

# Choosing battles



Members of a Syrian jihadist group near Aleppo, 2012 ©AFP

## A cross-case analysis of seven Muslim foreign fighter mobilizations (1980-2014)

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## Introduction

“For Muslims, this is not strange to go and die in other people’s homelands’  
(Father of Afghan-American recruit who was killed in Bosnia in 1993.<sup>1</sup>)

In May 2014 the war in Syria had just entered its fourth year and despite the deaths of over 160,000 Syrians and the displacement of several million citizens, no international agreement was in sight to stop the conflict, which at that time also seemed to suffer from media fatigue.<sup>2</sup> Yet two consecutive days at the end of that month brought back the attention to one specific feature of the conflict that could always count on more attention from media, policymakers and scholars.

On May 24, in the Belgian capital Brussels, a gunman fired on people at the Jewish Museum entrance killing four people.<sup>3</sup> Six days later the man, Mehdi Nemmouche (29), was arrested (by chance) at a train station in Marseille and claimed responsibility for the attack.<sup>4</sup> It was also revealed the Frenchman had spent over a year in Syria. Nemmouche had in his possession a Kalashnikov rifle and a handgun wrapped in a white sheet emblazoned with the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), a jihadist group fighting in Syria.<sup>5</sup>

In that country, on Sunday morning May 25 in the government-held northwestern city of Idlib, a man drove a vehicle loaded with 16 tons of explosives to attack a mountaintop restaurant where government forces were based.<sup>6</sup> A few days later the suicide bomber was identified as Moner Mohammad Abusalha, a man in his early 20s who grew up in Florida and travelled to Syria late last

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in E. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network*, (Oxford 2004), 65.

<sup>2</sup> *UN News Centre*, ‘Syrians internally displaced by war expected to nearly double to 6.5 million by year’s end – UN’, (February 5, 2014), <https://www.un.org/apps/news//story.asp?NewsID=47084&Cr=syria&Cr1=>. *The Daily Beast*, ‘After 3 Years of Brutal War Syria is Still Burning, but the World’s Attention Seems to Have Moved On’, (March 25, 2014), <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/03/25/after-3-years-of-brutal-war-syria-is-still-burning-but-the-world-s-attention-seems-to-have-moved-on.html>. *Wall Street Journal*, ‘Aid Groups Look for Ways to Combat Syria Fatigue’, (March 19, 2014), <http://blogs.wsj.com/middleeast/2014/03/19/aid-groups-look-for-ways-to-combat-syria-fatigue/>.

<sup>3</sup> *BBC*, ‘Brussels fatal gun attack at Jewish museum’, (May 24, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27558918>.

<sup>4</sup> *BBC*, ‘Brussels Jewish Museum killings: Suspect ‘admitted attack’’, (June 1, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27654505>. *NRC Handelsblad*, ‘Terreurcoördinator: aanhouding Syriëganger geluk bij ongeluk’, (June 2, 2014), <http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2014/06/02/terreurcoordinator-aanhouding-syrieganger-geluk-bij-ongeluk/>.

<sup>5</sup> *BBC*, ‘Brussels Jewish Museum killings: Suspect ‘admitted attack’.

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, ‘Suicide Bomber Is Identified as a Florida Man’, (May 30 2014), [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/31/world/middleeast/american-suicide-bomber-in-syria.html?hpw&rref=world&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/31/world/middleeast/american-suicide-bomber-in-syria.html?hpw&rref=world&_r=0)

year.<sup>7</sup> American officials stated Abusalha, who adopted the nom de guerre Abu Huraira al-Amriki, had spent two months in a training camp of another jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>8</sup> Officials quoted by American media said they thought it was the first time an American had been involved in a suicide attack in Syria, but a country like the Netherlands had already learned a month earlier that two of its citizens committed suicide attacks in Syria and Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

The two attacks of May 2014 can be seen as the manifestations of what many consider to be the most threatening element of the Syrian battlefield: the presence of Muslim foreign fighters also referred to as foreign jihadis, for now simply defined as unpaid combatants with no apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity with the Muslim side. Since 1980 and 2010 between 10,000 and 30,000 such fighters have inserted themselves into conflicts from Bosnia to Somalia.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2010 these numbers have stunningly risen. The *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation* (ICSR) estimated in December 2013 that just in Syria up to 11,000 individuals from 74 nations had become opposition fighters.<sup>11</sup> Among Western Europeans, the number had more than tripled from the previous estimate in April that year from 600 then to 1,900 in December 2013.<sup>12</sup> According to the Norwegian scholar and one of the rare foreign fighter experts Thomas Hegghammer, the number of European fighters in Syria may exceed the total number of Muslim foreign fighters from all Western countries together in all conflicts between 1990 and 2010.<sup>13</sup>

As the numbers of European foreign fighters in Syria (many of whom now crossing into Iraq) are alarmingly high and historically unprecedented, it is no surprise the Western governments and intelligence services are worried. Especially about those fighters who might make it back alive. 'Foreign fighters can gain combat experience, access to training and a network of overseas extremist contacts', warns the UK's domestic counter-intelligence and security agency MI5 on its website.<sup>14</sup> 'The skills, contacts and status acquired overseas can make these individuals a much greater threat when they return to the UK (...)'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, 'Suicide Bomber'.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> AIVD, Annual Report 2013, (May 23, 2014), <https://www.aivd.nl/english/publications-press/@3096/annual-report-2013/>

<sup>10</sup> T. Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad', *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/2011), 53.

<sup>11</sup> ICSR, 'Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans', (December 17 2013), <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>.

<sup>12</sup> ICSR, 'Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria'.

<sup>13</sup> T. Hegghammer, 'Number of foreign fighters from Europe in Syria is historically unprecedented. Who should be worried?', *Washington Post*, (November 27, 2013), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/11/27/number-of-foreign-fighters-from-europe-in-syria-is-historically-unprecedented-who-should-be-worried/>.

<sup>14</sup> MI5, 'Foreign Fighters', <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/the-threats/terrorism/international-terrorism/international-terrorism-and-the-uk/foreign-fighters.html>.

<sup>15</sup> MI5, 'Foreign Fighters'.

In the United States FBI Director James B. Comey said in May this year that the problem of Americans traveling to Syria to fight in the civil war there had worsened and that the FBI is worried that the Americans who have joined extremist groups allied with al-Qaeda in Syria, will return to the United States to carry out terrorist attacks.<sup>16</sup> 'All of us with a memory of the '80s and '90s saw the line drawn from Afghanistan in the '80s and '90s to Sept. 11,' Comey said. 'We see Syria as that, but an order of magnitude worse (...).'<sup>17</sup>

The Dutch *General Intelligence and Security Service* AIVD has declared that more than 100 people travelled to Syria from the Netherlands in 2013 with the intention of taking part in jihadist activities there.<sup>18</sup> 'Al-Qaeda's involvement in the Syrian conflict adds an extra dimension to the threat. It still has every intention of carrying out attacks in the West, and the use of fighters from Europe could make that goal easier to achieve. It is conceivable that some will return home with an order to commit or facilitate such acts.'<sup>19</sup> Already at an early stage the AIVD was concerned about this phenomenon and at the end of January 2013 it decided to put it to the notice of the general public.

These presumptions are not farfetched as the threats are real. The earlier mentioned events of May can be considered as proof, as well as other cases like the discovery of 900g of explosives in an apartment in the Côte d'Azur in February this year.<sup>20</sup> According to news agency AFP, the *Central Directorate of Internal Intelligence* (DCRI) had foiled an 'imminent terrorist attack' by a man who had recently returned from jihad in Syria.<sup>21</sup>

However, these reports often portray an image in which a few essential aspects concerning foreign fighters in Syria (and other conflicts) are forgotten. First of all, one could argue the number of terrorist plots so far, can be considered rather low compared to the many thousands of foreign fighters in Syria. Besides, it is not known whether the above mentioned returnees were instructed in Syria to commit terrorist acts at home.

Perhaps more importantly, the relatively large number of foreign fighters does not mean that the fight against Assad is led or dominated by 'foreign forces' or 'outsiders', as has been suggested by

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<sup>16</sup> *Washington Post*, 'FBI Director: Number of Americans traveling to fight in Syria increasing', (May 2, 2014), [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fbi-director-number-of-americans-traveling-to-fight-in-syria-increasing/2014/05/02/6fa3d84e-d222-11e3-937f-d3026234b51c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fbi-director-number-of-americans-traveling-to-fight-in-syria-increasing/2014/05/02/6fa3d84e-d222-11e3-937f-d3026234b51c_story.html).

<sup>17</sup> *Washington Post*, 'FBI Director'.

<sup>18</sup> AIVD, Annual Report 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> O. Hennessy, 'The Return of Europe's Foreign Fighters', *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (ICCT), (April 2, 2014), [http://icct.nl/publications/icct-commentaries/the-return-of-europes-foreign-fighters?dm\\_i=1ADT,2E45E,7XVH7C,8OP4U,1](http://icct.nl/publications/icct-commentaries/the-return-of-europes-foreign-fighters?dm_i=1ADT,2E45E,7XVH7C,8OP4U,1).

<sup>21</sup> Hennessy, 'The Return of Europe's Foreign Fighters'.



president Assad.<sup>22</sup> Even if the highest estimate turns out to be true, the ‘foreign contingent’ still does not represent more than 10 percent of the militant opposition, which is thought to number more than 100,000 men.<sup>23</sup> Within the foreign segment, individuals from Middle Eastern countries continue to represent the majority of foreign fighters, around 70 percent according to ICSR.<sup>24</sup> RAND has also indicated this year that ‘most of the 6,000 to 8,000 foreign fighters among Syria’s rebels come from Arab countries—Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia, plus some from the Gulf kingdoms.’<sup>25</sup> Both findings are representative for all conflicts that included Muslim foreign fighters over the past decades.<sup>26</sup>

Yet the focus, academic research included, is on Western foreign fighters. More specifically, the threat of a ‘bleed out’ as Western jihadi veterans, ‘equipped with new knowledge of fighting, training, recruitment, media and technical skills in building bombs, take their skills elsewhere—potentially facilitating the initiation or escalation of terrorism in their home country or in other arenas, and enhancing the power of insurgencies and terrorist groups’.<sup>27</sup> Another term often used is ‘blowback’, originally used by the CIA in 1954 as a metaphor for the unintended consequences of the US government’s international activities and after 9/11 further explored by Chalmers Johnson in *The Blowback Trilogy*.<sup>28</sup> In 2005, Peter Bergen used the term for the argument that ‘today’s insurgents are tomorrow’s terrorists’.<sup>29</sup>

Studying the foreign fighter threat is, however, accompanied by questions about representativeness, take for example the estimation of the earlier mentioned FBI Director who talked about no more than ‘dozens’ of Americans who have travelled to fight in Syria.<sup>30</sup> One can study the returnee impact on domestic terrorist activity by looking at the more people, from more countries over a longer period of time. Hegghammer, who truly is a pioneer in the research on Muslim foreign fighters, did exactly this just last year. His minimal estimate of the supply of foreign fighters from the West between 1990 and 2010 is 945 individuals.<sup>31</sup> He also counted 401 Islamist attack plots and

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<sup>22</sup> E. O’bagy, ‘Jihad in Syria’, *Institute for the Study of War* middle east security report 6 (september 2012) <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/jihad-syria> 39.

<sup>23</sup> ICSR, ‘Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria’.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> B.M. Jenkins, ‘The Dynamics of Syria’s Civil War’, RAND, (January 1, 2014), [http://www.RAND.org/content/dam/RAND/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND\\_PE115.pdf](http://www.RAND.org/content/dam/RAND/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND_PE115.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Hegghammer, ‘The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters’.

<sup>27</sup> B. Mendelsohn, ‘Foreign Fighter – Recent Trends’, *Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)*, (Spring 2011), <http://www.FPRI.org/docs/mendelsohn.foreignfighters.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> C. Johnson, ‘Blowback’, *The Nation* (October 15, 2001), <http://www.thenation.com/article/blowback?page=0,0>.

<sup>29</sup> P. Bergen and A. Reynolds, ‘Blowback Revisited’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, Iss. 6, (Nov/Dec 2005), 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Washington Post*, ‘FBI Director’. CNN, ‘Expert: ‘Dozens’ of Americans with ISIS’, (June 17, 2014), [http://edition.cnn.com/video/?/video/bestoftv/2014/06/16/lead-intv-jones-terrorist-groups-isis-iraq.cnn&utm\\_source=RAND\\_social&utm\\_medium=hootsuite\\_RAND&utm\\_campaign=hootsuite\\_RAND\\_social&video\\_referrer=httppercent3Apercent2Fpercent2Fwww.RAND.orgpercent2F](http://edition.cnn.com/video/?/video/bestoftv/2014/06/16/lead-intv-jones-terrorist-groups-isis-iraq.cnn&utm_source=RAND_social&utm_medium=hootsuite_RAND&utm_campaign=hootsuite_RAND_social&video_referrer=httppercent3Apercent2Fpercent2Fwww.RAND.orgpercent2F)

<sup>31</sup> T. Hegghammer, ‘Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting’, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 107, no. 1 (February 2013), pp.1-15.

plotters in the West, of whom at least 107 were previously foreign fighters. This led him to conclude that only about one in nine foreign fighters returned for an attack in the West. However, his maximum estimate of 7,500 fighters in the same period would lead to a complete different ratio. That would strengthen his conclusion that most jihadists prefer foreign fighting and do not 'come home to roost'.<sup>32</sup> Other scholars like Marc Sageman (author of *Understanding Terror Networks* and *Leaderless Jihad*), have also reached the conclusion that the number of instances in which foreign fighters carried out terrorist attacks in the West was limited, therefore refuting the concept of the 'wandering mujahideen'.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless it is hard to draw any conclusion based on numbers. Hegghammer is fully aware of this but stated in his 2013 article: 'Partial data are not always better than no data at all, but in this particular case I believe they are, because policies are already being informed by empirically unfounded assumptions about the threat posed by foreign fighters.'<sup>34</sup> Although this may sure be a valid point, Western Muslim foreign fighters are as a minority of a minority within an insurgency, hard to study.

That could also possibly be said about the subject of foreign fighters in general, as it has proved an under-researched topic in classic and contemporary studies of conflict and terrorism. Despite their increasingly common presence in conflicts, particularly in an Islamic context, outside governmental organizations the topic has received minimal and usually only indirect attention, often through the literature on al-Qaeda.<sup>35</sup>

One could say the foreign fighter "problem" is actually several problems that should be disaggregated for better understanding and for designing effective policies. Some have therefore argued to divide the fighter's 'life cycle' into the pre-war mobilization phase, the war stage, and the post-war period.<sup>36</sup> This division actually often seems to be applied when looking at the relatively small amount of existing literature. As said, the focus seems to be on the last phase because of the threat of returning fighters, neglecting the huge effect foreign fighters have on future conflict zones

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<sup>32</sup> *The Economist*, 'British fighters in Syria; Will they come home to roost?', (May 4, 2013), <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21577081-government-worried-about-british-jihadists-syriawith-reason-will-they-come-home>.

<sup>33</sup> FPRI, 'The Foreign Fighter Problem: Recent Trends and Case Studies', Conference report, (November 2010), <http://www.FPRI.org/articles/2010/11/foreign-fighter-problem-recent-trends-and-case-studies>.

<sup>34</sup> Hegghammer, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?'

<sup>35</sup> C. Moore and P. Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 31, no. 5 (2008), pp.412-43. See also for instance influential studies like Lorenzo Vidino's 'Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad', Lawrence Wright's 'The looming tower : Al-Qaeda and the road to 9/11' and Fawaz Gerges', 'The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global'.

<sup>36</sup> Stephanie Kaplan, Ph.D. candidate in MIT's Political Science department and a Visiting Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, suggested this during the "Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks" panel discussion from the FPRI's "The Foreign Fighter Problem" conference held at Washington, D.C., on September 27, 2010.

as many Muslim foreign fighters move from one conflict to another. This possible “domino-effect” will be explained further in the next chapter.

The war stage phase is another great unknown as little scholarship has explored the ways in which transnational insurgents, once they arrive, influence domestic struggles. A few studies have been conducted on the effect foreign fighters had in post-2003 Iraq by promoting sectarian violence and indiscriminate tactics.<sup>37</sup> Although reports indicated that transnational insurgents comprised less than 10 percent of the Iraqi resistance, they were responsible for more than 90 percent of suicide bombings and high lethality attacks.<sup>38</sup> Very recently, Kristin Bakke published an interesting article about how foreign fighters can possibly jeopardize a domestic insurgent movement’s strength by bringing in new ideas.<sup>39</sup>

Studying the first phase could answer puzzles regarding the volunteers’ motivations. A few studies have been conducted but none have given any definite answers. Christopher Hewitt and Jessica Kelley-Moore sought to identify the sources of jihadism in the Muslim world by examining the characteristics of the countries of origin of foreign fighters in Iraq. Their findings certainly did not support those who see the causes of jihadism in the political and economic failures of the Muslim world.<sup>40</sup>

The findings of an extensive research project to investigate the increasing internationalization of the jihad in Somalia underscored one issue in particular; ‘and that is how little we actually understand about these specific processes of radicalization and the subsequent recruitment to Jihad.’<sup>41</sup> In 2010, the *Homeland Security Policy Institute* at the *George Washington University* concluded that there is no single pathway to becoming a foreign fighter, nor is there a static profile of the fighters themselves . ‘Ideology, social circumstances, adventure seeking, political grievances, and so on, all appear to impact individuals’ choices in this regard . Foreign fighters’ socioeconomic circumstances also appear to be highly variable (...).’<sup>42</sup>

David Malet is an important name when discussing the first phase of mobilization as this senior lecturer in International Relations at the *University of Melbourne* wrote the first comparative analysis of historical foreign fighter insurgencies and recruitment patterns, comparing jihadists with

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<sup>37</sup> M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*, (Washington, 2007), 71.

<sup>38</sup> D. Malet, ‘Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts’, Ph.D. dissertation George Washington University, 2009, 7.

<sup>39</sup> K.M. Bakke, ‘Help Wanted?: The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies’, *International Security*, Volume 38, Number 4, (Spring 2014), <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ins/summary/v038/38.4.bakke.html>.

<sup>40</sup> C. Hewitt and J. Moore, ‘Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A Cross-National Analysis of Jihadism, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21:2, (2009), 211-220.

<sup>41</sup> L. Hallundbaek and M. Taarnby, ‘Al Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalisation Processes in Europe’, *Danish Ministry of Justice*, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> F.J. Cilluffo, J.B. Frank and M. Ranstorp, ‘Foreign Fighters: Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones’, *The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute*, October 2010.

other foreign fighter movements. In his book *Foreign Fighters; Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*, published in 2013, he argued that transnational recruitment occurs when local insurgents attempt to broaden the scope of conflict so as to increase their resources and maximize their chances of victory.<sup>43</sup>

This basic assumption (local insurgents initiate the mobilization), as Hegghammer has noted and as also will be shown in this thesis, does not square with the evidence from Muslim foreign fighter mobilizations, most of which were exogenous to the local insurgency, in the sense that foreign fighter recruitment was initiated and handled by other foreigners, not locals.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Muslim foreign fighters came uninvited almost wherever they went.

Regarding mobilization, some scholars go as far to state that the distribution across jihad arenas is random. Although according to Lorenzo Vidino (author of *Al-Qaeda in Europe*) ethnic ties have some predictive power with regard to where a volunteer ends up fighting, in many cases the destination reflects the accessibility of a particular place at a particular time, and the instructions of the volunteers' contact people.<sup>45</sup> 'The whole experience of foreign fighters is often shaped by coincidences in advance largely beyond the control of the 'wannabe' foreign fighter', according to Vidino.<sup>46</sup>

Coincidence might very well be an important factor in the mobilization of foreign fighters, but it seems hardly satisfying when looking at the widely differing number of foreign fighters in different conflicts in the last thirty years. In his groundbreaking study on the rise of Muslim foreign fighters in 2010, Hegghammer offered a new data set of foreign fighter mobilizations, based on a large collection of unexplored primary and secondary sources in Arabic, as well as personal interviews with former foreign fighters conducted in Britain, Jordan, Pakistan, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia. These findings will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter but are mentioned here as they largely served as a departing point for this thesis. It is namely interesting to see that conflicts like Afghanistan (1980-1992), Bosnia (1992-1995) and Iraq (2003-2010) attracted several thousands of foreign fighters, whereas other conflicts that are well known for their presence of foreign combatants like Chechnya (1994-2010) and Somalia (2006-2010) "only" attracted not more than

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<sup>43</sup> D. Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*, (New York 2013).

<sup>44</sup> T. Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad', *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/2011), pp.53-94.

<sup>45</sup> Comments made by Lorenzo Vidino, during the FPRI's "The Foreign Fighter Problem" conference held at Washington, D.C., on September 27, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> FPRI, 'The Foreign Fighter Problem: Recent Trends and Case Studies', (November 2010), <http://www.FPRI.org/articles/2010/11/foreign-fighter-problem-recent-trends-and-case-studies>.

respectively 300 and 400 fighters.<sup>47</sup> Even the American soldiers in Afghanistan after 2001 weren't fought by possibly more than 1,000 foreign fighters.<sup>48</sup>

The question why some conflicts can count on thousands of Muslim foreign fighters and others won't see more than a couple of hundred coming, has yet remained unanswered and is the central question of this thesis.<sup>49</sup> This study will focus on the specifics of the conflicts by looking into the possible pull factors that can shed light on the considerable variety in foreign fighter mobilizations. It will also explore whether the mobilization should be seen as a separate phase or if there is a synergetic effect with the actual war stage phase. Although not necessarily designed as such, studying the variety could help policymakers understand why aspiring jihadists travel to Syria, to fight in a bloody civil war between Muslim parties, and not to Mali, where a Western power is fighting Islamist groups. It also could help to predict if countries like Kenya or Nigeria will see the arrival of foreign fighters.

The cross-case analysis will look into seven different conflicts from the first Afghan war (1980-1992) to the current conflict in Syria (2011-2014). The other arenas are Bosnia (1992-1995), Somalia (1993-2014), Chechnya (1994-2009), Afghanistan (2001-2014) and Iraq (2003-2014). These conflicts were chosen for two reasons. The first is that there are hardly any other conflicts with significant numbers or reliable data (Tajikistan attracted an estimated 100-200 foreign fighters, Philippines, Kashmir and Lebanon no more than dozens).<sup>50</sup>

The second reason is although this type of activism remains notoriously understudied, most scholars will mention these conflicts when discussing foreign fighters since 1980. Most scholars have over the last ten years agreed that the period when Arabs volunteered to aid the struggle of the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, marks the start of the global jihadist movement whose milestones include Bosnia, Somalia, Chechnya, and Iraq.<sup>51</sup> In 2005 Jordan militant Islamist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi stated as the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI): 'Our jihad in Iraq is the same as in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, and Bosnia—an honorable Jihad (...)'.<sup>52</sup> The next chapter will also show that all of these theatres are connected in the sense that they are "stones" in what this author refers to as the "jihadi-domino".

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<sup>47</sup> Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters', 61.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, 61.

<sup>49</sup> Hegghammer's conceptual focus of his 2010 article was on the movement formation, not on general mechanisms of foreign fighter mobilization or predictions of rates of recruitment.

<sup>50</sup> Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters', 61.

<sup>51</sup> See for example Lorenzo Vidino's *Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad*, Lawrence Wright's *The looming tower : Al-Qaeda and the road to 9/11* and Fawaz Gerges', *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*.

<sup>52</sup> M. Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq: lessons from the Arab Afghans', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 32, no.2 (2009), 79.

Based on the many books about the “global jihad” written by authors who have conducted interviews with foreign fighters, as well as academic articles about the international aspects of the seven conflicts, a list of factors that could possibly explain the variety emerged. It is interesting to see that in this day and age the Internet provides a goldmine with a substantial amount of detailed, original data to be analyzed by those scholars like Hegghammer, Malet, Clint Watts, Aaron Zelin, Brian Glyn Williams, Mohammed Hafez, Barack Mendelsohn and Evan Kohlmann who have extensively studied the phenomenon. This includes online biographies, along with photographic and video evidence documenting their personal narratives. In the case of Iraq and Syria, much of this material has come to light after these various men were “martyred” in combat in the form of eulogies posted online.<sup>53</sup> In some cases scholars were able to communicate directly with foreign fighters via Twitter.<sup>54</sup>

Some factors didn’t make ‘the cut’ as will be explained in the second chapter which will also address the origin and definition of foreign fighters. The factors that did seem potentially relevant will be tested in the seven conflicts and therefor seven chapters. The conclusion will tell whether it is indeed possible to explain why some conflicts attract far more foreign fighters than others.

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<sup>53</sup> A. Zelin, E. Kohlmann and L. al Khouri, ‘Convoy of Martyrs in the Levant. A Joint Study Charting the Evolving Role of Sunni Foreign Fighters in the Armed Uprising Against the Assad Regime in Syria’, *Flashpoint Global Partners*, (June 2013).

<sup>54</sup> C. Watts, ‘Hammami thinks the grass might be greener in Syria’, personal website *Selected Wisdom* (January 15, 2013), <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=931>

## The rise of Muslim foreign fighters and the jihadist-domino effect

Foreign fighters are not a contemporary phenomenon. *Muslim* foreign fighters, however, are. The involvement of foreign fighters is a salient feature of armed conflict in the Muslim world only since 1980 as will be shown in this chapter, explaining the rise of Muslim foreign fighters, the domino-effect on several conflicts and the different factors that might or might not explain the widely differing numbers of foreign fighters showing up in conflict zones.

First it is necessary to establish what a foreign fighter is. This is easier said than done, as this type of activism remained notoriously understudied until perhaps a few years ago. In his Ph.D. dissertation David Malet stated in 2009 that although transnational insurgencies have existed for centuries, the fact that political scientists have not perceived them as a singular type of phenomenon is evident

from the lack of any existing term in the discipline used to describe the concept.<sup>55</sup> The main reason for the absence of such a term according to Hegghammer, is that foreign fighters constitute an intermediate actor category lost between local rebels, on the one hand, and international terrorists, on the other.<sup>56</sup>

As a result, the study of foreign fighters has largely been confined to the subfield of terrorism studies, where they, in the opinion of Hegghammer are too often conflated with al-Qaeda, 'even though most foreign fighters do not blow up planes, but use paramilitary tactics in confined theatres of war'.<sup>57</sup> Defining al-Qaeda has always been difficult as it became a unique phenomenon in the history of terrorism, because it enjoyed access to a territory, which it used to apply a unique organizational concept, namely an educational institution for global terrorism and guerrilla warfare.<sup>58</sup>

Defining al-Qaeda as a terrorist group can especially nowadays be misleading as it arguably has morphed from a discrete terrorist group into a wide-ranging fighting movement that conducts insurgencies, recruits foreign fighters into conflicts and 'conducts terrorism on the side'.<sup>59</sup> Earlier, Stephanie Kaplan argued that contemporary terrorism research is too terrorism-centric, and that war

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<sup>55</sup> Malet, 'Foreign Fighters', 9.

<sup>56</sup> Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters', 55.

<sup>57</sup> Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters', 55.

<sup>58</sup> T. Hegghammer, 'The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Islam and Transnational Militancy', Policy Brief, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, (January 2011).

<sup>59</sup> J.M. Berger, 'War on Error. We're fighting al Qaeda like a terrorist group. They're fighting us as an army', *Foreign Policy*, (February 5, 2014), [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/04/war\\_on\\_error\\_al\\_qaeda\\_terrorism](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/04/war_on_error_al_qaeda_terrorism).

is the most profitable lens through which to view the global jihadist movement.<sup>60</sup> In support of this assertion, she referenced data suggesting, 'more violent Islamic extremists participate in the movement through war than through terrorism.'<sup>61</sup>

In this study a distinction will be made between foreign fighters and international terrorists. Although foreign fighters and al-Qaeda hail from the same pan-Islamist mother movement, they often do not have the same political preferences.<sup>62</sup> It is worth noting as the renowned Lebanese-American academic Fawaz Gerges has done, that when militant Arab Islamists came to Afghanistan in the 1980s, they were mainly interested in acquiring the necessary skills and tools to confront the near enemy at home, not to unleash a campaign of terror against a faraway enemy that did not figure prominently on their radar screen.<sup>63</sup> 'Although their rhetoric and discourse were littered with anti-Western diatribes and they were socialized into an anti-Western mind-set, they assigned the highest priority to unseating local rulers who did not apply the Shariah (Islamic law) and who allied themselves with Islam's foreign enemies.'<sup>64</sup>

The same can be said about most of the foreign fighters that joined one of the conflicts studied in the next chapters. Also, as Hegghammer noted and as will be shown in this article, the two communities have often competed over resources, usually to the detriment of al-Qaeda. Hegghammer also rightly pointed out that foreign fighters consistently enjoy higher levels of popular support across the Muslim world, and thus recruit and fundraise more easily than terrorist groups.<sup>65</sup>

Malet uses the term foreign fighters interchangeably with "transnational insurgent" and defines them as 'non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts'.<sup>66</sup> Hegghammer built on this formulation and defined a foreign fighter in his much quoted 2010 article as an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid.<sup>67</sup> In 2013 however, he departed from this definition and stated that foreign fighting 'includes any military activity (training or fighting), using any tactic (terrorist or guerrilla tactics), against any enemy (Western or non-Western)—so long as it occurs outside the West.'<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Kaplan, 'The Foreign Fighter Problem conference'.

<sup>61</sup> FPRI, 'The Foreign Fighter Problem'.

<sup>62</sup> Hegghammer, 'The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon'.

<sup>63</sup> F. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, (New York, 2005), 85.

<sup>64</sup> Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, 85.

<sup>65</sup> Hegghammer, 'The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon'.

<sup>66</sup> Malet, 'Foreign Fighters', 9.

<sup>67</sup> Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters', 57-58.

<sup>68</sup> Hegghammer, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?', 1.



For a general definition of a foreign fighter, the last part seems somewhat problematic, although it does put the emphasis on the war zone. That admittedly conveniently serves the purpose of this study which looks into the mobilization and the war stage, rather than the path a fighter might choose after a conflict. To include training is a tricky one. According to FPRI's Barak Mendelsohn (author of *Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism*), a distinction must be made between two manifestations of foreign fighter: a foreigner fighting in a local conflict that is not his own country's war; and a foreign trained fighter, a local who goes to another area, receives training only, and comes back to carry out attacks elsewhere, normally in his own country.<sup>69</sup>

Here arises a complication because plans often seem to change. Those who merely wanted to visit a training camp, might end up as insurgents in the same country or join an insurgency in another, rather than conduct terrorism in their home countries when they arguably should be labelled as terrorists. Therefore, even though the focus of this thesis is on conflicts, (not training camps), this study includes training in the definition. Like Hegghammer in his 2013 article, this author does deliberately reject 'lacking kinship ties', as for example fighters may be European citizens, but will be part of a wider diaspora or generation of immigrants which also applies to Somali-Americans.

In sum, the definition used here is based on Hegghammer's but it also derived from Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty from the *University of Birmingham* who define foreign fighters as 'non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict zone to participate in hostilities'.<sup>70</sup> Next to transnational insurgents, the terms mujahideen, jihadis or jihadists will be mentioned as well, but it is important to note that they are in the authors opinion not necessarily the same as foreign fighters as many jihadis can be homegrown and will stay in their home country to fight for a mainly domestic cause. In other words, all Muslim foreign fighters can be considered jihadists, but not all jihadists are foreign fighters.

### **The rise of Muslim foreign fighters**

While identified today with Muslims joining coreligionists in jihad all around the world, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not restricted to individuals sharing this particular religious identity. There have been dozens of other rebel groups over the past two centuries who enlisted foreigners to fight for communism, their ethnic kin or other religious or ideological causes. Malet created a typology of foreign fighters using data combined from the *Correlates of War Intrastate War* and the *PRIO-CSCW Data on Armed Conflict* data sets. Among the 331 civil conflicts in the period

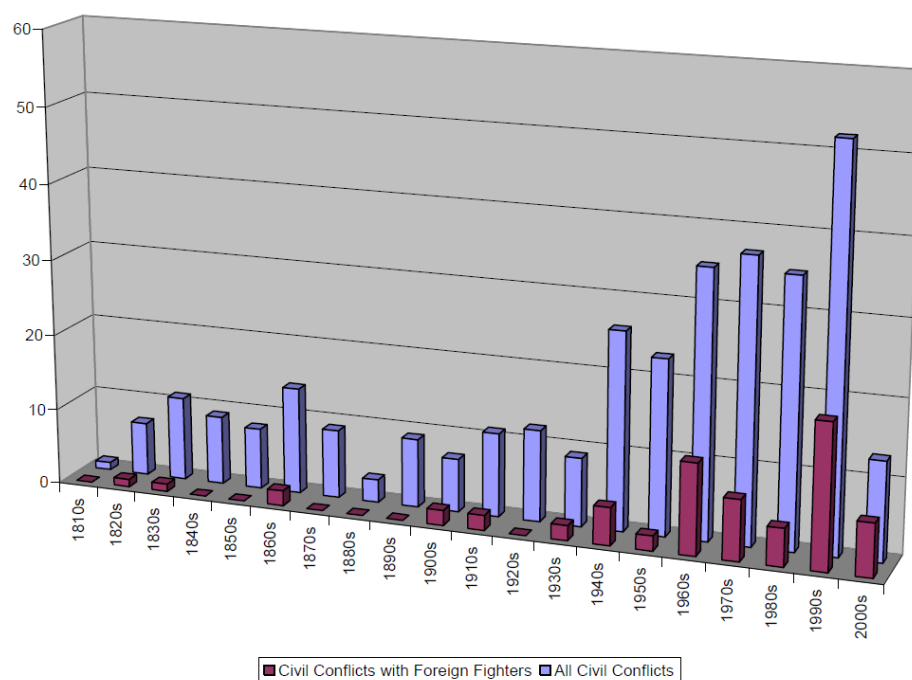
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<sup>69</sup> Mendelsohn, 'Foreign Fighter – Recent Trends', 193.

<sup>70</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 412.

1815-2005, at least 70 featured the presence of foreign fighters (see figure 1).<sup>71</sup> A few examples are the Texas Revolution (1835-36), the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the Israeli War of Independence (1948-49).

Malet found that transnational insurgents have appeared in an increasing share of conflicts over time, which he attributes to the ease of communication in an increasingly globalized world. It is interesting to see that among the conflicts with transnational insurgents present, more than 40 percent begun after the Cold War's demise, in Africa, the post-communist countries, Asia, and the Middle East. Among these conflicts, the transnational insurgents in eight to ten were Islamic militants.<sup>72</sup>



## 2 The number of foreign fighters between 1816 and 2005.<sup>73</sup>

Whereas foreign fighters are not new, Muslim foreign fighters relatively are. According to Hegghammer's data, out of seventy armed conflicts in the post-1945 Muslim world, eighteen had a private global foreign fighter contingent.<sup>74</sup> Sixteen contingents mobilized after 1980. Indeed, contemporary foreign fighters all share the same religious identity, stated Malet.<sup>75</sup> He concluded that

<sup>71</sup> D. Malet, 'The Foreign Fighter Project', (December 2013), [http://davidmalet.com/The\\_Foreign\\_Fighter\\_Project.php](http://davidmalet.com/The_Foreign_Fighter_Project.php)

<sup>72</sup> Malet, 'Foreign Fighters', 59.

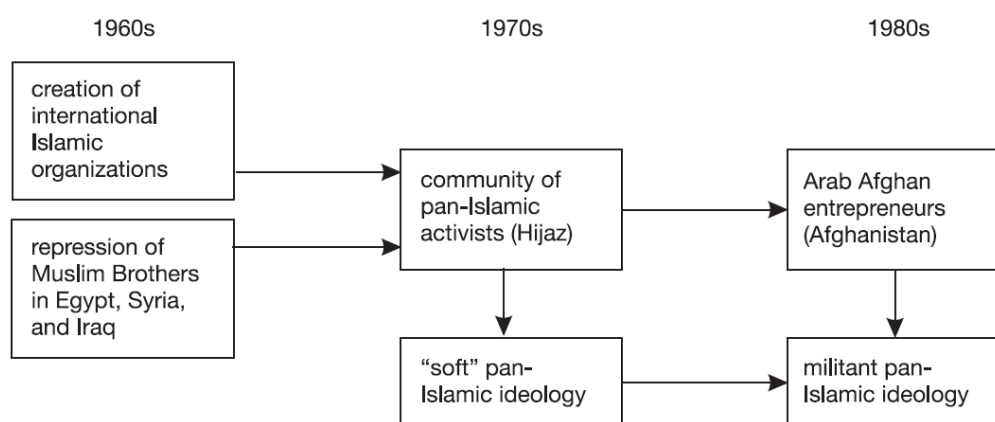
<sup>73</sup> Malet, 'Foreign Fighters', 66.

<sup>74</sup> Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters', 61.

<sup>75</sup> D. Malet, 'Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, (Winter 2010), 109.

the cause appears to be ‘partially the result of a period effect, the co-incidence of increasingly globalized communications and transportation technology with a particular identity community whose members have salient transnational identities’.<sup>76</sup>

In his 2010 article published in *International Security*, Hegghammer however argued that the Muslim foreign fighter phenomenon represents ‘a violent offshoot of a qualitatively new subcurrent of Islamism—populist pan-Islamism—which emerged in the 1970s (...)’ (see figure below).<sup>77</sup> This pan-Islamist community itself owed its existence to two exogenous developments in the 1960s, namely, the repression and exile of Muslim Brotherhood activists in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, and the establishment of international Islamic organizations and several new universities in Saudi Arabia. Seeking political relevance and increased budgets, these activists propagated an alarmist discourse emphasizing external threats to the Muslim nation. They also established a global network of charities for the provision of inter-Muslim aid. The norms and networks established by the pan-Islamists then enabled Arab activists in 1980s Afghanistan to recruit foreign fighters in the name of inter-Muslim solidarity. The “Arab-Afghan” mobilization, in turn, produced a foreign fighter movement that still exists today, as a phenomenon partially distinct from al-Qaeda.<sup>78</sup>



### 3 Origin of First Moves and Ideology of the Foreign Fighter Movement.<sup>79</sup>

#### The Afghan-Arabs and the jihadist domino

The so-called Afghan-Arabs deserve a considerable amount of attention as they kick-started a new movement. The conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which will be extensively discussed in the next

<sup>76</sup> Malet, ‘Why Foreign Fighters?’, 109-110.

<sup>77</sup> Hegghammer, ‘The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters’, 56-57.

<sup>78</sup> Hegghammer, ‘The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters’, 56-57.

<sup>79</sup> Hegghammer, ‘The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters’, 80.

chapter, was the first episode in recent history to attract thousands of Muslim foreign fighters under the banner of a defensive jihad.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, as a number of authors have noted, the mujahideen recruited to Afghanistan during the 1980s were essentially irrelevant in that particular civil conflict. As Olivier Roy already wrote in 1991: ‘The war would have been won with or without them. Militarily, they represented a tiny and inconsequential factor in the Afghan battle.’<sup>81</sup> This is confirmed by the Afghan fighters of that time: ‘Make no mistake: The Afghan mujahedeen, equipped with Western arms, won that war’, stated former mujahideen Masood Farivar. ‘International volunteers played a marginal role in sealing our victory, their numbers notwithstanding.’<sup>82</sup>

Concentrating on the limited fighting role would seem to make it easy to discount the significance of the foreign fighters in the ‘Afghan jihad’, but the actual import of this period lies in the training, socialization, and networking conducted by the Arab Afghans. Away from their home governments and free to propagate their radical views, some Arab Afghans began to contemplate a larger role for themselves. The Arab Afghans exaggerated their role in the conflict and claimed for themselves a mythical victory. This was also made possible by Afghani commanders who would tout them as ‘heroes’ in front of their Gulf benefactors, who would then contribute handsomely to their factions.<sup>83</sup> The Arab Afghans then developed a culture of jihad and martyrdom, and a template for mobilizing Muslims in defense of Islamic causes.<sup>84</sup> As the most important recruiter Sheikh Abdullah Azzam already wrote in 1988: ‘We shall continue the jihad no matter how long the way, until the last breath and the last beat of the pulse — or until we see the Islamic state established.’<sup>85</sup>

The property Azzam surveyed for the future of jihad included the southern Soviet republics, Bosnia, the Philippines, Kashmir, central Asia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Spain — the entire span of the once-great Islamic empire.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, their experiences and skills became manifest in several insurgencies and civil wars during the 1990s, often led by leaders like Osama bin Laden, *Emir* Khattab, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who made their debut in Afghanistan.<sup>87</sup>

If Afghanistan started what this author calls a “jihadi domino”, Bosnia was the next stone to be hit. One evident reason for the continuation of the transnational jihad was that although many Arab Afghans had returned home shortly after the fall of the Communist regime in Kabul, a large

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<sup>80</sup> M. Farivar, ‘The Foreign Fighters and Me’, *the New York Times*, (April 2, 2014). J. De Roy van Zuijdewijn, ‘Fearing the Western Muslim foreign Fighter’, MA thesis Utrecht University, (January 2014), <http://leidensafetyandsecurityblog.nl/articles/fearing-the-western-Muslim-foreign-fighter>

<sup>81</sup> O. Roy, *The Lessons of the Soviet/Afghan War*, (London, 1991), 84.

<sup>82</sup> M. Farivar, ‘The Foreign Fighters and Me’, *the New York Times*, (April 2, 2014).

<sup>83</sup> M. Hafez, ‘Jihad after Iraq: lessons from the Arab Afghans’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 32, no.2 (2009), 76.

<sup>84</sup> Hafez, ‘Jihad after Iraq’, 73-94.

<sup>85</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 130.

<sup>86</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 130.

<sup>87</sup> Hafez, ‘Jihad after Iraq’, 77.

number experienced difficulty in obtaining repatriation. While their departure for Afghanistan was generally blessed by the regimes in their countries, upon their return the alumni came up against the strong opposition of the authorities because they feared that the “Afghanis” would rapidly turn into a threat against them, due to their military experience and fundamentalist worldview. Therefore, in the majority of the Maghreb countries, as well as in Egypt and Jordan, the authorities took steps to prevent the return of the volunteers and the joining of the ranks of radical Islamic opposition in their lands.<sup>88</sup> As they couldn’t return, the fighters became a ‘a stateless, vagrant mob of religious mercenaries’.<sup>89</sup>

The de-territorialized Afghan-Arabs couldn’t return, but many also couldn’t stay. As the Afghan civil war intensified following the Soviet withdrawal, in 1993 the Pakistani government made the decision to close down the Arab guesthouses that for a decade had facilitated their entry into Afghanistan. Many hundreds of jihadis could either return home and face potential imprisonment, or find a new cause.<sup>90</sup>

The Arab Afghans were not only available, they were ready for combat as they had been given training courses in camps on the Pakistani border and in Jalalabad and Khost inside Afghanistan.<sup>91</sup> They had learned how to maneuver, use Kalashnikovs and fire rocket-propelled grenades. In addition to combat training, Arab Afghans acquired skills in logistics and facilitation of guerrilla warfare. Those who trained became the trainers of future jihadists in principally Bosnia where the defense of the Bosnian Muslims served as the new cause.

After the US-sponsored Dayton Peace Accords ended the Balkan conflicts in 1995, many Arab-Afghan mujahideen managed to settle down and blend in Bosnian society but some were forced to decamp from Bosnia by NATO.<sup>92</sup> These fighters had sought to intimidate moderate Bosnians and perpetuate the war with the Serbs before they were finally expelled in 1995 and 1996. The failure of those jihadis to establish a territorial foothold in Bosnia did nothing to dampen their interest in spreading the jihad revolution to other frontline Muslim areas, particularly toward Chechnya in the mid-1990s.<sup>93</sup> The man who was to help the homeless brotherhood of jihadi warriors find a new theatre for holy war was Afghan veteran *Emir Khattab* who had established training camps in the eastern part of the republic.<sup>94</sup> Chechnya was already linked to Afghanistan as the Chechen field

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<sup>88</sup> Malet, ‘Foreign Fighters’, 258.

<sup>89</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 163-164.

<sup>90</sup> Moore and Tumelty, ‘Foreign Fighters’, 418.

<sup>91</sup> Hafez, ‘Jihad after Iraq’, 77.

<sup>92</sup> B.G. Williams, ‘Allah’s foot soldiers. An assessment of the role of foreign fighters and Al-Qa’ida in the Chechen insurgency’, *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*, (London 2007), 159-160.

<sup>93</sup> Moore and Tumelty, ‘Foreign Fighters’, 418.

<sup>94</sup> Williams, ‘Allah’s foot soldiers’, 159-160.

commander Basayev had already in 1994 taken 30 of his fighters to military training camp in Khost.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, another Afghan veteran, bin Laden, sent a number of mujahideen to northern Africa, to fight American forces in Somalia.<sup>96</sup>

The attacks of 9/11 led to another impulse for the domino as after the US assault in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda found itself without a base of operation. The training camps were destroyed. Another Afghan-Arab who had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980s would manifest as a key figure in al-Qaeda's reorganization. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian and whose ties to al-Qaeda were minimal before 9/11, was the head of a small terrorist group called al Tawhed, whose headquarters were in the western Afghan city of Herat.<sup>97</sup> Zarqawi's importance grew significantly in the months following 9/11, as he began strong operational cooperation with Ansar al Islam, an Islamist group that resulted from the merger of several radical Islamist Kurdish groups operating in the parts of Iraq that were no longer under Saddam Hussein's rule after the 1991 Gulf War. He also helped hundreds of Arab fighters fleeing the Afghan scene pass into Iran, in order to relocate in the Ansar al Islam camps around the Iraqi city of Slaimaniya.<sup>98</sup>

The domino would then in way go back and forth as the foreign fighter contingent in Iraq would from 2004 on have an impact on the "forgotten war" of Afghanistan. Foreigners began to play an important role in the Afghan insurgency at this time, by teaching Taliban leaders the tactics of the evolving Iraqi insurgency. For example, Arabs from Iraq taught the Taliban the previously taboo tactic of suicide bombing which soon became a weapon of choice for the Afghan insurgents.<sup>99</sup> In 2009, with the reduction of violence in Iraq, foreign militants were in the words of the Afghan defense minister 'flooding from Iraq into Afghanistan' to join Taliban insurgents battling Afghan and international troops.<sup>100</sup> According to NATO, insurgent attacks in Afghanistan increased 33 percent in 2008, with military commanders reporting that 'in some of these engagements, actually 60 percent of the total force which we have encountered were foreign fighters'.<sup>101</sup>

Knowledge acquired on the battlefield in Iraq, particularly regarding improvised explosive devices (IEDs), was later used in another remote area: Somalia.<sup>102</sup> The influence of Zarqawi there was big enough for some scholars to talk about the 'Iraqization of the Somali Mujahidin Youth

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<sup>95</sup> K. Bakke, 'Copying and Learning from Outsiders? Assessing Diffusion from Transnational Insurgents in the Chechen Wars', presented at the workshop "Mobilizing across Borders: Transnational Dynamics of Civil War," *Peace Research Institute, Oslo*, (August 20-21, 2010), 22-23.

<sup>96</sup> Malet, 'Foreign Fighters', 266.

<sup>97</sup> L. Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad*, (New York, 2006), 235-236.

<sup>98</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 235-236.

<sup>99</sup> B.G. Williams, 'On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam": A History of Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 1980-2010, The Foreign Fighter Problem: Recent Trends and Case Studies, *Foreign Policy Research Institute Conference*, 2010, 232-233.

<sup>100</sup> *Radio Free Europe*, 'Afghanistan Says Foreign Fighters Coming From Iraq', (February 4, 2009), [http://www.rferl.org/content/Afghanistan\\_Says\\_Foreign\\_Fighters\\_Coming\\_From\\_Iraq/1379266.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Afghanistan_Says_Foreign_Fighters_Coming_From_Iraq/1379266.html).

<sup>101</sup> *Radio Free Europe*, 'Afghanistan Says Foreign Fighters'.

Movement'.<sup>103</sup> From Somalia, the domino would continue as al-Shabaab has exported jihadists to other places in the world – the evidence is overwhelming in the cases of Kenya and Nigeria.<sup>104</sup>

The conflict in Syria is also interesting from the domino perspective. Take for example the estimated 200 Chechens fighting alongside rebels in Syria, led by commanders from the Pankisi Valley in north-east Georgia.<sup>105</sup> One of the most prominent is Omar Shishani, who was appointed by the al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) as commander of the northern sector in Syria. Until recently Omar Shishani was leader of the Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa al-Ansar (Army of the Emigrants and Helpers), an al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist group comprising hundreds of mostly foreign fighters, many of them from the North Caucasus.<sup>106</sup>

However, the rapid resurgence of foreign fighter networks into Syria comes in large part from the second great foreign fighter migration to Iraq circa 2004–2010.<sup>107</sup> Those survivors of the Iraq battlefields today help facilitate new recruits to Syria and have provided fuel for ISIS splintering from core al-Qaeda.<sup>108</sup> And yet again a reversed effect can be seen as routes from Syria provide ISIS in Iraq with foreign fighters and supplies that are necessary for the continuation of their military campaign.<sup>109</sup> ISIS claims to have fighters from the UK, France, Germany and other European countries, as well as the US, the Arab world and the Caucasus.<sup>110</sup> Unlike other rebel groups in Syria, ISIS has been working towards an Islamic emirate that straddles Syria and Iraq. In July 2014, the extremist group officially announced the creation of a caliphate across its claimed territory.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Mendelsohn, 'Foreign Fighter – Recent Trends', 198.

<sup>103</sup> R. Paz, 'The Youth are Older: The Iraqization of the Somali Mujahidin Youth Movement', *The project for the research of Islamist movements* (PRISM), Occasional papers, Volume 6, Number 2 (December 2008), [http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM\\_no\\_2\\_vol\\_6\\_-\\_Millat\\_Ibrahim\\_-\\_Dec08.pdf](http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_no_2_vol_6_-_Millat_Ibrahim_-_Dec08.pdf)

<sup>104</sup> S.J. Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia : the history and ideology of a militant Islamist group, 2005-2012*, (Oxford, 2013), 140-141.

<sup>105</sup> BBC, 'Syria crisis: Omar Shishani, Chechen jihadist leader', (December 3, 2013), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25151104>.

<sup>106</sup> BBC, 'Chechens drawn south to fight against Syria's Assad', (November 28, 2013), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24999697>.

<sup>107</sup> C. Watts, 'How does the U.S. counter al Qaeda while al Qaeda fights itself?', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, (May 5, 2014), <http://www.FPRI.org/geopoliticus/2014/05/how-does-us-counter-al-qaeda-while-al-qaeda-fights-itself>.

<sup>108</sup> Watts, 'How does the U.S. counter al Qaeda'.

<sup>109</sup> *Institute for the Study of War*, 'ISIS annual report reveal a metrics-driven military command', (May 22, 2014), [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWBackgrounder\\_ISIS\\_Annual\\_Reports\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWBackgrounder_ISIS_Annual_Reports_0.pdf).

<sup>110</sup> BBC, 'Profile: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)', (June 11, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24179084>.

<sup>111</sup> BBC, 'The rise of Isis', (August 6, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28116033>. BBC, 'Iraq conflict: ISIS militants seize new towns', (June 13, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27828595>.

Location	Date	foreign fighters	Sources	Alternative estimates
Afghanistan	1978-1992	5,000-10,000	Hegghammer, (2013) <sup>112</sup> , Hegghammer/Zelin <sup>113</sup>	25,000, Burke <sup>114</sup> /3,000-4,000, Hafez <sup>115</sup> / 40,000 Malet <sup>116</sup> / 3,000, Wright <sup>117</sup>
Bosnia	1992-1995	1,000-3,000	Hegghammer, Erjavec <sup>118</sup>	5,000, Kohlmann <sup>119</sup> , 4,000, Malet <sup>120</sup> + Aubrey <sup>121</sup>
Somalia	1993-2014	250-450	Hegghammer	200-1,000, <i>Homeland Security</i> <sup>122</sup> / 200-300, Shinn (2011) <sup>123</sup> , 300 to 1,200, <i>Washington Post</i> (2010) <sup>124</sup>
Chechnya	1994-2009	200-700	Hegghammer, Bakke <sup>125</sup>	1994-1999: <100, Moore & Tumelty <sup>126</sup> , 1999 onwards 200, Vidino <sup>127</sup>
Afghanistan	2001-2014	1,000-1,500	Hegghammer	2,000-3,000, Jane's World Armies <sup>128</sup>
Iraq	2003-2014	4,000-6,000	Hegghammer, <i>the Economist</i> <sup>129</sup>	1,000-5,000, Gerges (2005) <sup>130</sup> , 2,000 Vidino (2005) <sup>131</sup> , 800-2,000, <i>Brookings</i> (2007) <sup>132</sup> , 900-3,000 Hewitt & Moore (2009) <sup>133</sup>
Syria	2011-2014	10,000	ICSR <sup>134</sup> , Soufan Group <sup>135</sup>	

4 An estimate of foreign fighters in seven conflicts between 1979-2014, primarily based on Hegghammer's data from 2010 and updated by the use of others sources.

<sup>112</sup> Hegghammer, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?'.  
<sup>113</sup> T. Hegghammer and A. Zelin, 'How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade', *Foreign Affairs*, (July 7, 2013).  
<sup>114</sup> J. Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror*, (London 2007), 58.  
<sup>115</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 75.  
<sup>116</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 245.  
<sup>117</sup> L. Wright, 'The looming tower : Al-Qaeda and the road to 9/11', 105.  
<sup>118</sup> K. Erjavec, 'The "Bosnian war on terrorism"', *Journal of Language and Politics*, vol. 8, no.1 (2009), 7-8.  
<sup>119</sup> E. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network*, (Oxford 2004), xii.  
<sup>120</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 320.  
<sup>121</sup> S. Aubrey, *The New Dimension of International Terrorism*, (2004), 194.  
<sup>122</sup> Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, 'Foreign Fighters'.  
<sup>123</sup> D. Shinn, 'Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia', *FPRI*, (Spring 2011), 25.  
<sup>124</sup> S. Raghavan, 'Foreign fighters gain influence in Somalia's Islamist al-Shabab militia', *The Washington Post*, (June 8, 2010).  
<sup>125</sup> K. Bakke, 'Copying and Learning from Outsiders?', 16-17.  
<sup>126</sup> C. Moore and P. Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 418.  
<sup>127</sup> L. Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad*, (New York, 2006).  
<sup>128</sup> B.G. Williams, 'On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam"', 226.  
<sup>129</sup> *The Economist*, 'Two Arab countries fall apart', (June 14, 2014), <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across>.  
<sup>130</sup> F. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, (New York, 2005), 260.  
<sup>131</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 264.  
<sup>132</sup> *The Brookings Institution*, 'Iraq Index; Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq', (October 1, 2007), [www.brookings.edu/iraqindex](http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex).  
<sup>133</sup> C. Hewitt and J. Moore, 'Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A Cross-National Analysis of Jihadism, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21:2, (2009), 211-220.  
<sup>134</sup> ICSR, 'Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans', (December 17 2013), <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>.  
<sup>135</sup> T. McCoy, 'How ISIS and other jihadists persuaded thousands of Westerners to fight their war of extremism', *the Washington Post*, (June 17, 2014), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/17/how-isis-persuaded-thousands-of-westerners-to-fight-its-war-of-extremism/>.



In sum, the battle fields of Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, Iraq and Syria are not only very much connected, the available foreign fighter contingents from one conflict have a significant effect on the next. This dynamic is for a large part made possible by the Afghan veterans. Although never conceived or intended as a way station to global jihad, the Afghan war ‘gave birth to a new mobilized, seasoned, and professionalized transnational force composed of Muslim fighters and freelancers who became addicted to the jihad business’.<sup>136</sup> The Afghan-Arabs were not a decisive factor in the eventual military defeat of the Soviet Union, but the influx of thousands of foreign fighters from all over the world proved that a local conflict could be “marketed” globally to provide a unifying focus for would-be militants.<sup>137</sup> A movement dedicated to defending Muslims wherever they are and without consideration of nationality became reality as shown in the table above.<sup>138</sup>

### Non-crucial factors

This domino-effect may very well explain how the conflicts addressed in this study are connected, but it doesn’t explain why some conflicts attract thousands of fighters whereas others will have to “make-do” with hundreds (see figure above). A list of factors emerged during the months of research based on over 70 academic books and articles, as well as dozens of news reports. Before mentioning the factors that might be decisive, it is necessary to address factors that also might seem likely, but will not be tested in this study.

First of all, solely the role of Internet won’t be addressed as a possible factor. This might perhaps seem somewhat illogic considering that the creation of a narrative for jihad on the Internet has undoubtedly contributed to motivating current foreign fighters to fight the Assad regime.<sup>139</sup> Widespread availability of images depicting suffering and destruction in Syria, combined with the frame of a secular autocrat oppressing Sunni Muslims are perhaps even feeding a ‘social media jihad’.<sup>140</sup> Also the Dutch intelligence agency stated this year that the Internet, or more generally speaking, the increasing digitization has been a key factor for the AIVD in 2013. ‘We have seen how digital space is used to disseminate the jihadist body of thought, to help youngsters to radicalise and to help them with their travel abroad or with preparations for attacks.’<sup>141</sup>

Even before the Syrian conflict, Hegghammer stated in a policy brief for the *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs* in 2011, that ‘those seeking to prevent Muslim foreign fighter

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<sup>136</sup> Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, 84.

<sup>137</sup> V. Brown, ‘al-Qa`ida’s Road In and Out of Iraq,’ in Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC)*, (2010), 29-30.

<sup>138</sup> Mendelsohn, ‘Foreign Fighter – Recent Trends’, 191.

<sup>139</sup> S. Boeke and D. Weggemans, ‘Destination Jihad: Why Syria and not Mali’, *ICCT Commentary* (April 10, 2013), <http://www.icct.nl/publications/icct-commentaries/destination-jihad-why-syria-and-not-mali>

<sup>140</sup> Boeke and Weggemans, ‘Destination Jihad’.

<sup>141</sup> *AIVD*, Annual Report 2013.

recruitment need to recognize that the recruitment message relies not primarily on complex theological arguments, but on simple, visceral appeals to people's sense of solidarity and altruism.'<sup>142</sup> Western governments should, according to Hegghammer, therefore worry less about ultraconservative Salafism than about 'the spread of the Muslim victim narrative in mainstream Muslim discourse and the availability of audiovisual jihadi propaganda on mainstream Internet sites such as Youtube and Facebook'.<sup>143</sup>

Yet although the evolution in the roles and significance of foreign fighters is affected by diverse factors, no element has generated more debate than the impact of the Internet on the nature of the jihadi threat and its influence on the foreign fighters' problem.<sup>144</sup> According to many, the Internet has become the instrument of choice (or necessity) for recruitment. True, the Internet offers sympathizers a means of gaining information and access to propaganda tapes, potentially motivating them to get physically involved with the jihadi movement. Without the Internet, some potential recruits would probably not be aware of events outside their small universe and of the opportunities to get involved.

However, beside the fact that many recruits do not live in countries with widespread Internet access, online recruitment has yet to make real physical connection obsolete.<sup>145</sup> For example, In 2006 and 2007 coalition forces near Sinjar, Iraq managed to capture almost 600 personnel records from al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI).<sup>146</sup> These so-called Sinjar files indicate that foreign fighters who ended up in Iraq appear overwhelmingly to have joined the Jihad through jihadi sympathizers (33.5 percent) and personal social networks (29 percent), both in their own country of origin.<sup>147</sup> Only a few jihadis appear to have met their local coordinators directly through the Internet. The Sinjar records demonstrate that despite the difficulties, al-Qaeda in Iraq still preferred to recruit through physical contact rather than online because of the personal trust that can be established.<sup>148</sup> *FPRI* Senior Fellow Clinton Watts has pointed out that the old Marine adage, 'The best recruiter of a Marine is a former Marine,' is also applicable in this phenomenon: 'The best recruiter of a foreign fighter is a former foreign fighter.'<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> T. Hegghammer, 'The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Islam and Transnational Militancy', Policy Brief, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, (January 2011).

<sup>143</sup> T. Hegghammer, 'The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Islam and Transnational Militancy'.

<sup>144</sup> Mendelsohn, 'Foreign Fighter – Recent Trends', 199-200.

<sup>145</sup> Malet, 'Foreign Fighters', 283.

<sup>146</sup> J. Felter and B. Fishman, 'Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records', *Combating Terrorism Center*, 2007.

<sup>147</sup> Felter and Fishman, 'Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters'.

<sup>148</sup> J. Felter and B. Fishman, 'Becoming a Foreign Fighter: A Second Look at the Sinjar Records,' in Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout*, 45–46.

<sup>149</sup> *FPRI*, 'The foreign fighter problem'.

These findings were recently confirmed by a *RAND* study. Based on interviews with extremists, convicted terrorists and police senior investigative officers, the authors concluded that while self-radicalisation might be possible through the medium of the Internet, physical contact still plays a significant role.<sup>150</sup>

Another reason to dismiss the role of Internet alone is the fact that although al-Shabaab in Somalia made good use of 'jihadi rock star' Omar Hammami (nom de guerre Abu Mansoor al-Ameriki), an Alabama native and a top field commander, by letting him star in online propaganda videos to attract more foreign fighters, their numbers would still prove disappointing.<sup>151</sup> During the Balkan war in the mid-1990s videos were produced and mailed to sympathisers around the country.<sup>152</sup> This kind of hardcopy propaganda was inherently problematic as recipients were limited and had to be already known, (leaving an easy trail to follow) yet thousands of fighters showed up in Bosnia. Not to mention Afghanistan of course, where many thousands volunteered to fight in a time when Internet simply wasn't available to the general public.

A second explanation that didn't seem relevant enough although some scholars do pay attention to it, is the time factor. In other words, the duration of a conflict would have an effect on the numbers of foreign fighters. As Watts as noted, the Syrian revolution has continued far longer than any other Arab Spring uprising. 'With each passing day, the Syrian conflict draws the attention of additional recruits'.<sup>153</sup> This would mean the longer a conflict lasts, the more fighters might arrive which is exactly the point Watts makes: 'The longer the Syrian civil war goes on, the more foreign fighters will descend on the country'.<sup>154</sup> On the other hand, one could argue that those who wished to participate, have already done so. According to Timothy Holman of the *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, the pool of at least European potential jihadists has by now been drained.<sup>155</sup>

The current mobilization in Syria is indeed more significant than every other instance of foreign fighter mobilization since the Afghanistan war in the 1980s. Although conflicts like Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan after 2001 went on for (much) longer, none of those conflicts mobilized as

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<sup>150</sup> I. Behr, 'The Internet's Role in Radicalisation', *the RAND blog*, (March 21, 2014), [http://www.RAND.org/blog/2014/03/the-Internets-role-in-radicalisation.html?utm\\_campaign=RAND\\_socialflow\\_facebook&utm\\_source=RAND\\_socialflow\\_facebook&utm\\_medium=socialflow](http://www.RAND.org/blog/2014/03/the-Internets-role-in-radicalisation.html?utm_campaign=RAND_socialflow_facebook&utm_source=RAND_socialflow_facebook&utm_medium=socialflow)

<sup>151</sup> *Washington Post*, 'Foreign fighters gain influence in Somalia's Islamist al-Shabab militia', (June 8, 2010), [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/07/AR2010060704667\\_2.html?sid=ST2010052605568](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/07/AR2010060704667_2.html?sid=ST2010052605568). Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, 'Foreign Fighters', 20-21.

<sup>152</sup> S. Maher, 'Road to jihad. Almost impossible to regulate, the web is a gift for a new generation of young extremists', *Index on Censorship*, 04 (2007).

<sup>153</sup> C. Watts, 'Syria: Suffering the effects of the 2nd Foreign Fighter Glut', *FPRI*, (May 26, 2014), <http://www.FPRI.org/geopoliticus/2013/05/syria-suffering-effects-2nd-foreign-fighter-glut>.

<sup>154</sup> C. Watts, 'Syria: Suffering the effects of the 2nd Foreign Fighter Glut'.

<sup>155</sup> H. Bahara, 'Teleurgesteld in de heilige strijd; Syrië-gangers ontvluchten de broedertwist', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, (February 26, 2014).

many foreigners.<sup>156</sup> The first Afghan war had arguably comparable numbers of foreign fighters, but their arrival can't seem to be explained by the time factor as between 1979–1984 only a handful of Arab volunteers came to aid the Afghans.<sup>157</sup> It took more than five years before thousands of fighters would arrive. And what took six years to build in Iraq at the height of the US occupation, may have accumulated inside Syria in less than half that time.<sup>158</sup>

Another factor ruled out is the location of the battleground. It would perhaps seem logical to pick the battlefield which is closest. Yet, geographic vicinity is no guarantee for facilitation into conflict zones. At least this seems to be the case for European foreign fighters. For example, according to Spain's *Guardia Civil*, there is a larger trend of trying to travel to Pakistan than to the Maghreb theatres (Algeria, Morocco and the Sahel countries).<sup>159</sup> In other cases, the Chechen theatre has proven too difficult to gain entry to and has pushed instead German recruits to the FATA theatre.<sup>160</sup> Nowadays a great deal is said about the accessibility of the Syrian battleground explaining the massive arrival of volunteers, but it is interesting to note that although in 2007/2008 American recruits were even offered flight tickets to Somalia, the number of American volunteers remained relatively low.<sup>161</sup> In the first Afghan war, Azzam mentioned 'over three hundred thousand kilometres of open borders' permitting easy entry for the thousands of volunteers that indeed would arrive.<sup>162</sup> Yet the same open borders weren't crossed by comparable numbers when another superpower invaded the country about twenty years later.

Finally, a factor that will not be considered decisive is that of a "call of duty" presumably coming from local insurgents who in the words of Malet 'attempt to broaden the scope of conflict so as to increase their resources and maximize their chances of victory'.<sup>163</sup> However, according to Malet, due precisely to their lack of resources, they typically must motivate outsiders to join them for reasons other than material gain. This main conclusion of Malet's Ph.D. thesis and book, somehow strangely seems to ignore the fact that most of the time local insurgents *do not* initiate the mobilization. Most Muslim foreign fighter mobilizations were exogenous to the local insurgency, in the sense that foreign fighter recruitment was initiated and handled by other foreigners, not locals.

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<sup>156</sup> *JCSR*, 'Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria'.

<sup>157</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 75.

<sup>158</sup> L. al-Khouri, E. Kohlmann and A. Zelin, 'Convoy of Martyrs in the Levant. A Joint Study Charting the Evolving Role of Sunni Foreign Fighters in the Armed Uprising Against the Assad Regime in Syria', (June 2013), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Zelin20130601-FlashpointReport-v2.pdf>.

<sup>159</sup> Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, 'Foreign Fighters', 19-20.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibidem*, 19-20.

<sup>161</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 58-61.

<sup>162</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 234.

<sup>163</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, ix.

Insurgents often appealed to the international Muslim community for financial and political support, but they rarely called explicitly for fighters.<sup>164</sup>

Oddly, Malet does refer to this in his chapter on Afghanistan where Azzam's initial group of 60 recruits (including bin Laden) in 1984 found that the Soviets had already retreated from the most recent battle and they were told 'your presence is no longer needed'.<sup>165</sup> Afghan commanders generally saw the foreigners even a nuisance, only slightly less bothersome than the Soviets.<sup>166</sup> Bin Laden noted in his first trip into Afghanistan that the Afghans did not appear frightened during Soviet attacks, but the Arabs did. Others noticed as well. During one attack, Arab recruits were 'thrown into a panic, and they were further humiliated when the Afghan forces asked them to leave because they were so useless.'<sup>167</sup> Terrorism analyst Evan Kohlmann, found that many foreign recruits came from upper-middle class families, and that 'the native Afghan warriors were typically very suspicious of their new Arab allies, regarding these foreigners as "Gucci" soldiers who were out of touch with the social and religious fabric of the Afghan people.'<sup>168</sup> Foreigners and Afghans 'disagreed on almost everything, including politics and religion'.<sup>169</sup> At the same time, the transnational Islamist insurgents thought that the Afghans were sacrilegious. As one Afghan complained, 'They say we are dumb, and we do not know the Koran (...)'.<sup>170</sup>

### Crucial factors

Instead of a "call of duty" as a crucial pull factor, the element of internal disagreement will be investigated as an essential push factor. Each group shares some identity markers with the forces fighting in the country, but also differences that may sometimes be important determinants of how each group of foreign fighters is received by the locals and what its impact on the arena (and its attraction) will be. Perhaps sometimes the level of "foreignness" can be greater than the commonalities, potentially rendering foreign volunteers a divisive factor rather than a 'force multiplier'.<sup>171</sup> The relatively recent infighting in Syria between jihadists shows that although fighters once shared more or less the same goals, different ideas regarding ideology and strategy can possibly discourage potential foreign fighters.

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<sup>164</sup> Hegghammer, 'The rise of Muslim foreign fighters', 64-65.

<sup>165</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 245.

<sup>166</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 249.

<sup>167</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 110-111.

<sup>168</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe*, 8.

<sup>169</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 250.

<sup>170</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 78.

<sup>171</sup> Mendelsohn, 'Foreign Fighter – Recent Trends', 192.

This notion in a way departs from the earlier mentioned argument to divide the fighter's 'life cycle' into the pre-war mobilization phase, the war stage, and the post-war period.<sup>172</sup> It also departs from the focus on how foreign fighters can influence a domestic insurgent movement.<sup>173</sup> Instead, here it will be investigated whether the war stage has an influence on the mobilization which according to the author's hypothesis is not just a pre-war phase, but an ongoing development.

This follows the argument Watts made that foreign fighters - eager to brag about their accomplishments - communicate back to peers at home via email, phone, social media and jihadi web forums. Satisfied fresh foreign fighters can in this way encourage fence-sitters at home that jihadi dreams can be fulfilled creating an exponential recruitment pace.<sup>174</sup> However, the negative experiences of foreign fighters also likely influence the choice of emerging recruits as complaints about infighting likely dissuade other foreign fighters at home from following their path. Therefore internal disagreement is one of the factors that will be tested in the seven conflicts studied in this article.

Another factor that stood out in the initial research phase, is the role of leaders (or the lack of) as an essential part of recruitment. Although Gerges didn't focus so much on foreign fighters in his 2009 book *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (this study focused on doctrinaire jihadis who have used violence against both their own governments and Western targets), he learned in his conversations with former jihadis that personalities, not ideas or organizations, are the drivers behind the movement. 'It is a personality-driven animal that devours idealistic and alienated young Muslims.'<sup>175</sup> Gerges found that the most lethal and violent jihadi factions and cells were led by highly charismatic, aggressive, and daring personalities who captivated and inspired followers to unquestionably do their bidding. This study will tell to what extent such personalities were there in the seven conflicts to recruit fighters from abroad.

Connected to the role of leaders, but yet seen as a separate factor is the recruiting message and how it is transferred mostly through the media. Malet found that records from across widely different historical cases indicate that insurgencies try to recruit foreign fighters by framing distant civil conflicts as threatening a transnational identity group with which the recruit is closely affiliated. According to Malet, recruitment messaging emphasizes the necessity of defensive action to preserve the existence of the community.<sup>176</sup> In other words, recruiters frame victory in the conflict as necessary to the interests of outsiders with whom they share connections and who might be credibly

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<sup>172</sup> Kaplan, 'The Foreign Fighter Problem conference'.

<sup>173</sup> Bakke, 'Help Wanted?'.

<sup>174</sup> C. Watts, 'Foreign Fighters and Ants: How they form their colonies', *FPRI*, (July 16, 2013), <http://www.FPRI.org/geopoliticus/2013/07/foreign-fighters-and-ants-how-they-form-their-colonies>

<sup>175</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 35-42.

<sup>176</sup> Malet, 'Why foreign fighters'.

convinced by these claims. In the seven conflicts it will be studied how powerful the recruitment messaging was and whether enough channels were available to transmit these messages.

A fourth factor is the role national governments have in obstructing or enabling foreign fighters to arrive on the battlefield. This can take the form of some degree of state sponsorship or support by providing material resources or turning a blind eye when recruits leave the country to fight in another. At the same time, it is interesting to see conflicts during or after which the foreign fighters host and home states established policies that rendered them stateless, and thus truly transnational. A more obvious role is when especially Western, non-Muslim states trigger foreign fighter recruitment by invading a Muslim country and nourish the pan-Islamist victim narrative. Certain Western policies in the 1990s and 2000s have likely fueled transnational militancy, although only because there existed an extreme sensitivity to such policies in the first place.<sup>177</sup>

The fifth and last possible factor that has been suggested to have a significant impact on the mobilization of foreign fighters is one that is not mentioned often but can perhaps only be stated in the most simple terms: what are the chances of winning? As Watts, a man who perhaps as a former U.S. Army infantry officer prefers clear language, once stated: 'Despite all their macho bravado, no foreign fighter wants to join a fight where al-Qaeda is getting its ass kicked.'<sup>178</sup> Could it be this simple? Are foreign fighters 'human after all' by favoring playing for a winner? This is in the author's opinion so thought-provoking that it is worth to at least quickly examine in the seven conflicts of this study whether the chances to succeed could be a pull or push factor to join an insurgency abroad.

In the next seven chapters, the five factors will be tested in the following order: recruitment message, leaders, influence of states, chances of success, internal disagreements. The chapters will be presented in chronological order: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Each conflict will be introduced with a description of the foreign fighter involvement in the conflict.

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<sup>177</sup> Hegghammer, 'The rise of Muslim foreign fighters', 89.

<sup>178</sup> C. Watts, 'Hammami thinks the grass might be greener in Syria', *Selected Wisdom*, (January 15, 2013), <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=931>

## Afghanistan 1980-1992: First tour of duty

‘The Islamic State will be born, but birth cannot be accomplished without labor, and with labor there is pain’.

(Abdullah Azzam in *Join the Caravan*, 1987.<sup>179</sup>)

Perhaps a handful, possibly a few dozen, but certainly no more than a hundred Arab volunteers came to aid the Afghans between 1979 and 1984.<sup>180</sup> Moreover, they did so mainly to help in humanitarian efforts rather than to fight the Soviets. These first years can best be described as a first phase when discussing foreign fighters in the Afghan-Soviet war.

The origins of this war can be found after World War II, when the Afghan monarchy felt pressure from the cosmopolitan upper class to modernize, which the Kabul regime did by developing closer ties with Moscow.<sup>181</sup> The last king of Afghanistan was overthrown in 1973 by his brother-in-law Mohammed Daoud who initially enjoyed the support of the Marxist factions, prompting armed Islamist groups to form in response. Soon the first direct (though not very successful) calls for foreign fighters to come to Afghanistan were made by an Islamist insurgent group, led by Jalaluddin Haqqani, which declared jihad against the Afghan regime after the coup by Daoud.<sup>182</sup>

With Islamist opposition rising, the feckless Daoud was overthrown in 1978 by a coalition of the Communist factions that soon would face an insurgency from multiple Islamist factions. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to aid the beleaguered communist regime but its presence invigorated the resistance movement, expanding the conflict and leading to the deployment of peak numbers of 100,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan, with more than half a million serving there throughout the 1980s.<sup>183</sup>

The movement was soon taken over by Islamists who successfully reframed the war as one for an uncorrupted Islamic society rather than a question of who controlled the government. This transnational Islamic frame would draw outside support and foreign advisors, but local commanders enjoying new levels of popular support as the defense against foreign invasion, tried to keep them

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<sup>179</sup> Quoted in Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 233.

<sup>180</sup> Hafez, ‘Jihad after Iraq’, 75.

<sup>181</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 223.

<sup>182</sup> V. Brown and D. Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2001*, (New York, 2013), 84.

<sup>183</sup> Hafez, ‘Jihad after Iraq’, 75. Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 223-224.



out of Afghanistan to avoid controversy with the local population.<sup>184</sup> Foreigners interested in aiding the Afghans were therefore obliged to set up operations in Pakistani border towns.<sup>185</sup>

By 1984, when transnational recruitment began, an estimated three million Afghan refugees were in Pakistan, a figure representing 20 percent of the prewar population.<sup>186</sup> This year would mark the second phase from 1984 to 1989 in which there was a gradual influx of Arab volunteers inspired by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, one of the fund-raisers and recruiters for the Afghan jihad and the founder of the *Services Bureau* (also known as *Makhtab al-Khadamat*, MAK) that hosted Arab volunteers in Peshawar, Pakistan.<sup>187</sup>

The Arab Afghans were, however, nothing more than ‘a drop in the ocean’ as estimates of Arab volunteers in the Afghan conflict have ranged from 3,000–4,000 volunteers at any one time.<sup>188</sup> To compare, estimates of the numbers of Afghans on the battlefield at any given moment during the war against the Soviets put the number at around 200,000.<sup>189</sup> Most of the volunteers cannot, according to the Californian *Naval Postgraduate School* professor Mohammed Hafez, even be considered as fighters as they served in Pakistani cities as humanitarian aid workers, cooks, drivers, accountants, teachers, doctors, engineers, and religious preachers. ‘They built camps, mosques, and make-shift hospitals and schools. They dug and treated water wells and attended the sick and wounded.’<sup>190</sup>

So in addition to their relatively small size, Arab Afghans had little impact on the battlefield as the vast majority of volunteers did not go inside Afghanistan, let alone fight there. One of the first Arab recruits to the Afghan jihad was an Algerian known as Abdullah Anas who together with Azzam and bin Laden set up the *Services Bureau* that facilitated the travel and accommodation of foreign volunteers.<sup>191</sup> Anas spent nine years in Afghanistan during the Jihad, and said that even at the height of the fighting against the communists there were, at most, 500 Arabs inside Afghanistan on the battlefield.<sup>192</sup> An al-Qaeda report released in 2000, however, claimed that there had been 2359 foreign martyrs in Afghanistan: 540 Algerians, 526 Egyptians, 433 Saudis, 284 Libyans, 184 Iraqis, 180 Syrians, 111 Sudanese, and 100 Tunisians.<sup>193</sup> Initially, Arabs that did engage in warfare were dispersed across the seven major insurgent factions. Azzam encouraged this strategy because he saw

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<sup>184</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 225.

<sup>185</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 226.

<sup>186</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 225.

<sup>187</sup> Hafez, ‘Jihad after Iraq’, 75.

<sup>188</sup> Ibidem, 75.

<sup>189</sup> P. Bergen, ‘After the War in Iraq: What Will the Foreign Fighters Do?’, in Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout*, *Combating Terrorism Center* at West Point (CTC), (2010), 99.

<sup>190</sup> Hafez, ‘Jihad after Iraq’, 75.

<sup>191</sup> P. Bergen, ‘After the War in Iraq’, 99.

<sup>192</sup> Ibidem, 99.

<sup>193</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 253..

the role of Arabs as propagandists who would report from the field and provide tales of heroism that could be disseminated to the Arab world to raise money and other assistance for the Afghan jihad.<sup>194</sup>

These tales of heroism gained credibility when the Soviet Union withdrew its forces from Afghanistan in 1989. The insurgency however continued until 1992. These three years can be seen as the third and last phase in which the number of Arab volunteers substantially increased from earlier periods. According to Malet more than 6,000 arrived between 1987 and 1993, which in his view would be more than twice the number that came to fight the Soviets.<sup>195</sup> After the complete withdrawal of Soviet forces, Pakistan and Afghanistan were indeed 'flooded' with Arab volunteers seeking training in guerrilla warfare.<sup>196</sup> Many came to take advantage of the training camps that had been set up by Afghan and Arab commanders but would also fight the remnants of the communist regime of Muhammad Najibullah based in Kabul.<sup>197</sup> When this regime fell, the victory of the Afghan mujahideen was complete.

### Recruitment messaging

As explained in the first chapter, the Muslim world was undergoing an Islamic revival that began in the 1970s. This atmosphere undoubtedly nudged young men to fulfill their religious duty toward fellow Muslims. Azzam's ambitions were not limited to the guesthouses of Peshawar. While he networked with contacts among the Muslim Brothers in major Islamic institutions to find support, he also developed a strategy for recruitment throughout the transnational Muslim world, viewed by Islamists as a single communal *ummah*.<sup>198</sup> A vital project of his *Service Bureau* was the *Jihad* (or *al-Jihad*) magazine, which started publishing in the fall of 1984.<sup>199</sup> The magazine appeared twice a month, and included news of the war in Afghanistan focused on Arab efforts to help the Afghan jihad. Over time, *Jihad* became increasingly professional. In its first six months, the magazine was an amateurish production in black and white; subsequent issues were well laid out and featured a wealth of color photographs. This magazine would as well as others prove to be vital for fundraising and recruiting Muslim volunteers from around the world for the holy war against the Soviets.<sup>200</sup>

The story of a Saudi volunteer, Abdullah Ali Mekkawi, is instructive. At the age of 18, he expressed a desire to aid the jihad in Afghanistan after learning about it through two magazines,

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<sup>194</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 76.

<sup>195</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 255.

<sup>196</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 76.

<sup>197</sup> Ibidem, 76.

<sup>198</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 231.

<sup>199</sup> P. Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq', 102.

<sup>200</sup> Ibidem, 102.

*Jihad* and *Al-Bunyan*. He had simply written down the address of Azzam's Services Bureau in Peshawar.<sup>201</sup> Abdullah Anas, one of the earliest volunteers to Afghanistan, stated that he decided to go after reading a fatwa in a Kuwaiti magazine.<sup>202</sup> In another magazine, *al Mujahid*, Azzam shifted the focus from the *causus belli* to coverage of Afghan, and later foreign, insurgents, offering statistics and detailed biographies of those killed in action.<sup>203</sup> Azzam and his associates were able to travel internationally, selecting venues in sympathetic mosques and community gatherings in the West and Middle East, where audiences had been exposed to years of television coverage of Muslim mujahideen battling invading Soviets and their Communist allies.<sup>204</sup> Recordings of speeches and printed recruitment material focused on reinforcing the message of religious and communitarian responsibility to intervene.<sup>205</sup>

In *Join the Caravan* (which even helpfully listed telephone numbers in Peshawar that individuals could call to join the jihad), Azzam described Afghanistan in 1987 as merely one front in a larger war against Muslims, in which fighting was necessary so 'that unbelievers do not dominate'.<sup>206</sup> He argued that the 'Establishment of the [uncompromised] Muslim community on an area of land is a necessity, as vital as water and air. This homeland will not come about without an organized Islamic movement... The Islamic State will be born, but birth cannot be accomplished without labor, and with labor there is pain.'<sup>207</sup> In 1979 he had already stated that jihad is the obligation and that combatants and 'preachers most of all' were needed as foreign fighters.<sup>208</sup>

Gerges, who has interviewed Arab Afghans as they completed their prison sentences for militant activity in Arab countries, argued that the volunteers were driven by the plight and predicament of their Afghan counterparts who were seen as struggling against an atheistic enemy. 'I heard heart-wrenching stories of men who sacrificed their jobs, economic well-being, and comfort and went to Afghanistan to do their "duty" and partake in what they saw as a sacred struggle.'<sup>209</sup> In his conversations with several former Afghan volunteers in Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, and elsewhere, they stressed that they had not been Islamic activists or jihadis before migrating to Afghanistan.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 76.

<sup>202</sup> Ibidem, 76.

<sup>203</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 232.

<sup>204</sup> Ibidem, 232.

<sup>205</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 233.

<sup>206</sup> A. Bubalo and G. Fealy, 'Joining the caravan?', *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, (2005), [http://www.lowyinstitute.org/files/pubfiles/Bubalo\\_Joining\\_the\\_caravan.pdf](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/files/pubfiles/Bubalo_Joining_the_caravan.pdf). Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 233.

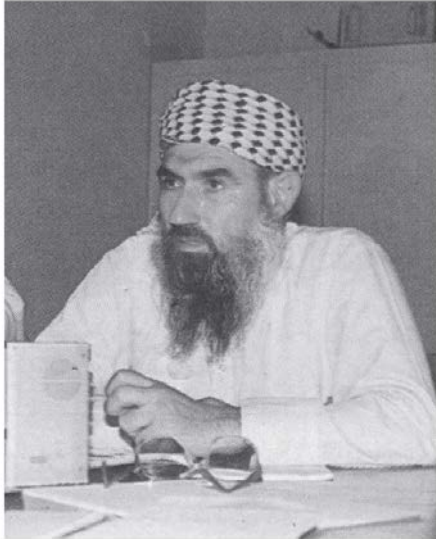
<sup>207</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 233-234. A. Azzam, 'Join the Caravan', (accessed June 16, 2014), [http://archive.org/stream/JoinTheCaravan/JoinTheCaravan\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/JoinTheCaravan/JoinTheCaravan_djvu.txt).

<sup>208</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 233-234.

<sup>209</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 80-81.

<sup>210</sup> Ibidem, 80-81.

Gerges concluded that the volunteers ('tens of thousands') were responding to mass media recruitment.<sup>211</sup>



5 Shaykh Abdullah Yusuf Azzam<sup>212</sup>

## Leaders

Probably the individual most responsible for recruiting a transnational fighting force was Abdullah Azzam, one of the early volunteers to the conflict and a charismatic personality.<sup>213</sup> Born in West Bank Transjordan in 1941 and recruited in the mid-1950s by a teacher to join the local branch of the Muslim Brothers, Azzam served with the Jordanian *fedayin* irregulars during the Six Day War but grew disillusioned with the secular Palestine Liberation Organization.<sup>214</sup> He launched a career in academia, where he gave influential and widely distributed lectures outlining his philosophy of the need to retake control of Muslim lands.<sup>215</sup> In 1979 Azzam took a position at the Islamic University in Islamabad just in time for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He soon relocated to Peshawar, capital of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province on the Afghan border, to teach at its university and work in support of the mujahideen.<sup>216</sup>

As the Afghan conflict escalated, Azzam grew frustrated that by 1984 only 'ten or twenty men' had come from the outside to fight, and he called upon the Brothers to send mujahideen.

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<sup>211</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 68-69, 80-84. Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 242.

<sup>212</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe*, 5.

<sup>213</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 75.

<sup>214</sup> Malet, 'Why foreign fighters?', 105.

<sup>215</sup> Ibidem, 105.

<sup>216</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 232.

When the leadership demurred, preferring to send weapons and humanitarian aid, Azzam publicly broke with the group. Although he would use his connections to the Brothers to deliver recruitment sermons, he set out to attract his own volunteer force dedicated to his territorial view of Islam and the need to repel infidels from its historic lands.<sup>217</sup> Azzam also used his direct connections to Saudi donors to fund his own organization, the *Service Bureau* and published recruitment and fundraising magazines such as *al-Jihad*. MAK operated differently than the other groups, establishing a hostel and a registry of volunteers for deployment to Afghanistan.<sup>218</sup>

Martyrdom was the product that Azzam sold in the books, tracts, videos, and cassette tapes that circulated in mosques and Arabic-language bookstores. 'I traveled to acquaint people with jihad,' as Lawrence Wright quotes Azzam in *The looming tower*, recalling his lectures in mosques and Islamic centers around the world.<sup>219</sup> Azzam visited the United States often looking for money and recruits among the young Muslims who were in the words of Wright 'mesmerized by the myths he spun'.<sup>220</sup> A few of those can be found in *The Scales of Allah*, in which Azzam offered anecdotes to demonstrate that, despite the lack of material goods or social status available to foreign fighters, their sacrifices would still be rewarded: 'The bodies of a number of those killed in battle reportedly emanated perfume for a week after their deaths in an indication of their ascension to the divine.'<sup>221</sup> As additional evidence of Allah's blessing, other foreign fighters miraculously survived attacks that killed local insurgents.<sup>222</sup>

Azzam savored the withdrawal of the Red Army in February 1989 as proof of the success of his model of transnational activism. Nine months later he was killed by a car bomb, and the movement he initiated left in the hands of his colleagues and rivals, amongst whom Osama bin Laden. Admittedly the best-known alumnus of the Afghan jihad, his role as a charismatic leader responsible for recruiting foreign fighters should perhaps not be overestimated. Bin Laden arrived in Pakistan to serve as a financier to jihad, not as an inspiring leader. Although bin Laden paid their rent, most of the Arab Afghans in the Peshawar guesthouses swore fealty to Azzam.<sup>223</sup> His wealth and his charity immediately distinguished him, but he would not make much of an impression as a charismatic leader, especially in the shadow of Azzam.<sup>224</sup> He was shy and serious, and he struck many

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<sup>217</sup> Malet, 'Why foreign fighters?', 105.

<sup>218</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 232.

<sup>219</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 105-106.

<sup>220</sup> Ibidem, 105-106.

<sup>221</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 237.

<sup>222</sup> Ibidem, 237.

<sup>223</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 103-106.

<sup>224</sup> Ibidem, 103-106.

as naïve according to Wright. 'He had a small smile on his face and soft hands' a hardened Pakistani mujahideen recalled in an interview with Wright.<sup>225</sup> 'You'd think you were shaking hands with a girl.'

It didn't help that bin Laden sought to open training camps just for the Arab volunteers as Azzam reportedly strongly disagreed. This would even mark the beginning of his split with bin Laden.<sup>226</sup> Moreover, new fighters recruited by bin Laden in 1988/1989 did sign their oath of loyalty to bin Laden but also received \$1,000 per month in salary, which would perhaps place a larger emphasis on his wallet than his charisma.<sup>227</sup>

However, the influence of that other individual is crucial for the mobilization of foreign fighters to Afghanistan as the Arab Afghan jihad only began in 1984 when Azzam left his final university post and made recruitment his full-time job, making speaking tours and publishing magazines through the auspices of his transnational donor network. By the end of 1984 there were according to Malet 12 foreign mujahideen, 25 in 1985, and 200 in 1986.<sup>228</sup>

### Influence of governments

As explained in the previous chapter, governments played a crucial role after the Afghan war as the volunteers extended their activities out of the conflict zone and established themselves in new ones. This could happen because the mujahideen were refused entry or persecuted by home governments that feared that they would continue their jihadist activities rather than settle down to normal daily lives. However, it were the same governments who first enabled their citizens to fight in Afghanistan.

According to Hafez's 2009 article *Jihad after Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans*, many governments subsidized the journey of volunteers and paid some salaries.<sup>229</sup> Azzam was welcomed in the Gulf and given plenty of opportunities to raise awareness of what was happening in Afghanistan, collect donations, and recruit volunteers. He was given funds to open up the *Services Bureau* in Peshawar.<sup>230</sup> The Saudi government reportedly subsidized airline tickets to Pakistan by 75 percent for jihadis.<sup>231</sup>

By the mid- and late-1980s, volunteers also came from Egypt and North Africa. The Egyptian president Sadat openly encouraged the Egyptian Muslim Brothers to join the jihad.<sup>232</sup> A number of Egyptian radicals were released from prison by the mid-1980s and knew that they would face harassment if they stayed at home. In addition to seeking a safe haven, they wanted to build up their

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<sup>225</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 103-106

<sup>226</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 246.

<sup>227</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 141.

<sup>228</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 244.

<sup>229</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 75.

<sup>230</sup> Ibidem, 75.

<sup>231</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 244.

<sup>232</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 241.

clandestine military capabilities in order to topple their regimes at home in the near future. By 1987, the core leaders of the Egyptian Islamic Group (*Gama'a Islamiyya*) established themselves in Peshawar and created their own guest house.<sup>233</sup>

In this way, according to Malet, the governments of various Muslim countries also permitted or actively facilitated recruitment for Afghanistan, hoping to simultaneously gain favor with the United States, domestic legitimacy by supporting Islam, and take the opportunity to 'unload militants and troublemakers'.<sup>234</sup> Hegghammer believes the Arab Afghans were not actively supported by governments, but they enjoyed a friction-free recruitment environment in the Gulf countries and in the West. The Arab governments' tolerance for open recruitment would last up until the early 1990s.<sup>235</sup> Hegghammer calls the passive state support for the Arab Afghans 'a necessary cause of the post-1980 proliferation of foreign fighters'.<sup>236</sup>

### Chances of success

As described in the first chapter, the foreign fighters would only arrive after the Afghan mujahideen already had achieved considerable successes in the fight against the Soviet army. So the chances of winning could be considered to be actually there. However, according to Wright 'it was death, not victory, that summoned many young Arabs to Peshawar', as martyrdom was the product that Azzam sold.<sup>237</sup>

There are a quite a few facts that counter this argument. For example Malet quoted an pro-jihad analyst who at the time stated that 'most of the Arab youth coming for training and participation for the limited time period they have, return to their countries, because they are students or clerks, and have to go to work. Many come during summer vacations or long holidays'.<sup>238</sup> In *A Message to Every Youth*, Azzam indeed concluded by exhorting readers to take advantage of the free time afforded them by their university holidays to follow the path of true Islam.<sup>239</sup>

Hafez quoted Michael Knights of *The Washington Institute* who also talked about 'vacationing' students from the Gulf. 'The vast majority of Saudi 'Afghan Arabs' saw the jihad as a colourful adventure (...).'<sup>240</sup> Hafez himself watched videotapes of Arab Afghans often revealing them

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<sup>233</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 76.

<sup>234</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 241.

<sup>235</sup> Hegghammer, 'The rise of Muslim foreign fighters', 68.

<sup>236</sup> Ibidem, 68.

<sup>237</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 106-107.

<sup>238</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 238.

<sup>239</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 233.

<sup>240</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 76.

eating together, wrestling with each other, and laughing with each other in austere settings.<sup>241</sup> Hafez therefor concluded that in many ways 'jihadists have put the fun back in fundamentalism—turning jihad into an adventure'.<sup>242</sup>

Adding Hegghammer's argument that the foreign fighter death rate was low (between 2 and 6 percent) and average tours short, one can indeed conclude that many volunteers, or at least the jihad "tourists", regarded their chances to succeed as considerable.<sup>243</sup>

### Internal disagreement

The differences between the Arab volunteers and the local Afghan mujahideen were undeniably there. To begin with, local commanders could not easily integrate Arabs into their Pashto or Dari speaking local units.<sup>244</sup> Many Afghan commanders even saw the foreigners as 'nuisances, only slightly less bothersome than the Soviets'.<sup>245</sup> Often they were regarded as 'superfluous' and weak by the hardened local mujahideen.<sup>246</sup>

This could arguably have affected the flow of foreign fighters as the fence sitters probably at some point would hear of the suspicious native Afghan warriors. Here however, bin Laden did play an important role behind the scenes. Bin Laden had observed that many Afghans treated the volunteers as 'glorified guests', not as real mujahideen.<sup>247</sup> He suggested to Azzam that 'we should take on the responsibility of the Arabs, because we know them better and can provide more rigorous training for them.'<sup>248</sup> So although few Arabs were actually fighting the jihad at that time, a more formal role for the Arabs in Afghanistan was created by bin Laden who offered a ticket, a residence, and living expenses for every Arab — and his family — who joined their forces.<sup>249</sup>

Azzam added to bin Laden's stunning announcement by issuing a fatwa that electrified Islamists everywhere. In a book eventually published under the title *Defense of Muslim Lands*, Azzam argued that jihad in Afghanistan was obligatory for every able-bodied Muslim.<sup>250</sup> So despite the internal disagreement, the volunteers would even arrive with increasing numbers as they were

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<sup>241</sup> See, for example, the video of Khattab in Afghanistan, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfIXiaO4Qx4>.

<sup>242</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 80.

<sup>243</sup> Hegghammer, 'The rise of Muslim foreign fighters', 63.

<sup>244</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 245.

<sup>245</sup> Ibidem, 249.

<sup>246</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>247</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 101-102.

<sup>248</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>249</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>250</sup> Ibidem.



trained separately in their own Arab sanctuaries on the Pakistani border and in Jalalabad and Khost inside Afghanistan.<sup>251</sup>

Those who trained became the trainers of future jihadists in the next arenas which were much needed as even within the Arab Afghan contingent there was hardly any unity. Malet: 'The fratricidal violence of the post-Red Army civil war gravely damaged ties among the mujahideen remaining in Afghanistan, and the anonymous assassination of Azzam, who had already lost his early influence as spiritual leader of the foreign fighters, reflected the deepening drift of the movement (...).'<sup>252</sup> In the words of Wright, the Afghan war had devolved in the early 1990s from a legendary struggle of Muslim 'heroes' battling the 'godless' infidels, into an endless parade of selfish internal squabbles (...).<sup>253</sup>

To maintain a sense of purpose among the recruits, the transnational foreign fighter movement needed to regroup and refocus its message of threat against the *ummah*, now that Communist Soviets had been defeated. The leadership now looked for another conflict that could be easily framed as a one-dimensional war to protect the faithful from murderous infidels, and it soon located one in Bosnia.<sup>254</sup>

In sum, the five factors seem to explain why at least many hundreds left their home country to fight in Afghanistan and at least thousands did so to train in the Arab camps. Azzam's preaching and advocacy of jihad to defend Afghan Muslims persecuted by the Soviets, reached audiences throughout the world via audio broadcasts, magazines and flyers. Advocating that jihad was a personal obligation of all Muslims, the charismatic Azzam became an essential fundraiser soliciting donations from the international Islamic community while establishing a Pakistani guesthouse and staging base for transitioning Arabs into his training camps in Afghanistan.<sup>255</sup> The governments of various Muslim countries permitted or actively facilitated recruitment for the struggle in Afghanistan, which was seen by many recruits as an adventure or at least a fight that could be won. There was a large amount of internal disagreement, but the volunteers would nevertheless arrive with increasing numbers as they were housed separately in their own Arab training camps. Internal squabbles amongst the Arab Afghans were resolved by focusing on a new enemy in a new arena that would (at least temporarily) unite them.

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<sup>251</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 77.

<sup>252</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 256.

<sup>253</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe*, 27-28.

<sup>254</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 256. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe*, 27-28.

<sup>255</sup> C. Watts, 'The Three Versions of Al Qaeda: A Primer', *FPRI*, (December 2013), <http://www.FPRI.org/articles/2013/12/three-versions-al-qaeda-primer>.

## Bosnia 1992-1995: Looking for jihad

‘Whoever was involved in this experience had the great desire that Allah would keep them engaged in Jihad until their death and that Allah would give them their death in the battlefield of Jihad.’

(Shaykh Abu Abdel Aziz ‘Barbaros’, a Saudi veteran of the Afghan jihad and one of the early leaders of foreign fighters in Bosnia, reflects the spirit of martyrdom in 1993.<sup>256</sup>)

The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina came into existence in March 1992 after a referendum confirmed its independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Of the various parts of the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina was a particularly troubled region: divided into a fractious, multi-ethnic patchwork since the days of the Ottoman Empire, it had a long history of religious and political tensions.<sup>257</sup> Not surprisingly, ethnic Serbs rebelled against Bosnia’s self-declared independent government in April 1992. When the carnage of the war began unfolding that spring, the Muslim-led Bosnian government was outgunned, outmanned, and almost entirely on the defensive. Western diplomatic condemnation of ethnic Serb offences fell on deaf ears, and the embattled Muslims struggled to hold out against a superior military force. This grave predicament captured the attention of sympathetic Muslims elsewhere in the world, and particularly in the Middle East.<sup>258</sup>

A Moroccan jihadi stated in a November 1992 press interview that he had come to fight ‘western aggression against the Muslim peoples’ and claimed there were already 700 mujahideen in the country.<sup>259</sup> Earlier that fall, small mujahideen units had begun attacking Serb militias, initially with unfavourable results. The first officially claimed action by Muslim foreign fighters in Bosnia occurred in September 1992, when a group of 55 mujahideen (including a Bahraini royal prince) attempted to open a supply line to Sarajevo.<sup>260</sup>

At the forefront of the movement of Arab volunteer soldiers to Bosnia were the mujahideen veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan.<sup>261</sup> In 1993 Arab, Turkish and Pakistani fighters made their way to join the *Kateebat al-Mujahidin* (‘Holy Warrior Brigade’ or ‘Battalion of the Holy Warriors’) led by a veteran of the Afghan conflict who went by the nom de guerre *Emir Barbaros*,

<sup>256</sup> Quoted in Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda’s Jihad in Europe*, 17.

<sup>257</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda’s Jihad in Europe*, 17-20.

<sup>258</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda’s Jihad in Europe*, 17-20.

<sup>259</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 261.

<sup>260</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 261.

<sup>261</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda’s Jihad in Europe*, 17-20.

(known also as Abu 'Abd al-'Aziz).<sup>262</sup> According to Kohlmann, thousands of young men driven by a warped sense of religious chivalry travelled to Bosnia ostensibly in the hopes of defending the ancient and threatened Muslim community in the Balkans.<sup>263</sup> The *Kateebat al-Mujahidin* was integrated into the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina's Third Corps, where more than 4,000 mujahideen would serve until implementation of the Dayton Accords in 1995.<sup>264</sup>

As transnational funds, supplies, and a mix of Afghanistan veteran and fresh recruits continued to flow, the foreign fighters quickly developed into a formidable adversary, one upon which the Sarajevo government came to increasingly rely. "*El Mujahidin*" was fully integrated into the Bosnian army command structure as Military Unit 5689, and its leaders were recognized and paid as officers.<sup>265</sup> By late 1994, the mujahideen had persevered in their efforts at waging war in Bosnia for almost three years, despite much strife and controversy. In 1995, the foreign guerrillas would manage to win significant battlefield victories independently and have a telling impact on the overall progress of the Bosnian civil war. Between May and September of 1995, three major combat offensives took place involving sizeable numbers of foreign jihadis which would eventually come to define the legacy of the foreign fighters in the Balkans.<sup>266</sup>

In December 1995, the lead United States peace negotiator in the Balkans Richard Holbrook met with the Bosnian president Izetbegovic in Sarajevo to stress 'the absolutely critical need' for the Bosnian government to remove any vestiges of between 700 and 3,000 'Iranian' or 'Afghan' veteran fighters remaining in the region, as they were perceived as a threat to the American and other forces there.<sup>267</sup> The Dayton Accords had therefor specifically mentioned expulsion of all foreign fighters from Bosnia within 30 days of the NATO deployment.<sup>268</sup>

The fundamentalist fighters, however, had formed and trained a critical frontline unit of the Bosnian military. Bosnian commanders uttered strong words of praise for the foreign mujahideen battalion who 'helped us very much'.<sup>269</sup> Thus, until the Bosnians could be certain that the war with the Serbs and Croats would not restart, the jihad battalion would not be sacrificed at the behest of fickle American foreign policy prerogatives.<sup>270</sup>

In order to evade the provision in the Dayton Accords to expel soldiers who were not of 'local origin', Izetbegovic's regime 'simply issued thousands of BiH passports, birth certificates, and other

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<sup>262</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 159-160.

<sup>263</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 17-20.

<sup>264</sup> S. Aubrey, *The New Dimension of International Terrorism*, (2004), 194.

<sup>265</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 261.

<sup>266</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 125.

<sup>267</sup> Ibidem, 162-163.

<sup>268</sup> Ibidem, 160.

<sup>269</sup> Ibidem, 162.

<sup>270</sup> Ibidem, 162-163.

official paperwork to various members of the foreign battalion'.<sup>271</sup> The easiest loophole to avoid the terms of the Dayton Agreement was through intermarriage and the organized settlement of former foreign mujahideen into civilian society. Once issued passports, these naturalized 'Bosniaks' blended into the local population beyond the view of NATO troops. Ultimately, American and European demands for the Bosnians to cast out their former Arab-Afghan allies went substantially unfulfilled until even after 11 September 2001.<sup>272</sup> Estimates put the number foreign fighters who remained in Bosnia after the war in 1995 around one thousand.<sup>273</sup> About the same number of citizenships were revoked in 2005.<sup>274</sup>

### Recruitment messaging

Hundreds of religious young Arabs, Asians and Iranians, many of them veterans of Afghanistan's civil war, flocked to Bosnia to join a distant war that had become a rallying point for radical young Muslims around the world, who saw in its unchecked violence, the treachery of the West and the powerlessness of their own leaders to do anything about it.<sup>275</sup> The struggle in Bosnia was another clear-cut example of a defensive jihad according to Aziz 'Barbaros' in a 1993 interview: 'We were looking for Jihad (after Afghanistan). (...) Only fifteen days lapsed (after the conquest of Kabul) and the crisis of Bosnia begun. This confirmed the saying of the Prophet (of Islam), peace and blessings be upon him, who said, "Indeed Jihad will continue till the day of Judgment"'.<sup>276</sup>

Arab Afghans may not have fought extensively in Afghanistan, but their mere presence there and socialization into radical Islamism fostered in some a desire for martyrdom. Jihadi magazines, especially Azzam's *al-Jihad*, lionized the "fallen martyrs" and fostered the image of heroic sacrifice in defense of Islam.<sup>277</sup> Bosnia saw similar propaganda, with improvement of the quality and techniques of martyrdom veneration. Despite a limited approach requiring the physical transmission of hardcopy material to known sympathizers, videos were produced and mailed around the country to draw attention to the conflict.<sup>278</sup>

Aziz, one of the early leaders of foreign fighters in Bosnia, reflected the spirit of martyrdom in a 1993 interview with *Al-Daawah* magazine: 'The Jihad in Afghanistan was a great experience.

<sup>271</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 163.

<sup>272</sup> Ibidem, 175-176

<sup>273</sup> K. Erjavec. 'The "Bosnian war on terrorism"', *Journal of Language and Politics*, vol. 8, no.1 (2009), 7-8, <http://www.jbe-platform.com/content/journals/10.1075/jlp.8.1.02erj>.

<sup>274</sup> Erjavec. 'The "Bosnian war on terrorism"', 8.

<sup>275</sup> K. Murphy, 'Islamic Volunteers Rallying to Killing Fields of Bosnia', *LA Times*, (December 14, 1992), [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-12-14/news/mn-1527\\_1\\_islamic-world](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-12-14/news/mn-1527_1_islamic-world)

<sup>276</sup> *Al-Sirat Al-Mustaqeem*, 'INTERVIEW: With Comm. Abu Abdel Aziz 'Barbaros' (Bosnia)', issue: No. 33, Safar 1415, (August 1994), <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/decani/conversations/topics/59625>.

<sup>277</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 75.

<sup>278</sup> Maher, 'Road to jihad'.

Whoever was involved in this experience had the great desire that Allah would keep them engaged in Jihad until their death and that Allah would give them their death in the battlefield of Jihad. And this is also our desire that we are killed in the way of Jihad.<sup>279</sup>

The enlistment of literate Western Muslims permitted mujahideen groups to translate and publish Arabic sermons into English and French to reach the sons of immigrants who were alienated in their new homelands and estranged from their old ones.<sup>280</sup> In 1993, the *Al-Kifah Refugee Center*, in Boston issued a flyer to local Muslims titled, *A Call to Jihad in Bosnia*.<sup>281</sup> *Al-Kifah's* English-language newsletter *Al-Hussam* (The Sword) also began publishing regular updates on jihad action in Bosnia.<sup>282</sup>

All messaging clearly reflected the strategy to present a morally unambiguous reason for continuing the jihad. Abu Abd al-Aziz, later a leader of *Palestinian Islamic Jihad*, claimed that he went from Afghanistan to Bosnia upon hearing of violations of Muslim women by Christians.<sup>283</sup> A recruitment video titled *The Sword is the Solution* featured an opening shot of an abandoned Soviet tank in Afghanistan that quickly lead to images of Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, police confrontations with civilian women, and the mutilation of the body of a young boy.<sup>284</sup> These were followed by readings from the Koran and the narrator insisting in Arabic that 'The religion of Allah will not be spread except through Jihad, and the Jihad is through fighting and killing ... Jihad is an activity to be carried out by society as a whole'.<sup>285</sup>

Propaganda videos of the military training in the Bosnian camps reflected strong similarities to the training camps in Afghanistan: demanding callisthenic exercises, daunting obstacle courses, basic weapons and explosives, and legions of black clad, bearded guerrillas chanting: 'There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is his messenger!'.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 17

<sup>280</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 260.

<sup>281</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 39.

<sup>282</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 39.

<sup>283</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 260.

<sup>284</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 260-261.

<sup>285</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 260-261.

<sup>286</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 18.



6 The foreign mujahideen in Bosnia, December 1992; Abu Abdel Aziz 'Barbaros' at far right<sup>287</sup>

## Leaders

Before the Bosnian war, Aziz 'Barbaros', was under his real name Abdelrahman al-Dosari known as a widely respected Islamic lecturer in the Arabian Gulf.<sup>288</sup> When the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan intensified in the early 1980s, he abandoned the lecture circuit and family life to join in the new international Islamic crusade. During the first Afghan war, Aziz gained the nickname 'Hown' for his particular combat proficiency with Russian-made 'Hound' artillery rockets.<sup>289</sup> Later on he took on the nom de guerre Barbaros, (meaning 'the red bearded') due to his characteristic thick reddish-orange colored beard.<sup>290</sup>

Within weeks of the start of Bosnia-Herzegovina's drive for secession from Yugoslavia, Aziz went with 'four of those who participated in Afghanistan to Bosnia to check out the landscape'.<sup>291</sup> He later related that there had not yet been international media coverage of the conflict, and that he previously had no idea where in the world Bosnia was or how many Muslims lived there. Upon experiencing this new civil war, he decided that the Arab Afghans were uniquely positioned to intervene: 'We are not here to bring supplies like food and medicine...There are a lot of organizations that can do that. We bring men.'<sup>292</sup>

Aziz possessed a strong personal charisma, in the style of Azzam, that proved vital in the recruitment of foreign mujahideen volunteers.<sup>293</sup> These idealistic young men listened obediently to his lectures like the one the Saudi militant gave in Chicago in 1993: 'Fight for the sake of Allah – not fighting by shouting, not fighting by burning tires by the road . . . no, this is not the Muslim way . . . [It

<sup>287</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 17

<sup>288</sup> Ibidem, 17-20.

<sup>289</sup> Ibidem, 17-20.

<sup>290</sup> Ibidem, 17-20.

<sup>291</sup> *Al-Sirat Al-Mustaqeem*, 'INTERVIEW: With Comm. Abu Abdel Aziz 'Barbaros'.

<sup>292</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 259.

<sup>293</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 17-20.

is] the fight . . . killing the enemy, and to be killed.'<sup>294</sup> By this time bin Laden already played an important part as Aziz proceeded to elaborate further on bin Laden's master plan for Bosnia which in Aziz's words was 'to establish a base for operations in Europe against al-Qaeda's true enemy, the United States.'<sup>295</sup>

Aziz also began a major fundraising and recruitment drive to help support the jihad. According to Kohlmann, he spread news of the Bosnian mujahideen to a number of fundamentalist Muslims clerics throughout the Middle East who were sympathetic to, and often joined the ranks of the Arab-Afghans. 'These radical clerics, mobilized by seemingly endless scenes of civilian bloodshed in Bosnia, castigated their followers that they were cowards and 'disbelievers' if they did not help the mujahideen defeat the 'Crucifixers' in the Balkans.'<sup>296</sup>

In Bosnia, Aziz served as the first commander-in-chief of the Bosnian Arab-Afghans with his first headquarters at a training camp near the central-Bosnian town of Travnik.<sup>297</sup> In his own words, his men had 'full jurisdiction in the region we are responsible for (...). The general command of the Muslim forces wants to see results, it does not dictate strategy or action.'<sup>298</sup>

A *Newsweek* reporter saw with his own eyes how even the local population praised Aziz: '... when mujahedin commander Aziz drives through Mehurici in his new black four-wheel-drive Nissan, the town turns out for him. Children wave, old people turn and smile, and other villagers approach with invitations to weddings and parties'.<sup>299</sup>

In addition to Aziz, the Bosnian conflict had more 'leading personalities' to attract foreign fighters. The Egypt born Wahiudeen al-Masri had developed himself in Afghanistan into an 'unusually proficient guerrilla soldier' and became another Arab legend of the Bosnian war.<sup>300</sup> The same can be said about Moataz Billah, a well-known student activist in the Islamist movement. 'His courage was the subject of hallowed (often far-fetched) legend; one story recounted how, in a bid to escape Egyptian authorities, he had jumped off a five-storey building and somehow miraculously escaped bodily harm.'<sup>301</sup> In any event, he was an ideal candidate to join the militant Arab exiles in Afghanistan, and developed into a professional and charismatic guerrilla fighter who personally trained virtually all of the early volunteers among the foreign mujahideen based in Bosnia.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 18.

<sup>295</sup> Ibidem, 18.

<sup>296</sup> Ibidem, 24.

<sup>297</sup> Ibidem, 19.

<sup>298</sup> *Al-Sirat Al-Mustaqeem*, 'INTERVIEW: With Comm. Abu Abdel Aziz 'Barbaros'.

<sup>299</sup> *Newsweek*, 'Help from the holy warriors', (April 10, 1992), <http://www.newsweek.com/help-holy-warriors-199918>.

<sup>300</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 24.

<sup>301</sup> Ibidem, 23.

<sup>302</sup> Ibidem, 23-24.

## Influence of governments

A few governments have played an important part in the mobilization of foreign fighters in Bosnia. First of all, there was a “competition” between Saudi Arabia and Iran over which country could send more weapons to the Muslims in Bosnia.<sup>303</sup> In 1995, State Department spokesperson Nicholas Burns confessed that United States intelligence was finding it ‘hard to distinguish’ between radical Shiite elements in the Balkans loyal to Iran and the Saudi-sponsored jihadi disciples of Afghanistan.<sup>304</sup>

It was, however, Pakistan which facilitated a push factor as in January 1993, the Pakistani government, eager to put the Afghan jihad in the past, ordered the closure of Arab mujahideen offices in the country and threatened any illegal foreign fighters who attempted to remain in Pakistan with official deportation.<sup>305</sup> According to Malet, this edict went largely unenforced, although Kohlmann mentioned a senior Egyptian jihad leader who told, ‘all of them [are] closed, Sheik, nothing is left open . . . even the Base [Al-Qaeda] is closed completely and they all departed from here . . . except for special situations.’<sup>306</sup> If this is true, the displaced men faced a serious problem, because return to their countries of origin meant certain arrest, torture, and likely death. At the time, a Saudi spokesman for the Arab-Afghans in Jeddah explained in the media, ‘the Algerians cannot go to Algeria, the Syrians cannot go to Syria or the Iraqis to Iraq. Some will opt to go to Bosnia, the others will have to go into Afghanistan permanently.’<sup>307</sup> His assessments were predictably accurate and a number of prominent Arab guerrillas left South Asia destined for a new life of asylum and ‘holy war’ amidst the brutal civil conflict in the Balkans.<sup>308</sup> So even if the Pakistani edict went largely unenforced, it coincided with the availability of just the type of conflict that the al-Qaeda leadership had been seeking.

## Chances of success

By the early fall of 1992, a new base for jihad was quickly growing in the Balkans. With the help of influential clerics and Al-Qaeda military commanders, the foreign Bosniak brigade was coalescing together various disparate elements in the international Arab-Afghan network. The mujahideen

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<sup>303</sup> T. Hegghammer and A. Zelin, ‘How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade’, *Foreign Affairs*, (July 7, 2103), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139557/thomas-hegghammer-aaron-y-zelin/how-syrias-civil-war-became-a-holy-crusade>

<sup>304</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 161.

<sup>305</sup> Ibidem, 17-20.

<sup>306</sup> Ibidem, 17-20. Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 258.

<sup>307</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 16.

<sup>308</sup> Ibidem, 16.



war machine so familiar in Afghanistan had been successfully revived many hundreds of miles westward in the heart of Europe.<sup>309</sup>

The Arab fighters could indeed claim many victories. In October 1992, a group of Arab mujahideen teamed up with local Bosnian army soldiers in a bold operation to 'liberate' the international airport in the suburb of Butmir and surrounding environs south of Sarajevo from the tenacious grip of nearby Serb troops and armor.<sup>310</sup> The October battle, though debatably successful, developed into quite a legendary tale which was memorialized and made relatively famous in a widespread propaganda and fundraising video. The video documented dramatic scenes of frontline combat and interviews with Arab survivors who discussed the events that took place near Sarajevo. One of the mujahideen was Abu Zubair, a 24-year-old Saudi and cousin of bin Laden, one of the most famous of a group of 'notable Mujahideen personalities' to participate in these celebrated combat operations.<sup>311</sup>

Another success was later achieved in Podsijelovo, where according to many eyewitnesses, in less than one hour, the mujahideen were able to seize control and silence Serbian artillery positions.<sup>312</sup> Soldiers from the Bosnian army claimed that the mujahideen had overwhelmed Serb trenches, killing sixty, and disabling three Serb battalions. The radios in the frontline base camp began to crackle with reports of victory from enthusiastic unit commanders.<sup>313</sup>

### Internal disagreement

As in Afghanistan, neo-fundamentalist foreign fighters clashed with local insurgents over their culture, as some Arabs complained that the Bosniaks were not really Muslims because they drank and danced.<sup>314</sup> In general though, it seems the Arab Afghans were very much appreciated because of the successes shown above. Local soldiers who had fought with the mujahideen were impressed with their bravery and their ability to strike terror in the hearts of Serbian fighters, 'who cringed at the sound of war cries to Allah'.<sup>315</sup> The Islamic warriors were admired as martyrs. 'They came here to be killed,' said Elis Bektas, a 22-year-old platoon leader in the Bosnian Army to a reporter.<sup>316</sup> 'They are very good fighters,' said another Bosnian. 'They have no fear for their lives.'<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, 30.

<sup>310</sup> Ibidem, 57-58.

<sup>311</sup> Ibidem, 57-58.

<sup>312</sup> Ibidem, 130.

<sup>313</sup> Ibidem, 130.

<sup>314</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 261-262.

<sup>315</sup> *Newsweek*, 'Help from the holy warriors'.

<sup>316</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>317</sup> Ibidem.

The mujahideen were even fully integrated into the Bosnian army command structure and would have a telling impact on the overall progress of the Bosnian civil war.<sup>318</sup> The proof can be found in the fact that the Bosnian government did not put serious pressure on the Arab fighters to leave after the war.<sup>319</sup>

In sum, the five factors seem to explain very well why as many as thousands of mostly Arabs joined the war in Bosnia. Propaganda videos of the military training in the Bosnian camps reflected strong similarities to the training camps in Afghanistan, making the struggle in Bosnia another clear-cut example of a defensive jihad. In the style of Abdullah Azzam, Aziz ‘Barbaros’, was with his characteristic thick reddish-orange colored beard one of the leading personalities to recruit thousands of mujahideen volunteers. Many of them had to leave their bases in Pakistan as the Pakistani government ordered the closure of Arab mujahideen offices and threatened foreign fighters with deportation. In other words, Bosnia came at the right time for the mujahideen in Afghanistan where the civil war degenerated into intra-mujahideen factional fighting. The mujahideen war machine from Afghanistan had been successfully revived as the Arab fighters could claim many victories showing their chances of success. Because of this, they were regardless of ideological differences, generally appreciated by Bosnian soldiers and civilians.

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<sup>318</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 261.

<sup>319</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda’s Jihad in Europe*, 161.

## Somalia 1993-2014: no more heroes

'The jihad in Somalia is (...) completely the same as the global jihad in everything. However the jihad in Somalia lacks immigrant Mujahidin, (...). O heroes, how long should we wait?'

(Al-Shabaab's official spokesman Shaykh Abu-Mansur in a 2008 interview.<sup>320</sup>)

With the government's collapse in 1991, Somalia was about to experience a period of enormous upheaval including civil war, a US-led humanitarian intervention, attacks on UN and US forces and eventually the withdrawal of the UN mission in 1995.<sup>321</sup> This was also a period when a few Arab veterans now organized as al-Qaeda first attempted to forge cooperative relations with Somali Islamists. Somalis have practised Islam for over 1,000 years, since the faith reached the Horn of Africa from the Arabian peninsula before the ninth century. With the government's collapse in 1991, Islamists experienced unprecedented freedom. A bewildering array of Islamic associations suddenly emerged, each purporting to represent a discrete religious doctrine. Their common denominator was the desire for an "authentic" form of Islamic governance in Somalia.<sup>322</sup>

The initial objective of al-Qaeda was to explore an alternative base of operations to Afghanistan and Sudan to where bin Laden had relocated in 1992.<sup>323</sup> During these early days in Sudan, bin Laden dispatched teams to integrate with Islamist clans in southern Somalia. From 1992 - 1994, al-Qaeda unsuccessfully attempted to train and indoctrinate Somali militias while goading them to attack Western and United Nations forces.<sup>324</sup> Bin Laden claimed that he sent 250 men to Somalia to fight against U.S. troops, but according to Sudanese intelligence, the actual number of al-Qaeda fighters was only a handful.<sup>325</sup> No more than about a dozen Arabs were reported to have trained at the camps and participated in the incursion into Ethiopia in 1995.<sup>326</sup> The challenges of logistics, distance and culture that have undermined many foreign endeavours into rural Africa

<sup>320</sup> *Sada al-Jihad magazine*, 'Somalia's Mujahidin Youth Movement Spokesman Discusses Progress of Jihad', (February 22, 2009), <http://www.al-qimmah.net/showthread.php?t=3517>.

<sup>321</sup> *Combating Terrorism Center*, 'Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa', (July 2, 2007), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-misadventures-in-the-horn-of-africa>.

<sup>322</sup> *International Crisis Group*, 'Somalia's Islamists', Africa Report N°100 (December 12, 2005), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/somalia/Somalias%20Islamists.pdf>.

<sup>323</sup> *Combating Terrorism Center*, 'Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures', 37-38.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibidem*, iii.

<sup>325</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 188.

<sup>326</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 28.

plagued al-Qaeda's operations as well. By 1996, bin Laden and his Africa Corps had been run out of Sudan and were headed back to Afghanistan.<sup>327</sup>

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the subsequent US-led offensive to remove the Taliban from power and prevent al-Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a base, Somalia gained attention as a possible site for al-Qaeda to regroup.<sup>328</sup> Somalia was viewed by the US government as "ungoverned space" easily exploited by terrorists. The US specifically identified a small number of "high value" operatives from the East African al-Qaeda (EAAQ) cell, some of whom were responsible for the 1998 embassy bombings, and argued it had hard evidence that those figures were coming and going from Mogadishu.<sup>329</sup> The group that the EAAQ cell was relying on for protection in Mogadishu, was believed to be Somali jihadists linked to the militia which later became known as al-Shabaab.<sup>330</sup>

In July 2006, bin Laden made a specific call for Muslims to support the Sharia court movement, united in the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) declaring: 'We warn all the nations of the world not to agree to America's request to send international forces to Somalia. We swear to Allah that we will fight its soldiers on Somali soil, and we reserve the right to punish on their own soil (...)'.<sup>331</sup> The same year, a loose coalition of Islamists and the ICU defeated a coalition of US-backed militia leaders in Mogadishu. One militia wing was especially important this ICU victory. It was known as al-Shabaab, ("youth" in Arabic) and was a well-trained, well-armed, committed group of about 400 militia answering to a commander, Adan Hashi 'Ayro, who had served as a mujahideen fighter in Afghanistan.<sup>332</sup>

It is believed al-Shabaab by then had already begun to organize an influx of new foreign fighters.<sup>333</sup> In early 2005, Ayro and his militia took over a compound in Mogadishu and this was where he reportedly hosted operatives from Yemen, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia who were primarily involved in the training of young Somalis.<sup>334</sup> Together they unsuccessfully fought the invading Ethiopian army which attacked the Sharia Courts in December 2006.<sup>335</sup>

The defeat of the ICU forces in 2006-2007 turned in reality out to be a rearranging of forces after which al-Shabaab became the strongest militia force in southern Somalia.<sup>336</sup> Al-Shabaab took

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<sup>327</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 165, 219-222. *Combating Terrorism Center*, 'Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures', 5.

<sup>328</sup> K. Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America', Hearing before the *Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*, (March 11, 2009).

<sup>329</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism'.

<sup>330</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>331</sup> Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 41.

<sup>332</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism'.

<sup>333</sup> Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 44.

<sup>334</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 29.

<sup>335</sup> Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 41.

<sup>336</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 12.

control of the resistance and, over time, gained control of central and south Somalia. It would introduce new military technologies into Somalia, especially the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), but also it also introduced the use of suicide bombers, a tactic unheard of in the past. In 2008, the first known American suicide bomber — a 26-year-old Somali-American fighting with al-Shabaab — blew himself up in northern Somalia.<sup>337</sup> Still, al-Shabaab complained that too few foreign fighters joined their brothers in Somali (see quote at the beginning of this chapter).<sup>338</sup>

Nevertheless, in the spring of 2009 the influx of foreign fighters had begun to worry the UN Security Council. A Somalia report from April noted that the increased traffic of foreign fighters linking up with radical groups was of serious concern and that recent attacks had become more sophisticated, coordinated and lethal.<sup>339</sup> Somali military and police officials on several occasions offered various estimates ranging into several thousands, yet with no evidence to support these remarkable claims. A Somali colonel told the Danish researchers Michael Taarnby and Lars Hallundbaek in 2009 that there were about 250 foreign fighters active in the Mogadishu area.<sup>340</sup> Asians and fighters from the Middle East seemed to be predominant. In 2010 Somali and US intelligence estimated the foreign fighters in Somalia to number 300 to 1,200.<sup>341</sup> Most of these were likely Somalis with foreign passports from the large Somali diaspora. The non-Somali contingent possibly numbered only about 200 to 300 by 2011.<sup>342</sup> In its annual terrorism situation and threat report, EUROPOL commented though that there had been an ‘increased interest’ of European foreign fighters in travelling to Somalia via Kenya in 2011.<sup>343</sup>

In February 2012, al-Shabaab officially merged with a Zawahiri-led al-Qaeda.<sup>344</sup> The merger, instead of demonstrating the group’s strength, signalled a downward spiral for al-Shabaab. Since the fall of 2012, al-Shabaab has been fraught with internal fractures and pushed from most major cities by the Somali National Army and their allies.<sup>345</sup> The ranks of willing local recruits have thinned and

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<sup>337</sup> R. James, ‘A Brief History Of Al-Shabab’, *Time*, (December 7, 2009), <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1945855,00.html>.

<sup>338</sup> R. Paz, ‘The Youth are Older: The Iraqization of the Somali Mujahidin Youth Movement’, *The project for the research of Islamist movements* (PRISM), Occasional papers, Volume 6, Number 2 (December 2008), [http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM\\_no\\_2\\_vol\\_6\\_-\\_Millat\\_Ibrahim\\_-\\_Dec08.pdf](http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_no_2_vol_6_-_Millat_Ibrahim_-_Dec08.pdf).

<sup>339</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, ‘Al Shabaab’, 31-32.

<sup>340</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>341</sup> S. Raghavan, ‘Foreign fighters gain influence in Somalia’s Islamist al-Shabab militia’, *The Washington Post*, (June 8, 2010), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/07/AR2010060704667.html?sid=ST2010052605568>.

<sup>342</sup> D. Shinn, ‘Al Shabaab’s Foreign Threat to Somalia’, *FPRI*, (Spring 2011), 25-32.

<sup>343</sup> Hennessy, ‘The Return of Europe’s Foreign Fighters’.

<sup>344</sup> C. Watts, ‘The Three Versions of Al Qaeda: A Primer’, *FPRI*, (December 2013), <http://www.FPRI.org/articles/2013/12/three-versions-al-qaeda-primer>.

<sup>345</sup> Watts, ‘The Three Versions of Al Qaeda’.

fewer international jihadists were coming into Somalia in 2012.<sup>346</sup> The Norwegian al-Shabaab expert Stig Jarle Hansen stated in February this year that its Western members are decreasing.<sup>347</sup> However, the September 2013 Westgate Mall and June 2014 Mpeketoni attacks in Kenya as well as its links with Boko Haram in Nigeria, demonstrate al-Shabaab is still a threat, despite its setbacks.<sup>348</sup>

### Recruitment messaging

In 1992, the sudden announcement of the US-led humanitarian intervention into Somalia was the “wildcard” that transformed al-Qaeda objectives in Somalia. Thereafter, the abiding preoccupation was the need to attack and derail the US/UN mission.<sup>349</sup> Given the diversity of the trainees and their causes, bin Laden's main task was to direct them toward a common enemy. He had developed a fixed idea about America, which he explained to each new class of al-Qaeda recruits.<sup>350</sup> America appeared mighty, he told them, but it was actually weak and cowardly: ‘Whenever soldiers start coming home in body bags, Americans panic and retreat’.<sup>351</sup> Bin Laden could scarcely wait to drive a spear into the heart of the last superpower. He saw his first opportunity in Somalia.

The downing of two American helicopters in October 1993, however, became the turning point in the war. Enraged Somali tribesmen triumphantly dragged the bodies of the dead crewmen through the streets of Mogadishu, a sight that prompted President Clinton to quickly withdraw all American soldiers from the country. As Wright noted, bin Laden's analysis of the American character had been proven correct.<sup>352</sup> ‘Only eighteen U.S. troops were killed. Nonetheless, they fled in the heart of darkness’, bin Laden boasted on *al-Jazeera*.<sup>353</sup> Even though his own men had run away, bin Laden attributed to al-Qaeda the downing of the helicopters in Somalia and the desecration of the bodies of U.S. servicemen.<sup>354</sup>

More than ten years later, bin Laden again mentioned the theme of Western interference and stated that any crusader soldier on Somali soil would be fought.<sup>355</sup> Moreover, he urged Muslims to assist the needs of the mujahideen in several theatres, including Somalia.<sup>356</sup> When Ethiopian troops invaded Somalia in December 2006 to crush the Islamic Courts Union, some Somalis indeed

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<sup>346</sup> B. Bruton, ‘Divisive Alliance’, *The Washington Post*, (February 21, 2012),

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/22/opinion/divisive-alliance.html?\\_r=3&ref=alshabab&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/22/opinion/divisive-alliance.html?_r=3&ref=alshabab&)

<sup>347</sup> S. Hansen, ‘An In-Depth Look at Al-Shabab’s Internal Divisions’, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 7 . Issue 2, (February, 2014), 9.

<sup>348</sup> K. Menkhaus, ‘Al-Shabab’s Capabilities Post-Westgate’, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 7 . Issue 2, (February, 2014), 4.

<sup>349</sup> *Combating Terrorism Center*, ‘Al-Qa’ida’s (Mis)Adventures’, 38-39.

<sup>350</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 187-188.

<sup>351</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>352</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>353</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>354</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>355</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, ‘Al Shabaab’, 24.

<sup>356</sup> Ibidem.

came to view the harsh Ethiopian occupation as part of a Western campaign against the Islamic world, linking the occupation to the US military occupation of Iraq, which was deeply unpopular in Somali circles.<sup>357</sup> What emerged in Somalia, and in the Somali diaspora, was a 'complex cocktail of nationalist, Islamist, anti-Ethiopian, anti-American, anti-Western, anti-foreigner sentiments'.<sup>358</sup> This cocktail was an ideal recipe for al-Shabaab, which emerged as main source of armed resistance to the Ethiopian occupation, presented as a defensive jihad.<sup>359</sup>

According to Hallundbaek and Taarnby, in 2006 and 2007 something had changed in the global jihadi community regarding the perception of the struggle in Somalia. 'What until then had been perceived as a relative backwater in a global struggle and vastly overshadowed by events in Afghanistan and Iraq, had gradually emerged as a new and legitimate arena of Jihad'.<sup>360</sup> The opportunity to fight Christian Ethiopian troops, a useless government and to deny the US a foothold in the Horn of Africa converged as radicalizing elements.

During 2008, and increasingly so in 2009, al-Shabaab became much more vocal in outlining an international agenda and called for a regional offensive against imperialist and Christian forces threatening Somalia.<sup>361</sup> In the autumn of 2008, al-Shabaab issued videos showing foreign fighters giving speeches in Arabic and English, asking Muslims around the world to join them in their jihad. The symbolism in the videos also drew on a global jihadist narrative referring to 'join the caravan'.<sup>362</sup>

Al-Shabaab spokesman Abu-Mansur, specifically stated in a 2008 interview that the Somali jihad belonged to the global jihadist movement and called for more foreign fighters to come to Somalia.<sup>363</sup> In the same year al-Shabaab launched a sophisticated recruitment campaign that was 'heavily endorsed and technically supported by al-Qaeda'.<sup>364</sup> The three top leaders of al-Qaeda made statements in 2009 supporting al-Shabaab's campaign in Somalia and even put it on the same level as Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>365</sup> By recognizing Somalia's significant role in global jihad, al-Qaeda gave credibility to al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab messages were now widely distributed through the Internet, and read by an online jihadist community.<sup>366</sup>

However, many question the "jihad nature" of the struggle in Somalia. American journalist and former fellow of the *New America Foundation* Nir Rosen stated that a major motivation for al-

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<sup>357</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism'.

<sup>358</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>359</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>360</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 30.

<sup>361</sup> Ibidem, 13.

<sup>362</sup> Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 64.

<sup>363</sup> Paz, 'The Youth are Older'.

<sup>364</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 48.

<sup>365</sup> Shinn, 'Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia', 29.

<sup>366</sup> Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 62.

Shabaab declaring al-Qaeda allegiance was attracting funding from al-Qaeda's Arab donors.<sup>367</sup> According to Rosen, the situation in Somalia was most of the time in reality 'a complex struggle of clan rivalry between merchants, traders, farmers and cattle herders, over issues including loss of property, fear of disenfranchisement, access to aid money, social inequality and political power — anything but a jihad'.<sup>368</sup> Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus has also argued that while al-Qaeda has a global agenda, al-Shabaab's agenda is still essentially a nationalist one.<sup>369</sup>



7 American-born Islamist militant Omar Hammami, right, sits with al-Shabaab deputy leader Sheikh Mukhtar Abu Mansur Robow during a press conference in Somalia.<sup>370</sup>

## Leaders

Bin Laden can be seen as one of the most influential leaders responsible for the flow of foreign fighters to Somalia. In the early 1990s he saw a first opportunity in Somalia to drive a spear into the heart of the last superpower and convinced some recruits this was an achievable goal.<sup>371</sup> Although al-Qaeda's efforts to establish a presence in this region were largely a failure, bin Laden would over a decade later, when he was much more influential, make specific calls for Muslims to support the

<sup>367</sup> N. Rosen, 'Somalia's al-Shabab: A Global or Local Movement?', *Time*, (August 20, 2010), <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2010700,00.html>.

<sup>368</sup> Rosen, 'Somalia's al-Shabab: A Global or Local Movement?'.

<sup>369</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism'.

<sup>370</sup> Photo taken from *NPR* website: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/09/22/224491508/the-last-tweets-from-an-american-jihadist-in-somalia>.

<sup>371</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 187-188.



Sharia court movement, united in Islamic Courts Union (ICU).<sup>372</sup> Al-Zawahiri as well would campaign for the Somali cause, demonstrating al-Qaeda's continued desire to make Somalia a new front for jihadis to face off against the West. For example, in early 2007, Al-Zawahiri called for attacks on Ethiopian forces in Somalia using 'ambushes, mines, raids and martyrdom seeking raids to devour them as the lions devour their prey'.<sup>373</sup>

The degree to which al-Qaeda has actually established a foothold in the region—and why—is however still the subject of significant debate among analysts and policy makers.<sup>374</sup> For example, Menkhaus, has noted that despite the inflammatory rhetoric, the actual level of al-Qaeda engagement in Somalia has been fairly modest.<sup>375</sup> 'Compared to a number of other theaters of operation in the world, al Qa'ida has not demonstrated an intent to make Somalia a major priority.'<sup>376</sup>

Therefor perhaps a more influential leader is Omar Shafik Hammami, also known by the pseudonym Abu Mansur Al-Amriki, an American citizen who arrived in Mogadishu in late 2006. Although he initially was arrested by the ICU accused of being a spy, he later was acquitted and would by 2010 lead his own small group of fighters, including both foreigners and Somalis, of about 30.<sup>377</sup> In the words of Hallundbaek and Taarnby, he became a 'jihadi icon'. 'Abu Mansour al-Amriki appears to be the star in the recruitment scheme. Even though his style at times clash with traditional tenets of Jihadi culture, the application of hip-hop tunes can only be interpreted as specifically aimed at a young, Westernized audience. His background is obviously an asset to al-Shabaab.'<sup>378</sup>

As a native English speaker and someone who has clearly turned his back on the US, he has appeared in several videos. In March, 2009, a thirty one minute video featuring this American was released which was described by *The New York Times* as a 'veritable homage to Hammami'.<sup>379</sup> The video depicts him running in slow motion followed by a group of fighters; a jihadist rap song plays in the background. Analysts contend that Hammami's identity as an American cast against the backdrop of jihadist activities provided at risk youth with an ideal type (even a sort of 'rock star') to which they may aspire.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 41.

<sup>373</sup> *Combating Terrorism Center*, 'Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures', 1.

<sup>374</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>375</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism'.

<sup>376</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>377</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 36.

<sup>378</sup> Ibidem, 49.

<sup>379</sup> Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, 'Foreign Fighters', 20-21.

<sup>380</sup> Ibidem.

## Influence of governments

Al-Shabaab's rise to prominence is according to Rosen tied to decisions taken by the US and its regional allies in pursuit of the Bush Administration's global war on terrorism.<sup>381</sup> Following the 9/11 attacks, the US deemed the 10-year power vacuum in Somalia a potential refuge for al-Qaeda, one that prompted Washington, together with African allies, to arm and fund various Somali warlords. In 2004, some warlords were drawn together into the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). However, the TFG failed to transcend the predatory warlord politics that had prevailed for 15 years, and in 2006 the ICU seized control of Mogadishu. The U.S. then backed an Ethiopian invasion to restore the TFG to power but would only lead to an insurgency against the Ethiopian occupation which legitimized the more militant outlook of al-Shabaab.<sup>382</sup>

Another important event was designating al-Shabaab a terrorist organization in March 2008. Al-Shabaab had not directly targeted the US, and was focused entirely on a national, not international struggle.<sup>383</sup> When in May of 2008 the US launched a tomahawk missile attack and killed al-Shabaab leader Aden Hashi Ayro, the organization announced that from that point it would target all US, Western, and UN personnel and interests, as well as Somalis working for the US or the UN, and any countries in the region collaborating with the US. Fears that al-Shabaab would make good on its pledge to widen its war into the broader region, were realized when in late October 2008 it executed five synchronized suicide bombing attacks against local government, Ethiopian, and UN compounds.<sup>384</sup> The American drone attacks that followed in the years after, could possibly have created more insurgents rather than eliminate them.

At the same time it can be argued that once labelled as a terrorist organization, the American government had more instruments to prevent at least American recruits from leaving for Somalia. In 2009, in one of the broadest domestic terrorism investigations since September 11, American federal officials charged 14 people with recruiting an estimated 20 Americans to join the radical Islamist group since late 2007.<sup>385</sup>

## Chances of success

The downing of two American helicopters in October 1993, wasn't the work of al-Qaeda foreign fighters, but was presented as such. The departure of the US military from Somalia in 1994 was perceived as a tremendous success by al-Qaeda.<sup>386</sup> Perhaps this encouraged a number of Arabs that

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<sup>381</sup> N. Rosen, 'How Did al-Shabab Emerge from the Chaos of Somalia?', *Time*, (August 20, 2010), <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2010699,00.html>

<sup>382</sup> Rosen, 'How Did al-Shabab Emerge'.

<sup>383</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism'.

<sup>384</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism'.

<sup>385</sup> James, 'A Brief History Of Al-Shabab'.

<sup>386</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 27.

participated in the incursion into Ethiopia in 1995. However, the Somali jihadis miscalculated as their Ethiopian adventure in 1996 backfired. Many were taken prisoner or had died on the battlefield. Among those jihadis killed were fighters from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Algeria and from other African countries.<sup>387</sup> By 1997, many of the Islamists – including foreigners – had been killed or injured, the training camps were dismantled and a short-lived terror campaign in Ethiopia had come to an end.<sup>388</sup>

Ten years later however, al-Shabaab enjoyed considerable success in Somalia. The attention from bin Laden was also significant in raising awareness. Somalia appeared as the third most important front and promised a swifter victory than both Afghanistan and Iraq since the only real opposition at the time was Ethiopia.<sup>389</sup> By mid-2008, al-Shabaab controlled all of the territory from the Kenyan border to the outskirts of Mogadishu. It was without question the strongest militia force in southern Somalia.<sup>390</sup> Two years later however, Rosen argued al-Shabaab had militarily become very weak. 'Nowhere close to a highly sophisticated jihadist network, the Shabab is composed of dedicated fighters as well as criminal gangs involved in kidnapping. While its forces operate in more territory than anybody else, they do not control much of it, on occasion meeting their match in rival Islamist militias.'<sup>391</sup>

Perhaps because of this, a year later, the foreign fighters in the organization would suffer heavily. A field researcher working for Hansen checked the nationalities of Al-Shabaab fighters in Mogadishu hospitals after the battles in June 2011, searching for foreigners who had been brought in by Al-Shabaab militias.<sup>392</sup> He found thirty-eight Western and Non-Arab Asians (including Chechens), 123 Africans including people from Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania, Zanzibar and Uganda, one American and two Arabs. The body count of dead Al-Shabaab fighters conducted by the field researcher indicates the same international diversity. As Hansen stated, the foreign fighters were not always good soldiers.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 28.

<sup>388</sup> *International Crisis Group*, 'Somalia's Islamists', Africa Report N°100 (December 12, 2005), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/somalia/Somalias%20Islamists.pdf>, 9.

<sup>389</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 30.

<sup>390</sup> Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism'.

<sup>391</sup> N. Rosen, 'Somalia's al-Shabab: A Global or Local Movement?', *Time*, (August 20, 2010), <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2010700,00.html>.

<sup>392</sup> Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 135-137.

<sup>393</sup> Ibidem.



8 A Twitter screenshot of American militant Omar Hammami's Tweet claiming al-Shabaab just attempted to kill him.<sup>394</sup>

### Internal disagreement

To what extent was al-Qaeda welcomed by local insurgents when it tried to gain a foothold in Somalia in the early 1990s? The *Combating Terrorism Center* 2007 report with the telling title *Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*, concluded that al-Qaeda failed to gain traction in Somalia in the early 1990s partially because their arguments about fighting a foreign occupier did not resonate with locals because they too were seen as a foreign force.<sup>395</sup> In the end 'al-Qa'ida's members fell victim to many of the same challenges that plague Western interventions in the Horn. They were prone to extortion and betrayal, found themselves trapped in the middle of incomprehensible (to them) clan conflicts'.<sup>396</sup> 'The Somalis treated us in a bad way', one of the Arabs complained. 'Due to the bad leadership situation there, we decided to withdraw.'<sup>397</sup> At one point al-Qaeda operatives were so frustrated that they listed going after clan leaders (to eliminate the most quarrelsome allies) as the second priority for jihad after expelling Western forces.<sup>398</sup> In turn, the Somalis were despised by the al-Qaeda team who considered them as greedy, corrupt, unreliable, and prone to outright banditry.<sup>399</sup>

The Islamic Courts Union wasn't too fond of foreign fighters either, as the last thing Somalia needed, was more teenage gunmen.<sup>400</sup> Moreover, many foreigners were unaccustomed to the hardships of living in the bush and were quite often a liability and many spoke the Somali language poorly.<sup>401</sup> Also, racism is mentioned as an important dividing force between Arab and African

<sup>394</sup> C. Watts, 'Shabaab in Somalia tries to kill Omar Hammami', *Selected Wisdom*, (April 26, 2013), <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=1055>.

<sup>395</sup> *Combating Terrorism Center*, 'Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures', 64.

<sup>396</sup> *Combating Terrorism Center*, 'Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures', iii.

<sup>397</sup> Wright, *The looming tower*, 187-188.

<sup>398</sup> *Combating Terrorism Center*, 'Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures', 6.

<sup>399</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 27.

<sup>400</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 31.

<sup>401</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, 'Al Shabaab', 31.

jihadists that runs below the surface, but affects their ability to unite effectively to fight in common cause.<sup>402</sup>

It is also argued that foreign fighters in Somalia are generally characterized as “jihadist tourists” by local fighters, who also question the foreigners’ fighting capacity and competence.<sup>403</sup> According to Hammami himself in 2008 ‘the Muhajireen were welcomed at the airport by the Islamic Courts with terrible statements like: “We don’t need the Muhajireen” and they tried to send them back”.’<sup>404</sup> According to a Somali colonel the foreigners were liked by the locals simply because they brought money, yet their austere form of Islam did not win them any sympathy.<sup>405</sup> Beheadings were singled out as particularly repulsive to the population of Mogadishu.

Al-Shabaab however, would reportedly eagerly embrace any foreign recruit, although there are many reports about foreign fighters leaving because of internal disagreement. At least 100 foreign al-Qaeda fighters working in Somalia with al-Shabaab are believed to have fled the country in 2012 for Yemen due to leadership squabbles and allied government advances towards their strongholds.<sup>406</sup> Top al-Shabaab officials and al-Qaeda leaders in Somalia supposedly have been at odds since airstrikes have hit the country over the last six months, targeting fighters both terrorist groups. At least one al-Shabaab commander confirmed this exodus by stating: ‘Yes, it is true that those brothers left us and went to Yemen due to some minor internal misunderstandings amongst ourselves.’<sup>407</sup>

Misunderstandings can in some cases be considered as quite an understatement as disagreement more than once led to outright infighting. In 2011, a top al-Qaeda figure working with al-Shabaab was killed in a checkpoint shoot-out that was widely believed to be a set-up by his rival in al-Shabaab.<sup>408</sup> A year later a UK-born jihadist was killed by a US drone strike, but reportedly it were his fellow Somali jihadists who supposedly led the drone to its target.<sup>409</sup> As several other foreign jihadists were killed, this too likely prompted the above mentioned exodus as these foreign fighters no longer trusted their Somali counterparts who were possibly conducting an internal purge.<sup>410</sup>

To top this, Hammami himself after publicly considering moving to Syria, detailed in early 2013 how al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda betrayed him and sought to kill him (see his tweet above). The

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<sup>402</sup> Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, ‘Foreign Fighters’.

<sup>403</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>404</sup> Hallundbaek and Taarnby, ‘Al Shabaab’, 29-30.

<sup>405</sup> Ibidem, 32.

<sup>406</sup> R. Nuune, ‘To Flee or Not to Flee: Where are the Foreign Fighters?’, Somali Report, (September 2, 2012), <http://www.somaliareport.com/index.php/post/2749>.

<sup>407</sup> Nuune, ‘To Flee or Not to Flee: Where are the Foreign Fighters?’.

<sup>408</sup> Menkhaus, ‘Al-Shabab’s Capabilities Post-Westgate’.

<sup>409</sup> R. Pantucci, ‘Bilal al-Berjawi and the Shifting Fortunes of Foreign Fighters in Somalia’, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 6 . Issue 9 (September 2013), 16.

<sup>410</sup> Menkhaus, ‘Al-Shabab’s Capabilities Post-Westgate’.

reason was that Hammami suspected al-Shabaab leader Sheikh Moktar Ali Zubeyr (also known as Muktar Abdirahman "Godane"), was killing off al-Qaeda leaders and foreign fighters that had travelled to Somalia.<sup>411</sup> Omar's prophecy came true when after highlighting the disagreements within al-Shabaab on Twitter and YouTube, his own organization killed him in September 2013.<sup>412</sup>

In sum, it is especially this last factor that likely explains why no more than a few hundred foreign fighters travelled to Somalia in the last two decades. Although the US-led invasion as well as the Ethiopian occupation nourished the recruiting message of a defensive jihad that could easily be transferred by leaders like bin Laden as well as the American "rock star" jihadist Hammami through different modern media channels like Twitter, the truth is that Somalia has never been a clear-cut case of a holy struggle, let alone a welcoming place for foreigners seeking to advance a narrative of global jihad. The first al-Qaeda fighters were just like the Americans and Ethiopians seen as outsiders and the foreign jihadists that would arrive in the last eight years weren't welcomed by local fighters who questioned the foreigners' fighting capacity and competence. Many that did get to fight would be killed. If not by the Ethiopian government (its army to be more precise), then by their fellow Somali insurgents. This infighting was very likely a public relations nightmare that kept and still keeps possible jihadists at home as the negative experiences of foreign fighters will likely influence the choice of emerging recruits.

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<sup>411</sup> C. Watts, 'American Foreign Fighter Details How al Qaeda's Nusra Betrayed Him In Syria', *Selected Wisdom*, (February 12, 2014), <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=1048>. C. Watts, 'Hammami thinks the grass might be greener in Syria', *Selected Wisdom*, (January 15, 2013), <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=931>.

<sup>412</sup> O. Hammami, 'Urgent Message to Whoever it Might Reach,' (2012), available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAR2srINqks](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAR2srINqks). B. Roggio, 'Shabaab kills American jihadist Omar Hammami and British fighter', *The long war journal*, (September 12, 2013), [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/shabaab\\_kills\\_america.php?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=shabaab-kills-american-jihadist-omar-hammami-british-fighter###ixzz35BxFrLrY](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/shabaab_kills_america.php?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=shabaab-kills-american-jihadist-omar-hammami-british-fighter###ixzz35BxFrLrY).

## Chechnya 1994-2009: A new door policy

‘We do not need them, they will give us a lot of trouble’

(An unnamed Chechen leader discusses foreign fighters in 1999.<sup>413</sup>)

Chechnya’s conflict with the Russian federal government began with the Chechen declaration of independence in 1991, turned into a war in 1994, came to an end with a cease-fire in 1996, reignited in 1999 when Russian forces again entered the republic, and today has come to an uneasy stalemate, with violence dwindling since 2005.<sup>414</sup> Chechnya, which today has slightly more than 1 million inhabitants, has, however, fought for centuries to obtain its independence, struggling against Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union before fighting the Russian Federation. The Chechens, a proud people whose unity is bolstered by their Islamic identity, have never surrendered or accepted Moscow’s authority over their land.<sup>415</sup>

In 1994, after the fall of the Soviet Regime, Chechnya’s unilateral secession of the oil-rich territory was not accepted by Russia, which sent troops to the region. The first Chechen war, which ended with the Russian retreat of November 1996 and the creation of an independent Chechen government, involved few foreign fighters.<sup>416</sup> In total, approximately eighty Middle Eastern Arabs fought against the Russians during the 1994–96 war, in addition to smaller numbers of North African, Turkish and Central Asian fighters.<sup>417</sup>

The first organized group came to Chechnya in the spring of 1995, led by the Saudi native Ibn ul-Khattab. Khattab, who had fought against the Soviets alongside bin Laden and other legendary Arab mujahideen in Afghanistan, saw media reports of the war in Chechnya and with a few of his closest aides decided to join the jihad in the Caucasus. This vanguard teamed up with local Chechen fighters and had considerable success. Russian forces were surprised and repeatedly defeated by the mujahideen’s guerilla tactics. By the summer of 1996, Khattab and his fighters were taking part in the

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<sup>413</sup> L. Vidino, ‘How Chechnya Became a Breeding Ground for Terror’, *Middle East Quarterly*, (Summer 2005), 57-66.

<sup>414</sup> K. Bakke, ‘Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies’, *International Security*, Volume 38, Number 4, (Spring 2014), 163.

<sup>415</sup> L. Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad*, (New York, 2006), 202-203.

<sup>416</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 202-203.

<sup>417</sup> Moore and Tumelty, ‘Foreign Fighters’, 418.

most intense fighting; along with the militias of the Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev, they had a primary role in the capture of the Chechen capital, Grozny.<sup>418</sup>

After the 1996 peace treaty, the well-funded Afghan–Bosnian veteran militants became a source of instability in impoverished Chechnya. In about seven camps in the region, which resembled the Afghan training camps, young militants from Dagestan, the Middle East, Chechnya and many other Muslim regions of the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia, enrolled in courses that trained them in the use of explosives, light weapons, ambush tactics and Islamic practices.<sup>419</sup>

In parallel to the chaos enveloping Chechen society between 1996 and 1999, the neighboring republic of Dagestan experienced significant uprisings against local authorities. The insurgents were joined by Khattab's unit which attacked a Russian military garrison causing not only violent escalation but also the formation in April 1998 of a *Congress of Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan*.<sup>420</sup> This alliance between the Dagestani and Chechen fighters aimed to unify both republics which in turn brought the calamitous Second Russo-Chechen War down upon the people of Chechnya in 1999, before they had a chance to enjoy their independence.<sup>421</sup>

It has been suggested that over the course of the two wars, 500 to 700 transnational Insurgents have fought in Chechnya, indicating an increase over time, from the 80 to 90 who were reported to be active in the first war.<sup>422</sup> Some estimate there were 100 to 200 transnational insurgents present during the second which would still suggest that the highest number of transnational insurgents entered in the interwar period and early years of the second war.<sup>423</sup>

From 1999 until 2009, when the counter-terrorism operation in Chechnya officially ended, the second war was characterized by greater reliance on terrorist tactics previously unseen in the conflict and likely imported by the foreign mujahideen.<sup>424</sup> Khattab was killed in March 2002, probably by a poisoned letter sent by Russian intelligence. After his death, Abu Walid al Ghamdi, another Saudi, became the leader of the foreign mujahideen in Chechnya, who paid more attention to terrorist acts in Russia than to guerilla warfare within Chechnya.<sup>425</sup> For example, the FSB (Russia's domestic security agency) believes that Abu Walid was one of the planners of the February 2004

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<sup>418</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 202-203.

<sup>419</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 165-166.

<sup>420</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 419.

<sup>421</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 170.

<sup>422</sup> Bakke, 'Copying and Learning from Outsiders?', 16-17.

<sup>423</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>424</sup> BBC, 'Russia 'ends Chechnya operation'', (April 16, 2009), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8001495.stm>.

Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 204-210.

<sup>425</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 204-210.



bombing in the Moscow subway that killed more than forty people.<sup>426</sup> Abu Walid was reportedly killed two months after this attack.<sup>427</sup>

The above mentioned numbers of foreign fighters can be considered low when compared to the thousands who visited Afghanistan and Bosnia. Especially when one could argue as Lorenzo Vidino does that by the late 1990s, 'no other major conflict involved Muslims, adding to Chechnya's attractiveness to (...) jihadis seeking the battlefield'.<sup>428</sup> By 2007, Russian sources usually put the number of insurgents in Chechnya at somewhere between 1,000 and 1,200 and stated that the size of the foreign component in this 'army' was probably no more than 100.<sup>429</sup>

In 2006, the then leader of the Islamist branch Doku Umarov claimed that the influence of Arab fighters was exaggerated. 'I can count around five of them', he said in an interview.<sup>430</sup> Nevertheless, in the following years Umarov sought to distance the insurgency from its original stated goal of Chechen independence and instead align it with the global jihadist narrative.<sup>431</sup> In March this year, the Caucasus Emirate leader reportedly became a martyr himself.<sup>432</sup>

### Recruitment messaging

The shocking full scale invasion of Chechnya by Russian forces in 1994 no doubt appeared to Afghan veterans to be a replication of the USSR's attempt to brutally subjugate the free Muslim people of Afghanistan.<sup>433</sup> As the fame of the Chechen resistance spread in the Middle East, many Arabs came to idealize the Chechens, according to Brian Glyn Williams, associate professor of Islamic History at the *University of Massachusetts* and author of many articles about foreign fighters. 'Even Usama Bin Laden, (...) admired the Chechens and identified their struggle for self-determination as a struggle between Islam and the Unbelievers.'<sup>434</sup>

Links between the North Caucasus and the Middle East are centuries old; Dagestan, for example, was once an important center of Islam. Relations between the two regions have been shaped by Ottoman and Russian imperial policies, particularly the latter, which caused thousands of

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<sup>426</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 204-210.

<sup>427</sup> *NBC News*, 'Russia cautious about reports Chechnya rebel leader killed, (April 19, 2004), [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/4779128/ns/us\\_news-security/t/russia-cautious-about-reports-chechnya-rebel-leader-killed/](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/4779128/ns/us_news-security/t/russia-cautious-about-reports-chechnya-rebel-leader-killed/).

<sup>428</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 204-210.

<sup>429</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 172.

<sup>430</sup> Bakke, 'Copying and Learning from Outsiders?', 29.

<sup>431</sup> Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, 'Foreign Fighters', 19.

<sup>432</sup> *BBC*, 'Chechen rebel leader Doku Umarov 'dead'', (March 18, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26634403>.

<sup>433</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 160.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibidem*.

Chechens and other North Caucasians to migrate to modern day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan.<sup>435</sup> According to some reports, figures from the history of the North Caucasus have been used symbolically to shape an anti-Russian narrative that Arab groups played on from the latter part of the first Chechen war.<sup>436</sup>

However, the role played by the approximately eighty foreign fighters that took part in hostilities in the first Russo-Chechen war, was rather than a source of radicalization, peripheral, focusing upon organizing networks and undertaking small scale military operations.<sup>437</sup> In fact, they played a minor role shaping the Islamic dimension of the first war.<sup>438</sup> The interwar years were more important as in this period under the guidance of Khattab and others, finances, fighters and a new doctrine of political Islam began to emerge.<sup>439</sup> As a result, dozens if not hundreds of foreign fighters travelled to the region, often to train in camps, but also to develop their knowledge of radical Islam.<sup>440</sup>

Aiding radical preachers and recruiters in their attempts at persuasion was the cunning of Khattab, according to Vidino a 'media genius' who fully understood the importance of propaganda and released dozens of videotapes describing the plight of the Chechens and the endeavors of the mujahideen.<sup>441</sup> These tapes, notable for both their image quality and their brutality, were distributed through a network of radical mosques and constituted 'an unparalleled recruiting tool'.<sup>442</sup> His policy of "jihad through the media" led to an insistence that all operations were filmed. He stated in one of his many interviews in March 2000 that 'in the modern age, the media has become more important than rifles and guns . . . (t)hanks to (our) breaking the media siege . . . a clear shift has taken place in Russian public opinion.'<sup>443</sup> The filming of military operations in Chechnya and their widespread dissemination on CDs and the Internet in the second half of the 1990s, provided potent propaganda for a second generation of jihadis in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>444</sup>

In addition radical Islamists sympathizing with the Chechen cause ran several websites that showed images of the fighting mujahideen. One published detailed accounts of the deeds of the mujahideen, the other (azzam.com, the domain name is currently for sale for 5000 dollar) provided guides in English on how to obtain military training, which the website described as 'an obligation in

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<sup>435</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 416.

<sup>436</sup> Ibidem, 414.

<sup>437</sup> C. Moore, 'The radicalisation of the Chechen separatist movement: Myth or reality?', Prague Watchdog, (May 16, 2007), <http://www.watchdog.cz/index.php?lang=1&show=000000-000004-000001-000203>.

<sup>438</sup> Moore, 'The radicalisation of the Chechen separatist movement'.

<sup>439</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>440</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>441</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 205-206.

<sup>442</sup> Ibidem.

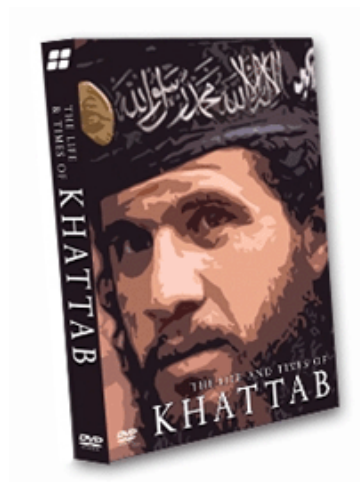
<sup>443</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 417.

<sup>444</sup> Ibidem.

Islam upon every sane, male mature Muslim ... whether living in a Muslim or non-Muslim country.'<sup>445</sup> It was in the words of Vidino a de facto travel guide for jihadis living in the west who wanted to reach the battlefields of Chechnya. The website advised potential volunteers not to travel until the snow had melted in the spring months and to talk to 'members of their own communities and countries who are known to have been for jihad'.<sup>446</sup>

The possibilities for propaganda were however dealt a blow when during the second Chechen war in 1999, the Putin administration has severely limited uncontrolled access to Chechnya by journalists, allowing only limited snapshots of the resistance.<sup>447</sup> Still, al-Qaeda masterminds such as Abu Doha and Abu Qatada in London or other imams and recruiters throughout Europe continually made Chechnya into a battle cry for jihad, as one of the lands where the infidels were carrying out their crusade against Islam and butchering Muslims.<sup>448</sup>

The Caucasus would in the last years remain an important component of the overall jihadist landscape. As said, Chechen rebel leader, Doku Umarov, has sought to distance the insurgency from its original stated goal of Chechen independence and instead align it with the global jihadist narrative; a narrative which supports the establishment of an Islamic emirate in the Caucasus. To that end, the insurgents have become increasingly adept at using the Internet to post videos of successful attacks on Russian military and security personnel, to espouse a message of jihad, and to recruit new fighters to its ranks, although the latter doesn't seem to have occurred very often.<sup>449</sup>



9 The popular DVD *The life and Times of Khattab*<sup>450</sup>.

<sup>445</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 205-206.

<sup>446</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>447</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 429.

<sup>448</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 204-210.

<sup>449</sup> Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, 'Foreign Fighters', 19.

<sup>450</sup> This documentary traces the life of the Arab commander Khattab from his childhood through the wars of Afghanistan (1988-1994), Tajikistan (1994 - 1995), the First Chechen War (1995 - 1996), Dagestan (1999) & the

## Leaders

While the Chechen Diaspora communities have been largely assimilated by the sociopolitical policies of Turkey, Syria and Iraq, there still exists a unique community of around 8000 Jordanian-Chechens of which dozens began to visit their newly independent homeland in the early 1990s.<sup>451</sup> Among them was an elderly veteran of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, Fathi Mohammed Habib (also known as Shaykh Ali Fathi al-Shishani), who moved to Chechnya in 1993. Capitalizing on his Chechen ancestry, Fathi organized a group of local Islamists and in alliance with a small number of Jordanian-Chechens, quickly creating a following numbering around 90.<sup>452</sup>

According to the British analysts Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, Fathi was to become the most influential figure in establishing the foreign fighters' presence in the North Caucasus following the onset of the Russo-Chechen war in December 1994.<sup>453</sup> His central recruitment ground was Afghanistan, rather than directly from the Middle East. According to an Islamist fundraiser, Fathi was formerly a Muslim Brother, which gave him a broad-based knowledge of Islamic movements and enabled Middle Eastern institutions to channel funding to him for distribution to the Chechen resistance.<sup>454</sup>

It was Fathi who invited Khattab who was joined by 60 of Fathi's fighters.<sup>455</sup> On 16 April 1996 the Russians came to know the name of *Emir* (Arabic for 'Commander') Khattab. On that day, a thirty vehicle Russian convoy came under a mountain ambush attack by 100 fighters who within two hours destroyed most trucks and killed nearly all of the soldiers.<sup>456</sup> Williams painted a vivid picture in his 2007 article *Allah's foot soldiers*.<sup>457</sup> As the smoke drifted from the carcasses of the burnt out Russian vehicles, an apocalyptic figure was filmed by an aide strolling triumphantly through the blackened Russian corpses brandishing an AK-47 assault rifle and proclaiming '*Allahu Akbar!*'. As the smoke cleared from his face, the fighter featured in the video was clearly seen to be a swarthy Arab with a full '*Wahhabi*'-style beard, curling long hair and a black beret.<sup>458</sup>

Williams: 'This was Khattab's fighting (and acting) debut in a conflict on the frontiers of the *Dar al Islam* (Realm of Islam) that he was to forever link with the global jihadi movement.'<sup>459</sup> Dubbed copies of Khattab's grisly victory march made their way to radical mosques abroad where they served as recruitment propaganda for radical extremists who sought to recruit fighters for Chechnya and

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beginning of the Second Chechen War (1999). Picture taken from online store  
<http://www.kalamullah.com/videos.html>.

<sup>451</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 416.

<sup>452</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>453</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>454</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>455</sup> Bakke, 'Copying and Learning from Outsiders?', 16-17.

<sup>456</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 159-160.

<sup>457</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>458</sup> Ibidem, 157-158.

<sup>459</sup> Ibidem.

other causes of the Islamists.<sup>460</sup> Images of Khattab in combat were, for example, featured in an al-Qaeda recruitment video found in Afghanistan by coalition forces after 9/11.<sup>461</sup>

After Chechnya's independence was reluctantly recognized by the Russians in 1996, Khattab and his foreign fighters settled more permanently in the region as he was reportedly invited by the Chechen leadership to help train insurgents. In 1996 Khattab and his fighters established training camps reportedly visited by hundreds of young men, many of whom went on to become fighters in the second war.<sup>462</sup>

By then, several high ranking al-Qaeda operatives paid close attention to Chechnya and they would likely have had a big impact. If they made it in into the country that is. For example, in 1997, Al-Zawahiri attempted to enter Chechnya, but was arrested by Russian police in Dagestan carrying false documents. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the architect of 9/11, similarly failed to join Khattab in Chechnya in 1997; he could not cross the border from Azerbaijan.<sup>463</sup>

Bin Laden had no better luck. He had considered Chechnya to be an early post-Afghanistan priority, and had established an office in Azerbaijan to process recruits.<sup>464</sup> However, Khattab, often seen as the 'connecting dot' between the Chechens and al-Qaeda, was never a member of bin Laden's Sudan and Afghanistan-based organization.<sup>465</sup> Gerges analyzed the relationship between Khattab and bin Laden and claimed that Khattab not only competed on an equal footing with bin Laden, but assembled a more powerful contingent of jihadis than the latter. In the 1990s the two Saudi jihadis communicated with each other and tried to pull each other into their own battle plans, but Khattab and bin Laden had defined the enemy differently and both were too ambitious to accept a subordinate role.<sup>466</sup> It even occurred that recruits who trained in Afghanistan in order to fight in Chechnya, would team up with al-Qaeda after hearing bin Laden's speeches, volunteered to become suicide operatives, and eventually were selected as muscle hijackers for the planes operation on 9/11.<sup>467</sup>

"Competition" between leaders can thus possibly be seen as a factor not stimulating the recruitment and flow of foreign fighters. The fast changing of the guard within Chechnya can perhaps be seen as another (see table below).

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<sup>460</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 157-158

<sup>461</sup> Ibidem, 169.

<sup>462</sup> Bakke, 'Help Wanted?', 166.

<sup>463</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 206. *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 'The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States', (Washington, 2004), 233.

<sup>464</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 428.

<sup>465</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 265.

<sup>466</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 164.

<sup>467</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 58. Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 164.

<sup>467</sup> *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 'The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States', (Washington, 2004), 233.

Nom de guerre	Name	Nationality	Tenure
Emir Khattab	Samir Salih Abdallah al-Suwaylim	Saudi	February '95–May '02
Abu Walid	Abd al-Aziz al-Ghamidi	Saudi	May '02–April '04
Abu Hafis	Yusuf Amerat	Jordanian	April '04–December '06
Muhannad	Not Known	Gulf states	December '06–

#### 10 Arab leaders in Chechnya: 1995-2006<sup>468</sup>

Khattab was killed by an anthrax laden letter delivered to him by the FSB in the spring of 2002.<sup>469</sup> His place as 'Commander of the Supreme Shura of the Mujahidin' in Chechnya was taken by another Saudi veteran from Afghanistan as well as Bosnia, Abu Walid, but he too was killed in an artillery strike in 2004.<sup>470</sup>

Interestingly, another influential Chechnya-based Saudi by the name of Abu 'Umar al-Sayf would under Walid's watch call upon the Saudi jihadists to end their terrorist campaign and travel to Iraq instead.<sup>471</sup> He did not ask them to join him in Chechnya. Al-Sayf was anyway killed in battle in 2005, removing the jihadi movement's primary conduit for money from the Arab Gulf.<sup>472</sup> Walid would die a year later, his death heralding the demise of the first generation of Afghan-Arab mujahideen in Chechnya.<sup>473</sup>

Though not visible in the figure above, Muhannad too was killed by Russian security forces early 2011. His death is thought to have paved the way for reconciliation between the Chechen commanders and the leadership of the Caucasus Emirate which had suffered from a yearlong split.<sup>474</sup> Moore and Tumelty concluded in 2008 that the Arab influence in Chechnya has been in gradual decline since its heyday between 1999 and 2002.<sup>475</sup>

<sup>468</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 428.

<sup>469</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 173.

<sup>470</sup> Ibidem, 173.

<sup>471</sup> MEMRI, 'Al-Qa'ida Leader Calls for Attacks on Americans in Iraq Rather Than on the Saudi Government in Saudi Arabia', MEMRI Special Dispatch 635, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/91/1030.htm>.

<sup>472</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 174.

<sup>473</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 427.

<sup>474</sup> B. Roggio, 'Internal divisions resolved, claims Caucasus Emirate', *The long war journal*, (July 25, 2011), <http://www.webcitation.org/60SJUdWF7>.

<sup>475</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 427.

### Influence of governments

This decline of Arab influence in Chechnya can partially be attributed to Russian special forces who have conducted a particularly effective counterinsurgency campaign against the foreign fighters in the last decade. Through a system of intelligent targeting, they have methodically hunted down the Arab leadership. According to Moore and Tumelty, 'the effect of removing a small number of key players has had strategic impact, with a dramatic drop in Chechnya's profile in the Islamist narrative internationally and a commensurate reduction in funding, as repeatedly highlighted by Chechen commanders in their appeals to the Muslim world.'<sup>476</sup>

Russia also managed to keep its borders closed for those who wished to fight in Chechnya. For example, several members of the Hamburg cell involved in 9/11 seriously had considered travelling to the Caucasus to fight alongside Khattab. However, an important al-Qaeda operative discouraged the group, stressing the difficulty of crossing the Russian border, and helped them organize their trip to the al-Qadea camps in Afghanistan instead.<sup>477</sup>

As Chechnya was controlled on three sides by Russian forces, the only way to enter the enclave was to partake in a perilous hike over the helicopter-patrolled Caucasus Mountains via neighboring Georgia or 'roll the dice and attempt to bribe one's way through Russian forces in neighboring Dagestan'.<sup>478</sup> In other words, due to Russia's control over the border, joining the fight in the encircled republic was a great risk. Many Arabs were killed or arrested on their hazardous journeys to Chechnya and the biographies of dozens of jihadis reveal their desire to fight in Chechnya, but show their failure to do so.<sup>479</sup>

### Chances of success

Although the first Chechen war showed it was possible to once again fight the Russian army with success like in Afghanistan, it would soon become clear it was hard to win the second Chechen war, let alone to leave the battleground alive. According to Tumelty, Chechnya was well-known as one of the more difficult jihadi fronts, 'where the climate is extremely harsh and, due to linguistic and physical differences and their dearth of local knowledge, the Arab fighters have been prone to death or capture.'<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 427.

<sup>477</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 206.

<sup>478</sup> Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 161.

<sup>479</sup> Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 422. Williams, 'Allah's foot soldiers', 161.

<sup>480</sup> P. Tumelty, 'The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya.' *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 4, Issue 2 (January 26, 2006), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=658](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=658).

Hegghammer wrote in 2010 that although reliable numbers do not exist, only a minority of those who made it to Chechnya in the late 1990s returned alive.<sup>481</sup> Hegghammer referred to Tumelty but also saw very few Arab veterans from Chechnya appearing in his own sources. In 2013 he stated that the death rate of foreign fighters in late 1990s Chechnya was more than 90 percent but named no sources other than ‘anecdotal evidence’.<sup>482</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason Islamist websites encouraged those interested in fighting in Chechnya, to first acquire military training in Afghanistan.<sup>483</sup>

### Internal disagreement

Regarded by the rebel leadership as something of an anomaly, the foreign fighters in Chechnya were not so much welcomed as fighters, but according to Moore and Tumelty ‘exploited for their ability to attract finances and materiel, through purported charities, Islamist political parties and large one-off donations from wealthy individuals in the Gulf States’.<sup>484</sup> Although with only 80 foreigners their military influence was negligible within the larger war effort, the foreign fighters’ militant ideas and religious influence began to percolate through war-torn Chechen society after August 1996, in part hastening the divisions in Chechen society and ultimately inspiring some of the events that led to the resurgence of the Russo–Chechen war in 1999.<sup>485</sup> In that war, again, the Arab involvement was supposedly designed specifically to attract financial support to the resistance from the Middle East.<sup>486</sup>

This could very well be true considering the extremely remarkable fact that Khattab *refused* to allow large numbers of foreign fighters to enter Chechnya—on explicit instruction from the Chechens—following the beginning of the second war.<sup>487</sup> At the earlier stages of the second War, manpower was not an issue for the resistance and therefore most of those foreigners who entered the area used up vital resources and could contribute little to the war effort, particularly as most were poorly trained.<sup>488</sup> Especially after the 9/11 attacks when they had to counter more effective Russian information warfare, the Chechen rebels sought to regulate the number of foreign fighters, and where possible only accepted those with adequate military experience.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Hegghammer, ‘The rise of Muslim foreign fighters’, 63.

<sup>482</sup> Hegghammer, ‘Should I Stay or Should I Go?’, 6.

<sup>483</sup> Moore and Tumelty, ‘Foreign Fighters’, 422.

<sup>484</sup> Ibidem, 418.

<sup>485</sup> Ibidem, 418.

<sup>486</sup> Ibidem, 426.

<sup>487</sup> Ibidem, 421.

<sup>488</sup> Ibidem, 421.

<sup>489</sup> Ibidem, 422.



Khattab's limitations on the numbers of fighters proved highly controversial, particularly following the collapse of the Taliban regime in late 2001 when hundreds of foreign fighters and al-Qaeda personnel were forced to seek sanctuary elsewhere. His constraints on them led to a build-up of 60 to 200 foreign fighters on Chechnya's doorstep in Georgia (and potentially ultimately led to him being betrayed and assassinated by Russian intelligence in May 2002).<sup>490</sup>

In sum, most factors above could very well explain why no more than a few hundred foreign fighters made it to Chechnya in the last twenty years starting with the first Chechen war in 1994. At first it wasn't hard for recruits and recruiters to see the parallels with Afghanistan and frame the Chechen struggle for self-determination as a struggle between Islam and the "Unbelievers". Even present was a charismatic leader who had an acute awareness of the power of the media and at the dawn of the Internet age, revolutionized media and modern insurgency as never before. It was, however, the very same leader who, in order to avoid disagreement with the local insurgents, would refuse to allow large numbers of foreign fighters to enter Chechnya as they often lacked adequate military experience. Even if they were welcomed, the Russian government made it extremely hard for fighters to cross the borders of the enclave, deterring many possible recruits. The ones that did make it to the battlefield, would most of the time not live to tell the tale.

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<sup>490</sup> Bakke, 'Learning from outsiders', 17. Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters', 422.

## Afghanistan 2001-2014: Doomed Arabs

‘We left at night like frightened women. It was a disgrace’.

(A young Pakistani volunteer with the Taliban.<sup>491</sup>)

In 1996, the same year the Taliban had seized the Afghan capital, bin Laden arrived in eastern Afghanistan from Sudan to establish a close rapport with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar who made him *Emir* (commander) of all the various foreign jihadi training camps in Afghanistan.<sup>492</sup> In return for offering al-Qaeda and other jihadists sanctuary to train for jihad in different theatres, bin Laden promised to create an international support brigade to assist the Taliban in their fight against the Northern Alliance. As the latter were seen as enemies of Islam, many foreigners joined this battle too.<sup>493</sup> Through the 1990s, it is estimated between 10,000 and 20,000 individuals travelled to Afghanistan.<sup>494</sup> Those who facilitated the passage of the young men to Afghanistan tended to be older, part of the generation of militants formed during the 1980s.<sup>495</sup>

At the moment of the 9/11 attacks, many of the foreigners had already left. Either to fight in another arena or simply to return home after disappointment at the quality of teaching, at the lack of solidarity between groups of students and at the food.<sup>496</sup> According to Jason Burke, around a quarter to a third of volunteers, few of whom had ever traveled before, suffered gastro-intestinal problems or other illnesses, and few camps had even rudimentary medical facilities.<sup>497</sup> Still, according to *Jane's World Armies*, by 2001, bin Laden was able to field a predominantly Arab fighting force of approximately 2,000-3,000 fighters.<sup>498</sup> However, the total number of foreign fighters in Afghanistan on the eve of 9/11 was by some estimated at 12,000 (mostly Pakistanis and Arabs), approximately a fourth of the Taliban's army that was estimated to be 45,000 men strong.<sup>499</sup> Some even have argued that the Taliban had come to depend on foreign fighters to entirely defend its territory.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> Quoted in J. Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, (London, 2011), 57.

<sup>492</sup> Williams, 'On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam"', 223.

<sup>493</sup> Williams, 'On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam"', 223. Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 39-40.

<sup>494</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 39-40.

<sup>495</sup> Ibidem, 36-37.

<sup>496</sup> Ibidem 41.

<sup>497</sup> Ibidem, 41.

<sup>498</sup> Williams, 'On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam"', 226.

<sup>499</sup> Ibidem, 226.

<sup>500</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 268.

It is quite remarkable that despite these numbers and the invasion that would follow after 9/11, there still are few studies that have traced the history of the foreign fighters in Afghanistan after 11 September 2001. The Norwegian scholar Anne Stenersen, argued in 2011 that their campaign has gone through two stages until 2006: the first from September 2001 to March 2002, when foreign fighters united with bin Laden and the Taliban leader Mullah Omar to take part in an all-out armed confrontation with the United States and their allies. The second from March 2002 to around 2005–06, a period which was spent hiding and regrouping outside Afghanistan's borders, mainly in Pakistan. One of the main findings of Stenersen's study is that there was little migration of foreign fighters from abroad to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan in 2001-2006.<sup>501</sup>

From 2005 on, a third stage manifested as the insurgency in Afghanistan exploded in both scope and intensity. In this period, foreign fighters became increasingly involved in offensive operations inside Afghanistan, in addition to taking part in supportive activities.<sup>502</sup> According to Williams, foreigners indeed began to play an important role in the Afghan insurgency at this time by teaching Taliban leaders the tactics of the evolving Iraqi insurgency. 'Arabs from Iraq taught the Taliban the previously taboo tactic of suicide bombing, which soon became a weapon of choice for the Afghan insurgents.'<sup>503</sup>

While Iraq took centre stage, war with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan endured with according to Watts 'a steady trickle of foreign fighters' continuing to travel to Pakistan to fight the US in eastern Afghanistan.<sup>504</sup> Targeted drone strikes would soon have an impact on this migration. Increasing substantially in 2008, drone strikes on Pakistani Taliban sanctuaries began inflicting a significant toll on al-Qaeda and the Taliban. 'For the first time, al Qaeda's key leaders, while not defeated, were pinned down in Pakistan and the leadership losses started to slow al Qaeda's global coordination.'<sup>505</sup> By the end of 2011, foreign fighter recruitment appeared practically non-existent with many leaders 'wiped out', but perhaps also because young men in North Africa and the Middle East saw opportunities at home amongst the Arab revolutions that had commenced after a Tunisian

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<sup>501</sup> A. Stenersen, 'Al Qaeda's Foot Soldiers: A Study of the Biographies of Foreign Fighters Killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan Between 2002 and 2006', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 34:3, (2011), 175.

<sup>502</sup> A. Stenersen, 'Al Qaeda's Foot Soldiers', 175.

<sup>503</sup> Williams, 'On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam"', 233.

<sup>504</sup> Watts, 'The Three Versions of Al Qaeda'.

<sup>505</sup> Ibidem.

street vendor set himself on fire in December 2010.<sup>506</sup> It was widely believed that by 2012, no more than 50 to 150 foreign fighters were present in the region.<sup>507</sup>

Still, in 2014 many news reports indicate that not all foreign fighters have given up. In February, hundreds of insurgents, including foreign fighters, targeted a checkpoint in Kunar province with heavy weapons, in which 21 soldiers were killed.<sup>508</sup> In April, Afghan forces backed by NATO air power repelled an assault by more than 300 militants including foreign fighters on an army base close to the Pakistani border.<sup>509</sup> In June 2014, 10 militants attacked *Jinnah International Airport* in Karachi, Pakistan killing 26 people. The attackers who also died, were foreigners of Uzbek origin who belonged to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an al-Qaeda-linked militant organisation that works closely with the Taliban in Pakistan.<sup>510</sup> This attack was followed by a series of aerial strikes on militant hideouts in the tribal areas along the Afghan border, killing more than 150 insurgents, including foreigners supposedly linked to the airport attack.<sup>511</sup>

### Recruitment messaging

No one in the Bush administration had any desire to end up where the Soviets had found themselves, and the key to this was seen as keeping a “light footprint” to avoid becoming an army of occupation and sparking a generalized insurrection.<sup>512</sup> Still, the idea of the remaining superpower invading a Muslim country seemed very suitable for recruitment messaging. The message, however, would not be that powerful, as the 9/11 attacks had been controversial among extremists, with many within al-Qaeda itself concerned that, by risking the safe haven the group had secured in Afghanistan, they could prove counterproductive.<sup>513</sup>

Outside al-Qaeda, the strikes had been by no means universally welcomed. In his book *The 9/11 wars*, Jason Burke for example mentioned a twenty-six-year-old Saudi shopkeeper who before his debut as a mujahideen in Iraq never considered to go to Afghanistan as he had been shocked and

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<sup>506</sup> J. Burke, ‘Al-Qaida leadership almost wiped out in Pakistan, British officials believe’, *The Guardian*, (December 25, 2011), [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/25/al-qaida-leadership-pakistan-africa?CMP=tw\\_t\\_gu](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/25/al-qaida-leadership-pakistan-africa?CMP=tw_t_gu). C. Watts, ‘Al Qaeda’s Foreign Fighter Recruitment – Not Dead, but Dying’, *Selected Wisdom*, (January 6, 2012), <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=511>.

<sup>507</sup> Williams, ‘On the Trail of the “Lions of Islam”’, 236.

<sup>508</sup> BBC, ‘Afghan army officers dismissed over Kunar attack’, (February 24, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26341651>.

<sup>509</sup> BBC, ‘Afghans ‘repel big militant attack on border army base’’, (April 30, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27217603>.

<sup>510</sup> M. Golovkina, ‘Feared Uzbek Jihadists behind deadly Pakistan airport attack’, *Reuters*, (June 11, 2014), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/11/us-pakistan-militants-idUSKBN0EM14L20140611>.

<sup>511</sup> H. Mujtaba, ‘Pakistan army launches big operation after airport attack’, *Reuters*, (June 15, 2014), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/15/us-pakistan-airstrikes-idUSKBN0EQ0F720140615>.

<sup>512</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 48.

<sup>513</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 151.

upset by the 9/11 attacks. “I was not happy because all those people were civilians”, he remembered, admitting he “was not clear about al-Qaeda or their ideology”.<sup>514</sup> He had also been horrified by the violence in his own country, where returning Afghan veterans had built networks, recruited volunteers and eventually launched a series of increasingly bloody attacks in 2003.<sup>515</sup>

Though there weren’t many found during the research for this article, some recruitment videos were distributed online with familiar messages like ‘It is incumbent upon all Muslims in the world today to stand alongside the Afghans’.<sup>516</sup> Interestingly, through these movies, Arab fighters in Iraq shared the Iraqi tactic of improvising land mines and explosive devices with their Afghan Taliban comrades. Williams was in 2007 in Afghanistan able to buy inspirational DVDs from Iraq dubbed into Pashtu with images of Iraqi ambushes of U.S. troops, suicide bombings, and sniper attacks. ‘Despite their small numbers, the foreign fighters obviously played a key role in transforming the Taliban into a terrorist insurgency’.<sup>517</sup> In one video sequence, Arab fighters painted the name “Zarqawi”, the head of the foreign fighters in Iraq, on mortar shells then lobbed them at Coalition troops in eastern Afghanistan.<sup>518</sup>

## Leaders

It can be said that the Afghan war in 2001 had perhaps one of the best leaders to attract foreign fighters. Taliban leader Mullah Omar had, days before the American invasion, proclaimed: ‘Osama Bin Laden will be the last person to leave Afghanistan’ and warned his people not to be ‘cowards’.<sup>519</sup> Two months after the 9/11 attacks, local tribal leaders and Taliban notables from the area gathered in Jalalabad to hear bin Laden indeed make a rousing speech about resistance.<sup>520</sup> A month later, however, bin Laden gave permission for a general withdrawal to his troops.<sup>521</sup> He himself, as well as al-Zawahiri were gone, leaving subordinates to lead any remaining fighters to safety. Their departure was according to Burke precipitate and inglorious. ‘(Bin Laden) even “left his bodyguards in Tora Bora”, one captured militant later told interrogators. “(He) suddenly departed Tora Bora with a few individuals (he) selected’, another remembered.’<sup>522</sup>

When bin Laden himself was killed in May 2011, al-Qaeda had already suffered heavy losses due to targeted operations that eliminated key leadership figures, and hampered their planning and

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<sup>514</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 168-169.

<sup>515</sup> Ibidem, 168-169.

<sup>516</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 269.

<sup>517</sup> Williams, ‘On the Trail of the “Lions of Islam”’, 233.

<sup>518</sup> Ibidem, 233.

<sup>519</sup> Ibidem, 227.

<sup>520</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 62.

<sup>521</sup> Ibidem, 65-66.

<sup>522</sup> Ibidem, 65-66.

communications efforts.<sup>523</sup> By the end of 2011 British officials believed al-Qaeda leadership was almost wiped out in Pakistan after an intense campaign of air strikes involving missiles launched from unmanned drones. ‘Only a handful of the key players remain alive’, one official told Burke.<sup>524</sup>

### Influence of governments

As noted, the United States killed many Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders by drone strikes eliminating their role as influential personalities to attract foreign fighters. The Pakistani government had a comparable part in this. Many of those foreign volunteers and militants who had fled Afghanistan in November and December 2001, had first sought sanctuary in cities in Pakistan, exploiting the relationships with local groups they had made over previous years. But urban centers had proved far from safe, and with cooperation between American agencies and the Pakistani intelligence services, a series of raids rounded up many of the most senior or at least most notorious al-Qaeda figures.<sup>525</sup> However, for years the Pakistani army couldn’t enter the autonomous FATA region, providing the fleeing fighters a safe haven and the perfect chance to regroup in order to get involved in cross-border attacks.<sup>526</sup>



11 Anti-Taliban fighters look at the mountains of Tora Bora, hit by US air strikes in 2001<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>523</sup> Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, ‘Foreign Fighters’.

<sup>524</sup> Burke, ‘Al-Qaida leadership almost wiped out in Pakistan’.

<sup>525</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 74.

<sup>526</sup> Williams, ‘On the Trail of the “Lions of Islam”’. Stenersen, ‘Al Qaeda’s Foot Soldiers’.

<sup>527</sup> Picture taken by *Reuters* photographer Erik de Catro, <http://blogs.reuters.com/afghanistan/tag/osama-bin-laden/>.

## Chances of success

Did the Afghan and foreign fighters ever stand a chance? Not according to Taliban leader Mullah Omar. On the eve of war he told his followers that they were facing an extremely powerful enemy and that defeat and death were probable – though the forces of Islam would eventually prevail over the very long term.<sup>528</sup> On November 13, the Northern Alliance was in possession of Kabul. The major force of foreign mujahideen which some feared would defend the city, simply did not exist as the bulk of the Arab fighters were already heading towards the Pakistani border.<sup>529</sup> ‘We left in small groups and in any vehicle we could find. We did not know where we were going and we were scared of the missiles’, remembered later one young Pakistani volunteer with the Taliban at the time.<sup>530</sup>

The battle of Tora Bora is by some considered as heroic, but the fighting was ‘scrappy in the extreme’.<sup>531</sup> Though there was a hardcore of militants determined to seek martyrdom, many of those who filled the defenses scraped in the mountainsides, stayed only for a couple of days, sometimes even a few hours, before moving out of Afghanistan.<sup>532</sup> Later on, the remaining foreign fighters were either imprisoned dug into the mountain positions at Shah i Kot in southern Paktia province where an estimated 1,000 insurgents took heavy casualties under intense aerial bombardments. By mid-March the foreign fighters and Taliban made their escape and, like, bin Laden before them, slipped over the border into the tribal regions of Pakistan.<sup>533</sup> However, the American drones would catch up with many of them.

## Internal disagreement

The Taliban refused to hand bin Laden over but that didn’t mean they weren’t having problems with their Arab guests. In 1996 and 1998, bin Laden issued fatwas calling on Muslims to kill Americans, even civilians.<sup>534</sup> Mullah Omar responded by ordering bin Laden not to issue any more threats against the West. Many in the Taliban movement felt that the Arab terrorists represented a threat to their regime. But bin Laden did not repay his host’s hospitality in kind and in August 1998 al-Qaeda attacked the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. President Bill Clinton responded by launching cruise missile strikes.<sup>535</sup>

When the going got tough after the US invasion, again the Afghans and Arabs would collide. In Kunduz, the Taliban and their foreign allies were dug in and prepared to fight to the finish. But as

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<sup>528</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 57.

<sup>529</sup> Ibidem, 57.

<sup>530</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>531</sup> Ibidem, 64.

<sup>532</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>533</sup> Williams, ‘On the Trail of the “Lions of Islam”’, 231.

<sup>534</sup> Ibidem, 225.

<sup>535</sup> Ibidem, 225.

the US air force bombed and strafed them mercilessly, hundreds died in the withering bombardment, the local Taliban began to defect to the Northern Alliance.<sup>536</sup> At this time, the foreign fighters killed some 300-400 Afghan Taliban who attempted to give themselves up and announced 'We are going to be martyrs. We are not going from Kunduz'.<sup>537</sup>

Disagreement was also caused by the invasion in general as well as by post-9/11 security measures as it restricted the mobility and communication of al-Qaeda leaders. The result was according to Hegghammer, a weakening of what had been the organizational 'glue' in the al-Qaeda network, namely the strong personal relationships and the ideological unity. 'In 2002, the various local branches of the al-Qa'ida network were strategically disoriented, and it seemed that old ideological debates and dividing lines started reappearing. Not everyone agreed that the liberation of Afghanistan was the most important issue.'<sup>538</sup>

According to Mendelsohn, many European volunteers who arrived in Pakistan seeking to join the fight had been frustrated to find that the local groups were suspicious of them, fearing they may have been sent by foreign intelligence services. Some have even spent months closed in an apartment, unable to get training, let alone fight for the cause for which they had left their homes.<sup>539</sup>

In sum, all tested factors seem to explain why a relatively low number of foreign fighters were drawn to the latest conflict in Afghanistan. The US attack could despite its "light footprint" be seen as similar to the Soviet invasion, but many Muslims worldwide simply weren't outraged as they had disapproved the al-Qaeda attack on American civilians. This underpins the statement made by the author in the first chapter that foreign fighters are not the same as international terrorists. As abuses in Iraq would enrage Muslims, this conflict would steal the spotlight from 2003 on. Recruitment messaging therefore wasn't powerful which also applies to the leadership. Even though Taliban leader Mullah Omar had proclaimed that bin Laden would be the last person to leave Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda leader would in fact leave two months after the invasion in an inglorious departure. Other top leaders too were forced into hiding. Meanwhile, the vast majority of foreign fighters in Afghanistan had either been killed, captured or also forced to flee to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Even here, foreign fighters suffered heavy losses due to targeted drone

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<sup>536</sup> Williams, 'On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam"', 228-229.

<sup>537</sup> *The Guardian*, 'Doomed Arab units prepare for final battle against the odds', (November 20, 2001), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/20/afghanistan.terrorism4>.

<sup>538</sup> T. Hegghammer, 'Global Jihadism After the Iraq War', *Middle East Journal*, Volume 60, no.1 (Winter, 2006), 14.

<sup>539</sup> Mendelsohn, 'Foreign Fighter – Recent Trends', 200-201.



operations that eliminated key leadership figures, and hampered their planning and communications efforts.

## Iraq 2003-2014: Crossing borders

'I knew nothing of about the criteria of jihad. I just thought it was simple: you fought unfair aggression.'

(Hizam al-Ghatani (26), shopkeeper from Saudi Arabia, autumn 2004.<sup>540</sup>)

Bin Laden and al-Qaeda's leadership were likely quite surprised when only over just a year after being chased from Tora Bora, the US invaded Iraq. Early in the conflict when Saddam Hussein was still in power and the regular Iraqi army was trying to resist the pressure of the American infantry, the allied forces seemed to be engaged in a conventional war. Foreign volunteers had been seen in Baghdad before the war, but they did not carry out any significant attack in the first weeks of the war.<sup>541</sup> Only after the fall of Saddam's regime, when American forces thought that the difficult part was over, militants from throughout the Middle East streamed into the country with the intention of waging jihad against 'the infidel occupier'. Most of the volunteers (about 2,000 in the first 18 months) came from neighboring countries, with Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia reportedly sending the largest number of fighters.<sup>542</sup>

Unlike the Afghan Arabs, the foreign fighters in Iraq have had considerable strategic influence on the war. In August 2003, fighters belonging to the Jordanian leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi bombed the United Nations' headquarters in Baghdad, prompting the UN to withdraw.<sup>543</sup> Zarqawi also helped provoke the civil war. On August 30, 2003, his group exploded a massive car bomb outside a Shiite mosque in Najaf that killed 125.<sup>544</sup> New fights broke out after Saddam Hussein was pulled from a small underground hiding place on December 14, 2003. The reason was 'hard demographic logic'.<sup>545</sup> If the country was to be a democracy, then the Sunnis would be the losers. If the 22 percent of Iraqis who were Sunnis were going to keep at least some of their privileges, they were going to have to fight.<sup>546</sup>

<sup>540</sup> Quoted in Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 168-169.

<sup>541</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 264-265.

<sup>542</sup> Ibidem, 264-265.

<sup>543</sup> P. Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq: What Will the Foreign Fighters Do?', in Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC), (2010), 104-105.

<sup>544</sup> Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq', 104-105.

<sup>545</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 125-128.

<sup>546</sup> Ibidem, 125-128.

In 2004, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to bin Laden and changed the group's name to what would become known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which transformed into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), and after that Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also translated as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: ISIL) which is since July 2014 also known as Islamic State (IS).<sup>547</sup> His foreign fighters would appear in the battles of Fallujah in 2004 and engaged coalition forces in several counterinsurgency operations.<sup>548</sup> An analysis in early 2005 of fatal casualties among such mujahideen recorded on Arabic language extremist websites over six months, found mention of 154 non-Iraqi Arabs killed in the country.<sup>549</sup> From April to October 2005 311 foreigners from 27 different countries were captured.<sup>550</sup> Zarqawi's strategy to attack the Shiites had proven successful. The tipping point in the slide toward full-blown civil war was al-Qaeda in Iraq's February 2006 attack on the Golden Mosque in Samarra.<sup>551</sup>

By that time, the US government stated that the Iraq conflict had become the 'cause célèbre for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of US involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement'.<sup>552</sup> The CIA stated the same year that there were an estimated 1,300 foreign fighters in the country.<sup>553</sup> That number would increase as AQI documents captured by coalition forces near Sinjar showed 590 foreign fighters arriving in just a one-year time frame between August 2006 and August 2007.<sup>554</sup>

The number of Sunni Arab insurgents actively planning and carrying out attacks on American forces was probably more than 10,000, meaning that about 90 percent of the fighters were homegrown Iraqis, mostly inspired by nationalist and religious sentiment.<sup>555</sup> Foreign fighters, however, reportedly played a bigger role than their small number would imply because of their spectacular suicide bombings against Iraqi security forces, Shiites and Sunni Kurds.<sup>556</sup> From October

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<sup>547</sup> A. Zelin, 'Al-Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part I)', *The Washington Institute*, 10 september 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-in-syria-a-closer-look-at-isis-part-i>.

<sup>548</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 86-87.

<sup>549</sup> R. Paz, 'Arab volunteers killed in Iraq: an Analysis', *PRISM Series of Global Jihad*, No. 1/3, (March 2005), [http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM\\_no\\_1\\_vol\\_3\\_-\\_Arabs\\_killed\\_in\\_Iraq.pdf](http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_no_1_vol_3_-_Arabs_killed_in_Iraq.pdf).

<sup>550</sup> A. Krueger, 'The National Origins of Foreign Fighters in Iraq', *Princeton University* and *NBER*, (December 30, 2006).

<sup>551</sup> Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq', 104-105.

<sup>552</sup> *Office of the Director of National Intelligence* 'Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States', *National Intelligence Estimate* (NIE), NIE 2006-02R (April 2006).

<sup>553</sup> M. Gordon and M. Mazzetti, 'General Warns of Risks in Iraq if G.I.'s Are Cut', *New York Times*, (November 16, 2006), [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/16/world/middleeast/16policy.html?\\_r=3&ref=todayspaper&oref=slogin&oref=slogin&](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/16/world/middleeast/16policy.html?_r=3&ref=todayspaper&oref=slogin&oref=slogin&).

<sup>554</sup> Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq', 104.

<sup>555</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 260.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibidem*, 260.

2007 until 2010 there had been 864 suicide bombings that killed more than 10,000 Iraqis.<sup>557</sup> The US military estimated that foreign recruits constituted 'about 100 percent of the suicide bombers'.<sup>558</sup>

Tribal disaffection, the surge in Coalition and Iraqi Forces in 2007-2008, and AQI's self-destructive penchant for violence, however, contributed to a decline of the number of foreign fighters entering Iraq.<sup>559</sup> The number of foreign fighters entering Iraq declined from 120 per month in 2007 to between 40 and 50 in 2010.<sup>560</sup> Many found no mission upon arrival and waited in the desert for months before returning to their home countries.<sup>561</sup>

Al-Qaeda in Iraq would, however, rise again when the US forces departed in 2011. This resurgence was partially driven by the neighboring conflict in Syria, but a more important cause was the weakness of the Iraqi state and Prime Minister al-Maliki's focus on consolidating power and, in so doing, alienating Iraq's Sunni Muslim community.<sup>562</sup> As the Sunnis became marginalized, AQI's popularity again grew. Iraq's neighbors contributed to the problem, sending money and volunteers directly to AQI or indirectly to the organization to support its role in the Syrian conflict.<sup>563</sup>

In 2012 the group adopted its new moniker, ISIS as an expression of its broadened ambitions as its fighters would cross into neighboring Syria to challenge both the Assad regime and secular and Islamist opposition groups there.<sup>564</sup> By the summer of 2013, there were about 30-40 suicide attacks per month, committed by foreigners.<sup>565</sup> In early 2014, violence had reached 2007 levels with thousands dying monthly in terrorist attacks.<sup>566</sup>

Once again, Iraq currently seems to be attracting foreign fighters.<sup>567</sup> Run by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi jihadist, ISIS may have up to 6,000 fighters in Iraq and 3,000-5,000 in Syria, including perhaps 3,000 foreigners; nearly a thousand are reported to hail from Chechnya and

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<sup>557</sup> Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq', 104-105.

<sup>558</sup> *The US department of defense*, 'DoD News Briefing with Col. Sean MacFarland, Commander of 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, Stationed in Ramadi', (July 14, 2006), <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=54>.

<sup>559</sup> Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout*, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC)*, (2010), 6.

<sup>560</sup> Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq', 115.

<sup>561</sup> C. Watts, 'Foreign Fighters: How Are They Being Recruited? Two Imperfect Recruitment Models', *Small Wars Journal*, 2008.

<sup>562</sup> D. Byman, 'The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq', Testimony at the *Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Subcommittee and the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee, House Committee on Foreign Affairs*, (December 12, 2013), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2013/12/12-resurgence-al-qaeda-iraq-byman>.

<sup>563</sup> Byman, 'The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq'.

<sup>564</sup> *Council on Foreign Relations*, 'Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria', (June 12, 2014), <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state-iraq-greater-syria/p14811>.

<sup>565</sup> B. McGurk, 'Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to U.S. Interests', Testimony at *House Foreign Affairs Committee*, (February 4, 2014), <http://london.usembassy.gov/terror071.html>.

<sup>566</sup> A. Celso, 'Cycles of Jihadist Movements and the Role of Irrationality', *FPRI*, (February 17, 2014), 245.

<sup>567</sup> A. Zelin, 'The Return of Foreign Fighters in the Iraq Jihad', *The Clairvoyant*, (March 6, 2014), <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/06/the-clairvoyant-the-return-of-foreign-fighters-in-the-iraq-jihad/>

perhaps 500 or so more from France, Britain and elsewhere in Europe.<sup>568</sup> By June 2014, the group's fighters had routed the Iraqi military in the major cities of Fallujah and Mosul and established territorial control and administrative structures on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border.<sup>569</sup>

### Recruitment messaging

The war in Iraq was more than a shift in the US focus from pursuing the 9/11 attackers to removing the regime of Saddam Hussein – a character and country with few links to al-Qaeda and no role in the 9/11 attacks. It also reinforced the credibility of the extremists' key message, that a belligerent West led by America was set on the subordination, exploitation and humiliation of Muslim lands and it boosted further the image of the extremists as the legitimate defender of a beleaguered community.<sup>570</sup> Hussein's regime fell quickly but this rapid success created a security vacuum ripe for al-Qaeda's narrative of far-enemy aggression.<sup>571</sup> Iraq became central in al-Qaeda's ideological outreach and recruitment efforts. Bin Laden, for example, characterized the Iraqi resistance as the central battle in a 'Third World War', which the 'Crusader-Zionist' coalition started against the *ummah*.<sup>572</sup>

The religious scholars in the global jihadist movement also began dealing with the Iraq question at an early stage. As early as September 2002, the prominent radical Saudi sheikh Nasir al-Fahd released a book entitled *The Crusader Campaign in its Second Phase: The Iraq War* followed by a statement from him and six other Saudi sheikhs.<sup>573</sup> In October 2002, called *Fatwa on the Infidelity of Whoever Helps the Americans Against Muslims in Iraq*.<sup>574</sup> Virtually all of the most prominent jihad sheikhs have since then issued statements on the necessity of fighting the crusaders in Iraq.<sup>575</sup>

The battle of Fallujah in 2004 after the widely publicized killing and lynching of four American private contractors, ended with a ceasefire enabling insurgents to take over the city. It inspired insurgents throughout Iraq, provoking what one officer called 'a jihad wildfire, spreading mosque to mosque from the Syrian border to Baghdad'.<sup>576</sup> Hastily produced DVDs of the fighting, edited to mournful music and melodramatic soundtracks flooded local markets. With saturation coverage of the fighting across the Islamic world, Fallujah had become a household name, a byword for

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<sup>568</sup> *The Economist*, 'Two Arab countries fall apart', (June 14, 2014), <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across>.

<sup>569</sup> *Council on Foreign Relations*, 'Islamic State in Iraq'.

<sup>570</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 151.

<sup>571</sup> Watts, 'The Three Versions of Al Qaeda'.

<sup>572</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 252.

<sup>573</sup> Hegghammer, 'Global Jihadism After the Iraq War', 17-21.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibidem*, 17-21.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>576</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 129-131.

successful Arab and Islamic resistance against the ‘neo-imperialist crusading Americans and their Jewish manipulators’.<sup>577</sup>

Although it is difficult to measure the evolution of the relative interest in the Iraq issue in jihad communities, Hegghammer made an attempt at quantifying this interest by reading and classifying all the messages posted from October 2003 to January 2005 on the radical Islamist Web forum *al-Qal’a*. The figure below shows that in those years Iraq gained the status as the most important battlefield for the global jihadist movement.

	Iraq		Palestine		Saudi Arabia		Afghanistan		Chechnya		Other topics	
	P	R	P	R	P	R	P	R	P	R	P	R
Oct 03	4	626	4	524	31	26871	0	0	0	0	28	14061
Feb 04	7	4120	1	464	7	12473	0	0	0	0	17	8265
May 04	13	11423	1	297	11	7443	0	0	1	689	26	12151
Aug 04	19	12666	2	469	3	1430	0	0	0	0	15	7532
Nov 04	6	5999	1	515	2	969	0	0	0	0	8	5652
Jan 05	18	4957	4	1258	4	2237	0	0	0	0	17	8486

12 Number of postings (P) and related readings (R) on different jihad fronts on the Internet forum *al-Qal’a* on the 15th of selected months between Oct. 2003-Jan. 2005.<sup>578</sup>

According to Hegghammer, the reason why fighters joined the Iraqi jihad is first of all that Iraq constituted the best example of Muslim suffering at the hands of Americans. The young Saudi shopkeeper mentioned in the previous Afghanistan chapter can arguably serve as proof for this claim. Although he had been shocked and upset by the 9/11 attacks, he was just as shocked by images from Iraq. ‘I saw the TV, al-Jazeera, the Internet news websites, and I was angry at the aggression against civilians, the children being killed, the air attacks...I wanted to be of service...They were at war, I was at peace. I wanted to do something for them’.<sup>579</sup>

Many ideologues emphasized that the US-led invasion of Iraq confirmed Washington’s evil intentions in the Middle East once and for all. In October 2004, bin Laden said: ‘[O]ppression and the intentional killing of innocent women and children is a deliberate American policy. [...]’.<sup>580</sup> Violent battles and American war crimes introduced names such as Abu Ghraib into the jihadist vocabulary. Pictures of American soldiers torturing Iraqis became powerful expressions of Muslims’ suffering and were widely used in propaganda films and declarations by militant Islamist groups.<sup>581</sup> Burke quoted

<sup>577</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 129-131.

<sup>578</sup> Hegghammer, ‘Global Jihadism After the Iraq War’, 21.

<sup>579</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 168-169.

<sup>580</sup> Hegghammer, ‘Global Jihadism After the Iraq War’, 17-21.

<sup>581</sup> Hegghammer, ‘Global Jihadism After the Iraq War’, 17-21.

in his book *The 9/11 Wars* a thirty-five-year-old Saudi who blamed *al-Jazeera* and 'the TV' for his decision to try to become a mujahideen.<sup>582</sup> The images from Abu Ghraib in particular and from Iraq more generally, created 'a kind of mental shock.' 'when I saw those pictures, it came into my mind that I had to do something.'<sup>583</sup>

By 2005, Zarqawi was a key part of the Sunni insurgency opposed to US forces and Baghdad's Shiite-dominated government. AQI's savvy media campaign featured video attacks against coalition forces, dramatized its martyrdom rituals, showed beheadings of foreign hostages and glorified its assault against the apostate Shiite community. The beheading of American Nicolas Berg was famously posted on AQI Internet sites.<sup>584</sup> Zarqawi's group took advantage of broadband Internet access to get its message out, using not only text and images, but also by distributing high resolution videos, including attacks filmed from multiple angles.<sup>585</sup>

Many of the video clips, audio recordings and online publications framed the conflict as a story in three acts: The humiliation, torture, and suffering of Muslims by Westerners, portrayed as constant across globe; next is the impotence or collusion of apostate Arab regimes; finally comes the inevitable Islamic victory because a righteous few have stepped forward and sacrificed to fight for justice.<sup>586</sup> The mythology surrounding individual suicide bombers and other fallen jihadists is intended to appeal to potential recruits to make similar "heroic" sacrifices.<sup>587</sup>

Yet it is perhaps not unthinkable that suicide would put some recruits off as they would prefer to fight a heroic battle instead. In 2007, a Palestinian member of ISI made it very clear that the insurgency did not need transnational recruits to be foot soldiers; rather the need was for martyrs.<sup>588</sup>

The chance of a "heroic" or at least a spectacular battle seems currently to be present. In June, ISIS militants launched a fresh attempt to attract foreign recruits with a polished video featuring British fighters urging their compatriots to join them in Iraq and Syria.<sup>589</sup> The film was part of a coordinated social media campaign launched by the extremist group to capitalize on its territorial gains. In a sign of the growing sophistication of its propaganda operation, ISIS said it was

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<sup>582</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 171.

<sup>583</sup> Ibidem, 171.

<sup>584</sup> Celso, 'Cycles of Jihadist Movements', 238.

<sup>585</sup> Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq', 102.

<sup>586</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 277.

<sup>587</sup> M. Hafez, 'Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 19, (2007), 111.

<sup>588</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 272.

<sup>589</sup> C. Milmo, 'Iraq crisis: Isis militants release video to recruit foreign fighters', *The Independent*, (June 20, 2014), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-crisis-isis-militants-release-video-to-recruit-foreign-fighters-9552142.html#>.

aiming to get one billion Muslims to post messages of support for a hardline Islamist state on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.<sup>590</sup>



13 A screenshot from the 2004 hostage video of Nick Berg, titled Abu Musa'b al-Zarqawi slaughters an American. The figure in the center is most likely Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.<sup>591</sup>

## Leaders

Both bin Laden and al-Zawahiri were influential leaders that would call foreign fighters to battle. Bin Laden's first reference to the Iraq War came in early February 2003 after which he and al-Zawahiri would issue at least 22 declarations referring to Iraq in the two years after the invasion.<sup>592</sup> As Gerges has noted, both could at that time be seen as the 'latest embodiments of a long line of revered (mostly martyred) heroes like Egyptian pioneer Sayyid Qutb and his disciples (...) Abdullah Azzam (...)'.<sup>593</sup> The experience and character of the two complemented each other and in the words of Gerges, 'fuelled their unholy alliance with missionary zeal'.<sup>594</sup>

<sup>590</sup> Milmo, 'Iraq crisis'.

<sup>591</sup> Picture taken from Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu\\_Musab\\_al-Zarqawi#mediaviewer/File:NickBergandFiveMen.JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Musab_al-Zarqawi#mediaviewer/File:NickBergandFiveMen.JPG).

<sup>592</sup> Hegghammer, 'Global Jihadism After the Iraq War', 17-21.

<sup>593</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 35-42.

<sup>594</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 35-42.



Another alliance was made in 2004 when al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to bin Laden, becoming al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>595</sup> Zarqawi had traveled to Peshawar in 1989 where he became a reporter for a jihadi newspaper and apparently made the acquaintance of bin Laden.<sup>596</sup> After militant activity in Europe, and imprisonment in Jordan, Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan to establish his own training camp but relocated to Iraq in 2002 as Washington began announcing plans to topple the Hussein regime.<sup>597</sup>

The 2004 alliance was perfect timing for bin Laden, whose prominence had even been partially obscured by Zarqawi's brazen operations in Iraq.<sup>598</sup> Now, bin Laden could benefit from Zarqawi's popularity and make the Iraqi insurgency's successes his own. At the same time, Zarqawi could demonstrate he had the support of the undisputed leader of the worldwide jihadi movement, adding to his prestige.<sup>599</sup>

Although he began with humble resources, Zarqawi, who had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980s, had gradually and steadily built an operational infrastructure that proved to be durable despite suffering painful military blows by US raids and counteroffensives.<sup>600</sup> Zarqawi showed both extreme brutality – himself killing by knife several hostages – and a talent for media manipulation – rapidly and effectively ensuring the broadcast of the atrocious images of executions by Internet and video.<sup>601</sup> In the words of Vidino, Zarqawi became a 'jihad star'.<sup>602</sup> In this way, Zarqawi reinvigorated an al-Qaeda in retreat, inspiring a second round of foreign fighters to travel to and fight in Iraq.<sup>603</sup> He and his Syrian aides concentrated diligently on recruitment efforts in Syria, Jordan, and Palestine and on fund-raising from sympathetic wealthy Syrian businessmen in Europe.<sup>604</sup>

In June 2006, Zarqawi was killed in a US air strike. AQI fractured and the group sought renewal by elevating Iraqis into key leadership ranks.<sup>605</sup> AQI created the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and appointed al-Baghdadi to be its nominal leader, but at that time he would not emerge as a charismatic leader in the mould of Zarqawi or bin Laden.<sup>606</sup> There was initially even some question whether al-Baghdadi was a fictional character.<sup>607</sup> Years later al-Baghdadi proved to be anything but

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<sup>595</sup> M. al-Zarqawi, 'Letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Osama bin Laden', CFR Primary sources, (February 1, 2004), <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/letter-abu-musab-al-zarqawi-osama-bin-laden/p9863>.

<sup>596</sup> Malet, *Foreign fighters*, 273.

<sup>597</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>598</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 283-284.

<sup>599</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>600</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 253.

<sup>601</sup> BBC, 'Zarqawi' beheaded US man in Iraq', (May 13, 2004), [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3712421.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3712421.stm). Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 166.

<sup>602</sup> Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, 282.

<sup>603</sup> Watts, 'The Three Versions of Al Qaeda'.

<sup>604</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 253.

<sup>605</sup> Celso, 'Cycles of Jihadist Movements', 241.

<sup>606</sup> Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq', 113.

<sup>607</sup> Ibidem.

fictional. It was al-Baghdadi that dispatched operatives to Syria to set up a new jihadist organization, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, what would become one of the opposition's best fighting forces.<sup>608</sup> Late June, his own group ISIS has proclaimed him as caliph and 'leader for Muslims everywhere'.<sup>609</sup>

### Influence of governments

The US government was of course influential as it invaded Iraq and catalyzed AQI's ascension in Iraq. Historically repressed by Saddam Hussein's secular regime, Iraqi jihadist forces were weak prior to the war.<sup>610</sup> It was, moreover, the way US troops operated, as the harsh interrogation and imprisonment methods used by the United States against transnational insurgents became a central point of recruitment messaging. 'The reason why foreign fighters joined al-Qa'ida in Iraq was overwhelmingly because of abuses at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and not Islamic ideology', said an American major who personally conducted 300 interrogations of prisoners in Iraq.<sup>611</sup>

Another important development is the way the United States portrayed Zarqawi. In his speech to the United Nations on Iraq, US Secretary of State Colin Powell used over a thousand words to describe the threat coming from the Jordanian, calling him the leader of a 'deadly terrorist network' and a 'collaborator' of bin Laden.<sup>612</sup> President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney would as well portray Zarqawi as the world's most dangerous and prolific terrorist, preaching and practicing jihad, and ascribe to him mythic invulnerability.<sup>613</sup>

Even Zarqawi's biographer told Gerges that by exaggerating Zarqawi's military strength and blaming most attacks in Iraq on foreign terrorists led by Zarqawi, the United States unwittingly turned him into a 'hero and symbol' of resistance in the eyes of the Arabs: 'Every Arab and Muslim who wished to go to Iraq for jihad wanted to join al-Zarqawi and fight under his leadership.'<sup>614</sup> Although at the beginning of the American occupation, Zarqawi controlled fewer than 30 fighters, according to Hussein, it was estimated in 2005 that he had thousands of followers, 'thanks to U.S. media and government ingenuity'.<sup>615</sup> In 2006, a former American military intelligence officer in Iraq

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<sup>608</sup> A. Zelin, 'Al-Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part I)', *The Washington Institute*, (September 10, 2013), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-in-syria-a-closer-look-at-isis-part-i>.

<sup>609</sup> BBC, 'Isis rebels declare 'Islamic state' in Iraq and Syria', (June 30, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28082962>.

<sup>610</sup> Celso, 'Cycles of Jihadist Movements', 241.

<sup>611</sup> P. Cockburn, 'Torture? It probably killed more Americans than 9/11', *the Independent*, (April 26, 2009), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/torture-it-probably-killed-more-americans-than-911-1674396.html>.

<sup>612</sup> C. Powell, 'A Policy of Evasion and Deception', full text of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations on Iraq, *Washington Post*, (February 3, 2003), [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/transcripts/powelltext\\_020503.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/transcripts/powelltext_020503.html).

<sup>613</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 259.

<sup>614</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>615</sup> Ibidem.

said: 'Our own focus on Zarqawi has enlarged his caricature, if you will -- made him more important than he really is, in some ways.'<sup>616</sup>

Ironically, also the departure of American troops had a considerable effect on the mobilization of foreign fighters as afterwards, tensions between Sunni, Shia and Kurdish political blocs accelerated in Iraq's fractured government enabling AQI to recover.<sup>617</sup>

Saudi Arabia is another interesting player as some have argued that it has made great strides in recent years, detaining large groups of militants and supposedly rehabilitating former fighters.<sup>618</sup> However, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki has recently said that Saudi Arabia has 'clearly interfered' in Iraqi internal affairs as it was facilitating the entry of foreign mercenaries into Iraq.<sup>619</sup> Maliki himself is not free of blame as in 2011 he arrested a prominent Sunni politician accused of sponsoring terror, which seemed to have been an important trigger in accelerating sectarian tensions that AQI exploited successfully.<sup>620</sup>

The highest proportion of foreign militants in Iraq – up to two-thirds by some estimates – came indeed from Saudi Arabia.<sup>621</sup> Most reached Iraq through Syria. Tolerating, if not actively assisting, the passage of volunteers across their territory served several of the Syrian intelligence services' interests: it fuelled the insurgency in Iraq and therefore made a US intervention against Damascus less likely and at the same time it provided a useful card to play in any potential negotiations with Western states or even Israel.<sup>622</sup>

It also diverted the attention of anyone who might otherwise be tempted to take up arms against the Syrian regime, which as secular Ba'athist and in large Shia, represented two of contemporary Sunni militancy's priority targets.<sup>623</sup> The necessity for such a safety valve was shown by statistics on the origins of the volunteers arriving in Iraq. Up to a fifth were Syrian, their homeland naturally no more immune to the broad currents of radicalization coursing through the Islamic world than anywhere else in the region.<sup>624</sup>

Currently the influence of the US government is once again crucial. Late June, supporters of ISIS launched a viral propaganda campaign on Twitter threatening to attack the United States and its

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<sup>616</sup> T. Ricks, 'Military Plays Up Role of Zarqawi', *Washington Post*, (April 10, 2006), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/09/AR2006040900890.html>.

<sup>617</sup> Celso, 'Cycles of Jihadist Movements', 244.

<sup>618</sup> Watts, 'Foreign Fighters: How Are They Being Recruited?'

<sup>619</sup> BBC, 'Iraqi PM Nouri Maliki accuses Saudis of 'interference'', (April 25, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27164281>.

<sup>620</sup> Celso, 'Cycles of Jihadist Movements', 244.

<sup>621</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 169-171.

<sup>622</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>623</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>624</sup> Ibidem.

interests if America acts militarily against the group in Iraq.<sup>625</sup> The 'Twitter intimidation campaign', was seen as a combination of recruiting propaganda and an attempt to drive public support down for any future American strikes.

### Chances of success

One of the major themes Hegghammer found in jihadist writings on Iraq is that the prospects of victory were considered higher than on any other jihad front.<sup>626</sup> Prominent ideologues cited several different reasons for this, but most point out that the enormous costs and commitments undertaken by the US in Iraq, represented a significant strategic advantage for the jihadists. In September 2004, al-Zawahiri described how Iraq had become a quagmire for the United States:

'As for Muslim Iraq, the mujahidin in it have turned America's plan upside down after the interim government's weakness became clear. America's defeat in Iraq [...] has become a matter of time, God willing. The Americans [...] are between two fires; if they continue, they will bleed until death, and if they withdraw, they will lose everything.'<sup>627</sup>

By 2008, however, a growing number of foreign fighters were leaving or attempted to flee Iraq as US and Iraqi forces had weakened al-Qaeda and forced its members from former strongholds.<sup>628</sup> In 2010, al-Qaeda in Iraq was a wounded organization. The number of foreign fighters entering Iraq declined and more foreign fighters were trying to leave the country.<sup>629</sup> Prior to the 2011 US military disengagement, AQI (or ISI) was in retreat and written off by most analysts as a defeated organization.<sup>630</sup>

Yet on the verge of strategic defeat as US forces departed Iraq, former al-Qaeda fighters have since regrouped into a large and growing force, contributing to the surge in violence in Iraq and the broader region.<sup>631</sup> The name ISIS has become world-famous as fighters successfully and spectacularly seized Iraqi cities.<sup>632</sup> If ISIS (or IS) can hold Mosul and consolidate its presence there, it will have taken a giant step towards its goal of creating an Islamist emirate that straddles Iraq and Syria, which would arguably be the most significant act by a jihadist group since al-Qaeda attacked the US on 11

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<sup>625</sup> R. Kumar and J. Rossomando, 'Emboldened ISIS Threatens Americans', *The investigative Project on Terrorism*, (June 26, 2014), <http://www.investigativeproject.org/4440/emboldened-isis-threatens-americans>.

<sup>626</sup> Hegghammer, 'Global Jihadism After the Iraq War'.

<sup>627</sup> Hegghammer, 'Global Jihadism After the Iraq War', 23.

<sup>628</sup> J. Michaels, 'Military: foreign fighters getting out of Iraq', *USA Today/MilitaryTimes.com*, (March 21, 2008), available at [http://www.militarytimes.com/news/2008/03/gns\\_foreignfighters\\_032008/](http://www.militarytimes.com/news/2008/03/gns_foreignfighters_032008/).

<sup>629</sup> Bergen, 'After the War in Iraq', 115.

<sup>630</sup> Celso, 'Cycles of Jihadist Movements', 244.

<sup>631</sup> Byman, 'The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq'.

<sup>632</sup> BBC, 'Iraq conflict: ISIS militants seize new towns', (June 13, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27828595>.

September 2001.<sup>633</sup> Indeed, all al-Qaeda franchises seek to establish the Islamic State, but ISIS has already laid the foundations of one in northern Syria and western Iraq. Again, the conflict in Iraq can be considered as a magnet for foreign fighters.<sup>634</sup>

### Internal disagreement

Although at least many hundreds of foreign fighters had traveled to Iraq by 2004, it wasn't enough according to Zarqawi who stated that 'their numbers continue to be negligible as compared to the enormity of the expected battle'.<sup>635</sup> One of the reasons why many jihadists didn't answer the call to battle was 'confusion over the banner'. In a letter to bin Laden, Zarqawi also expressed frustration with the local population: 'Many an Iraqi will honor you as a guest and give you shelter as a peaceable brother. As for making his house into a base for launching [operations] and a place of movement and battle, this is rarer than red sulphur. (...) This makes training the green newcomers like wearing bonds and shackles (...)'.<sup>636</sup>

Perhaps Iraqis weren't always very welcoming as Zarqawi labeled whole segments of Iraqis as unbelievers.<sup>637</sup> Bin Laden reportedly was not in favor of civil strife between Shiites and Sunnis lest it distract from the focal confrontation against the Americans.<sup>638</sup> In 2006, a letter from al-Zawahiri instructed Zarqawi to control his violence against Shiites and civilians as it was creating backlash against al-Qaeda.<sup>639</sup> The influential sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi also openly criticized al-Zarqawi's indiscriminate attacks on Shiites in Iraq.<sup>640</sup>

When US forces killed Zarqawi in 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq turned ever more violent and sectarian, fully alienating their popular support. Foreign fighter supply lines to Iraq continued strong through 2007, but al-Qaeda in Iraq's excessive violence combined with the decimation of the group by US Special Forces resulted in the group's decline amongst Iraqi Sunni tribes fed up with their indiscriminate killing.<sup>641</sup> The fact that these tribes and nationalist insurgents became less willing to host foreign fighters and often even turned against AQI, substantially reduced the stream of foreign fighters into Iraq in 2007 and 2008.<sup>642</sup>

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<sup>633</sup> BBC, 'Iraq conflict: ISIS militants seize new towns'.

<sup>634</sup> Byman, 'The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq'.

<sup>635</sup> M. al-Zarqawi, 'Letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Osama bin Laden', CFR Primary sources, (February 1, 2004), <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/letter-abu-musab-al-zarqawi-osama-bin-laden/p9863>.

<sup>636</sup> Zarqawi, 'Letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi'.

<sup>637</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 257-258.

<sup>638</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy*, 257-258.

<sup>639</sup> A. al-Zawahiri, 'Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi (English Translation)', CTC, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>.

<sup>640</sup> Hegghammer, 'Global Jihadism After the Iraq War', 26-27.

<sup>641</sup> Watts, 'The Three Versions of Al Qaeda'.

<sup>642</sup> Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', 86.

In sum, most of the tested factors seem to be crucial elements that enabled the mobilization of thousands of foreign fighters who entered the Iraqi conflict zone after 2003. The Iraq conflict became the most pressing single issue on the global jihadist agenda as an opportunity to fight against the “Jewish-Crusader alliance”, but also as a duty to defend the Muslims who were tortured by Americans. The powerful symbols of Muslim suffering made Iraq different from Afghanistan, perhaps also because of its position in the heart of the Islamic world. Next to the influential leaders bin Laden and al-Zawahiri who inspired jihadists to fight in Iraq, a new jihad star Zarqawi with a talent for media manipulation entered the scene with a little help from the US government. After initial widely publicized successes, many foreign fighters left the country after local insurgents turned against them, but in the recent years the same factors seem to explain why many more returned for a new series of victories that immediately were used in a PR-campaign to attract new foreign recruits. One of the big questions now is if ISIS is any better than al-Qaeda at governing populations used to a far more moderate form of Islam or whether internal disagreement due to ISIS’ extremism could end the winning spree.

## Syria 2011-2014: Unlimited access

'1 hour flight from Istanbul, 30min drive from hatai and bing bang boom ur in!!'

(A British fighters' Facebook status mocks the ease with which foreign jihadists can cross the Turkish border into Syria.<sup>643</sup>)

In March 2011, the Arab Spring reached Syria. For many Syrians, the uprisings functioned as an example and generated expectations that change was possible in long-lasting authoritarian regimes. Since the coup of 1970, the Assad clan had consolidated a "family dictatorship", not unlike the regime in Iraq.<sup>644</sup> It can be argued that Iraq up to 2003 was Syria's 'fratricidal reverse twin', as Saddam's regime was also a minority-based government disempowering the demographic majority.<sup>645</sup>

As the protests widened in 2011, the government's violent response became more extensive and intensive. The *International Crisis Group* argued that 'by seeking to force entire communities into submission, they pushed them toward armed resistance; the protest movement's militarisation was a logical by-product of heightened repression.'<sup>646</sup>

The Syrian uprising began as a popular resistance against autocracy. Yet as the conflict dragged on, frustration with international inaction rose in tandem with the death toll, and a radical Islamist dynamic emerged within the opposition. The vast majority of Syrians opposing the regime are still local revolutionaries who espouse varying degrees of personal religious fervor, but in 2012 many pre-existing local opposition militias steadily adopted more Islamist identities.<sup>647</sup>

This shift coincided with the emergence of the uprising's first two prominent Salafi armed groups: Jabhat al-Nusra (translated as the Support Front) and Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham (the Freemen of Syria Battalions), both of which unambiguously embraced the language of jihad and called for

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<sup>643</sup> A. Roussinos, 'Jihad Selfies: These British Extremists in Syria Love Social Media', *Vice*, (December 5, 2013), [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/syrian-jihadist-selfies-tell-us-a-lot-about-their-war](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/syrian-jihadist-selfies-tell-us-a-lot-about-their-war).

<sup>644</sup> U.U. Üngör, 'Mass Violence in Syria: A Preliminary Analysis', *New Middle Eastern Studies*, (October 7, 2013), <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1161>.

<sup>645</sup> Üngör, 'Mass Violence in Syria'.

<sup>646</sup> *International Crisis Group*, 'Syria's Mutating Conflict', (2012), 3.

<sup>647</sup> C. Lister en P. Smyth, 'Syria's multipolar war', *Foreign Policy*, (November 6, 2013), [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/10/31/syrias\\_multipolar\\_war#sthash.VR3qhxhK.dpbs](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/10/31/syrias_multipolar_war#sthash.VR3qhxhK.dpbs). E. O'bagy, 'Jihad in Syria', Institute for the Study of War middle east security report 6 (September 2012) <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/jihad-syria>, 39.

replacing the regime with an Islamic state based on Salafi principles.<sup>648</sup> By November 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra had become one of the opposition's best fighting forces, and locals viewed its members as fair arbiters when dealing with corruption and social services.<sup>649</sup>

The Syrian jihadists were aided by foreign fighters, some with significant capabilities and connections to al-Qaeda and other international jihadist networks.<sup>650</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, "Al-Fateh" (The Conqueror) Abu Mohammed al-Golani, stated that its fighters were 'back from the various jihad fronts' alluding to the fact that its members had fought in other countries. Although jihadists from Lebanon would arrive later, al-Golani was most likely referring to Iraq as the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq at the hands of Sunni tribal fighters, US forces and the Iraqi army created a cadre of unemployed, frustrated and available fighters.<sup>651</sup>

Sometime in the spring or summer of 2013, history was made in Syria when the number of foreign fighters exceeded that of any previous conflict in the modern history of the Muslim world. There were by then over 5,000 Sunni foreign fighters in the war-torn country, including more than a thousand from the West.<sup>652</sup> 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.<sup>653</sup>

At the end of 2013, it was estimated more than 8,500 had gone to Syria to fight against the Assad government, with a particularly steep increase among non-Arabs, especially Westerners.<sup>654</sup> The latest estimates suggest that just the number of Westerners who have journeyed to the region has surged in the past year to as many as 3,000.<sup>655</sup> The vast majority seems to join Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS.<sup>656</sup> The latter is currently expanding its "Islamic State" between eastern Syria and Iraq and now holds territory larger than many countries.

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<sup>648</sup> *International Crisis Group*, 'Tentative Jihad: Syria's fundamentalist opposition', *Middle East Report* N°131 (October 12, 2012), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.pdf>, 4.

<sup>649</sup> Zelin, 'Al-Qaeda in Syria'.

<sup>650</sup> O'bagy, 'Jihad in Syria', 2.

<sup>651</sup> E. Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, (Oxon 2013), 94-95.

<sup>652</sup> T. Hegghammer, 'Syria's Foreign Fighters', *Foreign Policy*, (December 9, 2013), [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/12/09/syrias\\_foreign\\_fighters](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/12/09/syrias_foreign_fighters).

<sup>653</sup> Hegghammer, 'Syria's Foreign Fighters'.

<sup>654</sup> *ICSR*, 'Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria'.

<sup>655</sup> T. McCoy, 'How ISIS and other jihadists persuaded thousands of Westerners to fight their war of extremism', *the Washington Post*, (June 17, 2014), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/17/how-isis-persuaded-thousands-of-westerners-to-fight-its-war-of-extremism/>.

<sup>656</sup> *ICSR*, 'Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria'.



## Recruitment messaging

The recruitment messaging in Syria at first clearly emphasized what Malet has called 'the necessity of defensive action to preserve the existence of the community'.<sup>657</sup> While in Iraq Muslims were said to be suffering at the hands of Americans, in Syria it was the extreme brutality of the regime and the resulting images of unspeakable civilian suffering, which prompted many to do something about it. Even if this meant fighting a Shiite government, suggesting that the foreign fighter doctrine is more about who you help, than who you fight. As Hegghammer has argued, the intra-Sunni solidarity norm has long been present in many Sunni communities. '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.'<sup>658</sup>

As early as January 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra released a video on prominent jihadi forums announcing its formation in response to growing calls for jihadists to defend the Syrian people against the regime's forces.<sup>659</sup> Soon, the group would gain approval from key jihadi ideologues and develop a robust command-and-control network across Syria, conduct a devastating string of suicide attacks, and orchestrate hundreds of car bombs and assassinations against the Assad regime.<sup>660</sup> It claimed credit for many of its attacks in announcements released on jihadist forums and its Twitter site as Jabhat al-Nusra has established an advanced propaganda campaign.<sup>661</sup>

The campaign was supported by the general media coverage of the Syrian conflict, which specifically piqued media interest because of the unusually horrific appearance of chemical weapons. In August 2013, images of hundreds of shaking children dying on blood-streaked church floors flooded the news. This was a turning point for much of the world, including the US who threatened with a military strike in response. In December 2013 senator Dianne Feinstein, chairman of the US *Senate Intelligence Committee*, referred to Syria as a 'lightning rod for jihadists'.<sup>662</sup>

The foreign fighters in Syria and especially their commitment to jihad on social media attract fresh recruits. Western fighters answer questions on sites such as ask.fm, Tumblr and Kik and seemingly try to reassure and address the fear of the unfamiliar. For example, there are many postings of fighters with pet kittens.<sup>663</sup> In April this year, a British citizen who fights with the rebels in Syria released a video tour of the home he shares with fellow fighters in the war-torn country,

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<sup>657</sup> Malet, 'Why foreign fighters'.

<sup>658</sup> Hegghammer, 'Syria's Foreign Fighters'.

<sup>659</sup> O'bagy, 'Jihad in Syria', 31.

<sup>660</sup> O'bagy, 'Jihad in Syria', 31. S. Jones, 'The Terrorist Threat from Syria', Before the *Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence*, (May 22, 2013), [http://www.RAND.org/content/dam/RAND/pubs/testimonies/CT300/CT388/RAND\\_CT388.pdf](http://www.RAND.org/content/dam/RAND/pubs/testimonies/CT300/CT388/RAND_CT388.pdf).

<sup>661</sup> Jones, 'The Terrorist Threat from Syria'.

<sup>662</sup> CNN, 'Feinstein: 'Terror is up worldwide'', 1 december 2013, <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2013/12/01/feinstein-terror-is-up-worldwide/> (15 januari 2014).

<sup>663</sup> McCoy, 'How ISIS and other jihadists persuaded thousands of Westerners'.

presenting a surreal version of the hit MTV series *Cribs*.<sup>664</sup> At the same time, those killed on the battlefield are also honoured and glorified on Facebook and YouTube.

The extensive use of the YouTube led *BBC* journalist Paul Wood to the observation that the Syrian conflict ‘feels like the first YouTube war’: ‘There's a guy with a machine gun and two guys next to him with camera phones’.<sup>665</sup> In April this year a study by the *International Centre for the Study of Radicalism* concluded that Syria may, in fact, be the first conflict in which a large number of Western fighters have been documenting their experience of conflict in real-time.<sup>666</sup> For foreign fighters social media has come to represent both an essential source of inspiration and information including practical travel advice. ‘This is the most socially mediated conflict in history’, one of the authors mentioned.<sup>667</sup> They want to use it in order to inspire people to come and join them and support their cause.<sup>668</sup>



14 An image taken from a video released by jihadist group Al-Nusra Front allegedly shows a portrait of American citizen Moner Mohammad Abu-Salha, who is believed to have been involved in the suicide bombing against regime forces in Syria's northern province of Idlib on May 25, 2014.<sup>669</sup>

<sup>664</sup> R. Hall, ‘British rebel fighter offers rare insight into daily life of foreign jihadists’, *The Independent*, (April 20, 2014), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/british-rebel-fighter-offers-rare-insight-into-daily-life-of-foreign-jihadists-9272178.html>.

<sup>665</sup> *IFEX*, ‘Syria's war behind one of deadliest years worldwide for journalists’, (January 9, 2013), [http://www.ifex.org/international/2013/01/09/2012\\_toll/](http://www.ifex.org/international/2013/01/09/2012_toll/).

<sup>666</sup> J. Carter, S. Maher and P. Neumann, ‘#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks’, *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalism*, (April 15, 2014), <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Influence-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf>

<sup>667</sup> *BBC*, ‘Syria: How foreign fighters are using social media’, (April 17, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27064438>.

<sup>668</sup> *BBC*, ‘Syria: How foreign fighters are using social media’.

<sup>669</sup> The video was uploaded on *LiveLeak* on May 30, 2014, distributed via AFP/Getty Images and taken from the *Washington Post* website <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/17/how-isis-persuaded-thousands-of-westerners-to-fight-its-war-of-extremism/>.

## Leaders

Al-Zawahiri called Assad already in July 2011 ‘the leader of criminal gangs, the protector of traitors’, but interestingly the Syrian conflict didn’t seem to have any other strong charismatic leader in the period when many fighters were arriving.<sup>670</sup> According to Hegghammer and Zelin, the Egyptian mainstream theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi can be considered an influential figure as ‘perhaps the world’s most influential Sunni cleric’ called in May 2013 on Sunni Muslims worldwide to fight against the regime of Assad.<sup>671</sup> Qaradawi’s statement would likely have quickened the stream of foreign fighters into Syria considering the fact that he has authored more than 100 books that are sold across the Muslim world, and his weekly TV show on *al-Jazeera* has tens of millions of viewers.<sup>672</sup> ‘In some sense, he is the closest thing that the Sunni Muslim world has to a pope.’<sup>673</sup>

The best known leader to attract foreign fighters in 2014 has, however, successfully cloaked himself in mystery. He avoids the posturing and spotlight-seeking that Zarqawi craved to his undoing. He dismisses the old al-Qaeda leadership as not willing to push sectarian hatred far enough. He’s known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, head of the ruthless ISIS, and he oversees thousands of fighters in his quest to create a Sunni Islamic caliphate straddling the border of Iraq and Syria.

Jihadist propaganda has painted him as an imam from a religious family descended from noble tribes, and a scholar and a poet with a Ph.D. from Baghdad’s Islamic University, possibly in Arabic.<sup>674</sup> It is believed the 42-year-old Iraqi was active in Fallujah in the early 2000s, probably as a commander in charge of 50 to 100 men.<sup>675</sup> He was arrested by US forces in 2005 and turned over to the Iraqi authorities in 2009 although soon after he would be a free man rising through the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the successor to Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>676</sup> Still he managed his secret persona well (there are only two known photos of him) and kept a low profile compared to other militants, with their grandiose taped statements.

In an audio recording in June 2013, he vowed to erase Iraq’s ‘Western-imposed border with Syria’ and called on his followers to ‘tear apart’ the governments in both countries.<sup>677</sup> Other than this, the mystery surrounding the leader remained for a long time, which is one key to his survival, analysts have said. ‘When you start making videos and popping off, it increases the chance you’re

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<sup>670</sup> D. Lesch, *Syria. The Fall of the House of Assad*, (Yale 2013), 162.

<sup>671</sup> T. Hegghammer and A. Zelin, ‘How Syria’s Civil War Became a Holy Crusade’, *Foreign Affairs*, (July 7, 2013), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139557/thomas-hegghammer-aaron-y-zelin/how-syrias-civil-war-became-a-holy-crusade>.

<sup>672</sup> Hegghammer and Zelin, ‘How Syria’s Civil War Became a Holy Crusade’.

<sup>673</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>674</sup> T. Connor, ‘The Secret Life of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’, NBC News, (June 16, 2014), <http://www.nbcnews.com/#/storyline/iraq-turmoil/secret-life-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-n132311>.

<sup>675</sup> Connor, ‘The Secret Life of ISIS Leader’.

<sup>676</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>677</sup> Ibidem.

going to get caught or killed', security consultant Patrick Skinner told *NBC News*. 'He's been around five years, and that's like cat years. It is a long time.'<sup>678</sup> In the last months, jihadists have been calling for Baghdadi to be accepted as the true heir to bin Laden as the leader of the global jihad.<sup>679</sup> The extremist Sunni group declared on June 29 a new caliphate on the territory it holds in the two countries. An online statement declared Baghdadi the Caliph, or successor to the Prophet Mohammed.<sup>680</sup>

### Influence of governments

Many governments seemed to have played a crucial role for the mobilization of foreign fighters as many Syrians blamed the lack of Western support for driving the rebellion into the arms of extremists. It can indeed be said that the embrace by local populations of extreme Islamist factions was neither ideological nor absolute; rather it has been driven by despair and necessity.<sup>681</sup> In this way, jihadists were benefiting from increasing disenchantment with the international community and increasing support pouring in from the Gulf.<sup>682</sup>

Iran's role in assisting pro-government forces in Syria is quite direct, as Iran has not just assisted existing groups but created them. Saudi Arabia and Qatar appeared to have at least tacitly encouraged and supported some of these same organizations in their efforts.<sup>683</sup> The potential to overthrow Assad, Iran's most important Arab ally, represented for Saudi Arabia 'the best chance in a decade (...) to roll back Iranian power.'<sup>684</sup> According to reports dated April 2012, the Saudi Kingdom offered death row inmates a full pardon and financial payment in exchange for their commitment to fight jihad in Syria.<sup>685</sup> At the same time, the Saudi government has remarkably tried to be proactive in preventing violence once these fighters returned home. In early February 2014, the Saudi government issued a royal order declaring that any citizen who fights in conflicts abroad will face

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<sup>678</sup> Connor, 'The Secret Life of ISIS Leader'.

<sup>679</sup> B. Riedel, 'ISIS bids for global jihad leadership with Mosul attack', *Al-Monitor*, (June 11, 2014), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/isis-mosul-jihad.html#ixzz35jdDgWXS>.

<sup>680</sup> K. Vick, 'ISIS Militants Declare Islamist 'Caliphate'', *Time*, (June 29, 2014), <http://time.com/2938317/isis-militants-declare-islamist-caliphate/>.

<sup>681</sup> Hokayem, 99.

<sup>682</sup> O'bagy, 'Jihad in Syria', 38.

<sup>683</sup> B. Rich, 'Radicalising Syria: how the rebels are becoming more Islamist', *The Conversation*, (July 28, 2013), <http://theconversation.com/radicalising-syria-how-the-rebels-are-becoming-more-islamist-16309>.

<sup>684</sup> J. Skidmore, 'Foreign fighter involvement in Syria', *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT)*, (January, 2014), <http://i-hls.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Foreign-Fighter-Involvement-in-Syria.pdf>.

<sup>685</sup> 'G. Ingersoll, 'REPORT: Saudi Arabia Sent 1,200 Death Row Inmates To Fight In Syria', *Business Insider*, (January 23, 2013), <http://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-sent-inmates-against-assad-2013-1#ixzz35jkuX7QX>.

three to twenty years of jail.<sup>686</sup> A month later, the Saudis released a royal decree designating Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda in Iraq as terrorist organizations.<sup>687</sup>

Perhaps though the simplest answer why Syria is attracting so many war volunteers, is that at least at first no one was stopping them. 'It's so easy', said a Syrian living who smuggles travelers into Syria, in a recent *Washington Post* interview. '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. If the Turkish government wants to prevent them coming into the country, it would do so, but they don't.'<sup>688</sup>

It is not just the border crossing which is less complicated; the risk of legal sanctions at home also seemed lower for Syria-farers than for their predecessors. In the beginning, few, if any, European countries seemed to be systematically prosecuting foreign fighters returning from Syria.<sup>689</sup> In The Netherlands, only in June this year the first recruiter was arrested.<sup>690</sup> The reason for the late response by governments was simple; many states, including in the West, support the same side of the conflict that the Sunni foreign fighters were joining.<sup>691</sup> Even in May 2014 the Dutch former general Peter van Uhm still said to respect Dutch fighters who battled the Syrian regime, as they stood up to achieve an ideal.<sup>692</sup>

### Chances of success

Who wouldn't want to fight a ruthless dictator who's time was running out? That at least was the picture portrayed for many months in which secular and jihadist opposition groups in Syria, commanding an estimated 100,000 fighters, won many battles and seized territory.<sup>693</sup> Even in December 2013 the head of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Mohammed al-Julani, claimed that the rebels would 'achieve victory soon' against Assad's forces. 'The battle is almost over, we have covered about 70% of it, and what's left is small.'<sup>694</sup>

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<sup>686</sup> A. Zelin, 'The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria', *CTC*, (April 28, 2014), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-saudi-foreign-fighter-presence-in-syria>.

<sup>687</sup> Zelin, 'The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence'.

<sup>688</sup> Hegghammer, 'Syria's Foreign Fighters'.

<sup>689</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>690</sup> A. Kouwenhoven, 'Groeten uit het kalifaat...waar Nederlanders nu ook naar toe gaan', *NRC-Next*, (July 1, 2014).

<sup>691</sup> Hegghammer, 'Syria's Foreign Fighters'.

<sup>692</sup> J. Groen, 'Ex-commandant Van Uhm: respect voor Syriëgangers', *de Volkskrant*, (May 5, 2014), <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/13828/Burgeroorlog-in-Syrie/article/detail/3648620/2014/05/05/Ex-commandant-Van-Uhm-respect-voor-Syriëgangers.dhtml>.

<sup>693</sup> *BBC*, 'Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition', (December 13, 2014), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24403003>.

<sup>694</sup> *BBC*, 'Al-Nusra Front leader rejects Syria peace talks', (December 19, 2013), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25449796>.

Although the chances of success for Jabhat al-Nusra now seem to have diminished, it is important to note that by 2013 the group was one of al Qaeda's best-armed affiliates in the world resembling a small army than a rag-tag group of guerrilla fighters.<sup>695</sup> ISIS too displayed an immediate tactical efficacy over moderate local forces, often acting as the vanguard in major offensives.<sup>696</sup>

Given that rebels control large portions of territory along the northern border, nobody on the Syrian side is systematically preventing foreign fighters from entering. Another consequence of the seized territory is that it is actually 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 as there are many safe heavens.<sup>697</sup> Indeed, some of the volunteers are determined to fight, but others seem to be little more than jihadi tourists who stay out of harm's way while taking photos of themselves and boasting to their friends back home on social media.<sup>698</sup>

ISIS' recent display of power in Iraq will likely strengthen its hand over al-Qaeda in Syria and beyond. According to many observers, ISIS has supplanted al-Qaeda (which formally dissociated itself from its onetime affiliate) as the leader of the global jihadi movement.<sup>699</sup> As Barak Mendelsohn has stated: 'it is lost on few radical Islamists that Baghdadi's forces -- merely 5,000 men -- defeated 90,000 soldiers on a march toward Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate for 500 years'.<sup>700</sup> Mendelsohn pointed out in *Foreign Affairs* that 'as money and manpower breed success, success will breed more success'.<sup>701</sup> ISIS' popularity will likely rise among radicals, and that will translate into more funding and volunteers for the group.<sup>702</sup>

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<sup>695</sup> Jones, 'The Terrorist Threat from Syria'.

<sup>696</sup> B. Rich, 'Radicalising Syria: how the rebels are becoming more Islamist', *The Conversation*, (July 28, 2013), <http://theconversation.com/radicalising-syria-how-the-rebels-are-becoming-more-islamist-16309>.

<sup>697</sup> Hegghammer, 'Syria's Foreign Fighters'.

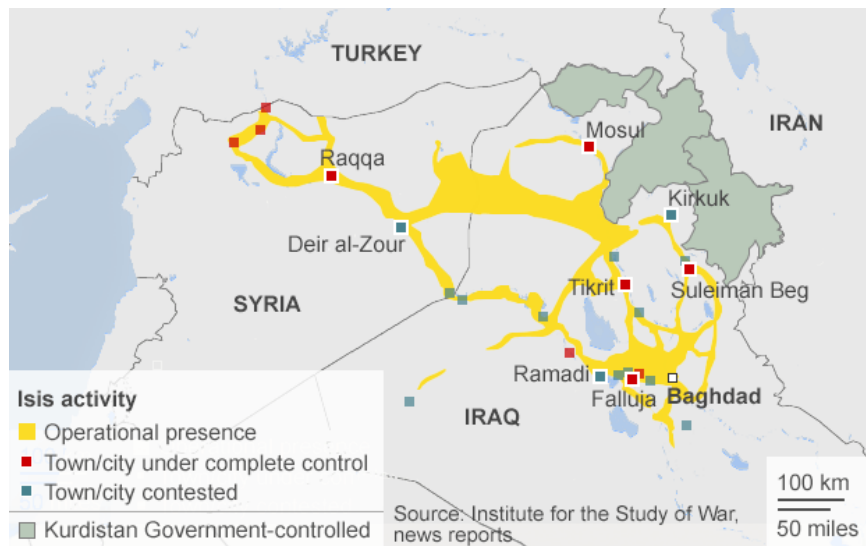
<sup>698</sup> B. M. Jenkins, 'The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War', *RAND*, (2014).

<sup>699</sup> *The Washington Post*, 'Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq', (February 3, 2014), [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html).

<sup>700</sup> B. Mendelsohn, 'Collateral Damage in Iraq; The Rise of ISIS and the Fall of al Qaeda', *Foreign Affairs*, (June 15, 2014), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141567/barak-mendelsohn/collateral-damage-in-iraq>.

<sup>701</sup> Mendelsohn, 'Collateral Damage in Iraq'.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibidem*.



15 ISIS activity in June 2014<sup>703</sup>.

### Internal disagreement

At first Jabhat al-Nusra and its foreign fighters gained a level of popular support. The group employed a cautious strategy, making efforts to avoid alienating the Syrian population and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This strategy has included avoiding civilian targets and taking care to minimize civilian casualties when methods like suicide bombings are employed, downplaying sectarian rhetoric.<sup>704</sup> They were even occasionally regarded ‘as heroes’, because a spokesman for the Aleppo Revolutionary Council said ‘they fight without fear or hesitation’.<sup>705</sup> In June 2012 in the town of Binnish, Jabhat al-Nusra was extolled during a mass demonstration in which hundreds of the town’s residents cheered on the group after the town was liberated from regime forces.<sup>706</sup> Similar videos appeared of residents in an Aleppo neighborhood cheering on Jabhat al-Nusra and waving their flag during a street parade.<sup>707</sup>

Their growing popularity also reflected general disillusionment with the lack of international support as a rebel commander said: ‘We don’t want al-Qaeda here, but if nobody else helps us, we will make an alliance with them.’<sup>708</sup> One of the founders of the Free Syrian Army called Jabhat al-

<sup>703</sup> Graphic taken from <http://www.vox.com/cards/things-about-isis-you-need-to-know>

<sup>704</sup> Szybala, ‘Al-Qaeda Shows its True Colors in Syria’.

<sup>705</sup> O’bagy, ‘Jihad in Syria’, 37.

<sup>706</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>707</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>708</sup> Ibidem.

Nusra 'our brothers in Islam' and many FSA groups cooperated tactically with Jabhat al-Nusra on many occasions.<sup>709</sup>

Yet as Jabhat al-Nusra gained strength in Syria, fissures began to appear in its relationship with its "parent" organization, ISI. The tension was made public in April of 2013 when Baghdadi released a statement that Jabhat al-Nusra and ISI were officially merging under the name Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).<sup>710</sup> This claim was quickly rebuffed by Julani who overtly acknowledged his allegiance to al-Qaeda.<sup>711</sup> Al-Qaeda's chief al-Zawahiri tried to calm the dispute by announcing that Jabhat al-Nusra would remain responsible for jihad in the Syrian arena and ISIS would keep to Iraq. ISIS however refused to accept Al-Zawahiri's decision and continued its expansion into Syria. Along the way, it trampled other Syrian rebel groups, including radical Islamists.

Soon, ISIS' overreach provoked a backlash, and opposing rebel groups mounted a counteroffensive. By 2014, the rift between ISIS and the Syrian opposition had resulted in infighting causing the death of hundreds of jihadists.<sup>712</sup> In February 2014, members of ISIS were believed to have carried out the suicide attack that killed the leader of a rival coalition of Islamist rebel groups.<sup>713</sup> In response, al-Zawahiri took the unprecedented step of publicly expelling ISIL from al-Qaeda.

The differences between ISIS, on the one side, and al-Qaeda and JN, on the other, are not merely about power and control of the jihadi movement. As important as these aspects are, the groups have serious differences when it comes to strategy, tactics, and Islamic authority. One key distinction between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra is that the latter has clearly made attempts to cultivate popularity and goodwill among Syrian civilians and fighters, whereas the first doesn't seem too concerned about winning "hearts and minds".<sup>714</sup> They differ on issues such as the implementation of harsh Islamist laws, the killing of Shiite civilians, and the right of one group to impose its authority over all others. The groups don't disagree about the legitimacy of all of these things, but al-Qaeda is more patient and ISIS is generally more radical and uncompromising.<sup>715</sup>

However, ISIS was able to muddle through the delegitimization campaign by hanging on to the support of some young and popular jihadi scholars who increasingly come to view the old guard - often identified with al Qaeda -- as disconnected from reality.<sup>716</sup> According to Mendelsohn, they give more respect to warriors than to religious scholars.<sup>717</sup> It is interesting to consider, as

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<sup>709</sup> Jones, 'The Terrorist Threat from Syria'. Szybala, 'Al-Qaeda Shows its True Colors in Syria'.

<sup>710</sup> Szybala, 'Al-Qaeda Shows its True Colors in Syria'.

<sup>711</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>712</sup> Mendelsohn, 'Collateral Damage in Iraq'.

<sup>713</sup> B.M. Jenkins, 'Brothers Killing Brothers; The Current Infighting Will Test al Qaeda's BRAND', *RAND*, (2014), <http://www.RAND.org/pubs/perspectives/PE123.html>

<sup>714</sup> Szybala, 'Al-Qaeda Shows its True Colors in Syria'.

<sup>715</sup> Mendelsohn, 'Collateral Damage in Iraq'.

<sup>716</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>717</sup> Ibidem.



Mendelsohn does, that al-Qaeda's greatest achievement was the 9/11 attacks which is now 13 years ago. Many of today's jihadis were young children at that time.

Amid the confusion, many Syrian jihadists left Jabhat al-Nusra for ISIS, but the bloody infighting reportedly also caused hundreds of foreign fighters to abandon rebel ranks.<sup>718</sup> The outflow of foreign militants was still small, rebels and activists said in March 2014, but illustrated the disillusionment many appeared to feel as they had spent more time fighting each other, than the regime of Assad.<sup>719</sup> In March this year, more than 4,000 people had died in three months of rebel-on-rebel clashes across opposition-held territories in northern and eastern Syria, according to the *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*.<sup>720</sup> According to Jabhat al-Nusra 'hundreds, if not more than two thousand, went back to their home countries'.<sup>721</sup>

However, more than 10,000 foreign fighters would remain and European intelligence analysts said the number of militants leaving Syria is small, while at the same time fighters were still coming, mostly to join ISIS, as Jabhat al-Nusra reportedly has become more reticent when it comes to integrating unknown recruits.<sup>722</sup> At the same time ISIS is 'very willing' to take foreign fighters even those who don't speak Arabic or are without military training.<sup>723</sup> Westerners simply arrive one day, ask for a gun, and often seem to get one.<sup>724</sup> The same is true for the Islamic Front, a merger of seven Islamist groups who with an estimated 45,000 fighters were in November 2013 seen as the largest rebel alliance yet.<sup>725</sup> The Islamic Front's charter welcomes foreign fighters, as 'brothers who supported us in jihad'.<sup>726</sup>

Even if foreign fighters are put off by the infighting in Syria, they can now also simply play for a winner in Iraq and fight a "real enemy". Discussion within jihadi social media has indeed indicated that some foreigners have escaped the internecine fighting and decided to move their fight to the Iraq war zone.<sup>727</sup>

The latest developments in Syria even seem to show that the extreme infighting might be over, as news agency *AFP* reported on June 25 that Jabhat al-Nusra has issued a loyalty pledge to

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<sup>718</sup> Zelin, 'Al-Qaeda in Syria'. S. Jones and E. Solomon, 'Disillusioned foreign fighters abandon rebel ranks in Syria', *Financial Times*, (March 18, 2014), <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a26ffc5c-adfc-11e3-bc07-00144feab7de.html#axzz2zW6bpDgB>

<sup>719</sup> Jones and Solomon, 'Disillusioned foreign fighters'.

<sup>720</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>721</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>722</sup> Hennessy, 'The Return of Europe's Foreign Fighters'. Jones and Solomon, 'Disillusioned foreign fighters'.

<sup>723</sup> Carter, Maher and Neumann, '#Greenbirds'.

<sup>724</sup> McCoy, 'How ISIS and other jihadists persuaded thousands of Westerners'.

<sup>725</sup> *BBC*, 'Syria crisis: Guide to armed and political opposition'.

<sup>726</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>727</sup> Zelin, "The Return of Foreign Fighters in the Iraq Jihad".

ISIS.<sup>728</sup> An ISIS fighter confirmed the reports on Twitter and posted a photograph showing an Egyptian Jabhat al-Nusra commander shaking hands with an ISIS leader of Chechen origin.<sup>729</sup> A merger will likely have a big impact on the developments in Syria as it possibly would make ISIS twice as powerful.

In sum, all of the tested factors seem relevant for explaining why the the number of foreign fighters in Syria since 2011 exceed that of any previous conflict in the modern history of the Muslim world. The recruitment messaging of defensive action to preserve the existence of the Muslim community seemed indeed necessary as the Syrian regime caused unspeakable civilian suffering, which was widely covered by traditional media as well as (foreign) fighters, who, like never before, used social media as both an essential source of information and inspiration for people to come and join them and support their cause. Two important leaders quickened the stream of foreign fighters into Syria: one a well-known and extremely popular Sunni cleric and the other a mysterious but successful commander who kept himself alive by staying out of the spotlight, which in turn increased his appeal. The influence of governments was crucial in the sense that they hardly tried to stop the foreign fighters. The journey to the war zone was therefore as simple as a jihad trip can get. Once present on the ground, the chances of successes were there: if not in Syria, than in Iraq where ISIS started to realize the reestablishment of the Caliphate, something which al-Qaeda only has tried. The chances of dying were real, but could be avoided by staying in the safe havens. For once, most of the local insurgents welcomed foreign fighters and even when they started to fight amongst themselves, the foreigners could avoid the infighting by playing for a winner by crossing into Iraq.

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<sup>728</sup> *The Telegraph*, 'Al-Qaeda merges with Isis at Syria-Iraq border town', (June 25, 2014), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/10925602/Al-Qaeda-merges-with-Isis-at-Syria-Iraq-border-town.html>.

<sup>729</sup> *The Telegraph*, 'Al-Qaeda merges with Isis'.

## Conclusion

This study has focused on the conflicts that in the past 35 years have triggered Muslims worldwide to leave their home country and become a so-called foreign fighter. Since 1980, seven conflict zones attracted in total more than 40,000 unpaid combatants with no apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity with the Muslim side. Partly for this reason, these insurgencies have drawn considerable attention from scholars and media but also from those Islamists leaders who wish to globalize local conflicts and promote the jihadist narrative.

However, most seem to ignore the fact that there are huge differences in the number of transnational insurgents who actually joined the fight. Connected conflicts like Afghanistan (1980-1992), Bosnia (1992-1995), Iraq (since 2003) and Syria (since 2011) each attracted several thousands of foreign fighters, whereas other conflicts like Chechnya (1994-2009), Somalia (1993-2014) and Afghanistan after 2001 could not count on more than a few hundred foreign combatants. Some have argued this is merely a coincidence, but no one has so far addressed this issue thoroughly.

This study has tried to offer a first preliminary explanation by testing five factors that possibly could be relevant to explain why some conflicts attract far more foreign fighters than others. These factors were 1: recruitment messaging (how is the conflict framed and how is this message transferred?), 2: leaders (are leading personalities present to inspire and motivate recruits?), 3: influence of governments (what role do they have in obstructing or enabling foreign fighters to arrive on the battlefield?), 4: chances of success (is there a chance of winning the fight or at least make it back alive?) and 5: internal disagreement (how are the foreigners received by the local population, but more importantly local insurgents: are the fighters welcomed or distrusted?).

Although the seven conflicts were presented chronologically, it is perhaps more interesting here to first take a look at the “less popular” conflicts in Chechnya, Somalia and Afghanistan (after 2001) where indeed many of the mentioned factors seem to have had a large impact on the relatively low poor turnout in terms of foreign fighter mobilization (see table below).

The Russian invasion in Chechnya in 1994 could easily be framed as a struggle between Islam and the “Unbelievers” and on the ground was a charismatic leader who, at the dawn of the Internet age, revolutionized media and modern insurgency. However, to avoid internal disagreement with the local insurgents this Afghan veteran would refuse large numbers of inexperienced foreign fighters to enter Chechnya. Even the ones that possessed the adequate military experience, had a hard time to

enter the enclave as the Russian government kept a tight control on the borders. The ones that did make it to the battlefield would most of the time not live to spread the (recruiting) word.

The case of Somalia is quite similar in the sense that the US-led invasion as well as the Ethiopian occupation nourished the recruiting message of a defensive jihad that could easily be transferred by leading personalities like bin Laden as well as by the American “rock star” jihadist Hammami, who communicated actively through different modern media channels like Twitter. However, because foreign combatants were seen as outsiders whose competence was questioned and because many foreigners were killed in combat or by their fellow rivalling Somali insurgents, Somalia would just like Chechnya not see the arrival of more than a few hundred foreign fighters.

Afghanistan is a rather strange case as many foreign fighters were already present on the ground when the US army invaded in 2001. Yet, all factors were crucial for the relatively low number of foreign fighters who would join to fight. The recruitment messaging suffered from the fact that many Muslims worldwide had disapproved of the al-Qaeda attack on American civilians. The al-Qaeda leaders were without a doubt charismatic, but they were also gone two months after the invasion. While in hiding, they disagreed on strategy while the conflict in Iraq stole the spotlight from 2003 on. The influence of the US government was crucial because the vast majority of foreign fighters in Afghanistan was killed, captured or forced to flee the US army and its drones that eliminated key leadership figures and therefore the ideological unity.

	<b>Somalia 1993-2014</b>	<b>Chechnya 1994-2009</b>	<b>Afghanistan 2001-2014</b>
<b>Recruitment messaging</b>	Strong	Strong	Weak
<b>Leaders</b>	Present	Present	Not present
<b>Influence of governments</b>	Obstructive (Ethiopia)	Obstructive (RUS)	Obstructive (US)
<b>Chances of success</b>	No	No	No
<b>Internal disagreement</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes

16 Conflicts with a relatively low turnout of foreign fighters (< 1000)

If the five tested factors explain the low numbers in these three conflicts, then they should also offer an explanation for the high turnout in the remaining four. This study argues that they do so.

The conflict in Afghanistan started a “jihadi domino” mainly because of its strong recruitment messaging for which one leader, at least for a large extent, can be held responsible. Azzam’s preaching and advocacy of jihad to defend Afghan Muslims persecuted by the Soviets reached audiences throughout the world via audio broadcasts, magazines and flyers. The governments of various Muslim countries permitted or actively facilitated recruitment for Afghanistan which was seen by many recruits as an adventure or at least a fight that could be won. There was a large amount of internal disagreement with local insurgents, but the volunteers would nevertheless arrive with increasing numbers as they were housed separately in their own Arab training camps. Internal squabbles amongst the Arab Afghans were resolved by focusing on a new enemy in a new arena that would unite them.

That arena was the Bosnian war that was successfully framed as another clear-cut example of a defensive jihad. Present was a leader with a characteristic thick reddish-orange colored beard who recruited thousands of mujahideen volunteers. The Pakistani government played an important role as it ordered the closure of Arab mujahideen offices, forcing many of them to find another base. The mujahideen war machine from Afghanistan was successfully revived as the Arab fighters could claim many victories showing their chances of success. Because of this, they were regardless of ideological differences, generally appreciated by Bosnian soldiers and civilians.

That wasn’t the case in Iraq where local insurgents turned against foreign fighters who under the leadership of Zarqawi labeled whole segments of Iraqis as unbelievers and attacked Shiites and civilians. It was likely the reason why foreign fighter flows to Iraq decreased around 2008. Before this occurred however, the Iraq conflict had become the most pressing single issue on the global jihadist agenda with powerful symbols of Muslim suffering caused by the US. Influential leaders who inspired jihadists to fight in Iraq were none other than bin Laden himself, al-Zawahiri and the new “jihad star” Zarqawi showing a talent for media manipulation by publicizing military successes. In the recent years the same factors seem to matter as many more fighters returned for a new series of victories that are currently used in a PR-campaign to attract new foreign recruits.

These victories are now connected with the conflict in Syria where in 2013 the number of foreign fighters had exceeded that of any previous conflict in the modern history of the Muslim world. Again, all of the tested factors seem relevant for explaining this record. The recruitment messaging was made easy by President Assad as he slaughtered his own Sunni Muslim population,

which was widely covered by traditional media as well as foreign fighters who like never before used social media as both an essential source of information and inspiration. Both an extremely popular Sunni cleric and a mysterious new jihadi leader quickened the stream of foreign fighters into Syria with hardly any government to stop these eager combatants. When infighting amongst the opposition and jihadists started to deter a significant number of recruits, the boldest jihadist group achieved unparalleled successes which were quickly used to attract new foreign recruits.

	<b>Afghanistan 1980-1992</b>	<b>Bosnia 1992-1995</b>	<b>Iraq 2003-2014</b>	<b>Syria 2011- 2014</b>
<b>Recruitment messaging</b>	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
<b>Leaders</b>	Present	Present	Present	Present
<b>Influence of governments</b>	Permissive (various Arab countries)	Permissive (Bosnia)	Permissive (US, Syria, Saudi Arabia)	Permissive (Turkey)
<b>Chances of success</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Internal disagreement</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

17 Conflicts with a relatively high turnout of foreign fighters (> 1000)

For most of the studied conflicts, except for 2001 Afghanistan, the foreign fighter recruitment appeared to share a single continuous narrative of a defensive mobilization, as partly developed by Azzam almost thirty years ago. Charismatic, aggressive, and daring personalities were also the drivers behind most foreign fighters movements. Yet, these factors were practically equal when comparing the seven conflicts (except for Afghanistan in 2001 when there was hardly any recruitment messaging as the leaders were on the run). In other words, these factors are important for explaining the *presence* of foreign fighters, but are not satisfying for explaining the *differentiating numbers* of foreign combatants.

The passive support for combatants from governments or, the opposite, government obstruction of foreign fighter recruitment, is however essential when comparing the conflicts with a relatively poor turnout (less than 1000 transnational insurgents) to the ones with a large turnout (more than 1000). To begin with the latter; governments from various countries played what can be

called a permissive role. The political leaders of different Muslim countries permitted or actively facilitated recruitment for the struggle in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Twenty years later, Saudi Arabia allegedly facilitated the entry of foreign mercenaries into Iraq.<sup>730</sup> Indeed, the highest proportion of foreign militants in Iraq came from Saudi Arabia.<sup>731</sup> Most reached Iraq through Syria, as the Assad regime tolerated or actively assisted the passage of volunteers across its territory to protect its own interests.<sup>732</sup> When this backfired, the Syrian government wasn't able to stop the flow of foreign fighters arriving from Turkey as the Syrian army had lost the borderland. Meanwhile, the Turkish government didn't prevent volunteers to enter the neighboring warzone. In Bosnia during the 1990s, the Bosnian government fully integrated the foreign mujahideen into its army and never put serious pressure on the Arab fighters to leave.

The influence of governments in the conflicts with a relatively poor turnout is again essential as many successfully prevented foreign fighters of gaining a strong foothold. In Chechnya, Russia managed to keep its borders tightly closed for those who wished to fight in the encircled republic. This makes it tempting to inform policy makers that foreign fighters can be kept out with tight border control, but it's important to keep in mind that those Arab fighters that did make it to Chechnya were often hunted down by Russian special forces who conducted a particularly effective counterinsurgency campaign. Likewise in Somalia, where the borders were porous, the Ethiopian government sent in its troops to kill a great number of foreign fighters, who would from 2008 on also be on the run from US drones. The drone strikes together with the other forces of the US military chased away most foreign fighters that were in Afghanistan in 2001. However, it's crucial to note that the same US government was responsible for the harsh interrogation and imprisonment methods against transnational insurgents, which became a central point of recruitment messaging in Iraq.

Still, the initial hard-handed approach does seem to effect the foreign fighter recruitment in the way pointed out by *FPRI* senior fellow Clinton Watts who stated that 'foreign fighter recruits may be a bit crazy but they are not stupid'.<sup>733</sup> One of the bigger deterrents of joining a distant struggle seems indeed whether the recruit thinks the fight he is joining has a chance to succeed. To use Watts' quote from the introduction again: 'Despite all their macho bravado, no foreign fighter wants to join a fight where al Qaeda is getting its ass kicked.'<sup>734</sup> As another example, in the winter of 2013 jihadi Internet forums briefly lit up with calls to support al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and

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<sup>730</sup> *BBC*, 'Iraqi PM Nouri Maliki accuses Saudis of 'interference'', (April 25, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27164281>.

<sup>731</sup> Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, 169-171.

<sup>732</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>733</sup> C. Watts, 'FPRI conference on Global Foreign Fighter Flow', *Selected Wisdom*, (October 23, 2013), <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=1172>.

<sup>734</sup> Watts, 'FPRI conference'.

affiliated groups in repelling the French intervention into Mali.<sup>735</sup> However, AQIM and its affiliates were quickly on the run at a time when the Syrian revolution continued to pick up steam, which likely convinced many ‘fickle foreign fighters’ to join a campaign on the rise rather than one in decline.<sup>736</sup>

Connected to the chances of success, is the factor labeled in this study as internal disagreement. As Peter Bergen has written, encoded in the ideological DNA of many jihadist groups are the seeds of their own destruction.<sup>737</sup> For example, AQI’s self-appointed disposition to decide who is Muslim and who is not degenerated into mass killing and social alienation and damaged standing with other Sunnis in Iraq. Also in other cases the ideological zeal to destroy apostate forces and the creation of Islamist enclaves often alienated the local population. Kristin Bakke has recently shown that mobilizing supporters is harder and more costly if the local community does not voluntarily support the insurgents, and organizational cohesion may suffer if there are cleavages in the local population the movement claims to represent.<sup>738</sup> Despite the often forgotten fact that many foreign fighters are not wanted because of their inexperience, their extremist ideas about what the struggle is about and how it should be fought, can cause resistance and divisions within the domestic insurgent movement itself.

This process occurs in the conflict zone and has been studied as such by a few scholars like Bakke, but the main conclusion of this study is that the foreign fighter’s “life cycle” should not strictly be divided into a pre-war mobilization phase, war stage, and post-war period, for it is *the war stage itself* that has a large influence on the mobilization. Especially in the digital age, there is an ongoing development as foreign fighters communicate back to peers at home via email, social media and jihadi web forums. When they do so, they will likely communicate about the five studied factors.

The first studied factor recruitment messaging, or how a conflict is framed, will largely depend on the how the conflict develops. Iraq didn’t attract many fighters until US soldiers mistreated a number prisoners which was essential for the jihadi PR machine. Leaders, the second factor, often were present before the actual fighting to mobilize combatants, but in many cases they gained status on the battlefield which would be used to inspire new transnational insurgents. The current “Caliph” Baghdadi was virtually unknown a few years ago, but as he led his jihadi troops to victory, an increasing number of jihadists would call for Baghdadi to be accepted as the true heir to bin Laden as the leader of the global jihad.

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<sup>735</sup> C. Watts, ‘Foreign Fighters and Ants: How they form their colonies’, *FPRI*, (July 16, 2013), <http://www.FPRI.org/geopoliticus/2013/07/foreign-fighters-and-ants-how-they-form-their-colonies>.

<sup>736</sup> Watts, ‘Foreign Fighters and Ants’.

<sup>737</sup> P. Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al-Qaeda*, (New York 2011), 300.

<sup>738</sup> K.M. Bakke, ‘Help Wanted?: The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies’, *International Security*, Volume 38, Number 4, (Spring 2014), <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ins/summary/v038/38.4.bakke.html>, 153.



The other three factors that will have an influence on the number of foreign fighters are also very much connected to events on the ground. Fresh foreign fighters who are satisfied about the internal cohesion and chances of success can convince fence-sitters at home to join them. The other way round, the negative experiences of foreign fighters also influence the choice of emerging recruits as complaints about infighting or strategic defeats likely dissuade other foreign fighters at home from following their path.

How to further analyze this ongoing recruitment process in the future? Watts has suggested to make use of swarm intelligence (SI), the collective behavior of decentralized, self-organized systems. More specifically, he believes that Ant Colony Optimization (ACO), an efficiency method by which ants find their food, might be an effective modeling system for analyzing, understanding and ultimately disrupting foreign fighter recruitment pipelines to conflicts like Syria.<sup>739</sup> In short, ants can find food without visual feedback but by following pheromone trails that guide them along the most efficient route between their nest and a food source.<sup>740</sup> Watts argues these so called ACO models can be used to understand how and where foreign fighter pipelines will flourish, as the migration of fighters and their activities in jihadi campaigns are quite visible for all to see on social media.<sup>741</sup> In this way, instead of excreting pheromones like ants, foreign fighters lay digital trails marking their routes, leaving virtual breadcrumbs.

Watts' highly original analytical approach is most certainly an interesting one, as indeed in this day and age the digital trails will help to predict whether dozens, hundreds or even many thousands of fighters will choose to join a distant battle. In all cases, the number of foreign combatants will largely be determined by the interaction of recruitment messaging, the presence of influential leaders, the influence of governments, chances of success and whether the insurgents amongst themselves agree or disagree. As the latter seems more commonplace than the first, perhaps there can always be a considerable amount of hope that often the foreign fighter problem will partially solve itself.

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<sup>739</sup> C. Watts, 'Foreign Fighters and Ants'.

<sup>740</sup> H.S. Lopes, 'Reconstruction of phylogenetic trees using the ant colony optimization paradigm', Laboratório de Bioinformática/CPGEI, (September 30, 2005), [http://www.funpecrp.com.br/gmr/year2005/vol3-4/wob09\\_full\\_text.htm](http://www.funpecrp.com.br/gmr/year2005/vol3-4/wob09_full_text.htm).

<sup>741</sup> Watts, 'Foreign Fighters and Ants'.

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