers leaving the country to participate in the conflict in Syria or Iraq (1,200), followed by Germany (500–600), the United Kingdom (500–600) and Belgium (440). Relative to population size, the most heavily affected Western country is Belgium, with up to 40 fighters per million population. Other countries with more than one hundred foreign fighters are the Netherlands (200–250), Sweden (150–180), Australia (100–250), Austria (100–150), Denmark (100–150), Canada (100), the United States (100), and Spain (50–100).²⁷

The February 2015 estimate of the ICSR also provides figures on returnees and the number of foreign fighters that have died in the conflict in Syria and Iraq. It assumes that between five to ten per cent have lost their lives and that a further ten to thirty per cent have left the conflict zone, ‘returning home or being stuck in transit countries’.²⁸ As a result, according to the ICSR, the total figure of foreign fighters currently on the ground in Syria and Iraq is likely to be significantly less than the total number of foreign persons that have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad over the course of the entire conflict.²⁹

2.3.3 Foreign Fighters Siding with the Governments in Damascus and Baghdad and Kurdish Groups

Besides those that joined groups opposing the regime of Bashar al-Assad, there are many foreigners fighting alongside the Syrian government. In addition, there are foreign fighters that have joined Kurdish groups fighting on either side.

²⁴Idem.

²⁵Idem.

²⁶Idem.

²⁷Idem.

²⁸Neumann 2015. Reed, de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker 2015.

²⁹Neumann 2015.

These categories of foreign fighters are rarely included in reports and statistics on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Their numbers, however, are significant, as is their role as trainer of Syrian Army and irregular units, as well as their impact on the battlefield as fighters who were reportedly decisive in a number of battlefield successes for the regime.³⁰ According to Zelin, foreigners fighting on the side of the government are important for the regime. 'Those who have come into Syria at the behest of Iran are professional fighters. They have ample experience, either against Israel or against American forces in Iraq.'³¹ Smyth even takes the position that foreign fighters joining the side of the government were vital to the Assad regime's continued survival.³²

Barrett also acknowledges the presence and role of foreign fighters on the government side in the Syrian conflict, most of which originate from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.³³ Individuals and groups from Lebanon are particularly important, especially the armed wing of Hezbollah. According to Barrett, 'Estimates of the scale of this support vary, but the Hezbollah contribution alone was believed to be between three and four thousand at the end of May 2014'.³⁴ Zelin estimates this number to be somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters in December 2013.³⁵ He provides a total number of foreign fighters siding with the government of about 10,000.³⁶ Besides the Hezbollah fighters this also includes between 3,500 and 4,000 Iraqi Shia fighters, and 1,000 to 1,500 members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) from Iran.³⁷ Zelin adds that most of these foreign fighters have come to Syria through Iran's state-sponsored apparatuses that support the Assad regime.³⁸ A recent report by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, authored by Phillip Smyth, also stresses the important role of Iran and its link with Shia communities in the region. It speaks of a shift east-ward by Iran towards the Indian sub-continent as a potential spot for future recruits and another area for Tehran's push for new spheres of influence abroad.³⁹ Smyth refers to an article in The Washington Post according to which upward of 30,000 Shia in India signed up to join the jihad in Iraq.⁴⁰ It is not known how many of them actually went to Iraq or Syria. There

³⁰For example in al-Qusayr in April 2013; Barrett 2014, p. 11.

³¹Zelin 2013.

³²Smyth 2015, p. 1. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus138_Smyth-2.pdf.

³³Barrett 2014.

³⁴Idem.

³⁵Zelin 2013.

³⁶Idem.

³⁷Idem.

³⁸Idem.

³⁹Smyth 2015, p. 43.

⁴⁰Ishaan Tharoor, 'Shiites in India Want to Join the Fight against the Islamic State in Iraq,' *The Washington Post*, 6 August 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/08/06/shiites-in-india-want-to-join-the-fight-against-the-islamic-state-in-iraq/>. Accessed 16 June 2015.

are some reports of Pakistani Shia foreign fighters, but Afghan Shia jihadists have provided the largest supply of non-Arab Shia foreign fighters.⁴¹ There have also been indications of the presence of Yemen's Shia Houthis in Syria. According to an article in the Jerusalem Post, the leadership of the Houthi rebels in Yemen have urged their supporters to support the Syrian government and at least some 200 fighters seem to have participated in operations in Syria.⁴²

In addition to foreign fighters joining Sunni rebel groups, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, or pro-regime Shia groups, there are also scattered reports that non-Syrian and non-Iraqi citizens have picked up arms under the banner of one of the many Kurdish fighting groups. There are reports of Kurds from Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and the Diaspora that have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq. Zelin specifically mentions the People's Protection Units militia (YPG), the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria.⁴³ There are no credible estimates of their numbers. The same holds for Westerners of non-Kurdish background that have joined one of the Kurdish groups in either Syria or Iraq. Some of them have been given much media attention, but one cannot extrapolate a good estimate from these stories or reports on social media of real or only virtual groups, such as the 'The Lions of Rojava,' featuring group pictures with heavily armed Western looking fighters. Possibly, their numbers are relatively low, about a few dozen, although some local journalistic reports speak of hundreds of non-Kurdish volunteers comprising Americans and Europeans that have joined the YPG fighting against Islamic State jihadists.⁴⁴ The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that just over 100 Western fighters have joined the Kurds in Syria and include Americans, French, Australian, British, Spanish and Dutch fighters, among other nationalities.⁴⁵

2.4 Explanations and Reactions

These unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters have surprised analysts and policymakers and deserve an explanation. It seems that various interrelated forces have been playing out simultaneously; combined, they created a 'perfect storm' scenario.

⁴¹Smyth, 'The Shiite Jihad in Syria', p. 40.

⁴²Ariel Ben Solomon, 'Report: Yemen Houthis fighting for Assad in Syria', *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 May 2013. <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-Yemen-Houthis-fighting-for-Assad-in-Syria-315005>. Accessed 16 June 2015.

⁴³Zelin 2013.

⁴⁴Rozh Ahmad, 'Western "comrades" join Kurds, Arabs, secularists, Yezidis, and Syriac Christians against Islamic State', *Your Middle East*, 29 October 2013. http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/western-comrades-join-kurds-arabs-secularists-yezidis-and-syriac-christians-against-islamic-state_27563. Accessed 16 June 2015.

⁴⁵Tom Perry and Sylvia Westall, 'German woman killed fighting Islamic State in Syria', *Reuters*, 9 March 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/09/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-germany-idUSKBN0M516T20150309>. Accessed 16 June 2015.

The mounting numbers of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is in large part the product of the civil war in Syria that started in 2011 and the subsequent rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State which has been labelled 'an accident of history, emerging from multiple social, political and economic tensions in the Middle East and beyond'.⁴⁶ Without dwelling too long on the history and contemporary make up of Middle Eastern politics, a full understanding of the foreign fighter phenomenon would not be complete without at least some explanation of the context in which it has been able to reach the unprecedented levels described above.

The foreign fighter phenomenon is essentially a symptom of the profoundly broken politics that afflict the Middle East today⁴⁷ and are rooted in history. It is no coincidence that IS, as part of its propaganda, declared that its aim is to alter the Sykes-Picot arrangement of 1917, when France and the United Kingdom redrew the map of the Middle East, effectively outlining their spheres of influence after the inevitable collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The colonial divide and rule principle lasted until 1949, when the last British soldier left Palestine, but its impact was felt long after, with the United States and Russia stepping up to the plate to support their allies.

Since then, three key events stand out in terms of their influence on Middle Eastern geopolitics. The first is the 1979 revolution in Iran, where the pro-Western Shah Pahlavi was ousted by the long-exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. The Ayatollah began implementing his Shia vision for an Islamic government, transforming Iran into a Shia power that advocated Muslim unity but mainly supported groups with Shia agendas.⁴⁸ This created the deep sectarian fault line between Shia and Sunni Islam that we witness to this day.

The second is the 2003 Iraq war that not only toppled Saddam Hussein's regime but also triggered an unprecedented cycle of sectarianism. The war gave birth to extremist forces in the region, including al Qaida affiliates such as Jabhat al Nusra and al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula and more recently Islamic State, a former al Qaida franchise.

The third and by far most important contributing factor is the war in Syria. What began as a civil war in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011, has now become a regional (proxy) war, with warring factions receiving support from regional parties, all of which have a growing stake in avoiding defeat. Assad's regime would not have been able to survive without the direct and indirect military and political support from Iran and Hezbollah, with Russia and China playing an important role behind the scenes. On the other side, non-State actors such as the Free Syrian Army receive material support from Gulf countries, the West and

⁴⁶Barrett 2014, p. 4.

⁴⁷European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2015, *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, p. 11. http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR125_SCORECARD_2015.pdf. Accessed 16 June 2015.

⁴⁸'The Sunni-Shia Divide', *Council on Foreign Relations*. [www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#//](http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/). Accessed 15 June 2015.

Turkey, whilst Jabhat al Nusra and others also rely on financial support from beneficiaries in the region.⁴⁹

As this war of attrition wages on, with no end in sight, a political and military vacuum has emerged in parts of Syria and Iraq that violent non-State actors such as Jabhat al Nusra and now also Islamic State have been quick to exploit. Against this background and in spite of its ruthless tactics, Islamic State has been able to build significant support among disgruntled Sunnis by exploiting their fear of a growing Shia influence in the region. Many Sunnis in Iraq and Syria may even prefer Islamic State to the alternative rule of the Iranian puppet Assad or a Shia-dominated Iraqi government. That said, with Jabhat al Nusra and Islamic State suffering losses at the hand of Shia militias, alliances and coalitions are shifting dramatically, with some Sunnis in Syria now leaning more towards support for Assad.⁵⁰

Despite the material threat posed by Islamic State to the territorial and political status quo in the region, so far, States on either side of the sectarian divide view Islamic State as a lesser danger than the regional dominance of their rivals. Arab Gulf States have deliberately supported Sunni sectarian mobilisation for their own geopolitical ends, seeing the conflict in Syria as a means to rebalance the regional power order by pulling Damascus out of the Iranian orbit.⁵¹ Seen in this light, extremism becomes a useful political tool to weaken rivals.

As long as the regional geopolitics remain largely intact, the war in Syria is likely to continue. As a consequence, Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, Kurdish groups and others will likely carry on playing their part, as will the international coalition against Islamic State. By default, foreign fighters will, for whatever reason, continue to flock to Syria and Iraq. Those that return pose a growing concern to their countries of origin as well as internationally. As Barrett notes, 'the experience of being in a war zone and exposed to the

⁴⁹See e.g. K. Sengupta, 'Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria', *The Independent UK*, 12 May 2015. www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-shock-western-countries-by-supporting-antiassad-jihadists-10242747.html. Accessed 16 June 2015. C. Chivers and E. Schmitt, 'Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria With Croatian Arms', *New York Times*, 25 February 2013. www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html. Accessed 16 June 2015; R. Khalaf and Ab. Fielding-Smith, 'How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution', *Financial Times*, 17 May 2013. www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de.html. Accessed 16 June 2015; K. DeYoung and L. Sly, 'Syrian rebels get influx of arms with gulf neighbours' money, U.S. coordination', *Washington Post*, 15 May 2012. www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-rebels-get-influx-of-arms-with-gulf-neighbors-money-us-coordination/2012/05/15/gIQAAds2TSU_story.html. Accessed 16 June 2015.

⁵⁰A. Lund, 'Who are the Pro-Assad Militias?', *Carnegie Endowment*, 2 March 2015. www.carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59215. Accessed 16 June 2015.

⁵¹European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2015, *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, p. 11. http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR125_SCORECARD_2015.pdf. Accessed 16 June 2015.

radicalising influences of sectarianism and other forms of extremism are bound to have an impact on their ability and willingness to resume their former lives'.⁵²

2.4.1 Reactions to the Rise of Numbers of Foreign Fighters to Syria and Iraq

This foreign fighter phenomenon comes in addition to the complexities surrounding the very fundamental concepts of radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism themselves. The fear that these individuals may develop into networks similar to al Qaeda and return to their home countries to perpetrate attacks has been exacerbated by the rapidly growing numbers of fighters returning in the last 2 years. At the same time, there has been a surge in lone actor attacks in Europe, North America and other 'Western' countries, some of which were apparently inspired by terrorist groups such as those operating in Iraq and Syria.

Evidently, internal and external (security) dimensions are increasingly intertwined. The spill-over of the wars in Iraq and Syria to other countries in the MENA region itself is a main concern to all. The combination of foreign fighters returning to their home countries together with the growing influence of extremist organisations such as al Qaeda and Islamic State in Libya and Yemen, is a nightmare scenario for the entire region and beyond. Violent incidents in Tunisia, Lebanon and elsewhere in 2015 illustrate how events abroad can impact domestic security and stability. The conflict in Libya between Islamist groups (including jihadist extremists), and the nationalist coalition led by Hifter, has attracted jihadist terrorist groups from other countries, including Tunisia, and is bolstering networks between terrorist groups in both countries.⁵³ The 18 March 2015 attack on mostly foreign tourists at the Bardo museum in Tunis exposed the State's difficulty in dealing with this development, and jeopardises the extremely delicate inclusive political process in Tunisia itself. With no solution for the conflict in Libya in sight, and more countries becoming involved, the threat posed by regional groups such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Islamic State is likely to grow.

In Europe, the latest incidents in January 2015 in Paris, Verviers and Copenhagen illustrate that the threat is no longer hypothetical. Immediately thereafter, security forces were deployed to protect vulnerable sites or targets, and more resources for security forces made available in the affected countries, with calls for similar measures in e.g. the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. At a national level, most of the newly taken measures appear to be predominantly of a repressive nature.

In the West, the political response to radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism has focused more on protection and punishment than on dissuasion or

⁵²Barrett 2014, p. 9.

⁵³Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2015.

reintegration. In the United States, Australia and Canada, radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism have traditionally been viewed through the prism of ‘homeland security’, often with little distinction between causes and objectives of the various manifestations thereof.⁵⁴ In Europe, during the summit of European Heads of State on 12 February, new measures to counter the perceived threat were adopted and legitimised in terms of protection of Western values and society.⁵⁵ Concrete measures focus largely on short-term, mainly ‘hard end’, repressive actions, addressing symptoms rather than root causes. Aimed to deter, disrupt, detect and detain, separate and raise the ‘cost’ of radicalisation, the measures include, *inter alia*: criminalisation of intent or actions, granting of more powers and resources for security forces, enhanced border control, and—most notably, considering previous opposition from the European Parliament and national legislators—adoption of thus far controversial Passenger Name Record (PNR) data sharing.⁵⁶

At the other end of the spectrum, we have also seen Western governments and voices in society underscoring the importance of ‘softer’ preventative measures: normative barriers through positive messaging, community engagement, a halting of recruitment via transmission of counter narratives; and the need for societal inclusion through disengagement, education and employment programmes.

In other countries, we observe a tendency towards hard, kinetic measures that risk violating human rights and rule of law principles. The rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and affiliated violent non-State actors in e.g. Pakistan, Libya and Egypt, and the growing number of foreign fighters emanating from the MENA region,⁵⁷ have provided these regimes with a convenient excuse to consolidate their internal powerbase, clamp down not only on Islamist opposition groups such as salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and the Pakistani Taliban, but also on critical secular opposition from civil society organisations. By adopting new anti-terror legislation that may reduce the space for legitimate opposition, there is a realistic chance that extremism will be fuelled, rather than diminished.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

In recent years, the phenomenon of foreign fighters has increased dramatically as a consequence of the civil war in Syria and the Iraqi insurgency. Both conflicts can be regarded as symptoms of the profoundly broken politics that afflict the Middle East today and have attracted thousands of fighters from both neighbouring countries and places as far away as China, New Zealand, Somalia and Canada. These fighters have joined a wide range of rebel or insurgent groups, such as the

⁵⁴For more information, see Chap. 21 by Zelin and Prohov in this volume.

⁵⁵For more information, see Chap. 16 by de Kerchove and Höhn in this volume.

⁵⁶Bakker et al. 2013.

⁵⁷For more information, see Chap. 22 by Gartenstein-Ross and Moreng in this volume.

Table 2.2 Total number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq 2014/2015

Total foreign fighters opposing the government in Damascus or Baghdad:	20,730 ^a
• From MENA region	±11,000
• From Western countries/EU	±4,000
• From former Soviet Union countries	±3,000
• From rest of the world	±3,000
Foreign fighters joining (pro) government forces	10,000 ^b
Foreign fighters joining Kurdish fighting groups	>100 ^c
Total number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq	±31,000

^aNeumann, 'Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000'

^bZelin 2013

^cAhmad, 'Western "comrades" join Kurds'. Perry and Westall, 'German woman killed fighting Islamic State in Syria'

Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al Nusra in Syria, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State on the territory of both Syria and Iraq. These groups of foreign fighters have gained a lot of attention from both policy makers and academics to an extent that the term 'foreign fighter' has become an implicit synonym for a Sunni jihadist. This chapter shows that along with this category of foreign fighters, there are thousands that have joined the side of (pro-) government forces, as well as hundreds who have taken up arms with one of the Kurdish fighting groups in Syria and Iraq.

The total of all these foreign fighters is difficult to determine. The latest estimates, published in early 2015, add up to a total number of more than 30,000 foreign fighters of all sorts for the entire conflict in Syria and Iraq since 2011 (see Table 2.2).

Based on the data provided by the ICSR and other reports, the totals indicate that the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters today is bigger than ever before. According to Peter Neumann, Syria is the top 'mobiliser for Islamists and jihadists in the last 10 or 20 years [...] more people from Europe are being mobilised than in all the other foreign conflicts that have happened for the past 20 years taken together'.⁵⁸ The conflict in Syria and the insurgency in Iraq and the rise of Islamic State have mobilised Muslims across the world and may be compared to the conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In fact, according to the ICSR, with an estimated total of 20,730 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq opposing the governments in Damascus and Baghdad, it is the largest mobilisation of jihadist foreign fighters in Muslim majority countries since 1945, surpassing the Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s.⁵⁹ The May 2015 report on foreign terrorist fighters by the Security Council Committee pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities also speaks of

⁵⁸Ella Flaye, 'At least 500 Europeans fighting with Syria rebels, study finds, stoking radicalization fears', *CBS News*, 30 April 2013, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57582040/at-least-500-europeans-fighting-with-syria-rebels-study-finds-stoking-radicalization-fears/. Accessed 16 June 2015.

⁵⁹Neumann 2015.

unprecedented numbers. According to a letter dated 19 May 2015 from the Chair of the committee to the President of the Security Council, ‘among the various Al-Qaida [...] associates around the world, including the splinter group Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)[...] there are more than 25,000 foreign terrorist fighters involved, travelling from more than 100 Member States. The rate of flow is higher than ever [...]’.⁶⁰

Of course, these high numbers worry not only the governments in Damascus and Baghdad—who also benefit from foreign fighters that join their ranks—but also the countries of origin and transit. Many officials and politicians have expressed worries over this phenomenon in general and the potential threat posed by returning foreign fighters in particular. So far, the potential threat has materialised in only a small number of terrorist attacks in the countries of origin. Compared with the situation in Syria and Iraq, the threat of foreign fighters is not (yet) a strategic one that threatens the functioning and continuity of the State, except for some countries in the MENA region such as Tunisia and Libya in which (attacks by) jihadist Salafist groups jeopardise the extremely fragile political situation. Cases in point are Libya and Yemen, where the presence of such groups, supported by foreign fighters, is further exacerbating local tensions and are an important factor in upsetting the peace process to solve the civil strife in both nations. However, this general picture of foreign fighters not (yet) being of major strategic importance might change. Given the continuous growth in foreign fighters and their transnational characteristics, the phenomenon deserves to be high on the political agenda, necessitating more and closer cooperation between all countries concerned.

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⁶⁰Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, Letter dated 19 May 2015 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, United Nations, S/2015/358, p. 3.

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