

ANALYSIS

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# THE MAKING OF EUROPEAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS

IDENTITY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIRTUAL RADICALIZATION

TUNCAY KARDAŞ • ÖMER BEHRAM ÖZDEMİR







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## ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is highly topical and hotly debated by almost everyone including journalists, pundits, and top public officials. There are a number of vital questions to which the global society desperately and hastily seeks answers: Who are these young men and women joining the civil war in Syria? What are their motivations to fight a foreign war? What is their emergent ‘hypergood’? What is the role of social media in their radicalization? How can a radicalized Muslim self be contained? This study examines the case of European foreign fighters by employing a threefold analytical framework of identity-claims, meaning-making/motives and means of radicalization. First section briefly investigates identity and motives of the European citizen fighters for joining the Syrian civil war. Second section analyzes the impact of social media in the radicalization process, the threats they pose to their home countries and the role of Turkey’s borders play as a gateway into the Syrian War theatre. Last section, provides a discussion of the findings and offers a set of responses necessary to counter and withstand the tribulations of life with foreign fighters. Rather than a pedantic enquiry, this study hence also seeks to provide a set of practical answers to pressing questions above.



**The phenomenon of foreign fighters is highly topical and hotly debated by almost everyone including journalists, pundits, and top public officials.**

## INTRODUCTION: THE UNCHARTED TERRITORY OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Official sources often put the number of foreign fighters who joined the civil war in Syria around 30,000, coming over from 80 countries. For instance, according to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ISIS<sup>1</sup> militants in Iraq and Syria now have about 20,000 to 31,500 fighters on the ground, 2500 of which are foreign fighters joined from major Western European countries,<sup>2</sup> while about a dozen Americans are known to be fighting in Syria<sup>3</sup> and several hundred are believed to have joined from Russia.<sup>4</sup> Speaking to mollify the public anger at the beheadings of two American journalists at a recent UNSC meeting he presided, Obama claimed that ‘Our intelligence

1. Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. While the organization calls itself Islamic State, ISIS and ISIL are often used by European and US sources, respectively. Curiously there is little progress in naming of the nature of the beast.

2. “CIA says number of Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria has swelled to between 20,000 and 31,500”, *The Telegraph*, 12 September 2014.

3. “Militant in Syria beheading videos identified: FBI”, *Reuters*, 25 September 2014.

4. Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*, The Soufan Group, June 2014.

agencies estimate that more than 15,000 foreign fighters from more than 80 nations have traveled to Syria in recent years. Many have joined terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda’s affiliate, the Nusrah Front, and ISIL, which now threatens people across Syria and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> President Obama expressed his sheer concern by stating that ‘What brings us together today, what is new is the unprecedented flow of fighters in recent years to and from conflict zones, including Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa, Yemen, Libya, and most recently, Syria and Iraq.’<sup>6</sup> Above numbers have been on the rise ever since ISIS declared itself a state and caliphate in late June and it is anticipated that the numbers are likely to increase, given the media frenzy and surprisingly steady flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq, who together certainly helped the organization earn its crust.

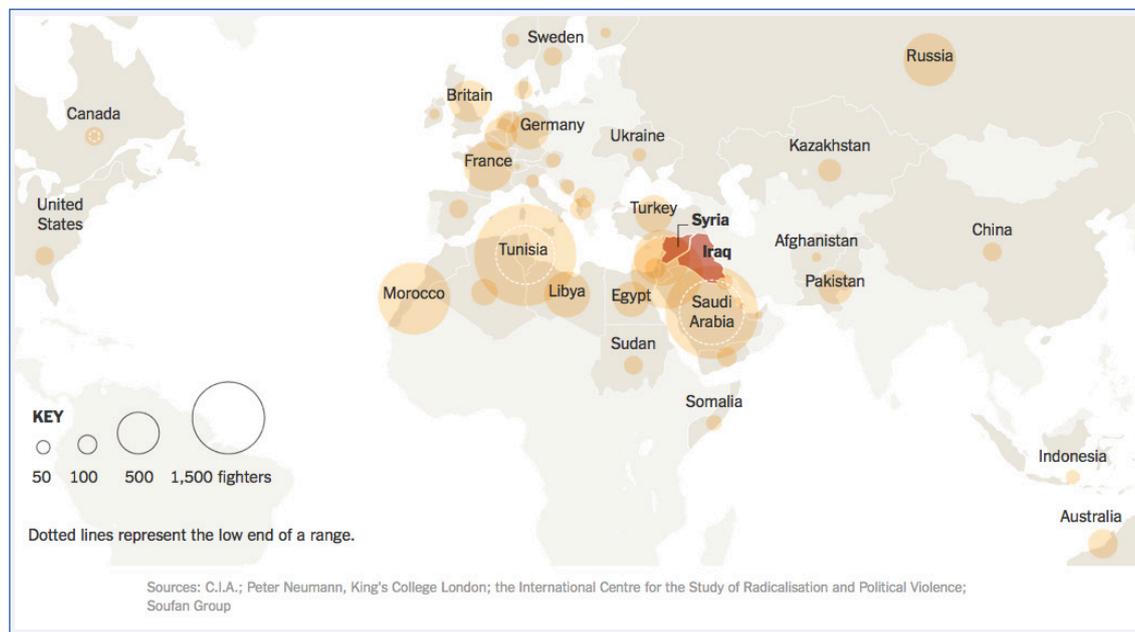
The Syrian crisis continues to be a hotbed of international politics and a matter of national security in Europe ever since the emergence of thousands of European fighters who joined Syria’s civil war. The US and European governments are particularly frantic apprehensive about the prospect of return of fighters who are not just some marginal ISIS sympathizers<sup>7</sup> but its rank and file. They are British, French, German, Belgian citizens. It is the alarming return of these citizen fighters back from the battlefield to European homeland that is sending shivers, igniting debate and indignation. Many British citizens have already returned home from the Syrian war theatre.<sup>8</sup> The London-based ‘International Centre

5. “Remarks by the President at U.N. Security Council Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters”, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-un-security-council-summit-foreign-terrorist-fighters> (24 September 2014).

6. “Remarks by the President at U.N. Security Council Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters”, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-un-security-council-summit-foreign-terrorist-fighters> (24 September 2014).

7. ISIS is the most radical extremist group amongst others fighting in Syria, whose human resources partly depend on foreign fighters.

8. “Al-Qaeda training British and European ‘jihadists’ in Syria to set up terror cells at home”, *The Telegraph*, 19 January 2014.



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 media too is awash with sensational headlines feeding on such fears, as a recent one reads: 'UK fears homecoming of London Boys fighting in Syria'.<sup>9</sup> Similar news often hit the headlines of German and French media as well, sounding the alarms mostly for domestic consumption. It is not just the media that airs feeds such fears, senior officials and top politicians share and spread them too. For example, US President Obama has recently macro-securitized the issue by stating that 'In the Middle East and elsewhere, these terrorists exacerbate conflicts; they pose an immediate threat to people in these regions; and as we've already seen in several cases, they may try to return to their home countries to carry out deadly attacks'.<sup>10</sup> British PM David

9. "UK fears homecoming of 'London boys' fighting in Syria", RT, 29 March 2013.

10. "Remarks by the President at U.N. Security Council Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters", Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-un-security-council-summit-foreign-terrorist-fighters> (24 September 2014).

Cameron also asserted that 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 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>11</sup> In February, Foreign Secretary William Hague 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>12</sup> The British Home Office's annual report titled 'The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism' also sounded alarms by declaring 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>13</sup> In a similar vein, British Home Secretary Theresa May also held that extremists 'of a Jihadi mindset'

11. "Cameron says foreign fighters in Iraq, Syria most serious threat to UK", Reuters, 17 June 2014.

12. "Cameron says foreign fighters in Iraq, Syria most serious threat to UK", Reuters, 17 June 2014.

13. "British extremists use Syria as training ground before returning home", RT, 6 October 2013.

are using the Syrian civil war ‘as a nursery’ before returning to Britain as trained terrorists’.<sup>14</sup> Similar concerns can be readily discerned from other European capitals. The French Interior Ministry estimates that nearly 700 French citizens have travelled to Syria to join the Syrian War since the conflict began and interestingly it tends to be a family trip as about 15% of them are women with their children, accompanying their husbands.<sup>15</sup> Many people think that these and other youngsters-who now possess an ineluctable war-fighting experience-have mainly been trained at the camps of some of the most extremist groups operating in the world such as the ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra. Rehabilitation of these émigrés, who are almost automatically taken as a homeland security threat is now one of the pressing preoccupations of US and European administrations.<sup>16</sup>

But how could a young thrill seeking Frenchmen-living an otherwise mundane life-choose to fight a voracious foreign war, far away from home? How can a British citizen be so radicalized that he becomes a suicide bomber and attacks a regime which does not constitute a direct threat for him/her or the UK? Similar questions abound and Europeans desperately need answers. As this study hopes to show, the European citizens’ praxis of fighting in the Syrian civil war can be better grasped by employing a threefold analytical framework of identity (agency), motivations (culture) and means of the radicalization process (structure). The next section begins with an examination of the identity and motivations of the European citizen fighters before investigating the impact of social media on the radicalization process. After examining Turkey’s borders as a vital gateway for foreign fighters to enter the fray

in Syria, the last section presents a discussion of the findings and offers an outline of possible solutions for ending the imbroglio of foreign fighters.

## WHO ARE THE ‘POTENTIAL TERRORISTS? THE POLITICS OF NAMING

The study of foreign fighters in Syria is still in its embryonic stages and therefore it is necessary not to generalize all the available figures under some cliché typologies or facile labels such as the politically motivated and highly vague ‘potential terrorist’ label. In effect, the recent high profile UNSC meeting-presided by US President Obama<sup>17</sup>-has just passed a resolution specifically on foreign fighters and worked out a definition, which coins the term foreign terrorist fighters defined as those:

“... individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict”<sup>18</sup>

Although broad in its sweep, this definition is nonetheless perfunctory and hardly able to capture the complexity of the phenomenon. In their stead, this study defines foreign fighters 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. We argue that these contingents ‘horizontally’ disseminate a form of ‘populist pan-Islamism’ rather than generic Islamism. They can hardly gather under umbrella terms since theirs is a ‘discrete actor category distinct from insurgents and terrorists’.<sup>19</sup>

14. “British extremists use Syria as training ground before returning home”, RT, 6 October 2013.

15. “Gruesome video of European jihadists in Syria shocks France”, France 24, 3 March 2014.

16. “Remarks by the President at U.N. Security Council Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters”, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-un-security-council-summit-foreign-terrorist-fighters> (24 September 2014).

17. A testimony to its political significance is the fact that this has been Obama’s second UNSC meeting which he presided. The first was on the spread of nuclear weapons in 2009.

18. UN Security Council Resolution, S2014/688.

19. Thomas Hegghamer, ‘The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad’ *International Security*, 35(3), 2010-11.

The first case of suicide attack by a British citizen in Syria took place in Aleppo in February 2014. 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>20</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>21</sup> Ifthekar Jaman (23)<sup>22</sup> and Anil Khalil Raoufi (20) (alias Abu Layth al-Khurasani)<sup>23</sup> were all killed in Syria in the last six months this year. Internet is full of disturbing footages showing the French jihadists operating in the Syrian countryside, ‘whooping, laughing and shouting in French as they drag the bodies of the slain civilians and fighters accused of supporting Assad’.<sup>24</sup> The saidAforementioned video was aired on 20 March 2014 in a documentary titled, ‘Le quotidien de jihadistes en Syrie’ (The daily lives of jihadists in Syria) on the French BFM TV station featuring ‘the exploits of an ISIS brigade comprised of about 40 French and Belgian jihadists in Syria’.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, two French citizens Nicolas Bons and his brother Jean-Daniel Bons recently died fighting in Syria on the frontlines of ISIS.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the British examples above, Bons brothers were raised in a Catholic family and had ethnic French parents. They were Christian Frenchmen who converted to Islam and travelled to Syria to fight for one of

the most extremist Jihadist groups. Consequently, though main perpetrators are of non-European ethnic origins, it would be erroneous to mark their ethnic origin as the main pull behind their act. Rather, it is the radicalization process they are subjected to that contributes to their dangerous journey, which explains why, for example, their family members (brothers, sisters) do not share their radical thoughts and feelings.

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**The US and European governments are particularly frantic apprehensive about the prospect of return of fighters who are not just some marginal ISIS sympathizers but its rank and file.**

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In all such examples, a simple question springs to mind: Why do they join the ranks of the hardline Salafist groups such as the ISIS? While the public ponders, French and British states feel they have to find an answer and quickly. In fact, almost all European governments are concerned and increasingly edgy due mostly to possible homeland security implications of the return of foreign fighters back to Europe.

## WHAT ARE THE MOTIVATIONS?

The easiest way to make a fighter out of the ‘arm-chair mujahid surfer’ and enlist him/her into the ranks abroad is by combining the use of Internet with the use of classical religious legal prose to highlight takfir (anathematization of fellow Muslims) and the duty of jihad against them and unjust rulers with a view to helping the oppressed

20. “Syria crisis: ‘First UK jihadist’ in suicide attack”, *BBC*, 11 February 2014.

21. “Briton from Notting Hill killed fighting Bashar al-Assad in Syria”, *The Telegraph*, 20 November 2013.

22. “Briton Ifthekar Jaman ‘killed fighting in Syria’, family says”, *BBC*, 17 December 2013.

23. “Anil Khalil Raoufi killed in Syria ‘was jihadist’” *BBC*, 13 February 2014.

24. “Gruesome video of European jihadists in Syria shocks France”, *France 24*, 3 March 2014.

25. “Gruesome video of European jihadists in Syria shocks France”, *France 24*, 3 March 2014.

26. “Syrie: quelques mois après son frère, un jihadist français meurt en kamikaze”, *Le Parisien*, <http://www.leparisien.fr/international/syrie-quelques-mois-apres-son-frere-un-jihadiste-francais-meurt-en-kamikaze-06-01-2014-3466999.php>, 6 January 2014.

Muslims.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, gruesome images of the Syrian civil war, merciless massacres by the Assad regime and the lack of empathy and support by western ('far enemy') and Muslim ('near enemy') countries are the reasons that motivate these women to fight in Syria.<sup>28</sup> For instance, an American foreign fighter alias Abu Hureyre al-Amiriki who was killed in a suicide attack was believed to be radicalized simply for what he saw: Assad getting away with incessant killings of innocent Muslims.<sup>29</sup> An adviser to the French government Mathieu Guidere seems also of the same view thinking that gruesome images and videos from Syrian conflict available on the Internet have a mobilizing impact on the young French citizens.<sup>30</sup> This helps to explain why such extremist groups as ISIS are very active on the social media with updated Facebook pages, YouTube videos and pro-organization Twitter accounts. Hussam Najjar nom de guerre 'Irish Sam'-a half Libyan a half Irish fighter- who first fought against Colonel Gaddafi in Libya before fighting Assad has also been 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>31</sup> In many cases, the Internet acts as 'radicalization-accelerant' in the very least.

On a deeper psychological level, it is worth mentioning a research on 2032 foreign fighters, which found that potential recruits 'have an unfulfilled need to define themselves', which help them turn to violence because of what they are seeking: revenge seekers, status seekers, identity

seekers.<sup>32</sup> Arguably 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 life.<sup>33</sup>

An equally important reason is that 'war makes jihad' through its social environment shaping those who join it.<sup>34</sup> In other words, a fighter who just wants to help rebels may turn into a radical fighter having other goals during fighting. Witnessing 'disproportionate military force against civilians' and getting exposed to the radical ideology of rebel forces at the battlefield constitute two powerful sources of radicalization.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, self-identification with and re-authentication of da'wa through the Internet that proliferates jihadi-Salafist concepts 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. Thus the British fighter Ibrahim Mazwagi mentions in a video posted in Youtube that he has left a comfortable lifestyle for help-

27. Stephen Ulph, "A Virtual Border Conflict", in *The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington's Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to the Virtual Ummah*, Ed. Stig Hansen, Atle Mesoy and Tuncay Kardas, (Hurst, London: 2009), p. 295-6.

28. Aaron Zelin, "European Foreign Fighters in Syria", The Washington Institute, 2 April 2013.

29. *BBC World News*, 15 September 2014.

30. "French brothers seek jihad in Syria", *BBC*, 20 August 2013.

31. "More and More Europeans Are Flying to Syria to Fight Assad", *Vice*, 14 May 2013.

32. John M. Venhaus, "Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda", *US Institute of Peace Special Report*, 236, 2010, p. 8-11.

33. "Gruesome video of European jihadists in Syria shocks France", *France 24*, 3 March 2014.

34. James Hughes, "Chechnya-How War Makes Jihad in *The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington's Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to the Virtual Ummah*, Ed. Stig Hansen, Atle Mesoy and Tuncay Kardas, (Hurst, London: 2009), p. 173-189.

35. James Hughes, "Chechnya-How War Makes Jihad in *The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington's Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to the Virtual Ummah*, Ed. Stig Hansen, Atle Mesoy and Tuncay Kardas, (Hurst, London: 2009), p. 187.

ing fellow Muslims in Syria.<sup>36</sup> Another British fighter Ifthekear Jaman tells that he has come to Syria to fight for reestablishing the Caliphate.<sup>37</sup> Yilmaz, a Turkish-Dutch, who was a soldier in Royal Netherlands Army, now finds himself fighting and training other rebel fighters in Syria. Yilmaz too claims he has come for helping 'the oppressed'.<sup>38</sup> While Jaman says he holds no desire to return and operate in the UK, Yilmaz says he is in Syria only for the Syrian people and he could have even joined Dutch Army, had it come and helped the oppressed people. In short, while Jaman and Yilmaz give different answers to the 'why' question asked above, they refer to the same 'hypergood':<sup>39</sup> helping 'the oppressed' against the unjust by establishing an alternative polity through use of force.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIRTUAL RADICALIZATION

The making of European fighters in the Syrian war is partly dependent on the effective uses of the Internet aiming to reinvigorate a particular type of Islamist activism. In line with Al-Qaeda-single narrative,<sup>40</sup> the latter feeds on a scheme of revenge that constructs Islam as a monolithic religion facing a monolithic antagonist. This narrative of social jihad is in turn perpetually echoed through digital social media outlets that surpass

traditional local authority figures (e.g., community elders, mosque) mainstream newspapers, radio and terrestrial television broadcasts in conveying its message faster and ceaselessly to millions of its target audience.<sup>41</sup>

The specific avatars used by foreign fighters are particularly instructive. Many use a nom de guerre starting with an Arabic name, ending with identification such as "Abu X al-Britani" or "Abu Z al-Turki". Using letters (as in "Abu X") may give the fighters the clout of secrecy against possible future threats directed to the person or family. On the other hand, identifications such as "al-Britani" could also be read as reflecting the need to accentuate the universal projection of jihad from the European homeland. It is also striking that the effect of Arabic in such usages is still strong. That is, in addition to the chosen nom de guerre there are other Arabic terms which must be taken into account. For instance, foreign fighters often make use of such adjectives as *ghurabaa* (strangers) or *muhajir* (immigrants) highlighting their link with the Islamic lexicon.<sup>42</sup>

Research shows that foreign fighters are mostly young men at their twenties and educated.<sup>43</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the fighters produce some popular front names and figures and use social media to garner support. Pop-figures prove attractive for the aspiring fighters, for example the German ex-rapper Denis Cuspert (alias Deso Dogg) became a sensation for the young European fighters. A 'gangsta rapper' who had four albums, he was already famous for his anti-American position before he abandoned his musical career after his conversion to Islam. Importantly, it was his strong relations with the Salafist groups in Germany such as Millatu Ibrahim that directed him into the Syrian civil war.

36. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IodtnNFyldc>, (Date of view: 1 March 2014)

37. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrQyhG9Pkzw>, (Date of view: 1 March 2014)

38. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWua3exa6rw>, (Date of view: 1 March 2014)

39. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge University Press Cambridge: 1992), p. 63.

40. Matteo Vergani, "Neo-Jihadist Prosumers and Al-Qaeda's Single Narrative: The Case Study of Juliano Delnevo", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37(7), 2014, p. 604-17.

41. Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*, The Soufan Group, June 2014.

42. "Foreign Fighters in Syria", *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, December 2013, p. 7.

43. "Foreign Fighters in Syria", *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, December 2013, p. 28-29.

Using his nom de guerre “Abu Talha al-Almani”, Cuspert did not just join the war as a foot-soldier; he has also transformed his pop-fame into a virtual-weapon for use in the Syrian war.<sup>44</sup> While his photos from the frontlines handily circulate in the social media, his ‘nasheeds’ that praise the Syrian jihad have been even more popular in the Salafi internet forums.<sup>45</sup> Thickening the plot was his wounds taken in an air strike by the Assad regime.<sup>46</sup> In September 2013 a video of him circulating on the YouTube shows he was in a serious condition because of his wounds after getting a cardiac massage to be saved.<sup>47</sup> The video triggered rumors about the death of Deso Dogg’s, while some German Salafi websites denied his death.<sup>48</sup> Even though Cuspert’s narrative was very attractive by itself, it was Deso Dogg’s social media experience that made the story ever more popular and potent.

In many cases, both the rebels and the foreign fighters in Syria make significant use of social media such that vigorous use of the Internet sites such as Twitter, Instagram, Ask.fm and Facebook has been an effective tool for propaganda war. By 2007 more than 4,500 jihadist Web sites was disseminating Salafist radical ideology by, for example, sponsoring jihadi chat-forums that mainly featured discussions about Muslim youth in search for identity and the ‘role of young Muslims in the modern world’.<sup>49</sup> As Gilles de Kerchove argues, social media has considerably facilitated the flow of foreign fighters into the Syria war-front, who tend to be ‘narcissists’ flaunting, for example, their AK-47s in selfies or

uploading videos directly from the combat zone into Tumblr or YouTube, rap and propaganda videos and clothing.<sup>50</sup> It is not only the European governments that are edgy about the online media; secretary General of the Council of Arab Interior Ministers Mohammed Kuman is also concerned with the content of digital media, since such platforms make available free spaces to radicalize.<sup>51</sup>

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 (I) of fighting in Syria.<sup>52</sup> The European fighters post almost everything from the frontlines including the capture of military vehicles with guns, but they make sure the whole incident is framed within a passionate storyline.<sup>53</sup> Check-clear is (the nickname of) a Dutch fighter who has an active Tumblr blog where he posts from the Syrian frontlines. The importance of social media for foreign fighters is literally captured in a photo that includes a gun, a knife and a smart phone, showing how ‘half of global jihad is social media’.<sup>54</sup> In regard to the militant discourse and stunning killing methods, it is reasonable to assume that extremism has fast become a mainstream attraction for foreign rebel fighters.

Additionally, media attention is evident in the news so far abundantly documenting how Syrian Civil War has turned into an attractive war theatre luring youngsters all over the world, including women and girls. The case of Austrian teenage girls Samra Kesinovic (16) and Sabina Selimovic (15) is noteworthy. They trav-

44. Martin Armstrong, “The Search For Deso Dogg, The German Rapper Turned Jihadi Poster Boy”, *Vice*, 20 September 2013.

45. “Rapping for al-Qaeda in Syria”, *CNN*, 18 November 2013.

46. “Rapper-turned-jihadist, Deso Dogg or Abu Talha al-Almani, injured in strike in Syria”, *News*, 9 September, 2013.

47. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UicrMJtGy5s>, (Date of view: 18 February 2014).

48. “Deso Dogg’un Şehid Olduğu Yalanlandı!”, *İslah Haber*, 24 November 2013.

49. Bruce Riedel, “Al Qaeda Strikes Back,” *Foreign Affairs* (May-June), 2007, p. 24-41.

50. “Social media ‘plays crucial role in recruiting jihadists’, anti-terrorism chief warns”, *Independent*, 28 January 2014.

51. “Syrian Jihadists Recruited by Social Media”, *Media Post*, 29 January 2014.

52. “Social networking sites promote ‘jihad duty’ for foreigners in Syria”, *Setimes.com*, 15 November 2013.

53. “Jihad Selfies: These British Extremists In Syria Love Social Media”, *Vice*, 5 December 2013.

54. “‘Half of Jihad’ in Syria is... on social media”, *Middle East Online*, 12 September 2013.

eled to Syria and joined the rebel forces<sup>55</sup> showcasing once again how ‘war makes jihad’. War also helps to make jihadi by, inter alia, generating attractive goals that can inspire potential fighters from across different age groups. Crafty use of media outlets and self-promoting slick media-productions combined with recruiting preachers on the ground, jihad may look doable and ‘cool’, for its message reaches out to the young “mujahid wannabes” faster and easier than traditional education.<sup>56</sup> Surely, one of the main functions of the digital media is that it provides the necessary means to reach the contact persons particularly at the border zones who would then help transfer foreign fighters to the war theatre. However, it is necessary, as shown above, not to reduce the impact of the social media to recruitment facilities.

Social media is not functioning as a passive transmitter between already established (secure) individual-selves. Learning and unlearning through digital media is a process which involves more than reproducing neo-jihadism or recycling its ‘single narrative’.<sup>57</sup> For, it introduces and facilitates the reinterpretation of that narrative by imbuing it with native-hybrid symbols, identities and individual life-stories. For instance, ICSR’s comprehensive report “#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighters” focuses on the effect of social media on foreign fighters’ self-education and recruitment patterns drawing on the fighters’ social media profiles. The report finds that most foreign fighters in the social media are pro-ISIS (55%).<sup>58</sup> ICSR classifies their accounts by their



nationalities finding out fighters from UK in the lead (17.9%) with French (11.6%) and German (11.1%) fighters lagging behind them on the list.<sup>59</sup> The overall finding of the report suggests that Twitter accounts and Facebook pages prove to be effective on foreign fighters. In regard to the popular Facebook pages among foreign fighters, it is possible to discern pages of popular salafi preachers such as Ahmad Musa Jibril, Musa Cerantonio and Sulaymaan al-Ulwan, all of which become “cause celebrity” among jihadi media networks by their rhetoric, charisma and stance on the Syrian civil war.

While some have supported Syrian jihad indirectly and anonymously, others such as Musa Cerantonio speaks clearly about his support for ISIS. Born to Christian parents, Cerantonio is an Australian, 29 years of age with Irish and Italian roots, who was seen as a fine young preacher

55. “Interpol in hunt for Austrian jihadist teenage girls”, *Al Arabiya*, 18 April 2014.

56. For a rendition of cool-Jihad, see the quintessential example of ‘Flames of War’, a slick YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vVLIUKdpFk> (Date of view: 25.09.2014)

57. Matteo Vergani, Neo-Jihadist Prosumers and Al-Qaeda’s Single Narrative: The Case Study of Juliano Delnevo, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37(7), 2014, 604-17, p. 611.

58. “#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighters”, ICSR, April 2014, p. 11.

59. “#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighters”, ICSR, April 2014, p. 11.

before he converted to Islam at the age of 17.<sup>60</sup> He does not shy away from suggesting that ISIS is the only option for a true Islamic rule over Syria while often posting full of pro-ISIS posts in his Facebook page, some of which are titled as “ISIS gaining in Raqqah”, “ISIS moving into Baghdad”, “Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi”, “Jabhat al-Nusra defectors to ISIS”.<sup>61</sup> What is significant is that Cerantonio has his comparative advantage put to effective use when it comes to reaching out to the youngsters and the newly converted Muslims. The latter identify themselves comfortably with Cerantonio, which in turn make him more effective in new possible foreign recruitments. To be sure, it is not just individuals who help transfer others into the war theatre. For instance, Kronos report on Dutch fighters in Syria groups finds out that Sharia4Holland and Sharia4Belgium—which are believed to be peaceful social groups and active in Belgium and Netherlands—have been active on recruitment. According to the report “Inside The Jihad, Dutch Fighters in Syria” both leaders and members of these groups’ inner circles have already traveled to Syria to join the fight.<sup>62</sup>

In all, it is necessary not to couch the matter in journalistic accounts such as the so-called ‘Jihad Cool’ or ‘twitter jihad’ though. Foreign fighter activity should be seen as a ‘genre of symbolic communications’ rather than either a diversion or favorite pastime activity.<sup>63</sup> The symbolic importance here is readily granted by the Salafists themselves. It is possible to capture this symbolism in the discourse of veteran figures. For instance, while al-Qaeda’s chief Ayman al-Zawahiri claimed that ‘More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media’ 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>64</sup>

## TURKEY AS A “GATEWAY” TO THE CIVIL WAR

To be sure it is not just online facilities that help make the foreign fighting experience possible. The European fighters’ journey to Syria has acquired a certain itinerary pattern. Their standard travel plan is to fly to Turkey from home countries and cross the Syrian border mostly with the help of smugglers before they join the rebel groups mostly in north Syria. With its massive 911 km border with Syria, Turkey has recently become a transit route for European foreign fighters taking up arms against their (and Turkey’s) enemy Assad. As a strong supporter of Syrian opposition—especially of FSA—for Turkey, the flow of foreign fighters into Syrian war theatre at first was not a security issue or political problem. However with the ISIS expansion in north Syria and the growing salafi-jihadi influence in the opposition ranks, the US and European governments’ threat perceptions regarding Turkey’s role have changed. Particularly, in the second half of 2013 popular media outlets were awash with queries most typically asking “Do Turkey supports extremists?” Turkey could not ignore or dismiss out of hand such misgivings for long. For, inter alia, the perception that “Turkey supports extremists” is anathema to its struggle to dissociate its Islam-friendly government from allegations of aiding and abetting religious terrorism.

By the end of 2013 Turkish officials took first serious steps to prevent foreign fighters entering Syria. According to Der Spiegel, by the end of 2013 officials sent more than 1000 poten-

60. <http://en.islamway.net/scholar/2581>

61. “#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighters”, ICSR, April 2014, p. 27.

62. “Inside the Jihad, Dutch Fighters in Syria”, Kronos, October 2013, p.7.

63. Nicholas J. O’Shaughnessey and Paul R. Baines, ‘Selling Terror: The Symbolization and Positioning of Jihad,’ *Marketing Theory*, 9(2), 2009, p. 227-41.

64. ‘Al-Qaeda Takes Jihad to Media Four Years after 9/11: Al-Qaeda Fighters Become Producers, Film Directors, Video Cameras Have Become Their Most Potent Weapon,’ *Middle East Online*, 9 Sept 2005.

tial European rebel fighters back to their countries.<sup>65</sup> An ISIS expert Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi argues that in the beginning Turkey saw ISIS (a group with non-Syrian fighters majority) as a useful proxy against the Assad regime and Syrian Kurdish militants (YPG) while Turkish officials often point to the difficulties of securing such a long border.<sup>66</sup> In early 2014 Turkish Army hit an ISIS convoy and the government began to target ISIS by increasingly construing it as a threat to homeland security.<sup>67</sup> While many western sources pointed to the ideological-religious affinities between the extremist groups and Turkey's Islam-friendly government, the alleged backing of foreign fighter flow was mainly for tactical rather than religious-ideological reasons. A testimony to this approach was a wiretap leaked involving Turkish top diplomatic and military officials including the Foreign Minister and Head of Intelligence in March just before the local elections, allegedly demonstrating Turkish officials' desire to use the ISIS threat against a Turkish enclave in Syria (Suleyman Shah Tomb) as an excuse to stage a possible military operation against the Assad regime.<sup>68</sup>

According to US State Department's "Country Reports on Terrorism 2013", Turkey has become a transit country for extremist foreign fighters particularly from ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>69</sup> The so-called 'safe houses' in southern Turkey have been used by foreign fighters for gatherings<sup>70</sup> prior to crossing into Syria functions as smugglers<sup>71</sup> making the jour-

**By the end of 2013 Turkish officials took first serious steps to prevent foreign fighters entering Syria. According to Der Spiegel, by the end of 2013 officials sent more than 1000 potential European rebel fighters back to their countries.**

ney all the more plausible. It can be argued that the presence of a common enemy (Assad Regime) encouraged Turkey to turn a blind eye to the foreign fighter movement at its borders however it is also quite difficult to secure such a long border. Furthermore, it is absurd to suggest that Turkey should easily arrest anyone for just being caught traveling to southern Turkey, absent a clear intelligence about a potential terror link. For many tourists as well as European and Arab citizens, Turkey is a very popular travel destination partly because no visas needed.<sup>72</sup> Thus technically in case a British citizen-who is not prevented by British authorities from traveling to Turkey-wants to join the Syrian rebels, s/he would face almost no obstacles thanks to his/her nationality and the relevant visa regime, certainly an encouragement in addition to the relevance of other motives in joining the ranks. Secondly, there are many national and international aid groups and organizations which might include potential foreign fighters desperate to get on the ground in Syria to fight. Many of them straddle the Turkish border because being a volunteer for an aid organization can hardly be a crime either. It is often not possible to stop someone leaving his/her aid convoy beyond the border before joining the rebels. Besides, there exist socioeconomic reasons that help foreign fighters to find agents for human transfer at the Turkish borders, turning it a gateway to the Syr-

65. "Der Spiegel: Türkiye, Suriye'ye giden 1100 kişiyi Avrupa'ya geri gönderdi", *Zaman*, 4 January, 2013.

66. "Jihadists flooding into northern Syria put Turkey on edge", *Fox News*, 15 October 2013.

67. "TSK, IŞİD konvoyunu vurdu", *Sabah*, 29 January 2014.

68. "Jihadist threat against sacred Turkish tomb threatens to widen Syria's war", *Fox News*, 28 March 2014.

69. "Country Reports on Terrorism 2013", US State Department of State Publication, April 2014, p. 119.

70. "Al-Qaeda recruits entering Syria from Turkey safehouses", *The Telegraph*, 30 October 2013.

71. "The secret jihadi smuggling route through Turkey", *CNN*, 5 November 2013.

72. "Land of the "Boutique Jihad": The Foreign Fighters in Syria", *Fair Observer*, November 2013.

ian war theatre. According to the existing data from Turkish Ministry of Development, Turkish cities on the Syrian border are not on top of Turkey's development list. Among six cities (Şırnak, Şanlıurfa-Hatay-Kilis-Gaziantep and Mardin) only Gaziantep appears the most developed (faring the 30th) in the 81 city-list<sup>73</sup> while others lag far behind Gaziantep.<sup>74</sup> Even so, the latter finds smuggling as an output of war industry, particularly for those in dire economic conditions. So much so that by May 2014 Turkish government decided to erect a wall on parts of the Syrian border for security reasons and preventing smugglers.<sup>75</sup>

Turkey's role in the Syrian civil war often gets caught in domestic political crossfire. Politically Turkish border towns are mostly the conservative ruling AK Party's constituency. The latest manifestation was the 2014 local elections that saw the party's sweeping victory. It won 14 of 22 border towns in southern Turkey (Yayladağı, Altınözü, Reyhanlı, Kumlu, Kırıkhan, Hassa, Karkamış, Musabeyli, Kilis (Centre), Elbeyli, Birecik, Akçakale, Harran and Ceylanpınar) while the Kurdish nationalist party BDP won seven (Suruç, Kızıltepe, Artuklu, Nusaybin, Silopi, Cizre and İdil) and Turkish Nationalist Party MHP won one (Oğuzeli).<sup>76</sup> With the exception of Suruç, the towns controlled by BDP are neighbor to Qamislo Canton, an area controlled by the Syrian Kurdish nationalist wing PYD. Oğuzeli has mostly Turkmen population and is neighbor to Syria's Turkmen population. Although both BDP and MHP criticize Erdogan's Syria policy for its lack of sympathy to the sufferings of Syrian Kurds and Syrian Turkmens re-

spectively; neither can be labelled as "pro-Assad" or "pro-regime". The only major political party that totally opposes Turkey's Syria policy is the secular main opposition party CHP, who is also opposed to Turkey's involvement in the US-led international coalition formed to destroy ISIS.<sup>77</sup> For instance, it had become commonplace during the election campaign for CHP to accuse Erdoğan for being an "al-Qaeda spokesperson",<sup>78</sup> while then PM Erdogan easily called CHP as a "Baathist" party.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, CHP's Hatay MP Ediboğlu holds that 20.000 anti-regime fighters have been in and out of Turkey's borders to fight Assad forces and criticizes decision-makers for their inability to stem the flow of 300 Chechen foreign fighters, who, he alleges, 'have been staying at the hotels of Yayladağ province of Hatay for months, crossing the border to wage war against Assad forces in Syria on a daily basis'.<sup>80</sup> The governor of Şanlıurfa İ. Küçük, on the other hand, dismisses out of hand any threat at the border zone either from IS or others.<sup>81</sup> In all, it seems reasonable to think that the anti-Assad local political landscape and the administrative bureaucracy of the border areas might have helped to turn a blind eye to the presence and flow of foreign fighters in Turkey.

## DISCUSSION: THE WAR, THE NET AND THE SELF

It is true that many gruesome videos of European jihadists in Syria posted in the YouTube are sending shivers and igniting debate. However, the woeful discourse of 'the return of the European fighters' by European politicians is adversely interiorizing threats and insecurity of the Syrian war

73. "İllerin Sosyo-Ekonomik Gelişmişlik Sırası güncellendi", Dicle Kalkınma Ajansı, <http://www.dika.org.tr/upload/archive/files/Sosyo-Ekonomik%20G%C3%B6stergeler%202011.pdf> (20 April 2014)

74. Kilis 63rd, Şanlıurfa 73rd, Mardin 74th, Şırnak 78th and Hatay 46th.

75. "Turkey builds wall in token effort to secure border with Syria", *Reuters*, 5 May 2014.

76. See: <http://secim.haberler.com/2014/> (Date of view: 1 October 2014).

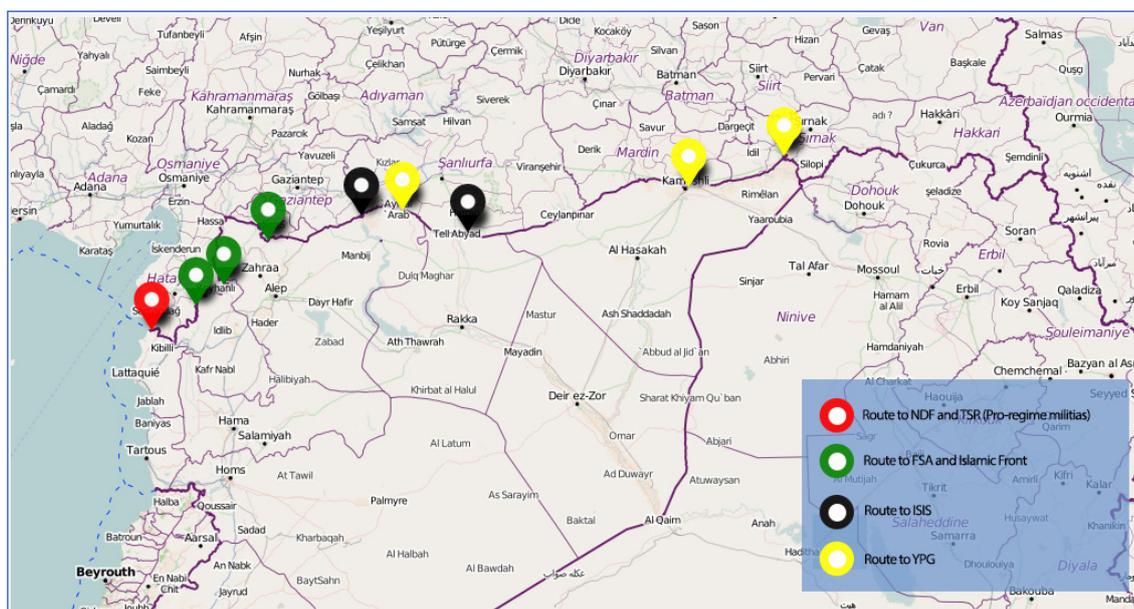
77. *CNNTurk*, 29.09.2014.

78. "El Kaide'nin sözcülüğüne mi soyundu?", *Bigün*, 15 March 2014.

79. "Muhalefete 'Baasçı' eleştirisi' Esad'dan önce CHP tepki verdi", *Türkiye*, 26 March 2014.

80. *CNNTurk*, 11 September, 2014.

81. "Sınırdaki eylem, müdahale ve hortum", *Hürriyet*, 22 September, 2014.



Source: [http://umap.openstreetmap.fr/en/map/untitled-map\\_17667#7/36.191/39.749](http://umap.openstreetmap.fr/en/map/untitled-map_17667#7/36.191/39.749)

front. In an effort to contain domestic spillover of the latter, European governments construct both the Syrian war and its ostensible European accomplices as part of the uncontrollable realm of the ‘foreign otherness’, distinct from the safety of ‘domestic sameness’. This double-move of exteriorizing the causes of war and yet interiorizing its threats is an unhelpful move. For, at least the claim that the terrorism threat posed by the return of European fighters is produce of ‘foreign’ factors (e.g., an in-built religious extremism) needs careful scrutiny. The tendency of governments to focus on the distinction between the ‘domestic’ (European) nationality of the fighters and their ‘foreign’ (Salafi) ideology belies the complicated nature of the process of radicalization documented above. As this study hopes to have shown, the latter defies easy categorizations and their attendant dichotomies of inside-outside or modern and pre-modern.<sup>82</sup> These fighters have neither been religious extremists ex nihilo nor have they necessarily got an in-built tendency for terrorism. It would therefore be simplistic

to entertain the idea that taking part in the war would necessarily make the fighters ‘potential terrorists’ for the domestic community.

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>83</sup> French intelligence finds these figures conservative and predicts a far higher set of numbers. Although the French journalist Oumar Ouahmane reckons that French fighters are mostly unwilling to return to France,<sup>84</sup> the governments nonetheless plan for the worst case scenario. France and England are now collaborating to protect themselves against such a threat.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, a possible extremist spillover onto Europe has become a nightmare frenzy for the European powers. According to UK of-

83. “ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans”, <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>

84. “Ces djihadistes français partis en Syrie qui “ne veulent pas revenir”, *France 24*, 18 February 2014.

85. “UK, France meet as EU ponders jihadist spillover from Syria”, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Special/2014/01/31/EU-nations-weigh-risk-of-jihadist-spillover-from-Syria/UPI-70911391209479/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2014/01/31/EU-nations-weigh-risk-of-jihadist-spillover-from-Syria/UPI-70911391209479/), 31 January 2014.

officials nearly 250 British returned from Syria and MI5 is now working to deal possible threats from the returnees.<sup>86</sup> Scandinavian countries Norway<sup>87</sup> and Sweden<sup>88</sup> too are concerned about the similar threats emanating from Syria returnees.

**Aaron Zelin claims that foreign rebel fighters are representing less than 10% of all rebels in Syria and that it would be simply wrong to lump together all the foreign rebel fighters as members of al-Qaeda and ISIS because there are many foreign fighters who joined the fight with their own distinct agendas.**

Despite officials and politicians often sounding alarms, it would nonetheless be incorrect to assume these fighters would automatically pose threats to domestic society once they return home. There are also foreign fighters in Syria who do not want or plan to attack their home countries upon their return.<sup>89</sup> It would, therefore, be inaccurate to presume all the fighters would turn against the authorities of their home countries. For instance, Aaron Zelin claims that foreign rebel fighters are representing less than 10% of all rebels in Syria and that it would be simply wrong to lump together all the foreign rebel fighters as members of al-Qaeda and ISIS because there are many foreign fighters who joined the fight with their own distinct agendas.<sup>90</sup> Some of them clear-

ly feel the UK is their home and that the idea of jihad in UK is surreal.<sup>91</sup> Still, the alarmist tone is often shored up institutionally. For instance, the EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove is adamant that even if not all fighters can be classified as radical they will nonetheless 'become radical fighters and their return will be a serious threat for homeland security'.<sup>92</sup> Expert scholars such as Thomas Hegghammer, on the other hand, 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>93</sup>

## CONTAINING THE RADICALIZED SELF

Even if not all foreign fighters are threats to home countries and other states, the need to contain the radicalized self is self-evident. A recent UNSC Resolution voted 15-0 in favor of a legally binding resolution under Chapter 7 calling on 193 UN member nations to harshly criminalize for their citizens to travel abroad to fight with and recruit for terror groups. However, as President Obama himself highlighted at the meeting 'resolutions alone will not be enough. Promises on paper cannot keep us safe. Lofty rhetoric and good intentions will not stop a single terrorist attack. The words spoken here today must be matched and translated into action'<sup>94</sup>

Leaving aside the 'lofty rhetoric', how can a radicalized self be contained? Perhaps it is better to start with the basics: containing the threat of the returnee fighters should go beyond summary prosecution, revoking citizenship or determining guilt by simple association. Instead,

86. "British jihadist warns life is hard in Syria and hundreds return to UK", *The Telegraph*, 17 February 2014.

87. "Norway faces Syria jihadist threat", *Ice News*, 3 March 2014.

88. "Swedish intelligence concerned about Syrian jihadists", *Long War Journal*, 17 June 2013.

89. "The next step on the jihadist trail: a tough return home", *France 24*, 26 September 2014.

90. Aaron Zelin, "ICSR Insight: European Foreign Fighters in Syria", ICSR, <http://icsr.info/2013/04/icsr-insight-european-foreign-fighters-in-syria-2/>, April 2013.

91. "Who are the British jihadists in Syria?", *BBC*, 15 October 2013.

92. "More and More Europeans Are Flying to Syria to Fight Assad", *Vice*, 14 May 2013.

93. Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting", *American Political Science Review*, February 2013, p.12.

94. "U.S., Security Council take on foreign fighters" *Politico*, 24 September 2014.

European governments are hard pressed to understand and engage with those returnees. A two-tiered online and offline approach is due here. First offline, a much needed dialogue with the virtual Ummah should start with discarding the myths that militant extremism is caused by religion, lack of education or poverty. In many cases discussed above, ‘the root-cause’ approach to terrorism<sup>95</sup> simply does not readily relate to above examples. De-radicalization policies and programs must focus on innovative ways to reintegrate foreign fighters into civilian life. Potential foreign fighters should be socially made less vulnerable to misinterpretations of the religious texts and selective passages that are used to justify violent behavior. Instead, they should be exposed to the plurality of Islamic commentary and scholarship of 1,400 years for doctrinal restoration. Importantly, the latter effort should run parallel to the efforts of experts in addressing ‘the depths of personal need and the peculiar nature of adolescent development that make al-Qaeda’s message resonate with young men’.<sup>96</sup>

Secondly, countering online radicalization should include both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ measures. The ‘negative’ measures include denying access to information and other materials published by extremists. However, this should be done with great care. Indeed, removing, IP or content filtering, hiding or blocking websites can get democratic governments caught between a rock (the need to protect society from harm) and a hard place (the loss of legitimacy due to the attempt to limit free speech and censorship).<sup>97</sup> Crucially, negative measures by the governments run the risk of fueling a sense of exclusion and impression that Muslims’ freedom of expression is exclusively targeted. Positive measures, on the

other hand, include alternative religious messages or attractive forms of content that could counter, challenge and ultimately neutralize extremists’ political messages. Overall, the practical objective should be reducing the extremists’ ‘audience share’ in the internet. Some positive measures are quite insightful such as funding community projects such as the ‘Black Country Imams’ scheme, which aimed training domestic clerics and promoting positive Muslim self-awareness, community resilience and civic participation, however, the downside is that these projects mostly revolve around Muslim communities, which in turn could make Muslims feel they are the ‘problem’.<sup>98</sup> According to a recent survey, a majority of young British Muslims could not feel able to ‘discuss extremism and terrorism freely in the presence of authority figures, even in universities’.<sup>99</sup>

Understanding the processes of radicalization and the perverse effects of non-action by European governments in the face of grave consequences of Syrian war is a prerequisite for preventing the potential threat posed by the European fighters. It is also necessary to address the reasons for the participation of Europeans in the Syrian War such as the humanitarian crisis and war crimes ‘festered’ by the Western in-action in Syria or the alienation and marginalization and the resultant disconnect with home states and societies.<sup>100</sup> The proposed alternative to this understanding is likely to be further social marginalization and state action by the governments that would include the withdrawal of their European passports making them stateless. Such a ‘blanket-ban’ would be tantamount to what Derrida calls ‘autoimmune process’ whereby Western

95. Richard Jackson, et.al. *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*, (Palgrave, McMillan: 2011), p. 9-29.

96. John M. Venhaus, “Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda”, *US Institute of Peace Special Report*, 236, 2010, p. 18.

97. “Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action”, *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) Report*, (2009), p. 14-22 and 42-48.

98. “Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action”, *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) Report*, (2009), p. 46.

99. “Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action”, *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) Report*, (2009), p. 19, ft. 47.

100. “Blanket-ban on Brit fighters returning from Syria may not be best answer” RT, 14 February 2014.

democratic governments adapt a ‘vicious circle of [domestic] repression’, that is ‘producing, reproducing and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm’.<sup>101</sup> Ironically this might even make the European governments resemble the very regimes they criticize<sup>102</sup> such as the Syrian regime in the name of protecting themselves against the threat posed by the ‘potential terrorists’.

## CONCLUSION

It is increasingly the case that the Internet enabled networks replace vertically integrated hierarchies as the dominant form of social organization, for the traditional authority figures seem to have lost their grip on the identity construction and practices of young Muslims.<sup>103</sup> In other words, instead of (territorially focused) political and social activism; the new norm constructs self-isolation, personal (digital) education and radicalization of the Self out of the ‘armchair mujahid surfer’. Indeed, thanks to the digital social media platforms, the latter easily embarks upon a self-radicalization process enabled by ‘the space of flows’ that is ‘isolating and subduing the logic of experience embodied in the space of places’.<sup>104</sup> The new logic sidesteps the mosques and other conventional social spaces that undertake face-to-face interaction, promote education and offer regulation. Many terrorist groups are recruited by small group activism and through Internet. The emergent global jihadi-hypertext is a techy ‘fourth world’ embodied by jihadi chat-forums, video clips, manuals, DIY munitions

productions, volumes of doctrinal-educational Salafist materials that make up the content of around 6000 websites, which espouse radical ideologies and generate a ‘virtual Ummah’ of believers living a ‘double rupture’ with the corrupt West, traditional/mainstream Islam and rulers.<sup>105</sup> The new Muslim defender of the virtual Ummah can then easily withdraw into his radicalized Self in order to unleash hell in the name of the oppressed Muslims, regardless of national and regional differences. As for the necessity to contain the radicalized self, it is necessary to realize that both online and offline measures will take considerable social and political effort to bear fruit and delicate social reintegration amongst others, just as it will take years ‘to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as ISIL’.<sup>106</sup>

101. Jacques Derrida, “Autoimmunity real and symbolic suicides”, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* ed. G. Borradori, (Chicago University Press, Chicago: 2003), p. 99.

102. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, California: Stanford University Press., 2005, p. 40.

103. Juan Stemann, “Middle East Salafism’s Influence and the Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Europe”, *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 10(3), 2006.

104. Manuel Castells, “Epilogue: Informationalism and the Network Society” in *The Hacker Ethic*, Pekka Himanen, (Random House, New York: 2001), p. 171.

105. Dominique Thomas, “Britain Rejecting Western Modernity?”, in *The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington’s Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to the Virtual Ummah*, ed. Stig Hansen, Atle Mesoy and Tuncay Kardas, Hurst, London: 2009, p. 247.

106. “Statement by the President on ISIL”, The White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/remarks-president-barack-obama-address-nation>, 10 September 2014.



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**T**he phenomenon of foreign fighters is highly topical and hotly debated by almost everyone including journalists, pundits, and top public officials. There are a number of vital questions to which the global society desperately and hastily seeks answers: Who are these young men and women joining the civil war in Syria? What are their motivations to fight a foreign war? What is their emergent 'hypergood'? What is the role of social media in their radicalization? How can a radicalized Muslim self be contained? This study examines the case of European foreign fighters by employing a threefold analytical framework of identity-claims, meaning-making/motives and means of radicalization. First section briefly investigates identity and motives of the European citizen fighters for joining the Syrian civil war. Second section analyzes the impact of social media in the radicalization process, the threats they pose to their home countries and the role of Turkey's borders play as a gateway into the Syrian War theatre. Last section, provides a discussion of the findings and offers a set of responses necessary to counter and withstand the tribulations of life with foreign fighters. Rather than a pedantic enquiry, this study hence also seeks to provide a set of practical answers to pressing questions above.



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