



# EUROPEAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA AND VIRTUAL RADICALIZATION

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The Syrian crisis continues to be a hotbed of international politics and a matter of national security in Europe ever since the emergence of thousands of European fighters who joined Syria's civil war. The European governments are particularly frantic about the prospects of return of their "radical-extremist" rebel citizens. Such fears are not unwarranted as many British citizens have already returned home from the Syrian war theatre<sup>3</sup>. Their alarming return back from the battlefield to European home countries is sending shivers, igniting debate and indignation all across the European establishments. The London-based 'International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation' holds that the current mobilization

of jihadists in Syria is the most significant phase in comparison to 'every other instance of foreign fighter mobilizations since the Afghanistan war in the 1980s'. The matter is also a hot topic for the European media which regularly pumps fear with the stories of "European suicide bombers" in the ranks of Syrian rebels.

It is not just the media that airs these fears, senior officials and top politicians share and spread such fears. For example, British Prime Minister David Cameron has said those British citizens and other nationals fighting alongside Islamist insurgents such as ISIS in Iraq and Syria 'posed the biggest threat to Britain's national security' claiming that 'the number of foreign fighters in that area, the

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number of foreign fighters including those from the UK who could try to return to the UK is a real threat to our country<sup>4</sup>. Foreign Secretary William Hague has warned that ‘jihadists who had become experienced “in weapons and explosives” in war-torn Syria could return to Europe to carry out terror attacks.’<sup>5</sup> The British Home Office’s annual report titled ‘The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism’ claims that ‘There are now hundreds of foreign fighters from Europe in Syria. And when UK residents return here there is risk that they may carry out attacks using the skills that they have developed overseas.’<sup>6</sup> Growing numbers of young European men who joins especially ISIS<sup>7</sup> or Jabhat al-Nusra<sup>8</sup> means a possible homeland security threat for European governments.

There are a number of important questions that analysts, academics and state officials are trying to answer. Who are these young men joining jihad in Syria? What are their motivations? What is the role of social media in their radicalization and recruitment? What are the possible threats for European governments? This brief discusses these questions in the order of questions posed here.

### Who are they?

It is crucial not to generalize all the available figures under some *cliché* typologies. It is unhelpful to use terms like “pro al-Qaeda”, “jihadist”, “Islamist” all interchangeably to portray European rebel fighters in Syria. Although we focus on the European

continent, these fighters are truly global and their reach stretch from Britain to China. For example, it emerged in March 2013 that Bo Wang (Yusuf al-Sini) a Han Chinese convert to Islam was featured in a rebel YouTube video released by Jaysh al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar, while in another example, the Uighur-led ‘Turkistan Islamic Party’ explained why it was involved in the Syrian conflict in its magazine ‘Islamic Turkistan’ by asserting that “If China has the right to support al-Assad in Syria, we have the right to support our Muslim Syrians.”<sup>9</sup>

It is better to start with a definition: the European foreign fighters here are taken as violent private volunteers taking part in wars or civil insurgencies in which they have otherwise no pre-given proclivity based on material interest, organizational or civic affiliation. These contingents disseminate a form of ‘populist pan-Islamism’ rather than generic Islamism. They can hardly gather under such umbrella terms as ‘jihadists’ or ‘salafi jihadists’ since theirs is a ‘discrete actor category distinct from insurgents and terrorists.’<sup>10</sup>

### Why do they join in?

A research on 2032 foreign fighters finds that potential recruits ‘have an unfulfilled need to define themselves’, which help them turn to violence because of what they have been seeking: revenge seekers, status seekers, identity seekers.<sup>11</sup> These are partly what fighting in Syria offers: for ‘revenge seekers’ it is an outlet for venting frustrations regarding the oppression of

Muslims at the hands of their rulers. For 'status seekers' it provides reputation and prestige both in the Syrian war theatre and European homelands through duplicating the images of war fighting in the Internet. For 'identity seekers' it provides recognition in and beyond local community. For 'thrill seekers' it fulfills an appetite for adventure in distant places instead of the monotonous and dry daily routine of European life.<sup>12</sup>

The first case of suicide attack by a British citizen in Syria took place in Aleppo in February 2014 according to the UK officials. Abdul Waheed Majid (nom de guerre Abu Suleiman al-Britani) committed a suicide attack against the Assad forces in a joint operation by Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic Front to free Aleppo Central Prison.<sup>13</sup> He was not the first to shock the British public by getting himself killed in action. British citizens Mohammed al-Araj (23), Ibrahim al-Mazwagi (21),<sup>14</sup> Ifthekar Jaman (23)<sup>15</sup> and Anil Khalil Raoufi (20) a.k.a. Abu Layth al-Khurasani<sup>16</sup> were all killed in Syria in the last six months. Furthermore, two French citizens Nicolas Bons and his brother Jean-Daniel Bons recently died fighting in Syria on the frontlines of ISIS.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the British examples above, Bons brothers were raised in a Catholic family and had ethnic French parents. Furthermore, they were Christian Frenchmen who converted to Islam and travelled to Syria to fight for one of the most extremist Jihadist groups. It is the incidents like the Bons brothers or British suicide bombers that further push European

officials to find out the motivations of foreign fighters.

### What are the threats?

Do the European fighters present a homeland security threat? According to an ICSR study, the flow of west European fighters into Syria has increased particularly since April 2013 from 590 fighters to 1937 fighters.<sup>18</sup> According to UK officials nearly 250 British returned from Syria and MI5 is now working to deal with possible threats.<sup>19</sup> A possible extremist spillover onto Europe has become a nightmare for the European powers. Except the possible new 9/11 enthusiasts it should be stressed that not all the foreign fighters in Syria want or plan to attack their home countries upon their return. It would, therefore, be inaccurate to presume all the fighters would necessarily turn against the authorities of their home countries. Some of them clearly feel the UK is their home and that the idea of jihad in UK is surreal.<sup>20</sup> And experts such as Thomas Hegghammer, thinks that Western fighters mostly prefer to fight far away from home and that they do not have a tendency to fight in the West<sup>21</sup>. However, events such as the shooting attack at Jewish Museum in Brussels did spread fears of potential "native" radical terrorism again because the attacker had spent over a year in Syria with radicals, carrying an ISIS flag when he was arrested.<sup>22</sup> According to the Financial Times European intelligence agencies have handed a list which includes 5000 European citizens who may become

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potential radical rebel recruitments. With its 911 km border with Syria Turkey becomes a particularly convenient route for foreign insurgents and collaboration with Ankara on counterterrorism becomes a top issue between European governments and Turkey.<sup>23</sup>

### What are their motivations?

Free floating gruesome images of the civilian casualties from Syrian civil war, merciless massacres by the Assad regime and the lack of contrition or empathy by western *and* Muslim countries are some of the reasons that motivate these men to fight in Syria.<sup>24</sup> An adviser to the French government Mathieu Guidere is also of the same view thinking that horrific images and videos from Syrian conflict available on the Internet have a mobilizing impact on the young French citizens.<sup>25</sup> This helps explain why such extremist groups as ISIS are very active and shrewd on the use of social media with updated Facebook pages, YouTube videos and pro-organization Twitter accounts. Hussam Najjar a.k.a. “Irish Sam” – a half Libyan a half Irish fighter- who first fought against Colonel Gaddafi in Libya before fighting Assad was also subject to such a jihadi-Salafist radicalization process on the net. Najjar surmises that he joined into the ranks after seeing of rape as a war tool used by Gaddafi forces.<sup>26</sup>

Equally important is the fact that ‘war makes jihad’ in its conducive environment shaping those who join

it.<sup>27</sup> Experiences on the battleground surely shape minds of the fighters. In other words, a fighter who just wants to help rebels may turn into a radical fighter having other goals during fighting. Both being exposed to ‘disproportionate military force against civilians’ and the radical ideology of some of the rebels constitute two powerful sources of radicalization.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, self-identification with and re-authentication of *da’wa* through the Internet that proliferates jihadi-Salafist lexicon such as ‘*jahiliyya*’ ‘*martyrdom*’, ‘*jihad*’ and ideological primers such as the resurrection of the ideal of political ‘*Caliphate*’ all have the potential to serve a powerful alternative to both western ‘man-made legal systems’ and despotic Muslim leaders of the region who are blamed for the Syrian civil war.

### Social Media and Virtual Figures

Social jihad by foreign fighters should be seen as a ‘genre of symbolic communications’ rather than a simple military tactic.<sup>29</sup> The relevance and significance of social jihad *as* ‘genres of symbolic communications’ are readily granted by the Salafists themselves. For example, al-Qaeda’s chief Ayman al-Zawahiri claimed that ‘more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media’ while its chief propagandist and the emir of the Global Islamic Media Front (*nom de guerre*, Saladin II) urged the faithful Muslims to unite to ‘Set up squadrons of media jihad (holy war) to break Zionist control

over the media and terrorize the enemies.<sup>30</sup>

The specific avatars used by Syria's foreign fighters are particularly instructive in this regard. Most of them use a *nom de guerre* starting with an Arabic name, ending with identification. "Abu X al-Britani" or "Abu Z al-Turki" could be such examples. Using letters (as in "Abu X") gives the fighters the clout of secrecy and provides shelter against possible future threats directed to the person or family. Identifications, on the other hand, such as "al-Britani" could rather be read as the need to accentuate the universal projection of jihad from the European homeland. European identifications notwithstanding, it is striking that the effect and tone of Arabic in such usages are strong. In addition to the chosen *nom de guerre*, there are also other Arabic terms which must be taken into account to understand the role the Islamic lexicon plays for building bridges among otherwise anonymous individuals. For example, foreign fighters also make use of such adjectives as *ghurabaa* (strangers) or *muhajir* (immigrants) highlighting such a connection.<sup>31</sup>

Research shows that foreign fighters are mostly young men at their twenties and rather well educated.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore not very surprising that the fighters produce some popular front names or figures, which are media savvy using social media outlets to gain supporters. Pop figures prove particularly attractive for the fighter-wannabes. For example, the German ex-rapper Denis Cuspert

(a.k.a. *Deso Dogg*) became a sensation for the young European fighters. As a 'gangsta rapper', the former produced four albums and was famous for his anti-American position before he abandoned his musical career after conversion to Islam. Importantly, his strong relations with the Salafist groups in Germany such as *Millatu Ibrahim* helped to lead him into the Syrian civil war. Using his *nom de guerre* "Abu Talha al-Almani", Cuspert did not just join the war as a foot-soldier; he also transformed his pop-fame into a sensational cyber-weapon for use in the Syrian war.<sup>33</sup> While his photos from the frontlines handily circulated in the social media, his 'nasheeds' that praise the Syrian jihad have been even more venerated in the Salafi internet forums. Even though Cuspert's story was very attractive by itself, it was *Deso Dogg's* social media experience that made the story all the more popular and potent.

In all, rebels fuse jihad with social media. Internet websites like 'Sham Center' are zealously involved in what can be called 'social jihad' by producing effective visuals and spreading the idea(l) of fighting in Syria.<sup>34</sup> The European fighters post almost everything from the frontlines including the capture of military vehicles with guns however, they also make sure the whole incident is framed within a sensational storyline and passionate narrative frame.<sup>35</sup> Both the rebels and the foreign fighters in Syria have significantly utilized social media to such a degree that the potent use of the Internet sites such as Twitter,

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Instagram, Ask.fm and Facebook has been a very effective tool of war propaganda.

## Conclusion

All in all, young Muslim men from European countries do not make up one single standardized, monotype. Some of them seek a journey which can shape one's identity while some others seek revenge for the slain civilians and casualties from the Syrian War. While some fighters have only one goal-helping civilians-there are also others who dream of establishing an Islamic state or caliphate. They establish and entertain a discursive social space with the help of traditional Islamic terminology such as "jihad" and "caliphate" in order to connect with otherwise anonymous co-fighters. The traditional lexicon notwith-

standing, the platform for spreading their cause is a very modern one: social media. Successful popular jihadi figures partly represent the answer given to the gruesome images of Assad regime's brutal policy towards civilians. These are the factors that feed foreign fighter flow. With the speed and clout of online propaganda unmatched, European governments are facing an uphill struggle to address this modern homeland security threat which is decked with social and religious markers. It is unclear whether all these young men will pose a threat to their homes in Europe. However, it is clear that the European governments must refocus on this new phenomenon without falling back to clichés and unhelpful typologies to understand and tackle it.

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