

# Syria: The Playground of Jihad The Foreign Hand in Syrian War

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SHWETA DESAI

Earlier in the month of June when leaders from seven industrialised nations – the United States, Germany, France, Britain, Canada, Japan and Italy – along with Home Affairs Ministers from nine European countries gathered in Brussels, one of the top agendas on their mind was the flight of young men from the Western countries to fight the war in Syria. According to the recent estimates there are as many as 12,000 foreign fighters from 81 countries in the world alongside hardened Islamist rebels in Syria. The presence of young men and, in small numbers, of women, from France, Britain, Germany in Europe, America, Canada, Australia, China and Libya, Morocco, Tunisia has been alarming for the Western intelligence, with fears that radicals, inspired by weapons training and *jihad* aspirations, pose a potential risk of returning home to commit acts of terrorism.

The deadly shooting in the Jewish museum in Belgium in May, which killed four, is a stark reminder of the possible blowback that the conflict in Syria could lead to. The attacker was a 29-year-old Frenchman, Mehdi Nemmouche, who, having spent more than a year fighting with radical *jihadists* in Syria, had returned home to Europe. The attack, which remains the first and the only known one outside Syria by a foreign fighter, has raised grave concerns about the resurgence of violence and terror attacks from fighters returning from Syria.<sup>1</sup> Last month, the Syria conflict also recorded its first overseas conviction of British citizen Mashudur Choudhary for a terror offence of travelling to Syria to join a *jihadist* training camp. While Moner Mohammad Abusalha became the first American

suicide bomber to detonate a truck in an attack for the Al-Nusra Front.<sup>2</sup> The decision of the Group of Seven (G-7) leaders to act against and “to prevent, dissuade and punish” foreign fighters returning home from the Syrian front comes close on the heels of the emergence of the above events. It has, however, not dissuaded Western passport holders who are travelling to Syria in growing numbers to fight in the protracted civil war.

**The Syrian civil war is the largest mobilisation of foreign fighters since the Afghanistan War.**

The presence of foreign fighters is not unique to the conflict in Syria. Analysts have noted the involvement of young men with no apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity with the Muslim side, as one of the emerging features of conflicts in the Muslim world since 1980.<sup>3</sup> The wars in the Balkans, Chechnya, Philippines, Iraq, Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia and Yemen, all of which included Muslim insurgency, had foreign fighters mobilising themselves to defend the Muslim nation (*Ummah*) which faces an existential external threat.<sup>4</sup> In the post-1945 Muslim world, 70 armed conflicts were recorded, of which 18 had the involvement of a private global foreign fighter contingent. However, the numbers in every case constitute a very small proportion of the total number of combatants.<sup>5</sup> What makes the Syrian conflict different is the sheer number of foreign fighters, the number of nationalities represented and the inflow in a critically short phase of less than three years of active conflict. According to the estimates, the Syrian civil war involves approximately 100,000-120,000 fighters—roughly 7,000-10,000 of whom are non-Syrian nationals—divided among over 1,000 distinct armed units.<sup>6</sup> This is the largest mobilisation of foreign fighters since the Afghanistan War, where between 5,000 to 10,000 fighters from as far as Bangladesh and Indonesia, the Philippines, the US and Europe came to fight against the Soviet occupation.

### **Who are They?**

Post the US invasion of Iraq in 2002, Syria slowly emerged as the host country for the foreign fighters’ network. The Sunni insurgents in Iraq found support in neighbouring Syria – they would cross over the border to launch sectarian attacks. According to some estimates, perhaps 80 percent of foreign fighters who infiltrated Iraq, crossed the Syrian border.<sup>7</sup> Even before the Arab Spring inspired protests and the current upheaval brought by Islamist extremists from outside Syria, militants from Al Qaeda in Iraq (AIQ) established bases and routes to facilitate supplies and funds in Syria from where attacks could be launched in

Iraq. In 2009, Iraqi officials publicly and angrily accused Syria of hosting foreign fighter networks that were plotting and facilitating attacks in Iraq and withdrew their Ambassador from Damascus, after a series of attacks rocked Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

When the conflict began in Syria since 2011, President Bashar Al Assad and his ministers maintained a staunch stand saying that there was no uprising, and instead the government was fighting an insurgency created by foreign fighters from outside Syria who were responsible for perpetrating terrorism. Their calls appeared to be a case of crying wolf for the international community, which was certain that the Assad regime was creating a defence of 'fighting terrorism' to crush the dissent and hold onto its power. At the beginning, the theatre in Syria was largely played between Assad's military forces and the rebels groups that had formed under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army. But as the conflict continued, conflict of interests and infighting led to fragmentation of the rebel groups, creating ever more actors, including Islamist extremists. According to a report by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, in the first half of 2012, 700 to 1,400 fighters had entered Syria.<sup>9</sup>

The cause of the war which until then remained the downfall of the regime and a just political transition, soon began to be dominated by the events of brutal attacks and extremism being perpetrated by a handful of extremists. By 2012, rebel groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and Ghuraba al-Sham, that were interested in establishing the *Sharia* law in the state and turning Syria into an Islamic nation, seemed to be all over the place. The uprising by unarmed civilians for a democratic form of government turned into a raging civil war between and among the Sunni extremists fighting the Shia government forces. As the conflict spilled over to neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran, hundreds of young men, both Shias and Sunnis, entered the Syrian battlefield to protect their own against the tyranny of the others. With the countries in the West and Gulf supporting the militants with funding, training and arming, Syria has turned into a playground of *jihād*, attracting extremists from all over the world. Consequentially, the *jihād* against Assad has created an exogenous mobilisation of foreign fighters from countries across the world, including from Britain, France, Canada and Australia. The influx in the number of fighters from outside the conflict zone of Syria, on both sides, remains one of the prominent features of this war. In less than two years, Syria seems to have become the number one *jihād*ist destination and most prominent *jihād*ist battlefield in the world, providing both a rallying point and a training ground for radical Islamists from other nations.<sup>10</sup> Most are fighting with

the extremists rebel groups and many are also fighting with the government or to protect minority ethnic communities.

Today, there are a few hundred armed *jihadist* organisations fighting the regime and recruiting foreign fighters for the cause. Many are led by local rebel leaders who have either split from other organisations/or formed their own Army. The ISIS or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Al-Sham (Arabic: al-Dawla al-Islamiyyah Fi Al'Iraq Wash-Sham), and the Al-Nusra Front (Arabic: Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl Ash-Sham, which literally means "Support Front for the People of the Levant" are affiliated to Al Qaeda and two of the most prominent rebel groups heading the Islamist cause. Attracted by the ideology of creating one *Ummah* and the spectre of acts by the two central *jihadi* organisations in Syria, a large number of foreign fighters head towards them for guidance and enrolment in the conflict. The fact that these organisations are also better financed compared to other nationalist and secular actors has also pushed foreign fighters closer to them.<sup>11</sup> A study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) revealed that 61.4 percent of the fighters are affiliated to the ISIS, while 17.5 percent belong to Al-Nusra.<sup>12</sup> Both have a combined membership of 9,000, of whom an estimated 6,000 are foreign volunteers, according to the study. The Islamic Front composed of seven of Syria's most strategically important Islamist insurgent factions, comprises at least 50,000 fighters with previously identified military presence in 13 of Syria's 14 governorates.<sup>13</sup>

According to David Malet, foreign fighters are "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict."<sup>14</sup> A further improvisation on this definition by Thomas Hegghammer has added four sets of criteria: a foreign fighter as an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency; (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions; (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organisation; and (4) is unpaid.<sup>15</sup>

Both definitions can be applied to the foreign fighters in Syria who are coming from their countries in Europe, the US, Middle East and Asia to participate in the combat. Payment to these fighters, however, remains contentious as some groups like the Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS provide modest stipends for their members.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that foreign fighters in Syria joining extremist rebel groups as a result of an individual decision have no prior affiliation to these warring factions nor do they possess any military experience to fight armed conflicts. The Soufan Group, a New York-based consultancy, estimates that there are currently 12,000 foreign fighters from at least 81 countries who have joined the

civil war in Syria receiving military training and becoming more radicalised. These include around 2,500 from the Western countries, including most members of the European Union, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, Russia and the Arab world.<sup>17</sup>

The countries of origin of these fighters reveal high economic and social indicators and a higher variant of peace as compared to the turmoil in the Levant region. There are no direct benefits or visible material gains on offer for participation in the conflict. This raises an important question on the interests and the influences of foreign fighters travelling to Syria. Radicalisation by local Islamic groups, social media propaganda on Twitter, Facebook, Ask.fm have created opportunities for potential fighters and curious young men to be inspired by *jihād*. The Syrian War is also the first modern war where fighters and supporters are using social media to propagate, instigate and document the conflict. Groups like Al-Nusra and ISIS use Twitter and Facebook to post messages and reach a wider audience. For example, Ask.fm, a social network based in Latvia, has more than 60 million worldwide users and is widely used by Western *jihādists* in Syria. The platform offers anonymity in sharing of information and asking questions, and has become a connecting tool between rebel fighters on the ground to speak privately with prospective recruits.<sup>18</sup> In his recent online posts, Abu Abdullah Al Brittani, a British *jihādist*, instructed those travelling to join the ISIS forces from the Western countries to the Middle East to carry currency in dollars or pounds, not to carry more than £3,000 and if questioned about the large amounts of money, to tell the authorities that they were going on an “extravagant holiday”.<sup>19</sup>

The recent recruitment video by ISIS “No Life Without *Jihad*” posted in June by the group’s Al Hayat Media Centre shows foreign fighters from Australia, Bangladesh and Britain inciting Muslim men to leave the comforts of their Western life and join the *jihād*.<sup>20</sup> The online propaganda has been pivotal in luring young men to join the war in Syria. In the case of Abdullah Deghayes from the UK who is the nephew of a former Guantanamo detainee, the 18-year-old reportedly told his parents that he was visiting family in Libya and was found killed in the Syrian conflict in April this year. His family remained unaware of his intentions to join the insurgency.<sup>21</sup> Farah Mohamed Shirdon, a Canada resident in his early 20s, burnt his passport and joined the ISIS in Syria to fight alongside the rebels. He is the nephew of former Somalian Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon.<sup>22</sup>

The profile of these foreign fighters indicates a typical age range of 18-29 years, often teenagers, and a fair percentage of converts to Islam from non-Muslim majority countries. According to the analysis of the French government, which is increasingly concerned about the large number of French citizens travelling to Syria, these volunteers are “disaffected, aimless and lacking a sense of identity or belonging.”<sup>23</sup> Along with the

religious obligation to protect their faith and fellow Muslims, this appears to be common cause across most foreign fighters who seek to draw a greater sense of purpose. Volunteering for the war also provides an opportunity for some towards martyrdom and a place in heaven. In a video taken minutes before a suicide attack, Majeed, a 41-year-old British citizen is seen smiling and posing for pictures along with other fighters in the group, before he drives an explosive-filled truck into the prison’s compound.<sup>24</sup>

In the Muslim countries closer to Syria, a large number of foreign fighters have come from Tunisia (3,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500) and Morocco (1,500).<sup>25</sup> For many of these fighters, the war closer to home, offers prospects of fighting for the *Ummah*, protecting the brotherhood and defending the lives of Muslims from the oppressors. In countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, Jabhat Al-Nusra has been recruiting fighters from refugee camps.<sup>26</sup>

Syria’s geo-strategic position bordering Turkey in Europe has also made travelling to the country relatively easy for Westerners, logistically and financially. In this regard, some analysts talk about “Easyjet *jihadists*” considering the fact that many foreign fighters took low-cost flights to Turkey before crossing the border with Syria.<sup>27</sup> Most take advantage of the relaxed visa norms and border controls for European Union (EU) citizens in Turkey, which provide a three-month tourist visa on arrival. Turkey is also a *de-facto* base camp for potential fighters who are met by trusted contacts from rebel factions, committees of senior leaders or designated activists, to guide their way into Syria. Inside Turkey, a network of expressways and roads connects to the border of Syria, from where one can reach Antakya, Kilis, Gaziantep, Sanliurfa and Mardin. Fighters then cross the porous 910-km-long Turkish-Syrian border which is controlled by various rebel posts. Jordan and Egypt are the other two favoured countries for travelling inside Syria. Around Raqqa in the north and elsewhere, they’ve established very large training camps that are capable of absorbing these foreign fighters, putting a gun in their hand and giving

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them the kind of training and experience and confidence that puts them into battle very quickly.<sup>28</sup> After the training, foreign fighters get an AK-47 and magazines (4), a vest pack and grenades.<sup>29</sup> The attraction of guns, combat training, fighting against the oppressors to protect the faith and the opportunity to attain martyrdom can be considered as the precursor to the foreign fighters joining the extreme rebels. The ISIS's recent declaration of the captured parts from Der Ez Zor province in Syria to Mosul in northern Iraq as a Caliphate and an Islamic state<sup>30</sup> has given the *jihadi* group a commendable hold in the region. By establishing a local form of government here, the ISIS, with the help of its growing rank and file will attempt to establish a major presence in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey to fulfil its objective of forming the Islamic state in the Levant. By involving foreign fighters in its ranks, the ISIS and other rebel groups have widened the cause of their fight to indicate that all the Muslim brethren are together in the cause of the *Ummah*.

## **Government Forces**

On the regime side, the foreign fighters have proved to be a boost-up in the battle, changing the military offset against the rebels. According to a March 2014 report on the presence of foreign Shia fighters, 7,000 to 8,000 men have come to Syria to fight on behalf of the Assad regime. The arrival of Shia volunteers from the Arab-Muslim world, from countries such as Bahrain, Yemen (Houthi rebels), Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, is being orchestrated by Iran.<sup>31</sup>

Assad's own military strength roughly comprises a force of 300,000, including 220,000 in the Army and another 70,000 in the Air Force and an air defence command. A 350,000-man reserve force takes the total call of the Army up to 1.7 million fighters.<sup>32</sup> In the initial stages of the uprising, the regime, however, suffered mass defections by the mostly low-to-mid-ranking Sunni conscript soldiers who were unwilling to fight against their co-religionists, which halved the Syrian Army's strength to around 110,000 men.<sup>33</sup> The regime depends largely on the loyal, mainly Alawite Special Forces, the Republican Guard, and the elite 3rd and 4th Armoured Divisions, which are controlled by the President's brother Syrian General and Commander Maher-Al Assad comprising perhaps, 50,000 troops in total. It was countries like Iran and Lebanon that enabled Assad's weakened forces to hold up the offence against the rebels. Iran deployed its elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as advisers. It also enlisted Shia volunteers to fight in Syria and provided financial support and training for the militias.<sup>34</sup> These Shia foreign fighters played an important role by replacing Assad's less-reliable Sunni infantry units and fighting alongside the government forces.

Hezbollah's fighters were particularly important in the Assad regime's effort to retake important towns along the Lebanese border, such as Qusair. With their prior involvement of fighting on the battlefield, in training, and in strategy, the foreign fighters in Assad's forces were able to retain Damascus, all of the provincial capitals, and key Army bases.<sup>35</sup>

## **Blowback**

The presence of foreign *jihadists* in Syria has increased the security challenges that the Western nations face today. While the possibility of foreign fighters in Syria posing terror threats prevails, for many, fighting the regime or saving the regime remains the sole intention to join the war. The progression from foreign fighter to terrorist is not a linear one, nor is it inevitable.<sup>36</sup> Data is available on what happened to approximately 50 percent of those who came to Syria – 27.3 percent died, 21.8 percent had their travel disrupted due to expulsion from Syria, or arrest and/or imprisonment, and 5.3 percent returned from Iraq to Morocco.

There is no certain data on what happens to such returnees. The case of the Brussels attack by the French citizen, is the only known example of the radicalisation of foreign fighters. To prevent more of its citizens from going to Syria and vice-a-versa, Jordan has sealed its border with Iraq, while Turkey has began crackdowns over access into northern Syria, which has left several hundred potential ISIS recruits stranded.<sup>37</sup> In Europe, Belgium, France and Netherlands have started arresting and prosecuting foreign fighters and their facilitation networks while Norway and Denmark are monitoring cases of the fighters returning home.<sup>38</sup> In the UK, a new law allows for conviction of foreign fighters and confiscation of passports of British nationals affiliated with terrorist activities. Australia too is withdrawing the passports of such foreign fighters. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has dozens of former Syrian conflict fighters under surveillance in the US.<sup>39</sup>

The violent and extremist acts of *jihadi* groups like the ISIS and Al-Nusra include occupation of territory and they are often brutal in their attempts to crush local resistance: rape of women, killing of children and old people, public executions, harsh punishments, theatric and dramatic display of the dead, looting and desecration of Shia mosques and other religious sites, have exposed these foreign fighters to a war-time experience and indoctrination that will undoubtedly be difficult to shake off. Prolonged exposure to the militant environment, violence and radicalisation could certainly serve as a principal stepping-stone for individuals to more extreme forms of militancy.<sup>40</sup>

Based on historical patterns, there are legitimate reasons to be concerned. Veterans of the first Afghan *jihad* (against the Soviets in the 1980s) played a critical role in starting the Algerian civil war in 1991, which took the lives of hundreds of thousands. They were also instrumental in radicalising elements of the Bosnia resistance to the Serbian regime in the 1990s.<sup>41</sup>

The recent move by ISIS leaders to establish bases in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and even Saudi Arabia could lead the foreign fighters in its ranks to perpetrate terror activities in these countries. Rebel groups could also use foreign fighters to launch attacks in their countries of origin. A senior Kurdish intelligence officer, Lahoor Talabani, Director of Counter-Terrorism for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), has warned that the ISIS could launch hundreds of British nationals in cadres for further attacks in the UK.<sup>42</sup> In more than half of the major terrorist plots against the West between 2004 and 2011,<sup>43</sup> the attackers had been trained in Al Qaeda war zone camps. Indeed, a majority of Al Qaeda operatives began their militant careers as war volunteers, and most transnational *jihadi* groups today are by-products of foreign fighter mobilisations.<sup>44</sup> The gravity of the impact of foreign fighters perhaps emanates from the example of Osama Bin Laden, the founder of Al Qaeda, who fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s as a young foreign fighter from Saudi Arabia.

The Syrian War is, therefore, likely to be an incubator for a new generation of terrorists.<sup>45</sup> Earlier, one could have hoped that regime change in Syria would help to save the country from destruction. Given the protracted nature of the conflict in Syria that is likely to continue without a meaningful peace agreement for at least 10 to 15 years, the problem of inflow of foreign fighters and the war creating extremist elements will remain for some time to come. The presence of foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict has changed the equation of the game, where the movement is large enough to outlive the war.<sup>46</sup> The prospects of this war ending any time soon appear bleak.

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Ms Shweta Desai is a Associate Fellow at CLAWS.

## Notes

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