

Horizons Series No. 1

“Shooting in the right direction”: Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq

Henry Tuck

Tanya Silverman

Candace Smalley



About this paper

This report represents the first publication in ISD's new "Horizons" series, launched to examine emerging trends related to violent extremism or CVE. Whilst the term "foreign fighter" is commonly associated with these individuals joining ISIS and other extreme Islamist groups, there has been far less attention on the hundreds of other foreign fighters that have travelled to fight against ISIS. This report builds on ISD's research into the Islamist foreign fighter and female migrant phenomenon, and is based on a dataset of 300 anti-ISIS foreign fighters. It sheds light on this understudied group, examining who they are, who they are fighting with, and why they are prepared to participate in a far-away conflict. It also considers the legal frameworks of the countries providing the largest numbers of anti-ISIS fighters and the possible future implications for the fighters themselves, as well as their national governments.

About the authors

Henry Tuck is a Policy & Research Manager at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). Henry currently manages the Institute's educational programme, Extreme Dialogue, which aims to enhance critical thinking skills and resilience among young people, and is involved across various projects to counter extremism online. He holds a Masters in International Conflict Studies from Kings College London and a BA from Durham University.

Tanya Silverman coordinates the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. AVE is a partnership between ISD, Jigsaw (formerly Google Ideas) and the Gen Next Foundation which comprises of former extremists and survivors of extremism. Previously, she was involved across areas of the organisation's security and counter-extremism work, particularly counter-narratives.

Candace Smalley holds an MA from King's College London in Terrorism, Security, and Society, a BSc in Psychology from the University of Pittsburgh, and is pursuing an MS in Computer Science from the University of Tulsa. Her research interests include interdisciplinary approaches to counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Costan Barzanje and H  l  ne Trehin for all of their hard work in building the database. They would also like to thank Christopher Stewart, Jonathan Birdwell, Ross Frenett and Maud Piovesan for their support throughout the process. Finally, our sincerest gratitude is expressed to Kevin Knodell, a journalist for War Is Boring, who provided us with interview transcripts and conversations with fighters in Syria. All errors and omissions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Cover photo & title quote

The title quote is from American fighter, Matthew VanDyke, see endnote 114.

Copyright    2016 Institute for Strategic Dialogue, All rights reserved. Any copying, reproduction or exploitation of the whole or any part of this document without prior written approval from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue is prohibited.

This material is offered free of charge for personal and non-commercial use, provided the source is acknowledged. For commercial or any other use, prior written permission must be obtained from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. In no case may material be sold, altered, or rented. The Institute does not generally take positions on policy issues. This views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation.



INSTITUTE *for*
STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

Horizons Series No. 1

“Shooting in the right direction”: Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq

Henry Tuck
Tanya Silverman
Candace Smalley

Executive Summary

Whilst the phenomenon of travelling abroad to take part in war is not without historical precedents, the sheer volume of those attracted to the Syrian conflict has meant that the issue has come to dominate the agendas of those tasked with countering terrorism and radicalisation. Latest estimates suggest between 25,000 and 30,000 Islamist foreign fighters have made the journey from over 100 countries around the world, and between 4,000 and 7,000 from Western countries alone.¹ The term 'foreign fighter' is commonly associated with these individuals joining ISIS and other extreme Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. There has been far less attention paid to the hundreds of other 'foreign fighters' who have specifically travelled to fight against ISIS, predominantly from Western countries.

Based on a dataset of 300 individuals, this report sheds light on this understudied group of 'anti-ISIS foreign fighters', examining who they are, who they are fighting with, and why they are prepared to participate in a far-away conflict. It also considers the legal frameworks of the countries providing the largest numbers of anti-ISIS fighters and the possible future implications for the fighters themselves, as well as their national governments.

Terms & methodology

There are myriad groups involved in the Syrian conflict, including the Free Syrian Army, Assad-regime forces and Shia militias, Kurdish groups such as the YPG and Peshmerga, and of course extreme Islamist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. In this report, we look at those 'foreign fighters' who travelled to join groups that are fighting against ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra. For purposes of simplicity, we refer to them as 'anti-ISIS foreign fighters' given the prominence of ISIS in public and media discourse.

Our database was built using a combination of primary open-source, self-reported data from the social media profiles of anti-ISIS fighters, complemented by media reporting. As it was not always possible to find reliable information on each fighter, in some instances a full profile could not be constructed. Sources in English, French and German were used, with additional research conducted in Italian, Spanish, Turkish and Kurdish. As a result the database represents a sample rather than a comprehensive register of all anti-ISIS fighters.

Summary of findings

¹ See: (December 2015) "Global Terrorism Index 2015" p.47 <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf>; (December 2015) "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq" The Soufan Group p.5 http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf [Link last accessed 19/01/2016]

Who are the anti-ISIS foreign fighters?

- **Anti-ISIS foreign fighters tend to be older than Islamist foreign fighters.** A wide range of ages was observed among anti-ISIS foreign fighters, with the youngest only 14 years old, and the oldest 67. The average age of the anti-ISIS fighters in the dataset was 32 years old, although the largest proportion of fighters were in their 20s (48%) with median and modal ages of 28 and 26 respectively. On average anti-ISIS foreign fighters were older than those joining Islamist groups.
- **Anti-ISIS foreign fighters are less likely to include women or families, and those women who are included appear to be more active in combat roles.** While women and girls comprise a substantial proportion of those joining extreme Islamist groups (14² to 18%³), only 3% of those joining anti-ISIS groups are female. However, those that do are actively involved in combat roles, primarily with the all-female YPJ. Their counterparts joining ISIS are typically employed in domestic and matriarchal roles, with some also participating in propaganda activities or enforcing strict moral codes through the group's all-female al-Khansaa Brigade. ISIS has also encouraged parents to take their children, with some large family groups making the journey. With a single exception (a father and his teenage son) this was not a trend observed among anti-ISIS foreign fighters in the database.
- **Over one in three anti-ISIS foreign fighters are American and often military veterans.** The anti-ISIS fighters in the database originate from a total of 26 predominantly Western countries, with the U.S. (38%), U.K. (14%), Germany (8%), France (6%), Sweden (6%) and Canada (5%) providing the largest proportions. The prevalence of Americans is largely explained by the number of U.S. military veterans. In contrast, estimates suggest that only around 6% of Islamist foreign fighters are from the U.S.⁴
- **Kurdish is the most common ethnicity among anti-ISIS foreign fighters.** The largest self-identified ethnic minority group among the dataset were Kurdish (12%), with a small number of ethnically Assyrian and Yazidi fighters also present.

Who are they fighting with?

- **Syrian-Kurdish YPG (31%) and the Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga (22%) are the most popular groups among anti-ISIS foreign fighters.** Others were found to be fighting with Dwekh Nawsha (5.7%), an Assyrian Christian organisation, or the YPG's all-female YPJ units (1.3%). A small number of individual fighters were attached to Hezbollah, the FSA, the PKK and various Shia militias. Just under half of the fighters (44%) were publically affiliated with others within the ISD database, suggesting that anti-ISIS fighters are relatively well networked. The distribution of Islamist

2 Richard Barrett (2014) "Foreign fighters in Syria". See also Claire Davis, Jasmine Opperman (2014) "Female foreign fighters Syria and Iraq" TRAC Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium www.trackingterrorism.org/article/female-foreign-fighters-syria-and-iraq

3 Peter Bergen, Courtney Schuster, David Sterman (November 2015) "ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism" New America, 8 <https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/11813-isis-in-the-west-2/ISP-Isis-In-The-West-v2.b4f2e9e3a7c94b9e9bd2a293bae2e759.pdf> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
10 Ibid p.8-9

4 Ibid p.8-9

foreign fighters between groups is more concentrated than anti-ISIS foreign fighters who have a wider range of potential groups or units to join.

Why are they fighting?

Despite such a diverse group it is possible to identify common themes in the motivations of individual anti-ISIS foreign fighters. As in much of the research on Islamist foreign fighters, this report categorises observed motivations as either push or pull factors. Push factors are manifested in an individuals' dissatisfaction with their current circumstances or surroundings. Pull factors encompass what draws that individual to a particular conflict. These factors do not work in isolation. Instead, a combination of both push and pull factors usually must be present in order to finally elicit the decision to travel.

The overarching motives, goals, and hopes for the future of the region of anti-ISIS foreign fighters are diametrically opposed to their extreme Islamist counterparts. However, our research suggests that some of the more personal (rather than geopolitical) push and pull factors that motivate foreign fighters are observed across both groups.

Push factors

- **Anti-ISIS foreign fighters are motivated by their frustrations with foreign policy and international responses to the conflict.** The majority of anti-ISIS foreign fighters regularly express their disappointment with existing responses to the conflict, either from their respective national governments or the wider international community. This frustration is also observed among Islamists that make the journey, albeit in a vastly different way. This suggests that foreign policy can play an important role in the decision making processes of both foreign fighter cohorts.
- **Anti-ISIS foreign fighters are motivated by a desire for belonging and a lack of purpose in their lives.** Foreign fighters on all sides can be driven by feelings of alienation, isolation or boredom. Often these feelings can be exacerbated by persistent unemployment, relationship difficulties, or simply a lack of purpose or direction in life. Such factors were observed across the dataset and were not exclusive to any particular group, although there were specific recurring issues related to the reintegration of veterans following military service.

Pull factors

- **Anti-ISIS fighters are motivated by an altruistic desire to defend persecuted minority populations and defeat ISIS.** The brutal propaganda produced by ISIS appears to play an important role in recruiting anti-ISIS foreign fighters. Many directly state the impact of execution videos on their decisions to travel. The desire to protect persecuted minorities has a particularly strong impact on members of the

transnational ethnic communities based in the region. For some this is exacerbated by the presence of family members in the region, or even a family history of military involvement with one of the groups engaged in the current conflict.

- **Ex-military veteran fighters are also motivated by a desire to 'finish the job' and ensure previous sacrifices were not in vain.** This is true primarily among military veterans that have served in the region during the 'War on Terror'. Many fear that their previous efforts, and those of their colleagues that were killed or injured, will be in vain. Some also identify the region as a 'second home', having endured long deployments during their time in the military.
- **Anti-ISIS foreign fighters are motivated by an urge to fight, experience combat or are simply seeking an adrenaline-filled adventure.** In some cases, fighters appear to be ill-informed about the conflict they have chosen to participate in, float between various groups, or are simply seeking to defeat broadly defined concepts such as 'evil' or terrorism. Similar motivations can be observed among those who travel to join ISIS, including thrill-seeking, searching for purpose, or even a desire to stand out from the crowd. Group dynamics and a sense of belonging and 'family' also appears to play an important role for both foreign fighter cohorts.

How are they recruited?

- **Social media is used to recruit anti-ISIS foreign fighters, but recruitment and propaganda is less professionalised, less proactive and less violent.** Unlike the professionalised media centres of ISIS, anti-ISIS foreign fighters tend to rely on websites and social media groups, pages and individual profiles. There is an absence of the explicitly violent material produced by the online Islamist foreign fighter community, although as would be expected there is a considerable amount of material denigrating their enemies. Unlike ISIS, the anti-ISIS online community does not appear to actively groom potential recruits. However, there are concerted efforts to cultivate support by appealing to a collective sense of identity, pride or persecution, and in doing so construct a humanitarian moral obligation to fight.
- **Social media platforms are used more openly to network, raise funds and facilitate travel, compared to Islamist groups like ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra.** The most popular social media platform used by anti-ISIS foreign fighters is Facebook, although profiles and content are easily found on many other platforms including YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. The group most heavily recruiting online is the YPG. Among the most prominent pages is the 'Lions of Rojava', a collection of Westerners fighting alongside various YPG units. Anti-ISIS foreign fighters publically discuss their experiences and motivations in a more open way than their Islamist counterparts are now able to, with fewer concerns about potential legal repercussions. Media appearances by anti-ISIS foreign fighters bolster their online profile, and their social media accounts can act as a first point of contact for potential recruits.

Is it legal?

- **The legality of participating in conflicts abroad as a private citizen remains a legally complex area and some governments appear reluctant to state clearly the likely consequences for anti-ISIS foreign fighters.** Often the laws applied to anti-ISIS fighters are closely related to (or the same as) those for foreign terrorist fighters. A number of countries have recently updated their laws, but many still find they can be difficult or impractical to apply.
- **Legality can hinge on the state's current allegiances in the relevant conflict.** The complexity of the war in Syria and Iraq creates a situation whereby it is not always clear under what circumstances anti-ISIS fighters could face legal sanctions. This includes those fighting alongside groups such as the YPG that are working directly with the international coalition in both Syria. A number of anti-ISIS fighters have expressed uncertainty over the possibility of legal repercussions on their return to their country of origin.
- **Levels of enforcement and prosecution therefore vary, and are often considered on a case-by-case basis.** Despite this, there are an increasing number of precedent-setting cases that are beginning to provide additional clarity in some contexts.

Summary of recommendations

Although they do not pose the same potential threat as returning Islamist foreign fighters, returning anti-ISIS fighters may face similar risks. These risks can range from legal sanctions to physical or mental health problems, or difficulties reintegrating back into their former lives and communities, and if left unaddressed can create more long-term, intractable issues.

Governments need to reconsider whether existing support systems in place for military veterans are sufficient, but also whether they could be used to help returnees. Support for the families and parents of anti-ISIS foreign fighters, especially youth, could also be considered.

Social networks should ensure they are aware of which groups involved in conflicts are using their platforms, and what they are using them for, in order to ensure they are not violating their terms of service.

I. Introduction – Definitions, Terms & Methodology	4
II. Demographics	8
• Age & gender	8
• Nationalities & regions	8
• Ethnicity & religion	9
• Education, employment & military service	10
• Who are they fighting with?	10
• How do they compare with Islamist foreign fighters?	11
III. Group Affiliations	14
• YPG and splinter groups	14
• Peshmerga and non-YPG affiliated Kurdish groups	15
• Dwekh Nawsha and Assyrian forces	16
• Outliers	17
<i>i. Free Syrian Army</i>	17
<i>ii. Pro-regime and Shia militias</i>	18
IV. Motivations	20
• Push Factors	21
<i>i. Frustration with responses to the conflict</i>	21
<i>ii. Lack of belonging or purpose</i>	22
• Pull Factors	24
<i>i. Desire to make a difference</i>	24
<i>ii. Diaspora fighters</i>	25
<i>iii. Religious motivations</i>	26
<i>iv. Finishing the job</i>	27
<i>v. Adventure, adrenaline & aggression</i>	28
V. Activities	31
• Media & recruitment	31
• Social media	33

• Funding	37
• Travel	39
• Roles in conflict	40
VI. Legal Framework	43
• Overview	43
• North America	43
• Europe	44
• Human rights violations	47
VII. Conclusions & Recommendations	48
• The legality of foreign fighting	48
• Looking forward	50
• Possible issues for returnees	52
• Recommendations	53
i. Governments	54
ii. Social media and crowdfunding	55
iii. Researchers	55

List of Acronyms

FSA	Free Syrian Army (al-Jaysh al-Sūrī al-Ḥurr)
HMMWV	High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (Humvee)
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Hikûmetî Herêmi Kurdistan)
MLKP	Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (Marksist-Leninist Komünist Partisi)
NPU	Ninevah Plain Protection Units
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)
PSD	Protective Services Detail
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat)
SOLI	Sons of Liberty International
S-VBIED	Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
TBI	Traumatic Brain Injury
YPG	People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin)

1. Introduction

The unprecedented influx of foreigners into Syria and then Iraq since 2011 is dominated by those joining ISIS and other Islamist groups, as well as a significant number of Shia fighters.¹ Although the scale of the influx is unprecedented, the current conflict in Syria and Iraq is by no means the first to attract overseas fighters to a particular cause or group. The most commonly cited historical precedents of foreigner fighters (on one or both sides) include the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, the Afghan-Soviet War of the 1980s, or the Balkan and Chechen conflicts of the mid-1990s. More recently foreign fighters have been involved in conflicts in Somalia, Yemen, Mali and Libya to name just a few.

Although Islamist foreign fighters attract the majority of government concern and media interest, there are however also a number of anti-ISIS foreign fighters joining other factions in the conflict, including those fighting against ISIS. These fighters, likely numbering in the hundreds and drawn from all over the world, could offer valuable insights into the decision making process of the predominantly young people voluntarily participating in overseas conflicts, on either side. Although there have been several media reports covering these fighters to-date there has been little systematic research into foreigners fighting against ISIS.²

This report aims to provide insights into this group of fighters, examining who they are, who they are fighting for, and why they decided to volunteer. It builds on previous ISD research by drawing parallels between these anti-ISIS fighters and the foreign fighters and female migrants joining Islamist groups in terms of demographics, underlying motivations, recruitment pathways, online activities and combat roles.³ The legal context in the countries providing the most anti-ISIS fighters is also highlighted, along with some of the possible difficulties they may face on their return, legal or otherwise. Finally, the report offers a series of practical recommendations for governments and social media platforms, as well as identifying possible areas for future research.

1 Foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon in war. Thousands of foreign nationals have participated in numerous conflicts over the years, from the Spanish Civil War, to the resistance against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Current estimates of the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria since 2011 suggest that between 25,000 and 30,000 have travelled nearly 100 different countries, surpassing the 20,000 believed to have fought in Afghanistan. Western citizens are thought to number between 4000 and 7000. See: (December 2015) "Global Terrorism Index 2015" p.47 "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq" The Soufan Group p.5 http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf [Link last accessed 19/01/2016]

2 Nathan Patin (August 2015) "The Other Foreign Fighters: An Open-Source Investigation into American Volunteers Fighting the Islamic State" *Bellingcat* <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/08/26/the-other-foreign-fighters/> [Link last accessed 19/02/2016]

3 Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford, Ross Frenett (2015) "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS" *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.pdf; Erin Saltman, Melanie Smith (2015) "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part" *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*; Rachel Briggs OBE, Tanya Silverman (2014) "Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat" *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* [Link last accessed 19/02/2016]

Definitions, Terms & Methodology

The findings of this report are based on a database of 300 anti-ISIS fighters believed to have actively participated in the conflict in either Iraq or Syria, primarily fighting against ISIS, or made considerable attempts to travel to the region in order to do so. Those that attempted to travel were included if they were stopped en-route, but individuals simply expressing a desire to travel were not. The database also includes some that have now returned to their home countries. Although in many cases it proved difficult to verify the exact roles fulfilled by those in the database while in the theatre of war, all of those included have expressed a willingness to directly participate in combat if required. For the purposes of this report it was therefore decided to adopt the term “anti-ISIS foreign fighters” to avoid confusion with the “foreign fighter” term commonly associated with those joining ISIS or other extreme Islamist groups.

ISD’s researchers built the database using a combination of available open-sources. In order to identify as many individuals as possible, an initial handful of prominent anti-ISIS foreign fighters were identified through media reports. This information was used to find the social media accounts of these individuals, and then a simple 'snowball' technique was used to identify other anti-ISIS fighters within their online social networks. Once a fighter was identified, researchers would then return to media coverage to verify and supplement the information presented by anti-ISIS fighters on social media. In the case of three fighters, information was also gathered from original interview transcripts kindly shared with ISD.⁴ The information collected was then manually entered and coded into 30 distinct variables, encompassing basic demographic information, education and employment histories, stated or inferred motivations for travel, and affiliations with groups and other fighters within the database.

Whilst the database is extensive, there were a number of limitations to the research methodology employed for this study;

- The dataset represents a sample rather than a complete picture of the anti-ISIS foreign fighters involved in the conflict in Iraq and Syria. The true number of anti-ISIS foreign fighters is extremely difficult to determine as, unlike Islamist foreign fighters, there are few estimates available from official sources, researchers or the media.
- It was not always possible to find reliable information on each fighter for every data category, and therefore there are a number of 'unknowns' across most categories. Determining the affiliations of anti-ISIS fighters posed a particular challenge in this respect, as many individuals within the database appeared to have split their time between several of the disparate groups and local units.

4. War is Boring, Kevin Knodell - <http://warisboring.com/articles/author/kevin-knodell/> [Link last accessed 19/02/2016]

- Similarly, whilst researchers attempted to assign the motivations of fighters to various broad categories, this was typically an imprecise exercise. This report therefore does not rely on these categorisations to infer accurate statistics around the motivations of fighters in the database. Instead, this information is used to provide an overview of the most frequently cited reasons for fighters' participation.
- Every care was taken to ensure there was no repetition of individuals in the database by cross-referencing social media accounts with available news reporting. However, due to the widespread adoption of noms de guerre and use of multiple social media accounts among fighters, there is the possibility that some individuals may have been double-counted.
- Data collection was also somewhat limited in scope by the languages spoken by ISD's researchers. Primarily sources in English, French and German were considered (as well as some Italian and Spanish sources), with Turkish and Kurdish sources also included to supplement research on anti-ISIS Western fighters with Turkish or Kurdish roots. As a result, the overwhelming majority of those featured in the database originate from particular Western or European countries, with a few notable exceptions.
- This report does not examine at length non-Western foreign Shia fighters supporting the Assad regime in Syria, or fighting against ISIS in Iraq. The majority of foreign Shia fighters are mobilised from Lebanon, Iraq or Afghanistan and the militias they typically join often maintain ties to Iran. There were however a small number of individuals included in the dataset from the U.S., Canada and Norway affiliated with Hezbollah or Shia militias.⁵
- As a result of the primary open-source, self-reported nature of the data collected, the sample of fighters within the database mostly includes those that have shared information of their activities publically, either online or via the media. There are many additional fighters that have chosen not to publicise their participation in the conflict, most likely as a result of fears around either operational security or the legal repercussions they may face on their return to their countries of origin. It should also be stated that many of the fighters that are more open about their activities may have an interest in misrepresenting their contributions on the ground. ISIS fighters have often portrayed an idealised snapshot of the realities of life in the 'caliphate' online. In a similar way, a number of the anti-ISIS foreign fighters featured in the database have typically posted positive content around their experiences. Others are directly involved in the recruitment of potential fighters, or assisting in facilitating their journey to the frontlines of the conflict, and therefore have a possible incentive to present more positive perspectives to the outside world.

Finally, a note on the various fighters mentioned or featured within this report. All of

5. Canada, See; Stewart Bell (May 2014) "Canadian terrorist, who was a senior Hezbollah member, killed by Syrian rebels" *National Post* <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canadian-terrorist-who-was-a-senior-hezbollah-member-killed-by-syrian-rebels> [Link last accessed 19/02/2016] Norway, See; (02/02/2015) "14-year-old Norwegian found fighting in Iraq" *The Local.No* <http://www.thelocal.no/20150202/norwegian-boy-fighting-isis-in-iraq> See, US; Alexandra Trowbridge (March 2014) "L.A. Gang members in Syria: Why they fight for Assad" *CBS* <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/la-gang-members-in-syria-why-they-fight-for-assad/> [Link last accessed 19/02/2016]

those profiled have featured in media reports and typically are highly active on social media, and as a result their identities (or noms de guerre) are relatively well known. There are however fighters in the database who were considerably harder to identify, or had taken steps to scour their social media profiles of any identifying information. These fighters are included in the statistics used throughout the report, but are not profiled to protect their anonymity. All quotes from fighters that have been included in this report are unedited.

2. Demographics

Age & gender

The vast majority of anti-ISIS fighters identified were men (97%). Whilst only nine of those included in the dataset were women, they were typically actively engaged in the conflict as members of female-only militias, with six of the women identified fighting with the most well-known, the predominantly-Kurdish YPJ. Researchers identified a wide range of ages among anti-ISIS fighters, with the youngest only 14 years old, and the oldest 67. The average age of all anti-ISIS fighters was 32.44 years old, although as the chart below illustrates this was somewhat skewed by the presence of a small number of over-50s. By far the largest group (48.4%) were in their 20s, reflected in the median age of 28 and modal age of 26 years old. Female fighters were on average younger (25.7) than their male counterparts (32.9), although again this can be attributed to the small cohort of men aged over-50, many of whom are military veterans. Eight of the fighters featured in the database have since been reported killed. Their ages have been included at the time of death.

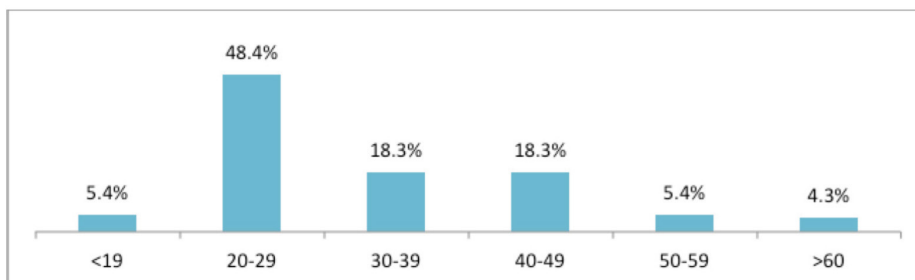


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters

Nationalities & regions

The nationalities of anti-ISIS foreign fighters could be determined for 277 (92.3%) of the 300 individuals contained within the database. Anti-ISIS fighters were recorded from 26 countries around the world, with the overwhelming majority (98.7%) originating from Western or European countries.⁶ The single largest cohort were from the U.S., which accounted for 114 (38.0%) of the fighters within the database. This figure is slightly higher but broadly consistent with the 108 fighters identified in an August 2015 report on U.S. citizens fighting against ISIS.⁷ The next largest contingents originated from the U.K. (41, 13.7%), Germany (24, 8.0%), France (19, 6.3%), Sweden (17, 5.7%) and Canada (14, 4.7%), with the remaining countries providing anti-ISIS

6. Researchers also identified single combatants from China, Columbia, Indonesia, Russia and South Korea, representing 1.3% of the 300 combatants in the dataset. Due in part to the languages spoken by researchers, few combatants were found from the MENA region.

7. Nathan Patin (August 2015)

fighters in single-figures. However, when broken down by region, Europe narrowly tops North America.

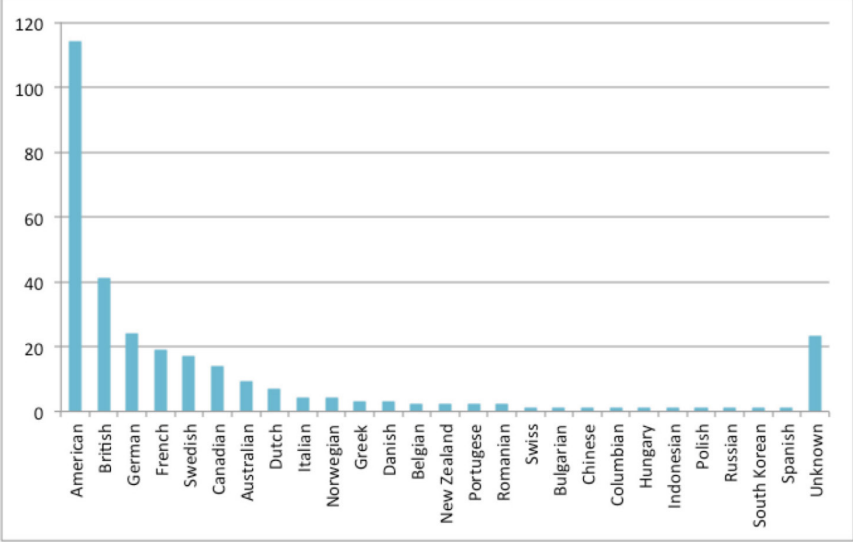


Figure 2: Number of Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters by Nationality

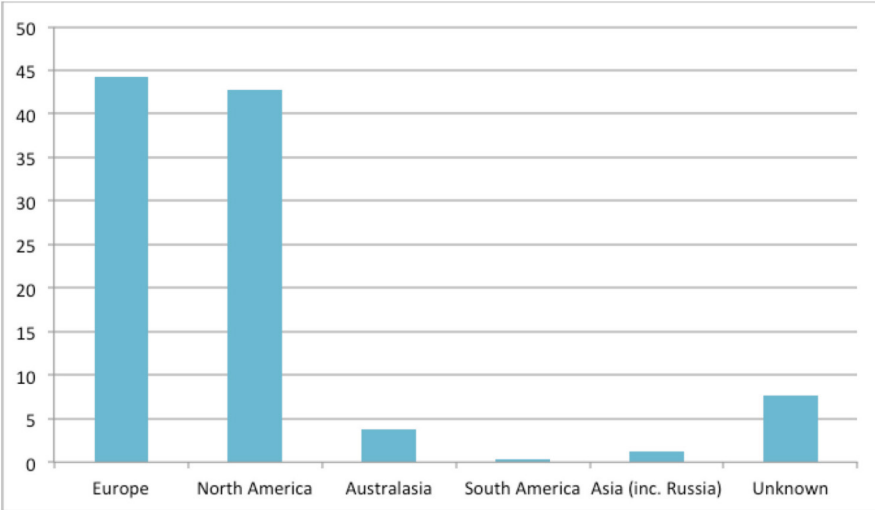


Figure 3: Percentage of Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters by Region

Ethnicity & religion

Specific regional ethnicities (in addition to primary nationalities) could only be determined for 53 of the fighters featured in the dataset. It should be noted that ethnicities were not inferred by researchers, only those fighters that openly stated their ethnicities have been included. By far the largest self-identified ethnic minority group among the entire dataset were the Kurdish (37, 12.3%), followed by small proportions of Assyrians and Yazidis (4 fighters, or 1.3% each).

The majority of anti-ISIS fighters did not self-identify a religious affiliation (88.7%), although interestingly among those that did express religious sentiments there were a surprisingly large number of Christians (25, 8.3%) and a comparatively small number of Muslims (3, 1.0%). However, these figures may not be an accurate reflection of religious beliefs among anti-ISIS fighters as the majority of Kurds in the dataset are likely to be Muslim. These figures suggest that for those anti-ISIS fighters from an ethnically Kurdish background, or those with Christian religious beliefs, these facets of their identities are particularly important to those from these two groups and were expressed either in their online profiles or comments to the media.

Education, employment & military service

Only 47 of the 300 anti-ISIS fighters (15.7%) revealed their educational backgrounds. Of those that did, there was a relatively even split between those completing secondary (22, 46.8%) and undergraduate (24, 51.1%) qualifications, with a single individual completing postgraduate studies. Interestingly, almost all of those that indicated an involvement in tertiary education studied Politics or International Relations courses. The lack of information around education could point to low levels of education among anti-ISIS fighters, although it is more likely that such identifying characteristics have been selectively removed from social media profiles for anonymity purposes.

In terms of employment again data was unavailable for the majority of anti-ISIS fighters (75.3%). However, of those whose prior work histories were available, the majority (58.1%) were coded as 'skilled workers', with 'professionals' (24.3%), 'unskilled workers' (12.2%), students (4.1%) and the unemployed (1.4%) comprising the remaining individuals. Whilst specific work histories were not available for most fighters, 94 individuals (31.3%) were happy to openly share details of their previous involvement with their respective national militaries. Further exploration into the large number of military veterans present within the dataset can be found within the *Motivations* section of this report.

Who are they fighting with?

Researchers were able to tie a majority of anti-ISIS fighters (193, 64.3%) to specific groups involved in the conflict (see the *Group Affiliations* section for more information). Of those claiming affiliations, by far the two most popular organisations were the YPG (92, 30.7%) and the Peshmerga (65, 21.7%). Others were found to be fighting with Dwekh Nawsha (17, 5.7%) or the YPJ (4, 1.3%), with a handful of individual fighters attached to other groups and organisations participating in the conflict, including Hezbollah, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and various Shia militias. 44.0% of anti-ISIS fighters are known to be affiliated with others within the ISD database. The remainder appear to not openly communicate with others online, although these fighters may well be doing so using private messages or non-public platforms or forums. This suggests that whilst there are many clusters of fighters who may know each other (or in some cases are related) there is also a large proportion of 'independents'.

How do they compare with Islamist Foreign Fighters?

Research has found that the typical age of Western Islamist foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq has fallen in comparison to previous conflicts in Afghanistan, the Balkans and Chechnya. The majority of today's fighters are aged between 18 and 29 years old, whereas in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s the typical age range was between 25 and 35.⁸ The ages of anti-ISIS foreign fighters within ISD's dataset are more comparable with previous Islamist foreign fighter mobilisations than the current cohort. For example, almost a fifth of Westerners joining Islamist groups are teenagers, whereas only 5.4% of anti-ISIS foreign fighters are under 20 years old.⁹ There are some similarities in terms of outliers and the overall range of ages, with small numbers of under-16s and over-65s found in both groups.¹⁰ Recent studies have found that among those joining Islamist groups, men (average age of 25) are typically older than women (21).¹¹ ISD's data shows that, on average, male anti-ISIS foreign fighters (33) are also older than their female contemporaries (26).

One striking disparity between anti-ISIS foreign fighters and those travelling to join Islamist groups is the number of women. Various studies estimate that women and girls account for an unprecedented proportion of those joining Islamist groups, believed to be between 14%¹² to 18%¹³, compared to just 3% of those joining the various other anti-ISIS groups involved in ISD's database. Despite the gulf in numbers, and in contrast to their Islamist counterparts, many of the women identified for this report were actively involved in combat-roles (mostly with the YPJ). Women and girls joining Islamist groups typically serve domestic and matriarchal roles, with a select few also participating in propaganda activities or enforcing strict 'moral' standards.¹⁴

Researchers were able to find anti-ISIS foreign fighters hailing from 26 different countries which, considering the much smaller overall numbers when compared to Islamist foreign fighters, suggests that both groups are highly international. However, in contrast to the overwhelming predominance of European citizens among Western Islamist foreign fighters, the leading nationality within the anti-ISIS foreign fighter database were Americans at 38%, whereas estimates suggest that only around 6% of Islamist foreign fighters are from the U.S..¹⁵ This disparity is largely explained by the large number of U.S. military veterans within the dataset, but may also point to the relative successes of U.S. law-enforcement in preventing Islamist foreign fighter travel when compared to their European counterparts.

The U.K. (13.7%), Germany (8%) and France (6.3%) follow the U.S. as the most common nationalities in the anti-ISIS foreign fighter dataset, but are also the top three providers of Western Islamist fighters. Conversely Belgium, the fourth largest provider

8. Richard Barrett (June 2014)

9. Peter Bergen, Courtney Schuster, David Sterman (November 2015)

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Richard Barrett (June 2014) [Link last accessed 19/02/2016] See; Davis, C, Jeff Opperman (2014) "Female foreign fighters Syria and Iraq" *TRAC Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium* www.trackingterrorism.org/article/female-foreign-fighters-syria-and-iraq [19/02/2016]

13. Peter Bergen, Courtney Schuster, David Sterman (November 2015)

14. Erin Saltman, Melanie Smith (2015)

15. Peter Bergen, Courtney Schuster, David Sterman (November 2015)

of Western Islamist fighters, provided just two anti-ISIS foreign fighters (0.7%).¹⁶ The chart below shows that the U.S. provides a much larger proportion of anti-ISIS than Islamist foreign fighters. French and Belgian citizens on the other hand contribute heavily to the contingent of Islamist foreign fighters when compared to the proportion of anti-ISIS foreign fighters they provide.¹⁷

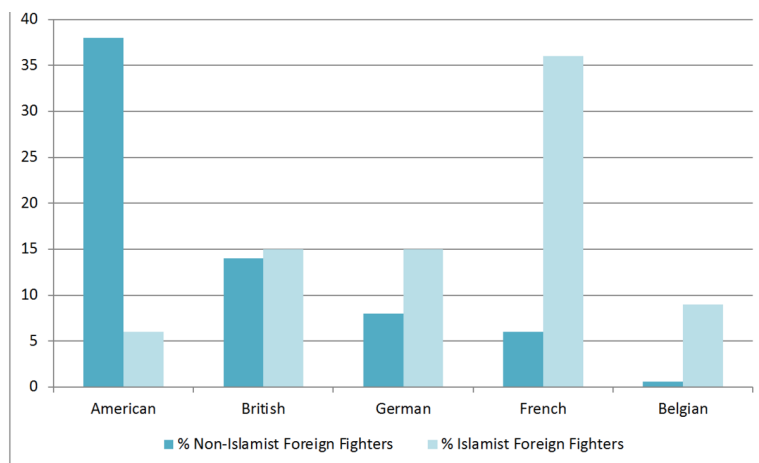


Figure 4: Estimated Proportion of Anti-ISIS and Islamist Foreign Fighters by Nationality

As would be expected, the vast majority of Western Islamist foreign fighters have joined ISIS, with only 10% joining the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, and a further 6% fighting with other smaller, lesser-known groups.¹⁸ The distribution of Islamist foreign fighters between groups is considerably more concentrated than that of anti-ISIS foreign fighters, who typically have a wider range of groups or units to consider joining and a freer choice (although some groups have stricter entry requirements than others).¹⁹ There were regular reports of Islamist foreign fighters moving between different groups earlier in the conflict, but as the opposition to the Assad regime splintered this became less common and ISIS is now known to execute potential deserters or dissidents. The situation among anti-ISIS foreign fighters however remains relatively fluid, with researchers observing multiple group affiliations among a number of individuals within the dataset.

“I’ve been in Syria (Rojava) with the YPG, now I’m in Iraqi Kurdistan looking for a Peshmerga unit to join, which lets me go to the front.”

A Romanian fighter near Irbil, Iraq

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has seen a significant number of Islamist foreign fighters

16. “Based on these estimates, almost 3,700 of the total 5,000+ European Union foreign fighter contingent come from just four countries – France (36%), Germany (15.2%), Belgium (9.4%) and the UK (15.2%)” (December 2015) “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq” *The Soufan Group* p.5 http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf [Link last accessed 19/01/2016]

17. Ibid.

18. Peter Bergen, Courtney Schuster, David Sterman (November 2015)

19. Nathan Patin (August 2015) See p.34-5 Peshmerga Application/Requirements

killed, with nearly two in five reported dead up to December 2015.²⁰ These figures suggest the conflict has proved far more deadly for anti-ISIS groups than those fighting against them, with only 2.4% of those within the foreign fighter dataset known to have been killed in action over the same period.

20. Peter Bergen, Courtney Schuster, David Sterman (November 2015)

3. Group Affiliations

The sheer variety of options available to anti-ISIS foreign fighters for enlistment reflects the conflict's inherent complexity and explains why some have fought with several different groups. Levels of experience and professionalism vary, as does the sophistication and availability of equipment, financing, and support structures. As a result, entry requirements and roles can also differ, with some groups requiring prior military experience or medical, linguistic or logistical skills. Similarly, some groups will accept foreign recruits (or even have special units for foreign fighters) while others that are primarily defined along national, ethnic or sectarian lines will not. Depending on their country of origin there is also a range of legal implications to consider for anti-ISIS foreign fighters when deciding which group to join. For example, some of the groups participating in the conflict (such as the PKK) are designated terrorist groups by some governments but not others.

Some groups are more unified and coordinated with centralised-command structures, while others are more akin to umbrella organisations representing numerous smaller local units or militias. Groups may fight a range of opponents at different times and in various locations, and not all are explicitly 'anti-ISIS', but are instead focused on ousting the Assad regime. Some groups have created ad-hoc alliances where at times they work directly together, but in other instances simply respect each other's territory. Other groups directly compete and some even exhibit intra-group conflict. Consequently, groups ostensibly working towards the same goal are often divided by factors including nationality, ethnicity, religion or language, and therefore do not coordinate effectively with one another. This section will briefly outline the major organisational players and provide an overview of their goals and relationships with other groups.

YPG and splinter groups

Though largely unified under a strong feeling of ethnic identity and anti-ISIS sentiment, the Kurdish region's population is very diverse and also includes Arab, Armenian, Assyrian, Turkish, and Yazidi inhabitants. Brought together through their mutual

Samantha Jay

Nationality: American.

Background: A 25 year old divorced mother of three and former geospatial engineer with the U.S. Army. Her hometown is Morehead City, North Carolina.

Role: Fought with the YPG.

"It's so disturbing to see the majority of everyone hate on the Muslims. I know MANY Muslims here in Kurdistan and they are all so sweet and peaceful. Don't let the media sway you to hate Muslims or Islam. Sure hate ISIS but don't think they are all extremists."

victimisation, there are many militias affiliated with the Kurdish counter-movement that cooperate or exhibit overlapping membership.²¹ For the purpose of this report, the major players are listed individually below, though it is notable that ideologically, strategically, and for incoming anti-ISIS foreign fighters, these lines are often blurred.

The group fighting against ISIS with the largest online presence is the People's Protection Units, or in abbreviated Kurdish, the YPG. The armed wing of the secular-leftist Democratic Union Party (PYD), this light infantry group operates largely in Western Kurdistan or the Rojava region in Syria.²² Its initial involvement in the war was defensive, fighting to protect the Kurdish people, but the YPG has since adapted a more proactive and aggressive approach and began overtaking ISIS controlled territories.²³ The group is comprised primarily of Kurdish fighters, but also maintains significant Arab and Christian factions and is open to foreign conscription.

There have been cases of individuals joining other anti-ISIS militias over the YPG because of the group's refusal to allow them to go to the frontlines. Speculation abounds that Westerners are protected due to their propaganda value to global audiences, drawing international recognition and legitimising their cause. However, YPG troop selection could simply be more stringent than other groups' processes.²⁴

Although the dataset does not report large numbers of Western women joining, the YPG has a fast growing female only brigade. The Women's Protection Units or YPJ, have been deemed vital to successes in Kobane and contributes an estimated 35% of Kurdish troops in Northern Syria.²⁵ Of the nine female anti-ISIS fighters in the database, six are specifically tied to the YPJ.

Another popular branch of the YPG is the international brigade, dubbed 'The Lions of Rojava'.²⁶ Not all anti-ISIS foreign fighters stay within their ranks for the duration of their time in combat, but many are recruited and filtered through this organisation to YPG or Peshmerga units. Nearly one-third of YPG fighters in the database identified The Lions of Rojava as either their primary organisational affiliation or as their initial point of contact when they arrived in the region.

Peshmerga and non-YPG affiliated Kurdish groups

The military force of Iraqi Kurdistan, the Peshmerga, is the second most successful group in attracting Western recruits. In Kurdish, the name means "one who confronts

-
21. Ben Winsor (October 2014) "This Might Be The Most Horrific Single Massacre ISIS Has Committed" *Business Insider UK* <http://uk.businessinsider.com/the-most-isis-horrific-atrocity-2014-10?r=US&IR=T> [Last last accessed 19/02/2016]
 22. Wladimir Van Wilgenburg (2013) "Conflict Intensifies in Kurdish Area of Syria" *Al Monitor* <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/conflict-intensifies-syrian-kurdish-region.html> [Last link accessed 19/02/2016]
 23. Lefteris Pitarakis, Bassem Mrou "Thousands of Syrians flee into Turkey amid intense fighting" *Big Story* <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/7f62663318e94589bf6097825914a088/kurds-nearing-key-islamic-state-held-syrian-border-town> [Link last accessed 19/02/2016]
 24. Florian Neuhofer (July 2015) "Anti-ISIS foreign legion: Ex-skinheads and angry white men swell ranks of Christian militia fighting Islamic State" *International Business Times* <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/anti-isis-foreign-legion-ex-skinheads-angry-white-men-swell-ranks-christian-militia-fighting-1510550> [Link last accessed]
 25. (October 2014) "Kurdish Women Turning Kobani into a Living 'Hell' State" *Telesur TV* <http://www.telesur.tv/english/news/Kurdish-Women-Turning-Kobani-into-a-Living-Hell-for-Islamic-State-20141014-0072.html> [Link last accessed 19/02/2016]
 26. See: Lions of Rojava Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/TheLionsOfRojava>

death”.²⁷ The group seems to be regionally inclusive and attracts members of local minority populations such as Yazidis, although they do not officially accept foreign enlistment by non-ethnic Kurds. Interestingly, while the ruling Kurdish Democratic Party’s Peshmerga regularly refuses foreigners, its opposition party in the east, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan or PUK, tends to be more lenient and accepting of incomers.²⁸ Around a fifth of the individuals associated with the Peshmerga in the dataset self-identified as ethnic Kurds, with some even coming from families with a tradition of providing Peshmerga fighters.

Additionally, the PKK has joined the fight against ISIS. Also partially operating out of Iraqi Kurdistan, the PKK is a militant group historically focused on improved socio-political rights in Turkey,²⁹ but in 2014 began engaging in territorially motivated anti-ISIS combat. Although the PKK is designated as a terrorist organisation by the European Union and several countries (including the U.S., the U.K., Canada and Australia), it is not listed by the United Nations and therefore there is no international legal consensus on the group’s status. The legality of fighting with the PKK can therefore vary depending on the nationality of the combatant. A small number of anti-ISIS foreign fighters also join the Peshmerga International Detachment (IDET), a volunteer unit under the command of the PUK.

Despite the number of available militias to join, some ethnically Kurdish foreign fighters appear to float between groups, being somewhat independent and fighting alongside several groups at different times. This is perhaps best demonstrated by fighters like 'Azad 1%er', the leader of the German biker gang Median Empire. The group openly voices support for the YPG as well as the Peshmerga and various Yazidi militant factions.³⁰

Dwekh Nawsha

Dwekh Nawsha is the final significant anti-ISIS militia attracting international fighters. The Syriac fighting force, whose name translates as “one who sacrifices”, was created in 2014 to defend Assyrian Christians from ISIS. Unlike the rivalries pervasive between other militias, Dwekh Nawsha cooperates with the Peshmerga and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and would be willing to accept their post-conflict governance.³¹ The group specifically appeals to Western Assyrian and Christian recruits, with 41% of the Dwekh Nawsha fighters in the dataset directly self-identifying as Christian.

27. (August 2014) “Profile: Who are the Peshmerga?” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28738975> [Link last accessed 19/02/2016]

28. Florian Neuhof (July 2015)

29. (July 2015) “Profile: Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)” *BBC* <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100> [19/02/2016]

30. Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith (October 2014) “German Motorcycle Club members join Dutch bikers in fight against ISIS” *Independent* <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/german-motorcycle-club-members-join-dutch-bikers-in-fight-against-isis-9804525.html> [Link last accessed 19/02/2016]

31. Peter Henderson (October 2014) “Iraq’s Christian paramilitaries split in IS fight” *Al Monitor* <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/iraq-christian-paramilitary-forces-nineveh.html#> [Link last accessed 19/02/2016]

Assyrian or Syriac Militias

The Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) is a small militia started from a partnership between Iraqi Assyrian Democratic Movement and were trained by American Matthew VanDyke's Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), a non-profit security contracting firm. VanDyke initially gained notoriety fighting to oust Colonel Gaddafi in Libya and started SOLI in June 2014 to act as the "first security contracting firm run as a non-profit".³² The organisation claims to offer free "security consulting and training services to vulnerable populations to enable them to defend themselves against terrorist and insurgent groups" and provides pathways for Western veterans to train local fighters.³³ The group aims to mobilise local Christians and works independently of the Peshmerga and other Kurdish forces.³⁴

The Syriac Military Council (created in 2013)³⁵ collaborates with other anti-ISIS affiliates, as illustrated by their collaboration with the YPG in securing Kobane in early 2015.³⁶ Interestingly, another female-only fighting group has seemingly emerged in addition to the YPJ. The "Female Protection Forces of the Land Between Two Rivers" is a Syriac Christian unit fighting ISIS in al-Hasakeh province, apparently aided by both local and foreign trainers.³⁷

Outliers

There are also several groups in Syria that have been involved in the conflict from its early stages but tend to attract much smaller numbers of anti-ISIS foreign fighters:

Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was the most prominent opposition to the Assad regime early in the conflict. It was formed when a number of Syrian Armed Forces officers and soldiers defected as a result of the onset of civil war and the atrocities committed against civilians by the Assad regime in 2011. Their members, alliances and goals have shifted over time however as they operate as a loose coalition of local brigades rather than an organised standing army. For example, they have previously worked alongside the YPG specifically to fight ISIS in ar-Raqqa province, although the alliance suffered from various disputes.³⁸

The FSA has stated that they do not need foreign recruits as the language barrier can

32. Katie Rogers (November 2012) "Matthew VanDyke: US citizen held in Libya emerged on Syria's frontline" *the Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/09/matthew-vandyke-syria-libya> See; (July 2015) "Americans Help Raise Anti-ISIS Christian Militia in Iraq" *Israel National News* <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/193769#.VaZayvViko> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
33. See; Sons of Liberty International webpage - <http://www.sonsoflibertyinternational.com> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
34. Peter Henderson (October 2014) "Iraq's Christian Paramilitaries split in IS fight"
35. Richard Spencer (February 2015) "Christian militia take the war Islamic State In Syria" *Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11430961/Christian-militia-takes-the-war-to-Islamic-State-in-Syria.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
36. Sheren Khalel (February 2015) "Syria's Christians Fight Back" *Foreign Policy* <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/24/syrias-christians-fight-back-assyrian-militias/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
37. (January 2016) "All-Female Christian Militia Takes on ISIS in Syria" *News Max* <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/christian-female-fighters-join/2016/01/18/id/709888/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
38. Notably with the establishment of the "Euphrates Volcano" joint operations control centre, See Kevin Truitte, Robert Caruso (October 2014) "The 'Volcano of The Euphrates' Is the Key To Reversing The US's Failed Policies in Syria" *Business Insider* <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-volcano-of-the-euphrates-and-us-policy-2014-10?IR=T> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

hamper their efforts inside Syria.³⁹ A U.S. Army veteran was one of few reported cases of Westerners attempting to join the FSA's ranks, although due to the murky affiliations of local brigades it was later thought that the militia he joined up with were closer aligned to the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴⁰ There have also been reports of a number of Croat mercenaries fighting with the FSA, as well as a considerable number of Lebanese.⁴¹ The FSA has faded as a force in the Syrian conflict, suffering at the hands of the regime, ISIS and al-Nusra, and more recently Russian airstrikes.⁴² These factors, combined with their disputes with YPG, have fed rumours that the FSA is on the verge of collapse and is therefore unlikely to represent an attractive option for anti-ISIS foreign fighters.⁴³

Pro-regime and Shia militias

Pro-regime militias provide a significant source of armed reinforcements for the Syrian Army, and there are reportedly around 25 militia groups that support Assad's governance.⁴⁴ These militias coordinate closely with, and receive support from, the regime, as well as Shia Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Lebanese Hezbollah forces.⁴⁵ These militias primarily recruit locals seeking to protect their communities from opposition fighters. These groups will accept foreign conscription, but have attracted only a small number of Westerners.⁴⁶

Other Shia forces are generally also pro-regime but have more explicit sectarian motivations and those operating in Syria are mostly Iranian-backed Iraqi groups.⁴⁷ They therefore have a number of non-Syrians, primarily Iraqi, Afghan, Lebanese and Iranian nationals, although they have also

Nerses Kilajyan

Nationality: American.

Background: A Westside Armenian Power gang member originally from Los Angeles, his nickname is "Wino".

Role: He became engaged in the conflict early on and fought with pro-Assad Hezbollah forces. His Facebook profile revealed that he planned to fight in Syria until his death, and he fulfilled was killed in Summer 2015. Madarian, his friend who joined him in the conflict previously, now lives in Armenia.

"I miss you guys more bro I'll be there in Syria soon where I belong die next to my brothers."

39. Maeve McClenaghan (August 2012) "Volunteers From Western Nations Join Fight in Syria" *Mint Press News* <http://www.mintpressnews.com/volunteers-from-western-nations-joining-fight-in-syria/35524/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
40. Nicholas Schmidle (February 2015) "Lost in Syria" *The New Yorker* <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/16/lost-syria> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
41. Nicholas Blanford (May 2012) "Lebanese join the Free Syrian Army's Struggle" *The Daily Star* <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/May-30/175072-lebanese-join-the-free-syrian-armys-struggle.ashx#axzz1wNF5ae2M>
42. Mona Mahmood and Ian Black (May 2013) "Free Syria Army Rebels Defect to Islamist Group Jabhat al-Nusra" *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/08/free-syrian-army-rebels-defect-islamist-group>
43. Shashank Joshi (December 2913) "The good guys have lost in Syria- only the bad guys are left fighting" *The Telegraph* <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/shashankjoshi/100250429/the-good-guys-have-lost-in-syria-only-the-bad-guys-are-left-fighting/> See also; Slobodan Lekic (December 2015) "US-Backed Syrian rebel group on verge of collapse" *Stars and Stripes* <http://www.stripes.com/news/us-backed-syrian-rebel-group-on-verge-of-collapse-1.383853> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
44. (September 2015) "Who are Pro-Assad Militias in Syria?" *Middle East Eye* <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/who-are-pro-assad-militias-syria-2030619965> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
45. Joseph Holliday (March 2013) "Assad Regime" *Institute for the Study of War* <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime> [Link last accessed 22/02.2016]
46. Alexander Trowbridge (March 2014)
47. Phillip Smith (October 2015) "Iran-backed Iraqi militias are pouring into Syria" *Business Insider* <http://uk.businessinsider.com/iran-backed-iraqi-militias-are-pouring-into-syria-2015-10?r=US&IR=T> [Link last accessed 22/02.2016]

reportedly been active in recruiting Western foreign fighters.⁴⁸ The youngest fighter in the dataset falls into this category; a teenage boy was taken by his father from Oslo to Syria in 2013 to join his militia.⁴⁹

48. ibid.

49. (February 2015) "14 year old Norwegian found fighting in Iraq" *The Local. No* <http://www.thelocal.no/20150202/norwegian-boy-fighting-isis-in-iraq> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

4. Motivations

Despite the broad demographic, ethnic and religious profiles of anti-ISIS foreign fighters, researchers were able to identify several common themes in their motivations. As is the case with Islamist foreign fighters, there are a range of factors that can lead an individual to voluntarily leave the comfort of their home countries to fight abroad. These factors can vary as much as the fighters themselves but can be divided into two simple but inextricably linked categories; push and pull factors.

Push factors are manifested in an individuals' dissatisfaction with their current circumstances or surroundings, while pull factors encompass what then draws that individual to the particular conflict. These factors are not mutually exclusive; fighters typically display an array of overlapping and complementary motivations. One combatant for example stated on the Lions of Rojava Facebook page:

"The reason why I came to Rojava is to do something meaningful with my life. When I saw what the ISIS done in Middle East, that shocked me very much, although I am just an ordinary college student, but I know what is just and what freedom is, I want to do something for humanity".⁵⁰

The push-pull factors identified in this report have either been directly stated by fighters themselves in the media or online, or inferred by researchers from extensive study of their social media profiles and accounts. Researchers found online profiles typically gave a more detailed and accurate indication of a combatant's motivations than news media due to the highly personalised, more natural and less guarded environment of social media. Interactions between fighters, blog posts, tweets, status updates and photos were often more telling than news media sources where there may be a greater incentive to project a particular view to an outside audience. It is important to note that there is little evidence pointing to anti-ISIS foreign fighters being paid to participate in the conflict. Mercenaries were not considered within the scope of this report, and as such, paid fighters were not included in the dataset.⁵¹

At first glance it would appear that Islamist and anti-ISIS foreign fighters traveling to fight on opposite sides of the conflict in Syria and Iraq have vastly contrasting reasons for participating. Whilst this is certainly the case for their overarching goals and hopes for the future of the region, there are however a number of similarities in their underlying motivations that are worth considering. This section therefore also examines the parallels between the push and pull factors observed among Islamist and anti-ISIS foreign fighters.

50. See; <https://www.facebook.com/TheLionsOfRojavaOfficial/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

51. For more information on Western mercenaries see: Robin Wright (September 2015) "Our high-priced mercenaries in Syria" *The New Yorker* <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/our-high-priced-mercenaries-in-syria> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

Push factors

Frustration with responses to the conflict

Many anti-ISIS fighters in the database express clear frustrations with what they perceive as an inadequate and lacklustre response to the situation in Syria and Iraq, either from their own national governments or the broader international community. The primary grievance relates to atrocities being committed against civilians, with many accusing world leaders of turning a blind eye to the ongoing suffering of those caught up in the conflict.

“These men are standing up against men who would commit acts of terror in there own nation while their own governments calls them criminals and does nothing about isis. Please show your support.”

An American fighter with the Lions of Rojava

This feeling is all the more pronounced in individuals that have served in their countries’ militaries and fought in the region. They are disappointed that their hard work in those conflicts, and the sacrifices of their friends and fellow soldiers, are in danger of being in vain. Some were also dismayed that the local civilians, who they were originally there to help, protect and work alongside, are again having to bear the brunt of a violent war.

“Well when are we going to learn ... it’s time to stop what we have been doing and take the gloves off. It’s time to get dirty 100% pure violence is needed stop this, stop tip toeing round and start kicking in doors kidnap these f*ckers of the street water board every potential terrorist lock up and kill every one of them if you the government can’t or wont then let those who are willing this not end soon.”

An English fighter with the YPG

The database also contains a significant number of anti-ISIS fighters that have ethnic or cultural ties to the region, some of whom have also fought in past conflicts. The vast majority are Kurdish, although there are also fighters in this subset that self-identify as Yazidi, Assyrian, Iraqi or Turkish. For them, their cultural or ethnic ties may perhaps heighten their feelings of discontent with the international community for not doing

enough to help their people.

Those involved on all sides of the conflict have long expressed dissatisfaction with responses to the crisis (or lack thereof). Earlier in the conflict many Islamist and anti-ISIS foreign fighters would have shared a desire to see more done to prevent the atrocities committed by the Assad regime. However, since August 2014, attention among Islamist foreign fighters has shifted towards anger at the coalition bombing campaign's targeting of ISIS. This has added to feelings of persecution and inevitably contributed to the binary 'us vs. them' ISIS narrative of a war against Muslims (although admittedly an extremely exclusive understanding of who they consider Muslim). Whilst the two groups may now express dissatisfaction in vastly different ways, it is clear that foreign policy can play a role in their decision making processes when considering whether to travel to the region.

Jordan Matson

Nationality: American.

Background: He previously served in a non-combat position with the US Army and returned to work in the food packaging industry. He is aged 28 and his hometown is Stuartevant, Wisconsin.

Role: A YPG fighter who cites a moral obligation to defend Christians and Kurds, as well as his disappointment in the premature withdrawal of U.S. troops.

"We occupied this land and left before they even had an airforce. Today these kinds of atrocities are being committed and our governments are pretty much letting it happen."

The role of identity and a lack of belonging or purpose

There were a number of more personal factors that were found among anti-ISIS fighters of all backgrounds. These included boredom, loneliness, persistent unemployment, relationship difficulties, or a more general lack of purpose. Some are attempting to escape a life in which they feel they have no place, prospects or future, others mention feeling trapped.

"This time last year I was a stay at home mom/wife. Even though I knew my marriage was up in flames I had still tried. I went through a very dark period in my life... After joining the Kurds and seeing the problems first hand in other parts of the world my priorities were set straight again. Thousands don't agree with my choice and honestly I don't give a damn."

An American recently returned from fighting alongside YPG

A failure to assimilate back into society following military service was observed

relatively regularly across the ex-military personnel within the database, although there were also a considerable number that left behind apparently stable lives. Having experienced the traumas of war, some veterans exhibited symptoms that were telling of their failure to reintegrate back into civilian life – including feelings of isolation, persecution, or frustration – and as a result pushed away family or friends, their primary support systems. Others suffered from health issues such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or depression.⁵²

There were also some veterans who felt that there was a lack of recognition or even acknowledgement of their service in previous conflicts. They state that people struggle to comprehend their losses, problems, or passion for resolving conflict. Some feel that there is a lack of sympathy and understanding from some due to inconsistent domestic support for the wars in which they fought, and as a result no longer feel like they belong.⁵³

Similar motivations were also observed among non-veteran fighters. Some of the Westerners with ethnic or cultural links to the region stated that they had not felt a true sense of belonging in their adopted countries, a feeling unfortunately not uncommon among diaspora communities in the West. This was not necessarily unique to recent or first generation migrants, with some fighters noting that they struggled to settle on a consistent definition of their identity.

Similar push factors are commonly identified in research on Islamist foreign fighters, including feelings of isolation or alienation, and a lack of genuine feelings of connection and belonging in their community, society or country.⁵⁴ Although often described as a failure to integrate fully, many of those joining ISIS or other extreme Islamist groups are typically intimately familiar with the societies they are rejecting. Many are born and raised in the countries they leave behind, and this familiarity often surfaces in online posts featuring westernised slang, acronyms and emojis combined with Arabic or Koranic phrases. Such posts are symptomatic of fractured identities, not dissimilar to the sentiments expressed by a small subset of diaspora fighters in

Samuel Swann

Nationality: American.

Background: He served in the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division in Afghanistan, and then became employed as a motorman at a drilling company on his return. Previously, he attended Tenaha High School and Panola College in Texas.

Role: He joined the Peshmerga (using the alias Salty Boot), driven by a desire to fight and the following blessing from his daughter:

"She [asked] me why I'm not over there kicking bad guys butts haha. In her eyes I'm her hero, but in reality I believe she is mine...I work with several other combat vets that volunteer their skills and efforts mainly because it's the right thing to do, many have trouble adjusting to civilian life. We are warriors, what can I say?"

52. See: "How Common is PTSD" *US Department of Veterans Affairs* <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

53. Samantha Jay and Jordan Matson - The profiles of American veterans Samantha Jay and Jordan Matson indicate a reengagement due to a passion for utilising their skill set, though notably, some other individuals simply cannot sustain relationships or jobs and return merely as an effort to find a place of belonging again. However, it is important to recognise that these are but few of the many reasons that may drive an individual to leave their homes and join a conflict abroad.

54. Tyson Smith and Gala True (July 2014) "Warring Identities: Identity Conflict and the Mental Distress of American Veterans of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan" *American Sociological Association* [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

the dataset, although typically this was not considered their primary reason for their participation.

Perhaps more strikingly however, the majority of those in the anti-ISIS foreign fighter database expressing frustrations with their place in their communities or societies were military veterans. Rather than a failure of integration, for the majority of these individuals they had failed (and in many cases not been supported - it should be noted that a number of cases in this category involved PTSD or depression) to effectively *reintegrate* into society on their return from active service. Research has identified the role identity issues can play in this process, with some former members of the military struggling in civilian life due having previously defined their identities around their military service.⁵⁵ The disparity between the structured, communal nature of the armed forces can be at odds with the lives they find themselves living back at home. These kinds of difficulties can also be drivers for, or closely related to the various mental health issues prevalent among veterans.

Besides issues of identity or alienation, other factors common across both groups included boredom and a lack of purpose or meaning in life, tied to dissatisfaction with aspects of individuals' personal or professional lives. In several cases fighters admitted not revealing their interest in the conflict or intentions to travel to their friends, families or partners, fearing that they would not understand or attempt to stop them.⁵⁶ Whilst the root causes of this kind of disaffection vary, the resulting decision to travel to Syria or Iraq begins to look remarkably similar in some cases to those joining Islamist groups, at least on a personal rather than ideological level.

Pull factors

The Desire to Make a Difference

Allied to a dissatisfaction with the current response, a proactive desire to 'do something' is strongly expressed among anti-ISIS fighters, regardless of whether their ire is aimed primarily at the Assad regime or ISIS (or the various opposition groups in the case of the small number of Shia and pro-regime fighters). This desire originates from a humanitarian or cosmopolitan mentality to prevent atrocities and uphold human rights, especially among persecuted ethnic or religious minorities. Often what attracts the attention of many prospective

Matthew Van Dyke

Nationality: American.

Background: He is a filmmaker and experienced foreign fighter that rose to prominence due to his involvement in the Libyan Civil War. He has an MA in Security Studies from Georgetown University, and a BA in Political Science from UMBC. He is originally from Baltimore, Maryland.

Role: Founded the Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), which partners with the NPU:

"...to enable those abandoned by the international system to take action in defence of themselves and their people, and to combat those forces that seek to harm and oppress them."

55. *ibid.*

56. "Frontline Fighting: The Brits Battling ISIS" *Channel 4* <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/frontline-fighting-the-brits-battling-isis/on-demand/62156-001> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

anti-ISIS fighters is not a detailed ideological narrative, but rather a simple and understandable emotional reaction to what is taking place in the region.

"I don't consider myself a hero or anything of the sort. I came over here to help humans regardless of nationality, race, or religion. Do I wish I got to do more? Yes, but with the situation given out unit, we've done all that we could."

An American veteran fighting with the Peshmerga

Propaganda can play an important role here on both sides. The hyper-violent material that has become a calling-card for ISIS may be celebrated by their supporters, and engender fear among their enemies, but it also plays an unintended role in recruiting anti-ISIS foreign fighters. Many have openly stated that their initial inspiration to fight against ISIS was caused by their visceral human reactions to the on-screen brutality of mass executions, hostage beheadings or media reports of the systemic commodification and rape of captured women and girls.

Two British fighters noted the impact the brutal imagery favoured by the terror group had on them, specifically mentioning the murder of the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kaseasbeh and an unidentified video featuring the beheading of a female captive.⁵⁷ Over time this can then develop into an urge to get involved, and often appears to provide fighters with a renewed sense of purpose in their lives that had previously been lacking. It should be noted however that atrocity propaganda is also used to recruit Islamist foreign fighters, primarily focusing on the impact of airstrikes by the Assad regime or more recently, the international anti-ISIS coalition or the Russian Air Force.

Some anti-ISIS fighters are therefore driven by a pressing sense of morality, obligation and mission to defend the innocent and pursue a 'fight against evil'. Ivana Hoffman stands out as this type of a fighter; she had neither past military experience nor ethnic, cultural or religious ties to the region. The 19 year old was previously a member of Turkey's Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MKLP)⁵⁸, but stated she joined the YPG exclusively to "fight for humanity and freedom."⁵⁹

Diaspora fighters

There are many anti-ISIS fighters primarily concerned with defending a specific ethnic group in the region they have a personal connection to, whether Kurdish, Assyrian or Yazidi. Many of these individuals also mention a general humanitarian or cosmopolitan stance, but they closely identify as members of groups that transcend

57. Ibid.

58. In 2015, the MKLP announced the founding of a permanent military centre in PKK-controlled Iraqi Kurdistan, and has been known to send volunteers to the YPG in Syrian Kurdistan and Northern Iraq in defence of Yazidis in Sinjar.

59. Ivana Hoffman, See; Owen Jones (March 2015) "Why the revolutionary Kurdish fight against ISIS deserves our support" *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/10/revolutionary-kurdish-isis-ivana-hoffman> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

national borders.⁶⁰ Diaspora fighters with ethnic or cultural links to the region may therefore have an added incentive to participate.

There is often a strong sense of belonging and a desire to support their transnational community, which is heightened when the community is plagued by conflict and violence. In some cases this pull factor is exacerbated by the presence of family members in the region or a family history of military involvement. The dataset contains several individuals from families that have an ongoing tradition of supporting or fighting for the Peshmerga. For example, one Kurdish fighter wrote on Facebook; "My Grandfather was a true Peshmerga... now it is my duty to go on with my grandfather's struggle to defend these sacred lands of Kurdistan".⁶¹ Many individuals travelling to fight alongside Islamist groups also have a relative (or relatives) that have preceded them in making the journey to Syria or Iraq.⁶² In some cases, there may even be a generational tradition of jihadist combat.

The largest transnational ethnic group in the database are the Kurds, who like others express a range of motivations. The geo-political location of Kurdistan, straddling parts of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey and bordering traditionally Sunni-majority areas, has meant the Kurds have often been in the sights of ISIS. Additionally, some Kurdish fighters have cited long-term state-building ambitions, and see Kurdistan's aspirations of genuine, independent sovereignty being undermined by the presence of ISIS. These factors, again combined with a frustration with the global response, have spurred Kurdish fighters into action.

Religious motivations

A number of anti-ISIS foreign fighters express religious motivations for their involvement. Although they may not have explicit familial or ethnic ties to the region, they feel a strong responsibility to those that share their religious convictions facing persecution. This passionate support for a community that transcends national

Azad 1%er

Nationality: German.

Background: Originally from Cologne and the founder of the Median Empire, a German biker gang that claims to have strong Kurdish ties. The group is named after the ancient region encompassing Iran to south-eastern Turkey.

Role: According to his travel companion, Fat Joe, after providing humanitarian aid for refugees the gang became involved in the conflict as a result of their ethnic Kurdish ties.

"It's our families, it's our brothers and sisters. We're here in a better place so we try to give them a better situation, because we know the feelings, what they're feeling right now."

60. This is very similar to the "ummah" transnational community, See; Riaz Hassan (October 2011) "Religion: A case study of the Islamic Ummah" *Lahore Journal of Policy Studies* 4(1)

61. Kurdish fighter from Europe fighting alongside the YPG, Facebook

62. See for example; Tom Brooks-Pollock (July 2015) "Yes we have joined ISIS' say missing British family of 12 who fled to Syria" *Independent* <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/yes-we-have-joined-isis-say-missing-british-family-of-12-who-fled-to-syria-luton-islamic-state-isis-10365915.html> See also; "Teenage 'terror twins' who fled Britain to join ISI tried to recruit their whole family telling brothers: 'We might seem evil to you, but we will all be happy in the afterlife'" *Daily Mail* <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3259363/Teenage-terror-twins-fled-Britain-join-ISIS-tried-recruit-family-telling-brothers-evil-happy-afterlife.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

boundaries parallels the Islamic concept of the 'ummah' (the global Muslim community) that is often cited in Islamist propaganda.

This concept of a global community defined by belief creates a sense of duty to, and responsibility for, fellow members of that religion that can draw people of all faiths to war. There is however a stark difference in how this sense of responsibility manifests itself. For many Islamist foreign fighters the perception is that the only way to protect the ummah is through offensive expansionism, with this stance hardening since the beginning of the Syrian conflict. For the majority of anti-ISIS foreign fighters, their sense of duty is more protectionist, and only encompasses defending innocents from religious persecution and oppression.

There are several Christian and Yazidi fighters in the database that are primarily motivated by a desire to protect their fellow adherents. For example, there are several American Christians seeking to protect Christian minorities and heritage in the region, and feel a moral duty to do so. One example is Brett, a 28 year old U.S. Army veteran who told ABC News; "Jesus says, you know, 'What you do unto the least of them, you do unto me. I take that very seriously.'"⁶³ Though not necessarily religiously inspired, some Kurdish and Assyrian diaspora fighters are similarly drawn to the conflict as a result of their cultural pride and collective ethnic identity.

Finishing the job

'Finishing the job' is a sentiment associated with some military veterans who previously served in Iraq, but also Afghanistan, during the so-called 'War on Terror'. This factor is inherently linked with not only frustrations with existing responses to the current crisis, but also the failure to consolidate the post-conflict reconstruction and stabilisation that they contributed to in Iraq after 2003. For these fighters, the state of affairs in the region has led them to feel that the death or suffering of civilians and fellow military personnel has been largely in vain.

Some also describe the region as a kind of 'second home' as a result of long military deployments there. They believe it is their personal responsibility to ensure the region's security if the international community and their own governments are unable to do so. Other anti-ISIS fighters have stated that they are motivated to (as they perceive it) protect their respective countries' geopolitical interests by fighting against hostile terrorist groups. Jordan Matson, another 28 year old U.S. Army veteran fighting

Brett

Nationality: American.

Background: A 28 year old veteran who served with the US Army in Baghdad as a marksman. He is from Detroit, Michigan.

Role: A fighter for Dwekh Nawsha, who wanted to use his military skills to defend the persecuted, stating in an interview with ABC News:

"Jesus says, you know, 'What you do unto the least of them, you do unto me.' I take that very seriously."

63. Terry Moran (February 2015) "Why is this American 'Soldier of Christ' Fighting ISIS in Iraq" ABC <http://abcnews.go.com/International/american-soldier-christ-fighting-isis-iraq/story?id=29171878> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

alongside the Lions of Rojava, typifies the 'finishing the job' mentality, explaining in an interview with CNN that;

"All the American veterans that have died over there – and paid their lives for that country so they could have democracy. That just resonated in my mind. And I couldn't live with myself letting that country fall, and all my brothers' lives be for nothing."⁶⁴

As the majority of Islamist foreign fighters (particularly those travelling from the West) have not fought in previous jihadist mobilisations, a desire to 'finish the job' is not a particularly common motivation. However, the less violent Islamist propaganda content often tries to portray a generational struggle, stressing an obligation to participate, and a 'now or never' urgency to stir potential recruits into action.

ISIS propaganda in particular has made attempts to recruit not just fighters but also women and certain types of professionals (such as doctors or engineers) and highlights their importance in their nascent state-building project. Islamist foreign fighters and female migrants therefore see themselves participating in a much longer-term effort to establish and expand their so-called caliphate. In this respect they can be considered to be inspired by 'finishing the job' of establishing a totalitarian theological dictatorship. In contrast, many anti-ISIS foreign fighters plan to return to their home countries after a certain period of time participating in the conflict, with the exception of some of the Kurdish diaspora fighters that hope to contribute to the founding of an independent, democratic Kurdistan after the cessation of hostilities.

For the women joining ISIS this state-building phase typically entails domestic and matriarchal rather than combat roles, with a select few involved in enforcing strict moral codes through the group's all-female al-Khansaa Brigade. Whilst enforcement regularly features violent punishments, women in ISIS are not permitted to take part in combat. In contrast female anti-ISIS foreign fighters are exactly that, fighters. All of the nine women in the foreign combatant database are thought to be actively involved in fighting, primarily with the YPJ. They do not mention a desire to start a family or settle in the region like their Islamist counterparts. This discrepancy in the roles adopted by women on either side may help to explain the much lower proportion of anti-ISIS female foreign fighters when compared to female migrants joining ISIS. A striking aspect of the ISIS phenomenon is the willingness of parents to take their children (and in some cases even babies and infants) with them to live in a dangerous conflict zone. With a single exception this was not a trend observed among anti-ISIS foreign fighters.⁶⁵

Adventure, adrenaline and aggression

The final pull factors observed by researchers are generally more individualistic than altruistic, and are related to push factors such as boredom or isolation. Some

64. Ivan Watson, Gul Toysuz, Dana Ford (October 2014) "'At Peace' in war: A former US soldier battles ISIS" *CNN* http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/27/world/meast/syria-former-us-soldier/index.html?hpt=hp_t2 [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

65. (February 2015) "14 year old Norwegian found fighting in Iraq" *The Local No* <http://www.thelocal.no/20150202/norwegian-boy-fighting-isis-in-iraq> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016] 72 Florian Neuhof (July 2015)

fighters are motivated by a search for personal fulfilment, adventure and excitement, or even a base urge to fight. A number of ex-military personnel within the dataset display these traits. Some appear to participate out of a desire to employ their skills once again, or in other cases are frustrated that they have not been part of official overseas deployments during their time in the military. One veteran, Louis Park, a 25 year old fighting with Dwekh Nawsha, admits that he was barred from serving legally in the army because of a PTSD diagnosis.⁶⁶ In an interview he states; "To be honest, I just missed the action and felt called to go help. I felt I had the will and ability to go fight and thus, the responsibility to go."⁶⁷ As this example shows, most of the fighters displaying these more personal motivations do also typically express a desire to make a difference and a sense of responsibility to protect innocent civilians and persecuted minorities.

"It's been fun ... when it hasn't been freezing f*cking cold, boiling f*cking hot or when c*nts haven't been trying to kill us."

A British fighter with Dwekh Nawsha

Based on analysis of their social media profiles, some fighters appear somewhat ill-informed about who they are fighting for or against, have bounced around various different groups, been shocked by the conditions and traumas of war, or simply express a broadly defined desire to defeat 'evil' or terrorism. For these fighters the desire to seek adventure, engage in conflict, or escape boredom potentially supersedes seemingly more logical or honourable motivations. The more personal or individualistic pull factors provide the most compelling comparison between anti-ISIS and Islamist foreign fighters. Similar trends are found across both groups, including thrill seeking, searching for purpose or comradeship, or even just a desire to stand out from the crowd. Many describe themselves or their former lives as "average", "normal", or "ordinary" but appear galvanised by their

Gill Rosenberg

Nationality: Canadian.

Background: Originally from Vancouver, and a former pilot in the Israeli army, the 31 year old has a criminal past due to her involvement in a lucrative phone scam.

Role: Fighting alongside the YPG, she expresses a desire to atone for her past and a desire to defend the persecuted.

"We as Jews say 'never again,' and we shouldn't stand by when a genocide is taking place...I think to some extent I was trying to do the right thing. I guess it's [Syria and Iraq] the wrong place to seek redemption, but I try to make amends for my past. Unfortunately the crime that was committed, I hurt a lot of people, I still feel I have a lot to make up for."

66. Florian Neuhofer (July 2015)

67. Kyle Swenson (June 2015) "Floridians are heading to Syria and Iraq to fight ISIS" *Broward Palm Beach New Times* <http://www.browardpalmbeach.com/news/floridians-are-heading-to-syria-and-iraq-to-fight-isis-7080183> [Link last accessed 22/02.2016]

participation in the conflict. There is a sense of adventure that can draw both men and women to fight for a cause they believe in overseas. Romanticised notions of adventure are explicitly played on in recruitment material aimed at both groups. For ex-military fighters there can be a need to relive the experience of previous deployments, and there are many (typically non-Western) Islamist fighters that have been involved in other conflict zones such as Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan or the Caucuses.

“My commander in Hasakah. I’m not feeling well I have lost commanders from both my units he was another great fighter and treated me the best as could be and always looked at me. I will be returning Rojava in December as I have the worse feeling sitting here at home while everyone is dying. Shehid Merin my brother.”

[Note: posted alongside a YPG martyrdom picture]

A Swedish fighter with the Lions of Rojava

A search for meaning, identity or belonging can be fulfilled through group membership, and group dynamics can play a key role for both sets of foreign fighters. Groups provide “the feeling that you share and understand the problems or experiences of someone else”, and can offer a ready-made, coherent identity and the opportunity of “identifying yourself as a particular kind of person.”⁶⁸ For those joining the ranks of ISIS, the draw of a surrogate family of 'brothers' or 'sisters' can be an important factor.⁶⁹ For both male and female anti-ISIS foreign fighters, the apparent camaraderie of the groups fighting against ISIS can also be highly attractive.⁷⁰ One 30 year old Minnesotan combatant told *The Independent*; “The Peshmerga are like family”.⁷¹ There can also be pressure to travel from friends or family already participating in the conflict, and this is again apparent on both sides, although to a lesser extent among the seemingly more independent anti-ISIS foreign fighters.

68. Barak Mendelsohn (2011) “Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends” *Orbis* 2 (55: 189-202)

69. Rachel Briggs OBE, Tanya Silverman (December 2014); Erin Saltman, Melanie Smith (2015) p15

70. Interview transcript provided by Kevin Knodell, War is Boring

71. Cathy Otten (July 2015) “War with ISIS: The ‘international brigade’ of foreign fighters joining up to help Kurdish Peshmerga tackle Islamists” *Independent* <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-the-international-brigade-of-foreign-fighters-joining-up-to-help-kurdish-peshmerga-10367544.html#gallery> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

5. Activities

Media and recruitment




Despite the hype around ISIS's media operation and apparent mastery of online communication, they are not the only group in Syria or Iraq producing propaganda and recruiting via social media. There are however considerable differences in the volume, scale and sophistication of content produced by the different groups, typically a reflection of the varying levels of importance they place on the media.

ISIS stands out as by far the most proactive. They have produced thousands of "official" propaganda releases in multiple languages, including execution and recruitment videos, magazines, music, handbooks and even textbooks.⁷² Members of the group, alongside a highly networked group of 'fan-boys' and 'cheerleaders', also maintain thousands of social media profiles across a variety of online platforms and messaging services. Overall, the group demonstrates communications expertise far beyond the reach of other groups involved in the conflict. They have a long-term strategy to radicalise and recruit new members and tailor their output to specific audiences.

In comparison, far less propaganda and recruitment material is produced by the various groups fighting against ISIS. These groups do not have well-funded, professionalised media centres and instead rely more on standalone websites and social media profiles, pages, and groups. Importantly, there is a conspicuous lack of the explicitly violent propaganda that has become the macabre calling-card of ISIS. Of the content that is produced, there is far less emphasis on production quality or attracting international audiences. In some cases this is intentional; not all groups enlist foreign fighters and instead prefer to recruit locally.

There are some parallels in the narratives used by Kurdish, Assyrian or Christian and extreme Islamist groups, but these are somewhat typical of most recruitment propaganda. All groups attempt to mobilise specific target audiences by appealing to a collective sense of identity, pride and persecution, and in doing so create a moral obligation to fight. A more detailed look at the narratives of key groups fighting against ISIS can be seen in the table below;

72. Emerson Brooking (August 2014) "The ISIS Propaganda Machine is horrifying and Effective. How does it Work?" *Council on Foreign Relations Blog* <http://blogs.cfr.org/davidson/2014/08/21/the-isis-propaganda-machine-is-horrifying-and-effective-how-does-it-work/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

Group	Audience(s)	Narratives
<p>YPG</p> 	<p>Kurdish and sympathisers</p> <p>Specifically attracts ex-military foreigners to splinter group, the Lions of Rojava</p> <p>Attracts women of all demographics to splinter group, the YPJ</p>	<p>Moral and cultural duty to defend the persecuted Kurdish people</p> <p>Defend territory that rightly belongs to the Kurdish</p> <p>Defeat terrorism and its evils</p>
<p>DWEKH NAWSHA</p> 	<p>Assyrians and sympathisers</p> <p>International Christian community</p> <p>Other minority and persecuted groups, both regionally and abroad</p>	<p>Moral and religious duty to defend the persecuted Christian and other minorities</p> <p>Necessity to preserve Assyrian culture and protect the remaining pieces of it</p>
<p>PESHMERGA</p> 	<p>Kurdish and sympathisers</p> <p>Core is more comprised of locals</p> <p>Attracts those who have a personal or familial tradition of fighting with them</p>	<p>Moral and cultural duty to defend the persecuted Kurdish people</p> <p>Defend territory, salvage regional power, and create a legitimate Kurdish state</p>

Those groups that are active online are typically more reactive than their ISIS counterparts. Whilst they do not actively groom potential recruits, they do provide information, advice and encouragement for those interested in becoming anti-ISIS foreign fighters. Overall, the contrast with the more publicity seeking ISIS reflects the localised ambitions of these groups. They do not seek to grow their profile in the same way and, as a result, media output is not given the same importance.⁷³

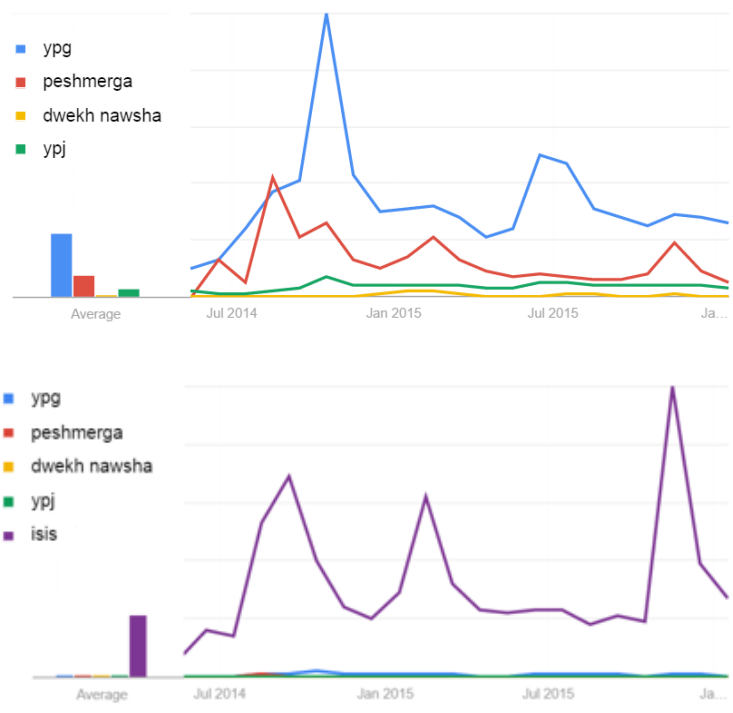


Figure 5: Google Trends News Searches (June 2014 – January 2016)

The result of this approach is clear from the volume of media coverage each of these groups attracts. They are considered less 'newsworthy' due to their predominantly local ambitions and lack of notoriety. Google Trends shows that the YGP lead the way among anti-ISIS groups, but they are unsurprisingly dwarfed in comparison to the levels of coverage received by ISIS.

Social media

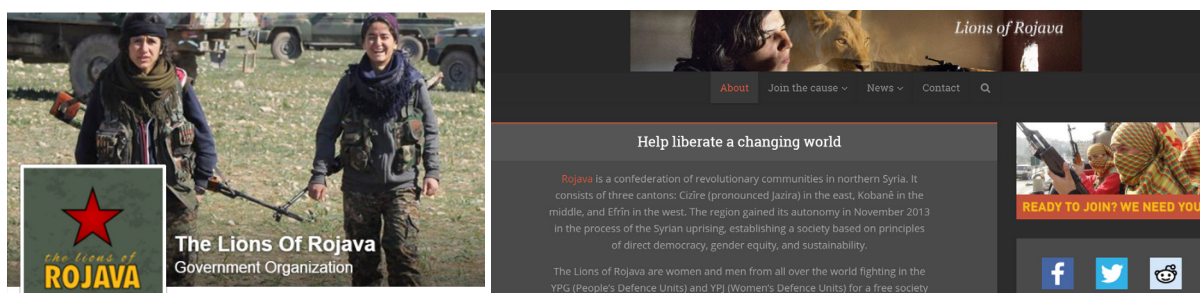
Social media platforms appear to be the first port of call for not only recruiting prospective anti-ISIS foreign fighters, but also networking, fundraising and facilitating travel. There are some similarities with the highly individual posts characteristic of some Western Islamist foreign fighters earlier in the conflict. As would be expected on social media, posts cataloguing fighters' day to day activities and experiences on the frontlines are common. These posts are not explicitly intended to serve as propaganda but do tend to attract considerable attention and support. Although most appear to be free of the more manipulative claims made in ISIS propaganda, posts often play

73. Martin Chulov (January 2016) "Media jihad: why ISIS's leaders bow to its propagandists" *the Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/04/media-jihad-why-isis-leaders-bow-to-its-propagandists> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

to some of the pull factors identified among anti-ISIS fighters, including a sense of adventure, camaraderie and righteous purpose, intentionally or otherwise. Some of the more popular accounts also serve as an approachable first point of contact for potential recruits. Media appearances by the more prominent anti-ISIS fighters then complement their online personas.

The primary social media platform used by anti-ISIS foreign fighters seems to be Facebook, with a network of individual profiles centred around a series of Facebook pages for the various groups and units. Despite this, anti-ISIS foreign fighter profiles, pages and content are present on numerous other platforms, including Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. The group most heavily recruiting online is the YPG, although researchers found that the majority of groups maintained some form of online presence. There is speculation however that some Western recruits, especially with the YPG, are preserved for propaganda purposes and not allowed on the frontlines as an attempt to legitimise their cause to an international audience.⁷⁴

One of the most prominent is the Lions of Rojava Facebook page, which has considerable reach with over 22,800 'likes'.⁷⁵ There are a number of users expressing an interest in participating in the conflict and asking for further information via private messages. One 26 year old American combatant told the *New York Times* that for him the process was as simple as directly messaging the page. He received an invitation to fight the next day, raised the money to cover his travel expenses, and was soon serving with the YPG.⁷⁶ The page also features group photos from the frontlines, news articles, YPG and YPJ related posts, and also martyr notices and obituaries. The Lions of Rojava also have a website which provides information on how to join the group.⁷⁷ The advice covers equipment, funding, language courses, travel arrangements, what to expect on the ground, as well their application process.⁷⁸



A similar but smaller page is Assisting the Volunteers of Rojava, whose description states; "This is a fund raising page to provide funding for those volunteers joining YPG defending against ISIS, for those who want to help pls send PM [private message]. God

74. Sofia Barbarani (July 2015) "Syria: Anti-ISIS Westerners fighting for Kurds disillusioned with YPG's 'school trip with guns' tactics" *International Business Times* <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/syria-anti-isis-westerners-fighting-kurds-disillusioned-ypps-school-trip-guns-strategy-1509470> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016] See also; Mat Wolf (March 2015) "Americans 'Fighting ISIS' Are Just Props" *The Daily Beast* <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/13/americans-fighting-isis-are-just-props.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

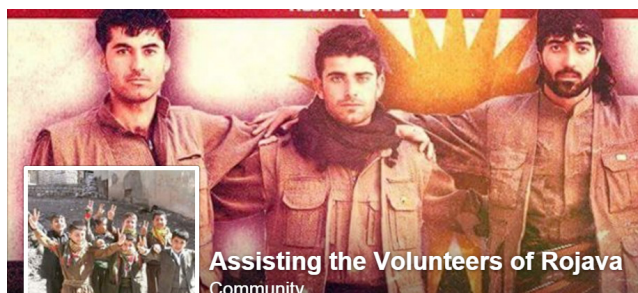
75. Lions of Rojava Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/TheLionsOfRojavaOfficial/>

76. Jennifer Percy (September 2015) "Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS" *New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/meet-the-american-vigilantes-who-are-fighting-isis.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

77. See; Lions of Rojava Facebook page - <http://www.thelionsofrojava.com/>, Rojava Plan webpage <http://rojavaplan.com/join.html>

78. See; Lions of Rojava webpage - <http://www.thelionsofrojava.com/index.php/im-ready-to-come/>

bless".⁷⁹ The page is active and there are regular posts from a Kurdish but international perspective, including news, fundraising campaigns, and worldwide coverage of protests over atrocities committed against the Kurds.



There are also pages that recruit for other groups, such as International Peshmerga Volunteers (IPV). Their page description states; "We are a well established organisation that guides experienced Military/Medics to volunteer their services PM page for more details or visit the website".⁸⁰ The page is regularly updated, has over 8,500 likes, an unusually for these groups is "verified" by Facebook.⁸¹ It appears to actively recruit, and even has a London office address.



The IPV page also provides a link to a well presented website which states the group is affiliated with the KRG. They claim to only provide training and support to the Peshmerga, rather than fight alongside them, but some of the videos posted include battlefield footage. The organisation also claims to have "provided a safe route of passage for 60+ international volunteers" and "integrated foreign volunteers into Peshmerga units".⁸² An application form is readily available to those who wish to sign up.

In contrast, a very different example of a pro-Peshmerga page is the ISIS Hunting Club. The purpose of the page is to "provide an international forum for the anti-ISIS community" (it has over 7,800 likes) and claims to "operate as a 'not-for-profit' [sic] business" whereby "all donations and profit from merchandize goes to support the International Peshmerga Volunteers".⁸³ The page also links to a website for merchandise

79. See; Assisting the Volunteers of Rojava Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/Assisting-the-Volunteers-of-Rojava-740646939367672/>
 80. See; International Peshmerga Volunteers webpage <https://www.facebook.com/International-Peshmerga-Volunteers-IPV-1470152063225449/>
 81. Any page owner can apply for "Verified" status, which is a glorified additional security step and requires only a business phone number. "Verified" status only adds a small tick and the following description next to the page name; "Facebook confirmed this is an authentic Page for this business or organization" but does enhance the group's credibility.
 82. See; International Peshmerga Volunteers webpage - <http://intlpm.com/>
 83. See; The ISIS Hunting Club Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/theisishuntingclub/timeline>

sales.⁸⁴ It also features numerous anti-ISIS memes and generally criticises inaction over the conflict from the Obama administration and the wider international community. Visitors to the public page have also posted more generic Islamophobic memes and broad anti-Muslim material and rhetoric which is somewhat ironic for a page raising money to support the Peshmerga, a predominantly Muslim organisation.



The *Veterans For the Protection of Christians Against ISIS International* page is not dissimilar to the ISIS Hunting Club page, although claims to support Dwekh Nawsha instead of the Peshmerga. The page’s audience is over 1,600 strong and primarily comprised of Americans and Canadians, typically with right-wing stances on the conflict and a frustration with what they see as a weak response from the Obama administration. They describe themselves as “veteran Army and Marine Corps combat Infantrymen dedicated to preventing the genocide of the Iraqi Christians and Jews”.⁸⁵ The page shares crowdfunding campaigns, fundraises through merchandise sales, and posts some news stories but is not active on a regular basis. Again, there are instances of anti-ISIS content, including some posts featuring crusader imagery, although this is somewhat less surprising considering the page predominantly backs Dwekh Nawsha, an explicitly Christian group. Visitors to this public page too have posted some anti-Muslim content.



There is also a popular Francophone Facebook group, Dwekh Nawsha France et Beaufort, which has over 4,000 members but is closed to non-members. Other more peripheral foreign combatant Facebook pages include the Median Empire biker gang, who post in both English and German and claim to be associated with YPG. They have over 2,200 likes and have previously posted battle footage and sought to raise funds, but haven’t posted since August 2015.⁸⁶ Their leader Azad 1%er posts much more regularly, with his page attracting over 14,000 likes and according to Facebook’s automated system

84. See: The ISIS Hunting Club webpage - <http://www.vision-strike-wear.com/Isis-Hunting-Club.html>

85. See: Vets Protect Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/VetsProtect/timeline>

86. See: 135 Army Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/135army/>

for estimating response rates is “very responsive to messages” and “typically replies within minutes”.⁸⁷

The vast majority of those that follow or interact with these pages are not foreign fighters but supporters, very few are in the region or directly involved in the conflict. Despite this, these virtual communities clearly play an important initial role in the recruitment process. Several openly provide encouragement and even direct enlistment pathways for potential anti-ISIS fighters. Social media also offers anti-ISIS foreign fighters a pre-existing distribution network for crowdfunding requests and opportunities to network with other groups and fighters. The pages with more pejorative content appear to serve as 'echo chambers', discouraging dissident opinions and promoting the demonisation of Muslims as a reaction to the actions of extremists, much in the same way as many extremist online communities operate.⁸⁸

Funding

Researchers found no evidence of anti-ISIS foreign fighters receiving pay from those they are fighting with, and many specifically emphasise that they are not being paid. Many anti-ISIS fighters state that they have self-funded their participation, often forgoing comfortable lives and well paid jobs in the process.⁸⁹ There were however a number of individuals in the dataset with backgrounds in the private military or security sector. The only exceptions were ethnically Kurdish fighters receiving material support from the YPG or Peshmerga once in the region, but not financial assistance to travel there in the first place.

Several anti-ISIS foreign fighters were also found to be using a range of crowdfunding sites in an attempt to fund their own travel or participation, or simply to raise money for the local populations impacted by the conflict once they are there. These appeals are found on sites such as IndieGoGo, GoFundMe and FundRazr that do not require a tangible product or 'reward' in return for an investment, but instead are geared toward charity appeals. While the primary purpose is to raise money, these individual appeals simultaneously raise greater awareness of the fighters' group or cause, and can therefore also be seen to function as a form of propaganda. The majority of those found did not come close to reaching the targets set, typically remaining in the hundreds of dollars. There have also been some reports of fraudulent campaigns being set up using the pictures of actual anti-ISIS foreign fighters, so it is not always clear where donations will go.⁹⁰

87. See; Azad 1%er Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/Azad.Onepercenter/>

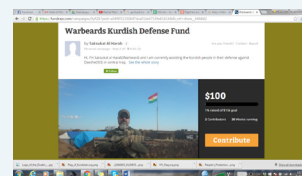
88. Ines von Behr, Anais Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon (2013) "Radicalisation in the Digital Era" RAND http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

89. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, typically, the cost of travelling can be anything upwards of several thousand U.S. Dollars

90. See; Fundrazr - <https://fundrazr.com/>

Fundrazr: “Warbeards Kurdish Defense Fund”

“Hi, I’m Saksukat al Harab (Warbeard), a U.S. citizen, former 82nd Paratrooper, and I am currently assisting the Kurdish people in their defense against Daesh [ISIS] in central Iraq. Due to the political situation, we are not officially part of the Peshmerga forces and thus don’t receive ANY support from the Kurdish government. This is where we need your help! I am currently supporting myself through your goodwill and donations in order to help assist the Peshmerga in their defense against ISIS.



Some of the people defending this region (in my group) are around 16 years old or less. Together, with your help, we can make a difference for just one villages’ defense and get that much closer to helping return these nice people to their homes. The goal for this campaign is obviously set very low. The reason for this is that I am on the move and frequently out of cell coverage or access to normal banking accommodations. Thank you very much for your support!”

The presence of open online funding campaigns, which in some cases are created by those yet to travel to the region, highlights a key difference between the online behaviour of Islamist and anti-ISIS foreign fighters. Whilst the legality of fighting for groups such as the YPG or Peshmerga varies on a national basis, it appears that anti-ISIS foreign fighters do not feel the need to withhold as much as their Islamist foreign fighter counterparts. Anti-ISIS foreign fighters speak about their experiences and motivations much more openly, apparently with less regard or fear of the potential legal repercussions. Public funding campaigns are particularly illustrative of the openness of anti-ISIS fighters online, and those donating to the cause would not face material support charges in the way that those supporting Islamist foreign fighter travel would.

Some people are however sceptical about the motivations of some fundraisers:

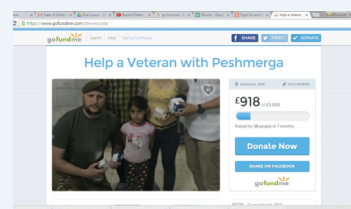
“Before you put money into the Gofundme account of a western ‘fighter’ over here you might want to ask how long s/he’s been here and where, if anywhere, they’ve actually fought. And what they are intending to use the money for. There’s lots of other ways you can support this struggle better than lining the pockets of someone here for selfish reasons, who never gets in to a battle (usually because they’re so bloody antisocial the Kurds never take them along), and use FB photos to make themselves look like something they aren’t. Standing by some rubble holding a weapon with a load of grizzled fighter does not make you one.”

A British fighter with the YPG

Separately, there have also been some reports of fraudulent campaigns being set up using the pictures of actual anti-ISIS foreign fighters, so it is not always clear where donations will go.

GoFundMe: "Help a Veteran with Peshmerga"

"My name is Steven and I am a veteran from the UK who travelled to Kurdistan back in May to try and help the Kurdish people after hearing of their suffering at the hands of the Islamic State. I left behind loved ones, a promising career and the comforts of Western living in a bid to try and make a difference no matter how small the difference may be. Since I have arrived I have seen first-hand the effects that this conflict is having on the people who call this region their home. I have come to Kurdistan as a volunteer and to this end have funded everything myself with the help of like-minded people who have been kind enough to make donations towards my stay."⁹¹



Researchers have however observed signs that anti-ISIS fighters are beginning to be more careful with what they post publically online, with many of the various Facebook accounts disappearing or increasing their privacy settings. Many crowdfunding campaigns have been removed, although it is not possible to determine whether this is a result of the campaigns ending or the platforms proactively removing them. There are however still numerous crowdfunding campaigns that are easily found across a variety of platforms. The varying legal situations anti-ISIS fighters face will be explored in the next section, but online at least, it appears that anti-ISIS foreign fighters continue to enjoy relative freedom to operate.

Travel

The often ambiguous legal situation for anti-ISIS foreign fighters, combined with seemingly less stringent enforcement measures, has meant that anti-ISIS fighters have more travel options available than their violent-extremist equivalents. Anti-ISIS foreign fighters have several pathways open to them to reach Syria and Iraq. The primary destination to join up with a group or unit appears to be Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan, and many travel through Turkey to get there. Others have gone via Europe or the Gulf, and then directly onto Sulaymaniyah.⁹²

Not only are the potential travel routes more open to anti-ISIS foreign fighters, but they are also less guarded about their plans. It is not unusual to observe those planning to travel openly discussing their intended routes online. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, at least earlier in the conflict, the group an Islamist foreign fighter joins can be determined by their arrival time at the border, or the network of travel-facilitators and

91. See; Steven Costa's Go Fund Me page - <https://www.gofundme.com/stevencosta>

92. Jennifer Percy (September 2015) "Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS" *New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/meet-the-american-vigilantes-who-are-fighting-isis.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

safe-houses they use to get there.⁹³ For this reason anti-ISIS foreign fighters are able to make considerably more concrete travel plans than Islamist foreign fighters, and therefore enjoy a higher degree of certainty in terms of knowing which group they will join before they arrive.

Roles in conflict

The activities that anti-ISIS foreign fighters are involved in when they arrive in Syria or Iraq can vary. Not all of those that have travelled have necessarily been involved in combat, even if they have a desire to do so. Often, inexperienced new recruits are engaged in low-level, menial tasks and are made to bide their time away from the action, reflecting reports of the roles fulfilled by many of the foreign fighters joining ISIS.⁹⁴ If they do make it to the frontlines there have been questions over their effectiveness, with one Peshmerga Colonel telling *The Independent*;

“When I take them to the front line I have to keep an eye on them because I don’t know how they are going to act... Personally, I don’t like to see these young guys leaving their homes and families to come here and be killed”.⁹⁵

Those with military experience or a particular set of skills can act as trainers to local fighters and militias, or provide specialist tactical, logistical or medical support.⁹⁶ In contrast to ISIS and many of the other groups involved in the conflict, there appears to be relative gender equality in terms of the roles fulfilled by foreign fighters. Western women joining the YPJ are reportedly able to participate in combat, although like many Islamist foreign fighters, the levels of action they experience may be relatively limited.

“Guard on a night when Daesh sends the 2nd car bomb to our village, but gets stuck in the hole the first bomb made the night before, we shoot a flare in the air and our dushka trucks blew him up such a beautiful view.”

A New Yorker fighting in Syria

There are cases of individuals switching groups to further their chances of being allowed to fight. Although the YPG presents Westerners in its media output as 'fighters', several have fallen out with the YPG due to the group’s refusal to allow them on the frontlines. The YPG may be reticent to allow relatively untrained foreigners on the frontlines in order to avoid tensions with better trained and more experienced

93. Rachel Briggs OBE, Tanya Silverman (December 2014) p15

94. Ibid.

95. Cathy Otten (July 2015) “War with ISIS: The ‘international brigade’ of foreign fighters joining up to help Kurdish Peshmerga tackle Islamists” <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-the-international-brigade-of-foreign-fighters-joining-up-to-help-kurdish-peshmerga-10367544.html#gallery> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

96. Julia Mason (November 2015) “Nevada volunteers join the fight against ISIS” *News 3 Las Vegas* <http://news3lv.com/news/local/nevada-volunteers-join-the-fight-against-isis> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

local fighters, but also to preserve the propaganda value of international volunteers. Some have complained of being treated more like prisoners or media “props” than colleagues or comrades.⁹⁷

“You see people go home and appear on chat shows and shit and they never bloody did anything while they were here.”

A British fighter with the YPG

There have also been reports of political and religious disagreements, with some Western fighters leaving for other groups such as Dwekh Nawsha due to the YPG’s strong left-wing, secular views.⁹⁸ There are also a number of anti-ISIS foreign fighters that operate in their own somewhat independent units, but fight alongside different groups at different times such as the German biker gang Median Empire. The group openly voices support for the YPG, Peshmerga, and some Yazidi militant factions.⁹⁹ The Dutch group No Surrender also functions on a similar basis.¹⁰⁰

-
97. Mat Wolf (March 2015) “Americans ‘Fighting ISIS’ Are Just Props” *The Daily Beast* <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/13/americans-fighting-isis-are-just-props.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016] See also; Dave Philipps, Thomas James Brennan (March 2015) “Unsettled at home, veterans volunteer to fight ISIS” *New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/us/disenchanted-by-civilian-life-veterans-volunteer-to-fight-isis.html?_r=0 [Link last accessed 22/04/2016]
 98. Alex MacDonald (February 2015) “Christian Foreign Fighters Deserting Kurdish YPG in Syria because THEY’RE ‘Damn Reds’” *Middle East Eye* <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/christian-foreign-fighters-deserting-kurdish-ypg-syria-because-theyre-damned-reds-1976493133> [Link last Accessed 22/02/2016] 107 Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith (October 2014)
 99. Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith (October 2014)
 100. Jennifer Percy (September 2015) “Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS” *New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/meet-the-american-vigilantes-who-are-fighting-isis.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016] “While we were talking, the unit he had arrived with drove off. Now he was alone, wondering how he would find a commander and return to the action. “I guess you could say I’m free-floating,” he said.”

"I've never understood why so many people insist on making themselves out to be more heroic than they really are. If you were a volunteer over here then tell the truth. Why make yourself out to be a badass when everyone over here knows exactly what you did. Too many media warriors over here. Ask me anything about my time in Kurdistan and I'll give you a straight answer.

Did I actively engage the enemy closer than 800 meters? No

Did I search a dead Daesh body for booby traps? Yes

Did I make a decisive manoeuvre on the enemy while taking contact? No

Did I sit in the same location while mortars landed within 100 meters of me? Yes

People don't understand this warfare. The first two months we sat 800-1500 meters from Daesh shooting at each other with mortars, snipers, rockets and heavy machine guns. The two months after that we conducted huge offensives where the coalition Airstrikes destroyed everything. We pushed into villages riddled with IEDs where one of our HMMWVs was hit with an S-VBIED drove at us while taking in civilians and some of my guys (not me) within 75 meters shot at it making him prematurely detonate, saving hundreds of lives. And these last two months we've barely done anything other than PSD and small operations.

When we pushed into villages Daesh run – just like I said on CBS. They didn't stay and actively engage us. We searched numerous houses in over 10 villages we personally entered. As a unit of westerners, we did more than any other unit composed of western volunteers. However, there are hundreds of westerners over here with varying experiences – especially those who've served with the YPG in Syria."

27 year old American Veteran fighting with the Peshmerga

6. Legal Frameworks

The legality of ordinary (i.e. non-military) citizens participating in conflicts abroad varies considerably in different jurisdictions and often remains a complex area. The laws surrounding volunteers and mercenaries (including private and military security) can in some instances be closely related to, or the same as, laws applied to foreign terrorist fighters. In response to the unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters joining ISIS and other terrorist organisations, a number of countries have recently updated their laws in this area. This section reviews the legal situations across the countries that produced the largest number of anti-ISIS foreign fighters within the dataset (the U.S., U.K., Germany, France, Sweden, Canada, Australia, Italy & the Netherlands).¹⁰¹ The below information was correct as of January 2016.

Despite the existence of laws surrounding fighting abroad, they can often be difficult or impractical to apply. In many countries legality hinges on the state's allegiances in the relevant conflict, and with the highly complex situation in Syria and Iraq it is not always clear where these allegiances lie. For law enforcement there can also be significant evidentiary difficulties when potential crimes take place in overseas war zones. Levels of enforcement and prosecutions therefore vary as much as the laws themselves. Through a number of precedent-setting cases the legal picture is, in some contexts at least, becoming increasingly clear for both Islamist and anti-ISIS foreign fighters.

As well as foreign conflict laws, anti-ISIS foreign fighters must also abide by the international humanitarian laws that cover conduct in wars. The United Nations and other international organisations have documented human rights abuses against civilians on a massive scale in both Syria and Iraq.¹⁰² While the Syrian regime and ISIS have been the primary perpetrators of these abuses, there are few groups that have been able to entirely escape allegations. It is therefore conceivable that anti-ISIS foreign fighters could be implicated in war crimes in future. Anti-ISIS foreign fighters are also potentially subject to the laws of the countries in which they are fighting, despite the likelihood of inconsistent enforcement in a war zone. For example, a group of six Western fighters aligned with the YPG were reportedly detained in northern Iraq. The group included American, Canadian, Spanish and Swedish nationals.¹⁰³

North America

The U.S. State Department has stated that a number of American citizens have joined groups fighting against ISIS, but that they are "neither in support of nor part of U.S.

101. For a global overview of foreign fighter laws see: The Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Center (December 2014), "Treatment of Foreign Fighters in Selected Jurisdictions" <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/foreign-fighters/treatment-of-foreign-fighters.pdf>, [Link last accessed 26/05/2016]

102. (October 2015) "report on the protection of civilians in the armed conflict in Iraq: 1 May – 31 October 2015" *OHCHR* <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMIRReport1May31October2015.pdf> See also; (October 2015) "Syria: US Ally's Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes" *Amnesty International* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/> (January 2016) "Northern Iraq: Satellite images back up evidence of deliberate mass destruction in Peshmerga-controlled Arab villages" *Amnesty International* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/01/northern-iraq-satellite-images-back-up-evidence-of-deliberate-mass-destruction-in-peshmerga-controlled-arab-villages/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

103. Adam Frisk (November 2015) "Canadian arrested in Iraq after reported fighting with Kurds against ISIS" *Global news CA* <http://globalnews.ca/news/2315531/canadian-arrested-in-iraq-after-reportedly-fighting-with-kurds-against-isis/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

efforts in the region.”¹⁰⁴ The State Department travel guidance for Iraq “warns U.S. citizens against all but essential travel to Iraq”, but also specifically states; “private U.S. citizens are strongly discouraged from traveling to Iraq to join in armed conflict”.¹⁰⁵ The guidance for Syria is even more explicit, offering a stark warning for those considering joining the conflict;

Individuals who demonstrate an interest in groups opposing ISIL, including on social media, could open themselves to being targeted by ISIL itself if those individuals travel to Syria. Private U.S. citizens are strongly discouraged from traveling to Syria to take part in the conflict. The U.S. government does not support this activity, and our ability to provide consular assistance to individuals who are injured or kidnapped, or to the families of individuals who die as a result of taking part in the conflict is extremely limited.¹⁰⁶

The U.S. Government’s position has been described by the American founder of Sons of Liberty International (SOLI - a non-profit group that hires veterans to train Assyrian Christians in Iraq), Matthew VanDyke, who said; “As long as you’re shooting in the right direction, at bad guys, they don’t really care”.¹⁰⁷

The situation in Canada is similar in two respects. Firstly, it is not explicitly illegal to participate in foreign conflicts, with the exceptions of fighting for officially proscribed terrorist organisations (including the PKK)¹⁰⁸ or participating in terrorist activities (as defined in the Canadian Criminal Code).¹⁰⁹ Secondly, there are reports that returning anti-ISIS foreign fighters have had little, if any, contact with law enforcement on their return to Canada.¹¹⁰

Europe

The U.K. forbids joining a foreign army that is actively fighting any state the U.K. is at peace with, as well as any entity recognised as an officially proscribed terrorist organisation by the government.¹¹¹ This allows foreign fighters that join the YPG or Peshmerga to go unprosecuted as long as they do not commit war crimes or become involved in criminal activities. Former Prime Minister David Cameron has even stated that there is a “fundamental difference” between fighting with ISIS and fighting with Kurdish troops, although the Home Office makes it clear that; “U.K. law makes provisions to deal with different conflicts in different ways - fighting in a foreign war

-
104. Dan Stewart (August 2015) “Meet the American Who went to Iraq to Fight ISIS But Ended up Taking on Iran” *Time* <http://time.com/3999270/american-ryan-oleary-fighting-iraq/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
 105. (December 2015) “Iraq Travel Warning” *US Passports and International Travel* <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/alertswarnings/iraq-travel-warning.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
 106. Ibid.
 107. Kevin Maurer (March 2015) “Is it legal to go overseas and fight ISIS?” *Men’s Journal* <http://www.mensjournal.com/adventure/collection/is-it-legal-to-go-overseas-and-fight-isis-20150324#ixzz3yAvug9bL> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
 108. Murray Brewster (January 2016) “Fighting alongside Kurds could get Canadians prosecuted under anti-terror laws” *The Star* <http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/01/28/fighting-alongside-kurds-could-get-canadians-prosecuted-under-anti-terror-laws.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
 109. See; Kate Dubinski (November 2015) “Ontario man killed fighting ISIS will receive same tribute as fallen military soldiers” *London Free Press* <http://www.lfpress.com/2015/11/18/ontario-man-killed-fighting-isis-will-receive-same-tribute-as-fallen-military-soldiers> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
 110. Stewart Bell (June 2015) “Canadians who travel abroad to fight ISIL get little scrutiny upon return, suggesting Canada isn’t keen on stopping them” *National Post* <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadians-who-travelled-abroad-to-fight-isis-get-little-scrutiny-upon-return-suggesting-canada-isnt-keen-on-stopping-them> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
 111. Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 See also; Emine Saner (February 2015) “Brits abroad: is it against the law to fight ISIS” *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2015/feb/25/brits-abroad-against-law-fight-isis> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

is not automatically an offence but will depend on the nature of the conflict and the individual's own activities"¹¹² and that "a decision on whether to prosecute will be made by the Crown Prosecution Service and police based on the evidence available".¹¹³

Many have been questioned, detained or in some cases even arrested on suspicion of terrorism offences on their return to the U.K., but none have been formally charged or prosecuted to date.¹¹⁴ However, any British citizens who fight alongside or seek to support the PKK may be prosecuted, as it is recognised by the U.K. as a proscribed terror group. An eighteen year old woman from North London was arrested in January 2015 and later jailed for 21 months for trying to join the PKK.¹¹⁵

"Well that was a barrel of laughs. Arrested, jailed and bailed under section 5 of the terrorism act. Basically, committing or preparing to commit (or help others to commit) acts of terrorism. Police have seized my passport, computer, all my clothes, basically everything I own and turfed me out into the winter night in a prison tracksuit and plimsolls. My lawyer had to argue like hell to get me some socks.

Now I'm effectively prevented from getting a job or place of my own and in any way sorting my life back out. And they can drag it out indefinitely. Also I can't get legal aid, so soon I won't have a lawyer any more to fight my corner. A year of conflict was beer and skittles compared to the battle I've got fight now. I expected scrutiny from the authorities of course, but I didn't think they'd go so far as to make it impossible for me to quite exist."

A returning British Army veteran

The Netherlands have similar restrictions, and do not prosecute citizens who choose to fight abroad on three conditions;

- Their actions do not threaten their nation's sovereignty or security.
- They do not commit criminal offences such as murder and torture.
- They do not join an organisation recognised by the state as criminal.

France utilises a similar framework, but also prohibits fighting abroad for personal

112. (September 2014) "Iraq Crisis: PM urges UK Kurds not to travel to fight IS" *BBC* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29038981> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

113. *E Kurd Daily* (March 2015), "UK's Home Office says fighting abroad could be a crime", <http://ekurd.net/uks-home-office-says-fighting-abroad-could-be-a-crime-2015-03-18>, [Link last accessed 26/05/2016]

114. (November 2015) "Soldier who went to fight in Syria arrested in Manchester" *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/26/soldier-who-went-fight-isis-in-syria-arrested-manchester> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016] (November 2015) "Former soldier held at Manchester Airport after Syria return bailed" *BBC* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lancashire-34943957>; (June 2015) "Briton fighting with Kurds against Islamic State defends actions" *BBC*; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-33080192> Guney Yildiz (February 2015) "An English IT worker trained to fight in Syria" *BBC* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31583736> [Links last accessed 22/02/2016]

115. Alexandra Topping (April 2015) "Kurds protest in support of British teenager in terrorism hearing" *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/01/kurds-protest-british-shilan-ozcelik-terrorism-old-bailey>; Ronke Phillips (November 2015) "Friends of teenager jailed for attempting to join banned Kurdish group appeal for her release" *ITV News* <http://www.itv.com/news/london/2015-11-24/friends-of-teenager-jailed-for-attempting-to-join-banned-kurdish-group-appeal-for-her-release/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

financial gain.¹¹⁶ These laws result in a complicated situation where anti-ISIS foreign fighters are in theory able to participate in combat against ISIS (France and the Netherlands are both members of the international coalition fighting ISIS), but remain bound by criminal law. The killing of ISIS fighters in combat can therefore still be a prosecutable offense. A Dutch citizen that fought alongside the YPG was arrested in Arnhem under these laws for suspected murder, although was later provisionally released in January 2016, with the case eventually dropped in June.¹¹⁷ Public prosecutors argued in a press release that; "Dutch law, apart for exceptional circumstances like self-defence, does not give citizens the right to use force and particularly not deadly force".¹¹⁸ The arrest was thought to be based partially at least on admissions made to the media and in public social media posts.¹¹⁹

"So it looks like I will be deported from Australia back to Vancouver Canada tomorrow leaving here around 1130. Ive been advised that I can challenge the deportation but that if I lose not only would I be charged by my legal counsel but by the government for their legal costs, as well if I win, the government might very well cancell my visa on other grounds. and having had a little tast of the way the Australian Government treats people who have fought against ISIS I dont doubt they would re-cancel my visa. So ive decided not to fight it at this time and be deported, though im sure my friends and family would support me in any legal challenge I would make im not willing to have them exsposed to the legal cost involved in it.

Id just like to thank everyone for the support theve shown me the last few days and wish them well hopefully Ill see a bunch of you soon."

A Canadian fighter with the YPG

Other countries such as Belgium and Australia forbid any citizen from joining a foreign army, regardless of its criminal status or intentions towards their state of origin.¹²⁰ This more clear-cut approach to foreign fighters does not allow any special dispensation for those fighting for, or alongside, anti-ISIS organisations or groups. Switzerland has adopted this kind of approach, arresting a 33-year old Swiss national in Basel following

116. France (Art 421-2-1 Penal Code); The Netherlands (Art 83 Penal Code); Latvia (Section 88 Criminal Code); Slovenia (Art 108 Criminal Code)

117. Agence France-Presse (June 2016) "Netherlands drops case against man suspected of killing Isis fighters" The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/21/netherlands-drops-case-against-man-suspected-of-killing-isis-fighters>

118. Landelĳĳk Parket (January 2016) "Aanhouding vanwege strijd tegen IS" *Openbaar Ministerie* <https://www.om.nl/actueel/nieuwsberichten/@92678/aanhouding-vanwege/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

119. Janene Pieters (January 2016) "Aggressive arrest of Dutch vigilante who fought ISIS detailed" *NL Times* <http://www.nltimes.nl/2016/01/19/aggressive-arrest-of-dutch-vigilante-who-fought-isis-detailed/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

120. Belgium (Art 140 Penal Code); Australia; See also: Czech Republic (Section 311 Criminal Code); Hungary (Chapter 30 Section 314 Criminal Code); Poland (Act of 6 June 1997 - Penal Code Art 115 § 20); Switzerland - <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/switzerland/11467962/Swiss-citizen-arrested-for-fighting-Islamic-State.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

his return from fighting against ISIS with the Syriac Military Council in March 2015.¹²¹ A number of other countries, including Germany, Sweden and Italy, prosecute citizens involved (either through founding, participating, recruiting, or supplying) in any group or organisation whose objectives are criminal and whose capacity includes the ability and/or will to use weapons or explosives.¹²²

Human rights violations

The vast majority of human rights abuses and war crimes have been committed by Assad-regime forces, with ISIS and other extreme Islamist groups also responsible for significant numbers of civilian deaths, as well as other war crimes.¹²³ However, both the YPG in Syria and the Peshmerga in Iraq have been accused by Amnesty International of carrying out forced displacements and home demolitions, claiming their actions amount to war crimes.¹²⁴ These alleged forced displacements followed the retaking of villages from ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra and were conducted in retaliation for the perceived support of, or links to, the terror group by predominantly Arab residents.

In Syria these incidents were reportedly carried out by the YPG, but directed by the Asayish (the security and police service of the "Autonomous Administration" controlled by the PYD), and were therefore unlikely to have involved foreign fighters. Not denied by the Asayish, these displacements are described as "isolated incidents" for the security of residents in areas where pockets of ISIS fighters may remain, or where there may be a high concentration of IEDs.¹²⁵

In northern Iraq Peshmerga forces, under the auspices of the KRG, have reportedly flattened thousands of homes in towns and villages won back from ISIS across Ninewa, Kirkuk and Diyala provinces. Amnesty also found evidence of the involvement of various Kurdish and Yazidi militias. The KRG and Peshmerga again explain these actions as necessary for the safety of residents and their forces.¹²⁶ Iraqi Security Forces and various Shia militias have also been accused of forced displacements, but have committed far more serious offenses including abductions and unlawful killings as well.¹²⁷ However, there are very few anti-ISIS foreign fighters associated with these groups.

-
121. Justin Huggler (March 2015) "Swiss citizen arrested for fighting Islamic State" *Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/switzerland/11467962/Swiss-citizen-arrested-for-fighting-Islamic-State.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
122. Germany (Section 129a Criminal Code); Sweden (Act on Criminal Responsibility for Terrorist Offences (2003:148)) See also: Italy (Art 270 Penal Code); Spain (Art 571 Penal Code), Two Spanish citizens fought alongside the International YPG Brigade and were arrested upon their return; Austria (Section 278c Penal Code); Croatia (Art 169 Penal Code); Denmark (Chapter 13 § 114 Criminal Code, A returning Danish fighter risked jail <http://nyhederne.tv2.dk/samfund/2015-02-25-dansk-kurder-risikerer-faengsel-for-sin-kamp-mod-islamisk-stat>) [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]; Estonia (Section 3 § 237. Terrorikuritegu - Penal Code); Finland (Chapter 34 Penal Code); Ireland (Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act 2005); Lithuania (Chapter 35 Section 250); Portugal (Art 300 & 301 Penal Code); Sweden (Act on Criminal Responsibility for Terrorist Offences (2003:148)); Luxembourg's ambiguous legal approach to foreign fighters essentially enables the government to decide, on a case-by-case basis, whether the person will be prosecuted or not (Chapter 3-1 Section 1 of the Penal Code). Luxembourg's position on citizens returning from Syria is that authorities cannot arrest them without definitive proof that they were involved in illegal or violent activity.
123. Samuel Osborne (October 2015), "Syrian government forces responsible for more civilian deaths than Isis, human rights group claims", *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-government-forces-responsible-for-more-civilian-deaths-than-isis-human-rights-group-claims-a6673956.html> [Link last accessed 26/05/2016]
124. (October 2015) "report on the protection of civilians in the armed conflict in Iraq: 1 May – 31 October 2015" *OHCHR* <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMIRReport1May31October2015.pdf> See also; (October 2015) "Syria: US Ally's Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes" *Amnesty International* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/> (January 2016) "Northern Iraq: Satellite images back up evidence of deliberate mass destruction in Peshmerga-controlled Arab villages" *Amnesty International* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/01/northern-iraq-satellite-images-back-up-evidence-of-deliberate-mass-destruction-in-peshmerga-controlled-arab-villages/> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]
125. *Ibid.*
126. *Ibid.*
127. (October 2015) "report on the protection of civilians in the armed conflict in Iraq: 1 May – 31 October 2015" *OHCHR* <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMIRReport1May31October2015.pdf> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

7. Conclusion & Recommendations

Anti-ISIS foreign fighters raise a number of difficult questions and concerns, not only regarding the effectiveness of existing laws in preventing or discouraging travel, but also in terms of how governments should respond to those returning home;

- With conflicts becoming increasingly fragmented and involving numerous competing groups and factions, should all fighting abroad be illegal? Or, can laws surrounding foreign fighters be crafted to provide sufficient clarity to those fighting on different sides of the same conflict without appearing unclear, unfair or inconsistent?
- Have anti-ISIS fighters had a significant impact on the ground, and what dangers could they face in future? Are further Western volunteers likely to travel to Syria and Iraq while the conflict continues, and could foreign fighters seeking to fight against extreme Islamist groups go on to participate in other conflicts around the world?
- What does the future hold for those anti-ISIS fighters that return, how should they be handled by governments and law enforcement, and what support, if any, should they receive?

This section begins to examine these questions before offering a series of recommendations for governments, social media platforms and researchers.

The legality of foreign fighting

What initially began as a series of anti-government protests first spawned a national civil war in Syria, and then a transnational conflict spilling over into Iraq involving regional and global powers with complex and often competing interests and proxy forces. The failure of the Syrian and Iraqi states, combined with the lack of a collective international or UN-led response, has resulted in a bloody and intractable conflict costing hundreds of thousands of lives and sparking the largest refugee crisis since World War Two. The U.S. led international anti-ISIS coalition features contributions from over 40 nations, illustrating the increasingly globalised nature of the conflict.¹²⁸ This globalisation of the conflict has had further repercussions, pulling in Islamist foreign fighters from over 80 countries, and anti-ISIS foreign fighters from at least 26 countries.¹²⁹

The result is a complicated situation whereby many Western anti-ISIS fighters are on the same side as their respective national governments (as part of the international anti-ISIS coalition), yet could still potentially face prosecution for their actions however honourable their initial intentions. For example, one American anti-ISIS fighter recently

128. al-Arabiya (September 2014), "More than 40 nations joined coalition against ISIS", <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2014/09/08/US-More-than-40-nations-joined-coalition-against-ISIS.html>, [Last accessed 27/05/2016]

129. Ashley Kirk (March 2016), "Iraq and Syria: How many foreign fighters are fighting for Isis?", The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/29/iraq-and-syria-how-many-foreign-fighters-are-fighting-for-isis/>, [Last accessed 27/05/2016]

claimed to have come into contact with U.S. Special Forces and advisors on the ground supporting the YPG in Syria, with similar reports also emanating from Iraq.¹³⁰ Intricate but fragile alliances further complicate the situation, with the PKK cooperating with the same Kurdish forces as the U.S. in some areas, despite their status as a designated terrorist organisation by the U.S. and a number of other states involved in the coalition.

Legal approaches vary considerably, and in a number of countries laws have recently been updated to address Islamist foreign fighter travel. Despite this, many governments have maintained or adopted a somewhat flexible stance on the issue of anti-ISIS foreign fighters. Official statements stress that participating in the conflict is strongly discouraged, but do not go as far as banning the practice outright. Individual fighters are then assessed on a case by case basis by security services or law enforcement, allowing for responses proportionate to the intent, motivations and actions of each individual.

However, such a stance can lead to a lack of clarity for those considering travelling and does little to discourage potential fighters that are unaware or unsure of how the law is applied and enforced. Potential anti-ISIS fighters can assume that by not preventing them from travelling, their government tacitly accepts their actions. However, many anti-ISIS fighters operate relatively independently and are therefore not always bound by the strict, regulated command structures found in national militaries. This, combined with the inherent evidentiary difficulties often faced by law enforcement in foreign fighter cases, can result in a situation where there is little oversight of their actions in the conflict.

Anti-ISIS foreign fighters can also be understood as a form of international vigilantism, with many stating that they are responding to what they perceive as a breakdown of international and humanitarian law, and the failure of the international system and community to prevent atrocities in Syria and Iraq. It is difficult to morally condemn those fighting against ISIS considering the widespread atrocities the extreme Islamist group have committed and actively publicised. Vigilantism is not however tolerated in Western societies and legal systems, and many local groups in the conflict have openly stated they would prefer foreign volunteers not to travel. By adopting a flexible approach to anti-ISIS foreign fighters, many Western countries are seemingly turning a blind eye those fighting against their enemies in Syria and Iraq against the wishes of some of their local allies.

Some governments do however comprehensively prohibit joining foreign armies, regardless of their status, intentions or allegiances. A blanket approach to foreign fighters does not provide any special dispensation for those fighting against extremist groups. The advantage of an approach such as this is that it provides clarity and consistency, clearly outlining the consequences for those that hope to return. As opposed to Islamist extremists joining proscribed terror groups, anti-ISIS fighters are therefore more likely to be deterred by clear legal sanctions as the vast majority do

130. Spencer Ackerman (May 2016), "US military special forces pictured aiding Kurdish fighters in Syria", The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/26/us-military-photos-syria-soldiers-fighting-isis>, [Last accessed 27/05/2016] Fazel Hawramy, Shalaw Mohammad, David Smith (November 2015), "Kurdish fighters say US special forces have been fighting Isis for months", The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/30/kurdish-fighters-us-special-forces-isis-combat>, [Last accessed 27/05/2016]

not plan to remain in the region indefinitely. Regardless of the conflict in question, a blanket ban on foreign fighters treats all citizens equally and can help to insulate governments from accusations of double-standards. It can also be easier to apply and enforce, with law enforcement only needing to prove an individuals' presence in a conflict zone or membership of a proscribed group, rather than find evidence of any crimes committed while fighting.

However, a blanket approach can also have drawbacks. It can lead to a perceived lack of proportionality when dealing with foreign fighters with diametrically opposing motivations, unless there is flexibility provided in sentencing guidelines. It can also create a situation whereby those with ethnic ties to a non-state force are denied the opportunity to defend their people or homeland. There is a range of views among the armed groups on the ground in Syria and Iraq, with the YPG welcoming foreign enlistment but the Peshmerga and various FSA-aligned groups attempting to dissuade international volunteers. There are however exceptions. For example, the Peshmerga are willing to accept ethnically Kurdish volunteers with Western citizenship. Many states' militaries allow citizens holding dual nationality to join, yet those with ethnic Kurdish, Assyrian or Yazidi roots do not have the same option under a blanket ban.

The most appropriate form for laws surrounding foreign fighters therefore remains open to debate. Whether all fighting abroad is illegal, or laws provide a number of caveats depending on the conflict and the actions of the individual, the legal situation is likely to become clearer in most contexts, either as laws are updated, or as more anti-ISIS foreign fighters return home and face precedent-setting prosecutions. Due to the notoriety of ISIS, any anti-ISIS fighters prosecuted for fighting against them are likely to attract significant public support. In the Netherlands for example, a petition to have potential murder charges against a Dutch fighter dropped reached over 65,000 signatures, and was supported by a Facebook page with over 24,000 "likes"¹³¹ with the case dropped in June 2016.¹³²

Looking forward

Overall, anti-ISIS foreign fighters are likely to have a limited impact on the conflicts currently raging in Syria and Iraq. The total number of anti-ISIS foreign fighters pales in comparison to the unprecedented number of Islamist foreign fighters. Although a higher proportion of anti-ISIS fighters arrive with existing military skills, many are also untrained and inexperienced, and as a result not all in fact make it to the frontlines. The remarkably low number of deaths reported among anti-ISIS foreign fighters reflects their often limited roles, yet this figure is unfortunately only likely to rise. There is also the possibility of anti-ISIS foreign fighters being taken hostage or being arrested, with reports of six-figure bounties being offered by ISIS for captured foreigners that have taken up arms against the group.¹³³

131. See; Justice for Jitse Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/justiceforjitse/>; also http://www.petities24.com/steun_jitse_akse [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

132. Agence France-Presse (June 2016) "Netherlands drops case against man suspected of killing Isis fighters" The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/21/netherlands-drops-case-against-man-suspected-of-killing-isis-fighters>

133. Merissa Richards (May 2016) "ISIS gangs formed 'to kidnap western fighters for \$150,000-a-head bounty" *Evening Standard* <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/isis-gangs-formed-to-kidnap-western-fighters-for-150000-a-head-bounty-10275929.html> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

The pattern of anti-ISIS fighters shifting allegiances between different groups will also continue as internal disputes fester, and those that are frustrated with their existing circumstances seek more action.¹³⁴ Although the Iraqi Peshmerga are increasingly dissuading foreign volunteers from attempting to join their ranks, the YPG still appear to be recruiting from overseas.¹³⁵ The longer anti-ISIS fighters remain involved it is however conceivable that, having garnered additional training and experience, they may begin to take on expanded roles in the future, including combat. Despite their relatively limited and localised impact on the conflict to date, anti-ISIS foreign fighters are likely to continue travelling to Syria and Iraq as long as the conflict is ongoing. Given this supply of volunteers, the demand from those groups that do recruit foreigners is also likely to endure.

The conflict in Syria and Iraq is certainly not the first conflict to feature the participation of large numbers of foreign nationals, and it will not be the last. There is also the possibility that the foreign fighter phenomenon could spread to other conflicts around the world as ISIS and other extremist groups attempt to take advantage of the instability plaguing a countries such as Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan or Nigeria.

There are however several factors that appear unique to the anti-ISIS foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq:

- There is a clear appetite among some anti-ISIS fighters for adventure and frontline combat, regardless of the arena. However, the key factor that would facilitate anti-ISIS foreign fighters' participation in a new warzone would be the presence of local groups that readily accept non-local recruits.
- Many of the anti-ISIS fighters in the dataset mentioned the impact of media coverage and widely published images of ISIS atrocities on their decisions to travel. Somewhat understandably, the conflict in Syria and Iraq currently dominates Western war reporting. Often this comes at the expense of other conflicts elsewhere, and there is therefore not the same draw to these lesser known conflicts for outside observers.
- A significant proportion of anti-ISIS foreign fighters have ethnic ties to the region, including Kurds, Assyrians and Yazidis. These fighters are highly unlikely to deploy to other conflicts considering they are primarily motivated by defending specific populations and territory within Syria or Iraq.
- The final factor unique to the foreign combatant phenomenon in Syria and Iraq is the large number of military veterans with previous experience in the region. These veterans feel a connection to the region that would not likely be replicated elsewhere (bar perhaps Afghanistan), and would therefore reduce the likelihood of these former soldiers travelling to other conflicts.

134. Alex MacDonald (February 2015) "Christian Foreign Fighters Deserting Kurdish YPG in Syria because THEY'RE 'Damn Reds'" *Middle East Eye* <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/christian-foreign-fighters-deserting-kurdish-ypg-syria-because-theyre-damned-reds-1976493133> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

135. Campbell MacDiarmid (February 2015) "Peshmerga frown on foreign volunteers" *Rudaw* <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/16022015> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016] See also; Cathy Otten (July 2015) "War with ISIS: The 'international brigade' of foreign fighters joining up to help Kurdish Peshmerga tackle Islamists" *Independent* <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-the-international-brigade-of-foreign-fighters-joining-up-to-help-kurdish-peshmerga-10367544.html#gallery> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

Possible issues for returnees

All returning foreign fighters face a variety of potential issues, ranging from legal sanctions to mental health problems and difficulties reintegrating back into their former lives and communities. In many ways returning anti-ISIS foreign fighters face similar difficulties to Islamist foreign fighters, although they do not pose the same potential threat. In his analysis of returning Islamist foreign fighters (originating from North America, Western Europe, and Australia from 1990 to 2010), Thomas Hegghammer concludes that no more than one in nine went on to attempt to carry out attacks in their home countries.¹³⁶ While it is difficult to predict the likelihood of the current contingent of Islamist foreign fighters committing attacks on their return, researchers observed no signs among anti-ISIS foreign fighters that they could pose a similar threat.

“I’m starting my life over from rock bottom as a single mom. It’s hard as hell but I won’t give up. I won’t let my ex or strangers try to guilt me because I followed my heart. Not everyone does that. The outcome could have been much worse... But I’m back home, working and restarting my life with my children. There are days I wish I was back in kurdistan, somethings it even seemed easier there. But I won’t give up. I will continue to work hard and give my children a role model.”

An American fighter previously with the YPG

The health problems experienced by some veterans are well documented, with depression, PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) the most common alongside other physical injuries. PTSD can result in concentration problems, feelings of apathy or detachment, loss of appetite, hypervigilance, heightened startled responses, and sleep disturbances. TBI is typically the result of significant or repeated blows to the head or body, with symptoms including persistent headaches, fatigue, drowsiness, and problems with memory, mood changes or mood swings.¹³⁷

Between 11-20% of U.S. veterans that fought in Iraq or Afghanistan in the “War on Terror” have subsequently been diagnosed with PTSD. Around 20% reportedly struggle with alcohol or substance abuse.¹³⁸ There are also higher rates of suicides among U.S. veterans, especially those over 50 years of age.¹³⁹ For fighters with military

136. Thomas Hegghammer (February 2013) “Should I stay or should I go?” *American Political Science Review*

137. See; National Alliance on Mental Illness <http://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Veterans-and-Active-Duty>; PTSD <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

138. (October 2012) “How the military stumbled in treating substance abuse” *Veterans Healing Initiative* <http://www.vetshealing.org/blog/bingham/how-military-stumbled-treating-substance-abuse> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

139. Janet Kemp, Robert Bossarte (2012) “Suicide Data Report” *Department of Veterans Affairs* <http://www.va.gov/opa/docs/suicide-data-report-2012-final.pdf> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

experience prior to their involvement in Syria or Iraq, such issues could have played a role in their original decision to travel, and could therefore have the potential to reoccur on their return. Without the support offered to military veterans, returning anti-ISIS foreign fighters could be even more at-risk to these health problems.

Returning anti-ISIS fighters may also face a variety of difficulties in integrating back into society. These could include difficulties in rebuilding relationships, struggling to find employment or accommodation, or finding themselves in dire financial circumstances as a result of their involvement. Whilst difficulties of this sort may be closely related to the health issues of a returning fighter, they can also affect those that have not experienced such problems. Returning anti-ISIS fighters may also need to go through a process of redefining their identity if they considered their involvement in the conflict as a central part of what defined them.¹⁴⁰ In combination, these kinds of issues could lead to a renewed sense of alienation or a lack of purpose, potentially perpetuating the original push factors that led them to war in the first place.

One British returnee, also an infantry veteran of a tour of Afghanistan in 2012, told the *Guardian*;

“When you go [to a war zone] with the military you’re getting paid, you’re getting lots of support, you have decompression and stuff like that... When I came back, I’d spent every penny I had to get over there, I left my job to get over there. I’ve had nowhere to live. I’ve come back with nothing, no support and nobody to talk to.”¹⁴¹

Having fought with the YPG near Kobani in northern Syria (and joined up via the Lions of Rojava), he was arrested on his return by U.K. counter-terrorism police. The former fighter had his passport seized, and remained on bail until March 2016 but is unlikely to face charges. Since his return he has reportedly been able to find employment and reached out to Combat Stress, a mental health charity for veterans, but has apparently received no official support.¹⁴²

Recommendations

Based on the potential implications associated with the participation of anti-ISIS foreign fighters in the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, ISD has a number of key recommendations for policy-makers, the private sector and researchers.

Governments

- There is a need in some instances for governments to clarify the legal situation surrounding anti-ISIS foreign fighters. All governments should be explicit in their communications around anti-ISIS foreign fighters to ensure the legal position and possible sanctions are clearly set out. Law enforcement measures and prosecutions

140. Tyson Smith, Gala True (July 2014) “Warring Identities: Identity Conflict and the Mental Distress of American Veterans of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan” *American Sociological Association* <http://www.asanet.org/journals/SMH/Jul14SMHFeature.pdf> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

141. Josh Halliday (January 2016) “Briton on fighting in Syria: ‘I was terrified the entire way’” *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jan/25/briton-on-fighting-in-syria-i-was-terrified-the-entire-way> [Link last accessed 22/02/2016]

142. *Ibid.*

then need to be applied consistently and proportionately.

- For governments seeking to stem the flow of anti-ISIS foreign fighters, efforts should be made to highlight the state's existing work on the ground, the potential dangers that anti-ISIS foreign fighters face, and the fact that many local groups explicitly ask foreigners not to come. Former anti-ISIS foreign fighters that have returned disillusioned could play a role here.
- Whilst not appearing to endorse or encourage their citizens to travel, governments should consider the possible support that may be required for returning anti-ISIS fighters, whether they face prosecution or not. Some may argue that anti-ISIS foreign fighters have chosen to operate in an unofficial capacity, and clear warnings have been given, and are not therefore entitled to support from the state. However, by offering support fighters are less likely to return to war or suffer from more persistent, long-term health issues. There may be a role for civil society veteran organisations to fill in this area, considering their experience in helping former soldiers reintegrate back into society. However, such organisations are often under-funded so additional support may be required if they are to take on returnees.
- Governments should also reconsider the support systems in place for military veterans. A number of anti-ISIS foreign fighters in the dataset with military backgrounds cited difficulties readjusting to civilian life or mentioned the impact of mental health problems in their initial decisions to travel to Syria or Iraq. With additional support, whether around mental health, employment or various other possible issues, the push factors contributing to these veteran fighters' decision to travel could potentially be ameliorated.
- There may also be a need for additional advice and safeguarding and support mechanisms for the families and parents of anti-ISIS foreign fighters either before or after their departure, or following their return. Although there were only six teenagers in the dataset (and only two under 18, one of whom was arrested before departure), it is conceivable that more youth may be drawn to the conflict in future considering the rise in teenage Islamist foreign fighters and female migrants. Young people are unlikely to have adequate training or experience, and the majority of groups operating on the ground are unlikely to actively recruit teenage fighters with no experience. However, any youth that are involved are likely to be deeply affected, and may therefore require specialist support.

Social media and crowdfunding platforms

- The internet is likely to remain the primary gateway for anti-ISIS foreign fighter recruitment. Groups will maintain their online presences unless they are shut down by law enforcement or the social networks themselves, in which case they could simply relocate to less prominent platforms as many Islamist extremists have done. Social networks should ensure they are aware of not only the various groups that are using their networks or platforms, but also what they are using them for, and consider whether any of their activities violate their terms of service. This

also applies to the various crowdfunding platforms utilised by fighters to support their travel or activities in theatre. It is not always explicitly clear how any funding provided would be used, and even whether the campaign is genuine.

Researchers

- Despite participating on opposing sides of the conflict there are enough similarities between the underlying, personal motivations of some Islamist and anti-ISIS foreign fighters to warrant further investigation. Learning derived from researching anti-ISIS foreign fighters' motivations, impact and experiences could provide valuable insights into the phenomenon of mostly young people travelling abroad to participate in foreign conflicts.



The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is a London-based 'think and do tank' that has pioneered policy and operational responses to the rising challenges of violent extremism and inter-communal conflict.

Combining research and analysis with government advisory work and delivery programmes, ISD has been at the forefront of forging real-world, evidence-based responses to the challenges of integration, extremism and terrorism, working to enhance Europe's capacity to act effectively in the global arena.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue

P.O. Box 7814, London, United Kingdom
info@strategicdialogue.org • www.strategicdialogue.org

Copyright © 2016 Institute for Strategic Dialogue, All rights reserved.

Any copying, reproduction or exploitation of the whole or any part of this document without prior written approval from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue is prohibited. Institute for Strategic Dialogue is the operating name of the Trialogue Educational Trust (registered charity number 1076660). The Institute for Strategic Dialogue is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales, number 06581421, and a registered charity, number 1141069.