

*Department of Political Science -
Master's Program in International
Relations*

Chair of Security Studies

**THE PHENOMENON OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS.
THE CASE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN THE
SYRIAN AND IRAQI CONFLICT**

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ACADEMIC YEAR 2014/2015

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The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters. The Case of the Islamic State in the Syrian and Iraqi War

Nowadays, the phenomenon of foreign fighters represents one of the most complex, multifaceted and highly debated matters of global security in many international forums and counter-terrorism centres. Citizens from all different nations decide to deliberately join someone else's war. Today this phenomenon is receiving growing attention from the international community especially within the framework of the Syrian conflict, which is insofar characterized by the highest level of mobilization of foreign fighters. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is characterized by a high degree of complexity that still today appears blurred and suffers from several ambiguities.

This is the reason behind the necessity to explore all the different aspects related to the phenomenon in order to understand why people decide to travel and participate in a foreign conflict that apparently does not pose a direct threat on them. Today major attention is dedicated to the reasons behind the decision of Muslim foreign fighters to travel to the Syrian-Iraqi region to join the ranks of the Islamic State.

The scholarly literature attempted several times at defining the phenomenon of foreign fighters. In the field of political science there has been a concrete lack of studies and researches on this subject, especially because there has been a tendency to do not consider it as a singular phenomenon, but rather to confine it under broader terrorism studies. Recently the academic literature further analysed it providing several theories differing in terms of starting points, approaches, means and results. Nevertheless, the works of scholars such as David Malet and Thomas Hegghammer are still today the most extensive researches available. The former defined foreign fighters as “non citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil wars”¹. While the latter as an “agent who a) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency; b) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions; c) lacks affiliation to an official military organization and d) is unpaid”².

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is relatively new. Indeed, already in the Greek War of Independence in the 1820's many English activists including Lord Byron were

¹ David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p.9.

² Thomas Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad*, *International Security*, Vol. 35 No. 3, 2011, pp. 57-58.

calling for transnational recruits to free the Greek population from the oppression of the Ottoman Empire. Further examples are the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the first Arab-Israeli War (1948). Nevertheless, the phenomenon enlarged its scope with the rise of Muslim foreign fighters, who can be considered as a sub-category of the broader phenomenon. Their origins can be traced in the Afghanistan war, after the Soviet Union's invasion in 1979. Indeed, thanks to the charismatic leading figures of the Palestinian preacher Abdullah Azzam and the Saudi wealthy businessman Osama Bin Laden, the war attracted approximately 20.000 foreign fighters, mostly coming from Arab countries. Azzam and Bin Laden were able to develop a completely new attractive jihadi ideology. After this first massive mobilization, foreign fighters proved not only to give outstanding contributions on the battlefield, but to be decisive actors also as the conflict ended. Indeed, once the Afghanistan war ended, most foreign fighters decided to stay in the country while another significant part decided to travel and reach other conflict zones in order to further continue jihad. The Afghan-Arab veterans equipped with new fighting, technical, strategic and recruitment skills reached and worsen later conflicts such as the Bosnian war (1992) as well as the Chechen wars (1994-1996; 1999). Foreign fighters do not only have the capacities and skills to worsen other conflicts, but they can be dangerous actors for their home countries as well as for other countries selected as targets. There is a growing concern that these foreign fighters equipped with new strategic and war skills may return back to their home countries to plot and perpetrate a terrorist attack. Consequently, national governments have tried to address foreign fighters also once conflicts end. Nevertheless, this has proved to be a challenging task because mostly recruits remain unknown to the authorities by covering their identities and traveling on unconventional routes. This fear for the returnees immediately wide spread after the Afghanistan war and today it is mainly fuelled by the current Syrian conflict. One of the most striking features of this war is the involvement of such an increasing number of Western foreign fighters. This is the reason behind the growing concerns of Western governments towards possible returnees. A shocking attack happened on May 24, 2014 when Mehdi Nemmouche, a French citizen opened fire in the Jewish Museum in Brussels killing four people. Once he was arrested, the Belgium police found out that Nemmouche spent the previous year fighting in Syria within the ranks of the jihadist organization of the Islamic State.

Despite the increasing efforts of the international community to address foreign fighters, it is still struggling in attaining on a global level their overall number. Lately, in May 2015, the UN Security Council held an important meeting on terrorism discussing also the issue of foreign fighters. According to a statement of the President of the UN Security Council, the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius, “[t]he Security Council expresses its grave concern that there are now over 25,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 countries who have travelled to join or fight for terrorist entities [...]”³. Moreover, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR) based in London, provide an estimation of the actual number of foreign fighters mobilized in the Syrian and Iraqi conflict. Accordingly, there are 20.730 foreign fighters coming from 80 up to 90 countries worldwide who have travelled to the Syrian and Iraqi region since the beginning of the war⁴. This estimation makes the Syrian conflict the one with the highest mobilization of foreign fighters ever occurred in history. ICSR also conducted a one-year time research from which it found that most foreign fighters once they arrive in Syria join extremist Islamist groups⁵. Around 55% decide to affiliate with the Islamic State while only 14% with Jabhat al-Nusra. Only a minor part of foreign fighters decide to join groups with a more relatively moderated ideology and behaviours.

The phenomenon of foreign fighters became a central topic of most terrorism studies as well as of counter-terrorism policymakers because it refers to an increasing tendency of individuals to join a war, which apparently seems to not pose a direct threat on them. This is the reason why all studies related to this phenomenon have been linked to analysis concerning the process of radicalization in order to better comprehend the motivations behind the decision to go to fight abroad.

The scholarly literature is still struggling in finding an agreed definition of radicalization even if it seems to agree at considering it at its most basic level as a process that involves an increase use of violence. Moreover, it is widely accepted that no individual will radicalize overnight, but rather it would occur over a specific period of time alongside the influence of several factors. Furthermore radicalization is considered to be a primary root of terrorism. Indeed, the concept became extremely

³ UN Security Council, *Statement of the President of the Security Council*, S/PRST/2015/11, May 29, 2015, http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1515667_EN.pdf.

⁴ Peter R. Neumann, *Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, London, 2015.

⁵ Joseph Carter, Shiraz Maher, Peter R. Neumann, *#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks*, ICSR, London, April, 2014.

popular after the 9/11 attacks in New York, and in particular in Europe after the Madrid and London bombings, respectively of 2004 and 2005.

Concerning radicalization, a very significant distinction needs to be taken into consideration. On one side there is cognitive radicalization where theorists “ [...] consider [it] to be a purely cognitive phenomenon that culminates in radically different ideas about society and governance [...]”⁶. On the other side, there is ‘behavioural radicalization’, which focuses more on the often-violent actions through which actors express these ideas and try to achieve the related aims. These two different dimensions are closely interlinked but they should not be considered as always depending one from another. If an individual embraces radical ideas, this does not always mean that he will engage in violent actions. While an individual who perpetrated violent actions or is member of violent groups does not necessarily adhere to radical ideas. For example people can become involved because of personal relationships with an already member of the group.

As previously stated, most elaborations on radicalization share the predominant assumption that it is a process divided into different phases, even if for some scholars it follows more a linear pattern while for the majority it follows a casual one. Today, there are several different theories and models concerning radicalization from which it became clear that the challenge posed by this process is that a single cause root and a straight pattern do not exist to explain how the process emerges and how it proceeds. Moreover, radicalization has incalculable outcomes that cover a wide spectrum of political actions. Consequently, it is misleading to consider terrorism as the only possible logical result of radicalization. It is important to singularly analyse the most important levels of analysis concerning radicalization in order to better comprehend how they interact and influence themselves in the way that lead to radicalization. First, the individual level is the most important one as radicalization is an individual process that starts in the psycho-cognitive dimension of someone’s mind. Indeed individuals after experiencing particular crisis are more vulnerable to internalize a new set of ideas and beliefs that in specific cases would justify violent behaviours. These crisis, which can be of personal, social, cultural, economic and political nature, will make them feel sentiments of anger, loneliness, depression, frustration and social

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.3.

exclusion that will drive them to seek for revenge, a new identity, a new personal status or even excitement and thrill.

Moreover, to take into consideration within the process of radicalization the group level is of significantly practical utility “[b]ecause violent extremism is [...] often a group-related phenomenon [and] the sub-discipline’s empirical lessons about group dynamics help to illuminate the behaviour of terrorist collectives”⁷. According to these studies, the group context tends to modify individuals’ opinions and behaviours towards the embrace of more radical views. In addition, the process of decision-making becomes less rational compared to the individual one. Indeed, the necessity for reaching an agreement within the group overrides the aim of choosing the most rational and appropriate decisions related to the goal. Moreover, the fact that accountability for the actions is shared within all the members of the group, individuals have a propensity to engage in more violent actions because they feel less responsible. Additionally radical groups offer means and ways for individuals to seek for revenge against a targeted entity or to expire the feeling of humiliation they are subjected to on a daily basis.

Lastly, “[...] it may [be] more profitable [to analyse radicalization] as a process of interaction between individuals, violent groups and their environment [...]”⁸. Indeed, the intra-state and international levels are of extreme importance to understand the context in which radicalization takes place. First it is useful to recall the distinction, which separates these context-related factors in two different categories: “*causes* that set the foundation for radicalization, and *catalysts* that abruptly accelerate the radicalization process”⁹. Both can be of political, cultural, religious, social and economic nature. Indeed, some of the major context-factors influencing the process of radicalization have been poor integration, economic deprivation, and social exclusion related to the ongoing phenomena of globalization and modernization.

Today it becomes central to focus on the process of Islamist radicalization in order to better develop counter measures to stop the ongoing mobilization of Muslim foreign fighters in the Syrian and Iraqi region. The key question is how apparently well-integrated Muslim men engage in a process of radicalization towards the adoption of a

⁷ Randy Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories*, Journal of Strategic Security 4, N.4, 2011, p.20.

⁸ Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree, *Guest Editorial: ‘Processes of Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation*, IJCV, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p.7.

⁹ Chuck Crosssett and Jason A. Spitaletta, *Radicalization: Relevant Psychological and Sociological Concepts*, The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, September, 2010, p.9.

radical interpretation of Islam as well as of violent behaviours. There is no single profile valid for all Islamist radicalized individuals, but they rather compose a high heterogeneous group. Nevertheless, the predominant Islamist ideology behind such a process is Salafi-Jihadism. Salafism is a movement within Sunni Islam “[...] predicated on an extremist and minoritarian reading of Islamic scripture that is also textually rigorous, deeply rooted in a pre-modern theological tradition, and extensively elaborated by a recognized cadre of religious authorities”¹⁰. While the term *jihad* literally means struggle or striving towards God. It is a highly questionable expression because within the same Muslim community there are persisting controversies around its true meaning. Nevertheless, the term *jihad* assumed two predominant connotations. The first one is “[t]he Greater Jihad [which] refers to an individual’s personal struggle to live a good and charitable life and adhere to God’s commands as understood within Islam”¹¹. The second one is Lesser Jihad, which refers to the engagement of a violent-type of struggle in the name of Islam¹². Individuals considered as *jihadists* are those who literally engage in *jihad*. Typically the term is used for indicating those who voluntarily decide to fight in the lesser *jihad*. This decision represents the core of the Islamist radicalization phenomenon. Consequently, “[s]upport for or justification of terrorism, rejection of integration in host societies, and the creation of an Islamic state in Europe are all ideas shared by those who adopt Salafism as their system of values and behavioural model”¹³. According to this ideology Muslims should fulfil their individual duty to engage in violent/lesser *jihad* against those who do not embrace such a radical interpretation of Islam and therefore are not considered to fit under the category of good Muslims. Despite the lack of a considerable amount of empirical data there are incalculable factors and events that serve as triggers for Islamist radicalization processes. Muslims may suffer from personal, economic, cultural and social identity crises, which make feel sentiments of anger, frustration, social exclusion, depression and loneliness. Nevertheless, the challenge of Islamist radicalization is that all these factors are not necessary causes. Indeed, the majority of people, in particular a significant part of Muslims living in the West constantly suffer from economic, political, social and

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Andrew Silke, *Holy Warriors. Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization*, European Journal of Criminology, Vol.5, n.1, 2008, p.100.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p.8.

cultural deprivation and they do not radicalize. Nevertheless, radical Islam has found increasing magnet locations where to proliferate, such as mosques, prisons, schools, bookshops, private homes and mostly the Internet. The latter has completely transformed the process of radicalization, becoming the new platform for propaganda and recruitment campaigns.

Today the phenomenon of foreign fighters has received growing attention especially after the eruption of the Syrian Civil War in the spring of 2011 and after the emergence of the Islamic State. The Syrian war has been labelled as the conflict with the highest mobilization of foreign fighters especially thanks to the role played by the Islamic State through its media strategy able to attract such a high number of foreign fighters.

The conflict arose as non-violent manifestations by Syrian people against the *Alawite* government of President Bashar al-Assad. The combination of increasing protests with their relative violent suppression of the Syrian army turned the civil war into a conflict. Shortly after, more than thousand non-state armed groups and jihadist organizations emerged and began to actively operate in order to gain control of the Syrian state. The Islamist organization known as Islamic State severely contributes to the persistence of insecurity as well as instability throughout the region. Its historical as well as ideological roots can be traced in the terrorist organization of al-Qaeda. Indeed, in 2004 the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi first established the Islamic State of Iraq as an affiliate of al-Qaeda. Its ultimate aim is to restore the Islamic Caliphate worldwide based on a strict and inflexible application of the Sharia law. After the emergence of the Syrian conflict, the new leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi decided to include Syria in its program and changed the name of the organization into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In June 2014, eventually ISIS conquered many Iraqi Sunni territories for example the one including the city of Mosul. Following, on June 29, the top leaders announced the last change name of the organization as only Islamic State (IS). This occasion had particular impacts on its scope and development. Rather than being confined within a specific territory or region, it now has global aspirations. Moreover, “[t]he removal of the geographic limitations in the name reinforced his challenge to al-Qaeda as the leader of global jihad and gave further reason to foreign fighters to join”¹⁴. There was

¹⁴ Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.22.

a general expectation of all other existing jihadi groups to join and accept the supreme domination of the Islamic State and that all Muslim individuals would migrate to its territories. Indeed, IS is constantly advocating and pursuing an increasing expansion of its territories wherever it can, mainly pushed by the prominent slogan of '*baqiyya wa tatamaddad*', which literally means remaining and expanding. The focal point of destroying geographical borders in Middle East, starting from the one between Iraq and Syria manifested the rejection of Abu Bakr of the Sykes – Picot Agreement established in 1916.

Furthermore, the Islamic State differentiates itself from other terrorist organizations for several main reasons. First, no other terrorist Islamist organization developed in a pseudo-state with the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate. Second, IS is able to greatly financially sustain itself thanks to outside funding and illegal resources appropriation. Following, another striking feature is its ultimate goal to expand the Caliphate worldwide. Finally, IS has transformed terrorism from the general way according to which it was understood in modern time especially because of its innovative and appealing media campaign. Consequently, “[t]he intensive use that IS makes of cyber jihad as a tool for recruitment, radicalization, and dissemination of propaganda makes the struggle against this element no less important than the physical engagement with its forces and the prevention of its geographic expansion”¹⁵. Indeed, IS was able to completely transform the nature of cyber jihad by shifting the efforts away from chat rooms or static website towards a more interactive use of social media. Internet and especially social media radically transformed the process of Islamist radicalization by making every individual who navigates online a possible target who could be touched by IS message calls to engage in a violent jihad against the West as well as against the infidels.

The Islamic State established a media wing, al-Furqan, to deal with social media by posting messages delivered by the top leadership and by sharing other contents from websites related to IS. First, Facebook represents one of the primary social media, especially because from a last report of July 2015 there are 1.49 billions monthly active users and an average of 968 millions daily active users on this social media. Following Twitter is another key social media supported by over 35 different languages. According to Twitter’s official site there are 316 millions monthly active

¹⁵ Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer, *Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, Strategic Assessment, Vol.18, N.1, April, 2015, p.71.

users who sent an average of 500 millions tweets per day. At the end of 2014, IS supporters had approximately 45.000 Twitter accounts and around 73% of them have at least 500 followers while others reached also 50.000 followers. Furthermore, the Islamic State exploits Twitter to use the so-called ‘twitter bombs’, which are fundamental parts of the strategy aiming at using trending hashtags which are able to redirect twitter users to links of website whose content is related to IS’s propaganda. In addition, the Islamic State was also able through complex coding, to develop an App called ‘Dawn of Glad Tidings’ supported by mobiles, which for a short period of time was available for downloading in both Google and Apple Store. “Downloading the application allowed IS to take temporary control of the Twitter account of the said user and publish messages in his/her name”¹⁶. Another particular feature of the overall media campaign of the Islamic State is the widespread use of social media, mostly Twitter, by Western foreign fighters. First, it is of significant utility to use the native language for tweeting in order to gain more Western followers who do not speak Arabic. Moreover, Western foreign fighters Twitter accounts mainly tweet contents that can be divided into five different categories. First, they post religious instructions by referring to important fatwas, scholars or other charismatic and leading Islamist figures. Second they report from the battlezone posting especially pictures of dead bodies, the location in which they fight or they recall specific fighting events. Third they share matters concerning interpersonal communication. Fourth, they tweet content not related to the fighting but rather to their everyday life. Finally, Western foreign fighters post constant threats against the West.

The Islamic State also exploits online space to conduct offensive activities, which are known as *ghazwa* that in Arabic literally means raid and attack. An example of these attacks occurred when “IS supports hacked into the Twitter and Youtube accounts of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), which is responsible for US military activity in the Middle East and for coordinating the international coalition attacks against IS”¹⁷. Finally, IS successfully manages to conduct different and more suitable propaganda campaigns according to the target it aims to reach. On one hand in order to attract men, IS exploits high quality images and videos portraying epic victories on the battlefield attracting those seeking glory, adventure and revenge. On

¹⁶ Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer, *Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, Strategic Assessment, Vol.18, N.1, April, 2015, p.73.

¹⁷ Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer, *Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, Strategic Assessment, Vol.18, N.1, April, 2015, p.73.

the other hand, IS developed a more soften approach to attract women, especially by resorting to pictures of kittens mainly through the twitter account @ISILCats or through Tumblr, which is the most used by women.

For what concerns radicalization and recruitment, IS is attempting at attracting new foreign fighters especially among young generations by portraying itself as the only entity able at offering means, opportunities and solutions for what they are seeking. The Islamic State is exploiting the Internet and social media to widespread Islamist content and foreign fighters testimonies in order to attract new foreign fighters and justify the legitimate use of violence. This attitude explains why all foreign fighters seem to join the Islamic State driven by different motivations. A significant part of IS's media strategy targets European Muslims, with a particular attention on those of second and third generation. All of them seem to feel a growing sentiment of exclusion combined with frustration and discrimination because of their religion. Despite all the policies adopted for integrating Muslim communities within Western societies, they feel they did not receive full equality and the respect they expected. By posting and sharing images, testimonies and videos of atrocities, injustices, killings and conflicts that Muslims in Syria and Iraq are constantly suffering from, IS aims at causing a strong moral outrage that will make them decide to militarily joining Is's ranks to defend the Muslim population.

This extensive use of Internet and social media completely transformed cyber jihad creating a new generation of terrorists. For all these reasons it becomes clear the urgent need for the international community, national governments and security agencies to develop effective counter-radicalization measures in order to halt this ongoing foreign fighters phenomenon.

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