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Citation

Roy van Zijldewijn, J. H. de. (2023). Radicalisation of 'foreign fighters'. In J. Busher, L. Malkki, & S. Marsden (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook on radicalisation and countering radicalisation* (pp. 231-244). Abingdon: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003035848-17

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4212624>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

RADICALISATION OF 'FOREIGN FIGHTERS'

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The emergence of studies into foreign fighters

A cursory search of academic databases using the keyword 'foreign fighters' seems to suggest that they are a truly modern phenomenon. The number of studies on this topic prior to 2010 was low. A Google Scholar search displays 2,750 hits for the period 1900–2009, compared to 17,100 hits for the decade that followed (2010–20). The level of academic interest reflected in these figures does not correspond to the level of involvement of foreign fighters in conflicts; they have been present in conflicts for centuries.

As a matter of fact, before the emergence of nation-states with large armies that gradually developed between the 17th and early 19th centuries, fighting forces often consisted of large numbers of foreign mercenaries. When nation-states could start to rely on their own national forces, this changed, and the number of mercenaries involved in conflicts slowly decreased (O'Connor & Piketty, 2020, p. 2). Nevertheless, the phenomenon of people taking up arms abroad remained a common feature of conflicts. David Malet studied the involvement of foreign fighters in conflicts between 1816 and 2005, showing that 70 out of 331 civil conflicts attracted such combatants (Malet, 2013, p. 43). In that sense, it is no surprise that conflicts today also attract foreign fighters. What has changed in recent years, however, is the unprecedented surge in both academic and public interest in the topic.

This recent increase in interest did not emerge from academic debates in conference halls. The spark that ignited this (academic) fire could be found in Syria around 2011. Thousands of people from across the globe travelled to the country, initially to partake in the fight against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The nature of this conflict rapidly transformed, as jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (later Jabhat Fateh al-Sham) and Islamic State (IS) increasingly gained power and eventually controlled large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq. Estimates of the total number of fighters vary, but the United Nations Security Council calculated in late 2017 that over 40,000 foreign fighters from over 110 countries had travelled to the region (United Nations, 2017). This steep rise in the number of foreign fighters was followed by a wave of around 17,000 publications that referred to the topic. Figuratively speaking, this meant that a new publication emerged for every third foreign fighter who joined the conflict. Among those thousands of foreign fighters were around 6,000 originating from European Union member states (5,684) and North America (430) (Pokalova, 2019, p. 818).

Most scholars were interested in this diverse group of Western jihadist fighters, who dominated the news for many years. The question of why men (and later also women) from relatively well-off backgrounds decided to join an organisation that has been involved in terrible crimes, including genocide, according to the UN (UN News, 2021), intrigued academics. The rise in studies was also a response to the growing concerns among policymakers, practitioners, and the wider public about the potential threat these fighters could pose. This threat was increasingly defined as the one that returnees would pose upon returning to their home countries (Bakker & De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2015). As a result, much of our understanding today is based on this specific sub-set of jihadist foreign fighters and has been informed by policy-oriented questions or concerns. More than a decade after the start of the Syrian conflict, it is high time to assess where the academic community stands with regard to understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon.

This chapter aims to assess the state of the art of research into foreign fighters. As many recent studies have investigated jihadist foreign fighters, this cohort features prominently in this chapter. However, the chapter also adopts a broader view by looking at various studies into other types of foreign fighters, using examples from, among others, the Spanish Civil War and the Waffen-SS. Many studies into the radicalisation process of foreign fighters have tried to answer one or more of the following questions: who are the foreign fighters, what are their motivations, and how are they mobilised or recruited? This chapter will discuss how academics have approached and answered these three questions. It will examine how and why scholars have different interpretations of the role of specific factors in the radicalisation process of foreign fighters. The chapter will end by assessing where we stand today and reflecting on some of the main gaps and questions for future research.

The definition question: contested elements

Similar to most terms in the field of terrorism studies, defining foreign fighters has not been straightforward or uncontested. Malet defined them as ‘non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts’ (Malet, 2013, p. 9, originally proposed in 2009). Hegghammer built on Malet’s definition to provide his own description of the term:

an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid.

(Hegghammer, 2011, pp. 57–58)

Both authors position foreign fighters within the context of an insurgency where they aid the non-state side, which is generally understood to be the weaker party involved in a conflict. Foreigners fortifying the ranks of an official military organisation, such as state forces, would generally not be considered foreign fighters, nor are soldiers who are sent abroad as part of their national military service. Yet, the question can be raised why foreigners who join or receive support from states should be excluded, such as the thousands of Shia fighters backed by Iran who travelled to Syria after 2012 to keep Assad’s regime in power (Reiff, 2020; Smyth, 2015). The reasoning behind excluding such fighters is tied to the fourth element of Hegghammer’s definition: such state-sponsored fighters are usually paid. Foreign fighters who join non-state factions, however, also often receive some form of payment; examples are found in Syria and with regard to those fighting with separatists in Ukraine (Bakker & De Bont, 2016, p. 849; Mareš, 2017, p. 33; Rácz, 2017, p. 68).

The question of payment is therefore not necessarily dichotomous, but it does point to an underlying assumption about who foreign fighters are: they fight because they believe in a cause, not because of a desire to make money or to simply have a form of employment. Some scholars thus chose to approach this issue of monetary reward less rigidly. Moore and Tumelty, for instance, defined foreign fighters as 'non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict zone to participate in hostilities' (Moore & Tumelty, 2008, p. 412). This definition would also include those who join the non-insurgent side of a conflict, but it excludes mercenaries, who often show little to no interest in the reasons behind the conflict itself (UN, 1989). These examples show that the definition of foreign fighters is not only based on what they do but also based on why they do it.

Another debated element of the definition is the extent of overlap between the terms foreign fighter and terrorist, as both could travel abroad to take part in hostilities. This issue became more pressing over recent years against the backdrop of the thousands of foreign fighters who joined IS, a designated terrorist organisation according to many countries and international organisations such as the UN and EU. The same overlap was visible in the case of those who joined the infamous Al-Qaeda training camps in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region while participating in combat activities around the turn of the century (Wright, 2006, pp. 322, 347). Historically, however, such overlap has been rare, and it does not seem to warrant the general and frequent conflation of the two terms. There is usually a difference between those who travel to fight in an insurgency and those who go abroad to attend a terrorist training camp or acquire skills with the primary aim of applying those at home (Mendelsohn, 2011, p. 193; De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2014b, p. 61). The current terminology of 'foreign terrorist fighters' that is widely used in policy circles might increase such conflation (United Nations Security Council, 2014). The use of the term also draws attention away from the fact that at least hundreds of foreign fighters have joined the Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) or the Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga active in the same conflict and are not listed as terrorist organisations by the UN, EU, or US (Tuck et al., 2016, p. ii).

A final element of the definition is linked to the question of when someone can be called a fighter. Historian Nir Arielli preferred to use the term 'foreign volunteers', as many fighters preferred to call themselves. Examples are the *Freiwilligen*, who joined the Waffen-SS during World War II, or the *volontaires* who assisted France in World War I (Arielli, 2017, p. 5). While this term might sound euphemistic, Arielli explained that the term indicates that people could also take on non-combat roles during a conflict. Performing more supportive, non-combat duties is vital to sustaining a conflict. This question regarding the extent of involvement in combat duties for someone to be considered a foreign fighter became more pressing in recent years, particularly after IS declared its Caliphate in 2014 and attracted a much broader audience of supporters. Thousands of women from across the globe travelled to the Caliphate to support the organisation, albeit rarely in a direct combat role (Cook & Vale, 2018). Nevertheless, these women are widely perceived to be part of the 'foreign fighter phenomenon' and are generally included in the statistics of foreign fighter counts. Thus, when referring to foreign fighters today, it implicitly also includes those who play a supporting role in combat activities. It often remains unclear how direct and concrete those efforts need to be. This question also has an important legal dimension. Some public prosecution services try to circumvent the issue by charging women with participation in a terrorist organisation rather than participation in an illegal fighting force.

Concluding this section on the definition question, there seems to be consensus that foreign fighters are individuals who travel to another country to join a conflict for ideological reasons. Contested elements include the side they fight on (state or non-state), which is indirectly connected to the issue of payment versus the primacy of ideological motivations; the difference between a

terrorist and a foreign fighter; and lastly, how concrete their contribution to the combat itself needs to be in order to be considered fighters.

The ‘who’ and ‘why’ questions: analytical lenses to understand the profiles

Over the past years, many studies into the profiles of foreign fighters and their motivations have been published. The majority of these studies have focused on those who joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. Before discussing the main results and debates regarding these jihadists, it is useful to assess the state of the art when it comes to understanding the profiles and motivations of foreign fighters more broadly. This section will first outline some of the broader and historical perspectives and then discuss studies that focus on case studies or individual fighters.

Broader and historical perspectives versus individual perspectives

The earlier-mentioned works of Malet and Arielli are prime examples of such a broader approach to the foreign fighter phenomenon. Malet offered a unique perspective by studying foreign fighter mobilisations in widely different contexts, ranging from the Texas Revolution (1835–6), the Spanish Civil War (1936–9), and the Israeli War of Independence (1947–9) to the *mujahideen*, or holy warriors, who fought in Afghanistan (1978–92). Despite the wide variety in the backgrounds and ideological commitments of the parties involved, Malet noted a common pattern in recruitment: the recruitment messages aimed to convince potential fighters of the idea that a transnational community was facing an existential threat and hence, needed to be helped (Malet, 2013, p. 211). Thus, foreign fighters join a battle to protect a group, community, identity, or set of values.

Examples that demonstrate the emphasis on defensive frames can be found across conflicts with widely different ideological configurations. For instance, those who fought alongside the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War wanted to stop the rise of fascism and were often motivated by communist views. The thousands who fought on the other side, aiding General Franco and his forces, wanted to protect Catholicism from the threat of communism (Keene, 2001; Petram & Kruizinga, 2020, p. 73). Similarly, those who heeded the calls of sheikh Azzam in Afghanistan in the 1980s responded to his claims that the *ummah* – the Islamic community – was under attack by the Soviet Union – a godless regime – and had to be defended (Azzam, 1987, pp. 15–16; Hegghammer, 2020, p. 303; De Roy van Zijdwijn, 2014a, pp. 36–37). Some of the ‘volunteers’ who joined the Waffen-SS on the eastern front during World War II explained that they did not primarily fight to support National Socialism, but that they were first and foremost engaged in a protective war of ‘Europe against Bolshevism’ (Smith et al., 1999, p. 76). Foreign fighters on the side of the Ukrainian forces who went there around 2014–6 and again in 2022, wanted to expel the Russians who threatened the integrity of the Ukrainian nation by invading the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and even larger parts of the country in 2022 whereas many Russian fighters who bolstered separatist groups claimed to fight to stop the rise of fascism that they allegedly witnessed in Ukraine (Rácz, 2017, p. 68; Weijenberg & De Roy van Zijdwijn, 2021). Despite the large differences between those conflicts, they overlap in the sense that the main mobilisation rhetoric referred to a defensive war against a force that threatened the core identity and values of a community.

While Malet focused mostly on the messages of recruitment instead of the personal motivations of fighters, he attempted to briefly link these two in his conclusions. He argued that the potential recruitment power of foreign fighter movements could be limited by decreasing the salience of transnational identities for individuals. Instead, feelings of attachment to the nation and fellow citizens should be strengthened, as they would decrease the chance of someone becoming a foreign

fighter (Malet, 2013, p. 213). This observation shifts the focus from propaganda and recruitment towards the role of identity and meaning at the individual level. If someone is strongly tied to his or her own environment, attempts to activate a different, transnational identity might be less successful.

This idea was further examined by Arielli, who identified the 'search for meaning' as the common denominator for all foreign fighters across conflicts (Arielli, 2017, p. 80). He argued that this search for meaning is both internal and social. Arielli provided several examples where he witnessed this search for meaning. For instance, he discussed Western fighters who joined Kurdish forces in the fight against IS, quoting a Canadian fighter: 'I have to admit I'm having the time of my life out here. If you ever have the chance, I strongly recommend fighting terrorists as a great way to get yourself out of your various existential funks' (Arielli, 2017, p. 86). The frame of fighting against terrorists provided the ideological framework that supported someone in dealing with personal issues.

Ideological versus personal factors

It is this mix between ideological convictions and personal, more mundane factors motivating fighters that is often found in detailed accounts of individual fighters. This mix, however, also seems to trouble those who want a straightforward answer to the question of which set of factors is most important when understanding the radicalisation of foreign fighters. As will be discussed below in the context of jihadist foreign fighters, scholars do not agree on the relative weight of various factors to explain why someone becomes a foreign fighter. Some of these differences reflect genuine academic or fundamental disagreements about what mobilises people to fight, or more broadly, to become violent extremists.

This chapter would argue, however, that these differences are at least also partially due to a difference in focus. Scholars who use broader, historical, or comparative perspectives aim to explain why foreign fighters join particular conflicts on a macro level. They often discuss the ideological configurations and broader trends in mobilisation and recruitment. Such studies rely on the propaganda and recruitment material of insurgent groups, sources that tend to emphasise ideological frames or messages. Other studies adopt a more micro-level focus, diving into the personal (hi)stories of foreign fighters while often paying little to no attention to recruitment messages or the broader historical and cultural contexts. In that case, mundane factors will start to appear, including personal grievances, life-changing events, and social factors. It is virtually inevitable that researchers will find mundane factors when zooming in on someone's life – regardless of the topic being studied – while it would be complicated to discover them when exclusively looking at broader trends but not at the individuals involved. Similarly, broader ideological trends or historical settings easily get lost when you dive deep into a person's trajectory. As Dutch football legend Johan Crujff once said: 'you'll only see it when you understand it'.

Several scholars have attempted to adopt a broader focus by looking at ideological factors and discussing how these might play out on the individual level. For instance, Rekawek noted that many foreign fighters who joined the conflict in Ukraine during the first wave of mobilisation around 2014–6 had 'extreme right wing or "nationalist" convictions' and often came from similar ideological milieus (Rekawek, 2020, p. 3). Yet he also concluded that the decision about which side they were fighting, separatist or pro-Ukrainian, was often not based on ideological motivations but on individual or group connections. He argued that this demonstrates the 'shallowness of the ideological convictions' of those involved (Rekawek, 2020, p. 4). Another example is a study of Dutch fighters who joined the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. Many of those

fighters had long-standing communist sympathies and were members of the Dutch Communist Party. Their decision to join the fight, however, was often preceded by various forms of personal hardship. Many young Dutch men had become unemployed in the late 1930s and, in some cases, had also lost their sense of purpose in life. They found a renewed sense of identity and meaning in fighting fascism in Spain (Petram & Kruizinga, 2020, pp. 32–36). Similarly, around half of the American volunteers in the Lincoln Brigade said they had been unemployed prior to joining the conflict (Arielli, 2013).

Such a conjunction of political convictions and personal circumstances was also found in the case of the volunteers in the Waffen-SS, the military branch of the SS, who fought in World War II. It has been estimated that more than half of its (at least) 600,000 soldiers did not originate from Germany but predominantly came from North Western European countries (Gingerich, 1997, p. 815; Smith et al., 1999, p. 73). Among them were around 6,000 Danish fighters, whose ideological convictions differed widely. For a significant number of fighters, there was no ‘consistent ideological belief that would identify them as convinced National Socialists’ (Smith et al., 1999, p. 88). For the more highly ranked officers, however, ideological motivations might have played a crucial role. Such a stronger focus on ideological motivations was emphasised in another study of Danish, Swedish, and Swiss Waffen-SS volunteers. The author sketched the following profile of these fighters: a man of ‘a middle or upper-class upbringing, well-educated and integrated into his society. Moreover, he would have a cosmopolitan outlook or an openness to the wider world [combined with an] ideological inclination towards fascism with an imbedded pan-Europeanist tension’ (Gutmann, 2013, pp. 591–592). There have been numerous examples of highly educated, successful individuals who decided to take up arms to support Hitler’s National Socialist regime. This description runs counter to what many would expect (or find morally acceptable) when referring to those who voluntarily played a role in such a horrific episode in European history.

There is a widespread tendency to label those whose actions we find incomprehensible as one of the following two options: they are either long-time, die-hard ideological fanatics who are no longer susceptible to any form of reasoning, or they are desperate, low-opportunity, or mentally challenged individuals who fell prey to life’s circumstances and hence were too weak to resist the lure of evil. Neither description, despite their instinctive appeal, suffices to understand those who joined the Waffen-SS (Gutmann, 2013, p. 588). Similar simplified descriptions have also surfaced time and again in relation to the thousands of jihadist fighters who joined another genocidal regime: that of IS.

Jihadists foreign fighters since 2011

Various scholars have decided to accept the challenge of studying, almost in real-time, the large numbers of foreign fighters who joined the fight in Syria and Iraq. Many initially tried to make sense of ‘their’ foreign fighter contingent by looking at data and profiles of those who departed from their countries of origin (Bakker & De Bont, 2016; Gustafsson & Ranstorp, 2017; Marone & Vidino, 2019; Reynolds & Hafez, 2019; Van Ostaeyen, 2017). While these studies acknowledge the difficulty of establishing a profile of the fighters, most still attempt to do so.

While the list of included characteristics varies per study, there seems to be tacit agreement that certain factors are relevant to include. Commonly found are gender, age, ethnic background, religious beliefs, socio-economic status, mental health issues, and crime history. Dawson analysed the findings of 34 studies on Western foreign fighters published between 2014 and 2019 and the profiles that these studies sketched. Close to 80% of the foreign fighters were male; the average age was about 26. Many were citizens of the countries they departed from, but they had an immigrant

background and around 15% might have converted to Islam (Dawson, 2021, p. 2). Results that strongly diverged between countries or were less conclusive were related to socio-economic status, mental health issues, and crime history. Those from continental Europe often came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, while this was not commonly observed in the North American or British context (Dawson, 2021, p. 2). Data on mental health and a criminal past was often inconclusive (Dawson, 2021, p. 3).

While most scholars who sketched such a profile of their national contingent warned their readers not to draw (causal) conclusions from their findings, their decision to include certain characteristics implies that these hold some kind of explanatory value. We do not find any studies that include the musical preferences, dietary requirements, shoe size, or hair colour of foreign fighters in an attempt to educate the reader. Such profiles influence perceptions and could be used to legitimise policies applicable to groups of people who share such characteristics. A well-known issue with profiles, however, is the specificity problem: many individuals share the same characteristics, but only very few of those become foreign fighters (Sageman, 2004, p. 69). This raises doubt about the utility of such profiles, especially when there is no (hypothesised) underlying mechanism that could explain the correlation of some factors with the act of becoming a foreign fighter.

Push and pull factors

Moving beyond the profiles, many studies looking into jihadist fighters attempted to answer the 'why question' by distinguishing between so-called push and pull factors: what pushes someone away from their own country and what pulls them towards a particular conflict? This discussion shares similarities with the earlier mentioned discussion on ideological versus personal factors for non-jihadist fighters. Ideology, in this case the belief in the necessity to engage in jihad, is often considered to be the most important pull factor (others include the desire to help, adventure, or a sense of comradeship), while personal issues are often discussed as part of the push factors. Often-mentioned push factors pertain to socio-economic status, especially the issue of relative deprivation and feelings of injustice and discrimination that might be linked to it.

It seems common sense to note that an individual is affected by both push and pull factors. Scholars do not agree on the significance of factors, however, and ascribe greater explanatory value to some than to others. Coolsaet, for instance, questioned the alleged dominance of explanations that focused on the role of ideology. He argued that group dynamics and other factors that are part of the socialisation process are more important to understand why someone becomes a foreign fighter or a terrorist. As he states, 'in this process of political radicalisation into extremism, it is not the narrative (i.e. the ideology) that eventually lures an individual into terrorism' (Coolsaet, 2015, p. 6). He also pointed at the importance of socio-economic conditions. While he and others have warned that these do not form a 'direct pathway' to terrorism, they are nevertheless seen as significant markers of the environment of would-be fighters (Bakker & De Bont, 2016, p. 845; Coolsaet, 2015, p. 16).

References to socio-economic factors are widely found and seem to have gained more support in the past decade after having been deemed irrelevant or even unscientific for many years. Examples of studies that aimed to redirect the spotlight on such factors include Weenink's work (which also focused on mental health, among other factors) and Hegghammer's plea for a renewed academic investigation of the terrorism-poverty link during the Society for Terrorism Research Conference in 2016 (Hegghammer, 2016; Weenink, 2019). Scholars do not necessarily consider socio-economic factors to be significant in absolute terms. They mostly surface in relative terms, often in conjunction with other factors. For instance, a study into Swedish foreign fighters

concluded that more than 70% came from so-called exposed areas, ‘socially deprived areas hit by high criminality and low socio-economic status’ (Gustafsson & Ranstorp, 2017, p. 104). Such studies draw attention to a wide range of structural factors that compose the environment in which an individual is situated and that might push someone to become violent. Similarly, there has also been renewed attention on a so-called crime-terror nexus (Basra & Neumann, 2016; Ljubic et al., 2017; Marcus, 2021).

This move to more thoroughly investigate push factors and increasingly stress their importance as an explanatory factor has been met with criticism. For instance, Dawson questioned the alleged dominance of such factors in terrorism studies, which he argued has resulted in ideology and religion being considered mostly irrelevant (Dawson, 2021, p. 31). He ascribed this (perceived) widespread neglect of the role of ideology and religion to a lack of understanding of religiosity among scholars in Western, secular societies. Scholars might interpret quick conversion processes as being unauthentic and therefore showing their irrelevancy.

Conversely, Dawson argued that such quick and intense changes in someone’s ideological or religious outlook, when followed by a decision to engage in violence, actually demonstrate their significance (Dawson, 2021, p. 32). He warned not to overstate the importance of religion or ideology: ‘religiosity alone is not explanatorily adequate, any more than socioeconomic push factors. Both explanations lack the requisite specificity’ (Dawson, 2021, p. 32). This is similar to Coolsaet’s warning that socio-economic factors are not considered to be a direct pathway to terrorism. In another study, Dawson and Amarasingam conducted interviews with foreign fighters from several (predominantly Western) countries and concluded that the relative importance of pull factors was probably greater than that of push factors (Dawson & Amarasingam, 2017, p. 206). As the authors also noted, acknowledging that both types of factors play a role seems sensible. Researchers could try to determine the importance of certain factors in particular circumstances, although that remains an arduous task.

Macro-level approaches

A different way to approach the questions of who foreign fighters are and what drives them is to look at country-specific factors. Is there any link between country characteristics and the number of foreign fighters, and could they explain what pushes individuals away from their own countries to take up arms abroad? Scholars have performed various forms of regression analysis on national statistics to see if any correlation with the number of foreign fighters could be found. These studies were often motivated by a desire to test assumptions about structural factors and their link to violence.

Most studies found little evidence for the importance of structural factors on the national level, such as those linked to poverty. For instance, Pokalova looked at various political, economic, demographic, and social factors in 190 countries – including 103 from which fighters departed – and performed regression analysis to establish how these correlated to the number of foreign fighters. Interestingly, she found that countries with higher Human Development Index (HDI) levels were positively correlated to higher numbers of foreign fighters, yet so was the unemployment rate, but only in non-Muslim majority countries (Pokalova, 2019, p. 809). Similarly, Benmelech and Klor looked at various economic, political, and social conditions. Among other things, they also found that the number of foreign fighters was positively related to the HDI level (as well as GDP). Their conclusion was that economic or political factors might not explain the foreign fighter phenomenon and that ideology and social issues such as assimilation would be more relevant: ‘the difficulties of Muslim immigrants to integrate into rich, secularized and homogenous societies

might lead them to radicalise', the authors concluded based on their statistical analysis (Benmelech & Klor, 2020, p. 1459).

While Pokalova did not include any indicators related to relative deprivation, Benmelech and Klor included the Gini coefficient – a measure of income inequality – in some of their models. They found that, contrary to widespread expectations, the number of foreign fighters was negatively correlated with the level of economic inequality. They also found that countries with less ethnic and linguistic fractionalisation generally saw more individuals departing to become foreign fighters (Benmelech & Klor, 2020, pp. 1468, 1477). Both of these studies thus seem to provide little evidence for socio-economic (and to some extent social) push factors on a structural or country level. It must be acknowledged, however, that such studies cannot be used to explain or assess personal experiences. They cannot look into the minds of those involved to measure the experienced level of deprivation or inequity, regardless of national statistics.

Limits to understanding the 'who and why'

Similar to the ongoing debates about violent extremism, radicalisation, and terrorism more broadly, scholars continue to discuss why people become foreign fighters. While research can help improve our understanding, there might be limits to what can be scientifically proven. A realistic, or perhaps pessimistic, view would entail that it might be very difficult, if not impossible, to assess the 'true' reasons why someone did something. As Morrison recently noted, asking such broad questions in terrorism studies means that 'we are potentially setting ourselves up for failure' (Morrison, 2021, p. 4). Researchers have to deal with a plethora of challenges. This becomes even more pertinent when interviewing foreign fighters with the desire to use their testimonies to assess their motivations rather than considering these to be justifications or self-representations, which are much easier to determine.

The academic challenges researchers face in such interviews include distorted memory, hindsight bias, path dependency, a tendency to ex-post provide (or even believe in) rationalised 'accounts' to explain their decisions, attempts to impress the researcher, and fear of reprisals or prosecution. All of these factors could lead to altered testimonies (for a more thorough discussion of the benefits and challenges of conducting interviews, see, for instance, Dawson, 2019; Horgan, 2012; Khalil, 2019; Morrison, 2021). Further complicating the matter is the simple yet unwelcome fact that people might perform the same action for various different reasons or perform widely different actions for similar reasons. The painfully unsatisfying answer to the question of why people become foreign fighters is that it differs for each person. This does not mean that it is impossible to better understand some larger, commonly found groups of factors or the mechanisms by which these might have affected a particular individual. Concluding, scholars will most likely continue to debate, and disagree, why someone becomes a foreign fighter.

The 'how' question: analytical lenses to understand recruitment and mobilisation

As the question of why people become foreign fighters remains difficult to answer, some scholars have instead tried to understand how this is taking place. This corresponds to a broader trend in terrorism studies of scholars preferring to discuss (de-)mobilisation or (dis)engagement practices, in other words, behaviour, rather than processes of radicalisation or beliefs, or, in other words, thoughts. The underlying assumption is that many people share similar radical ideas and are confronted with similar structural conditions, but only some of them become foreign fighters.

Processes of recruitment and mobilisation, inextricably tied to social networks, are therefore the *sine qua non* needed for people to join movements.

The importance of social networks in terrorism studies more generally was strongly articulated by Sageman in his landmark work *Understanding Terror Networks* (Sageman, 2004). He noted that profiling attempts are of little value because of the specificity problem, but he identified a common denominator in the fact that all these individuals somehow ‘made a link to the jihad’ (Sageman, 2004, p. 99). Jihadist groups were mostly composed of young men who found each other through friendship, kinship, and discipleship and, later on, adopted jihadist beliefs and translated these into violent actions. Thus, Sageman considered ideology to be of secondary importance compared to social bonds. The process of recruitment was mostly bottom-up, through existing local networks and ties. Other scholars, such as Hoffmann, have argued that terrorist groups have been mostly involved in top-down recruitment efforts (Hoffman, 2006). What both authors have in common, along with many others, is the emphasis on the necessity of either top-down or bottom-up recruitment as having more explanatory value to understand why someone becomes a foreign fighter than focusing on structural (or personal, for that matter) factors only.

The importance of recruitment: historical examples

As foreign fighters often travel to distant conflicts, they might not be aware of cultural norms or do not speak the local language, which means that they would probably need some support to make their way into a conflict group. Such groups might introduce methods of vetting to ensure that those who intend to join have some value to the group or, less ambitiously, are not spies trying to infiltrate. The level of organised recruitment varies by conflict and group. There are several examples where organisations indeed played a crucial role in recruitment and mobilisation efforts. For instance, the Communist International (Comintern), controlled by the Soviet Union, helped many prospective fighters reach the battlefield in Spain (Raeburn, 2020, p. 721). Volunteers from various countries often met in Paris, where the Comintern (and other groups) had their offices (Arielli, 2013, p. 227; Petram & Kruijzinga, 2020, p. 65). For the Comintern itself, mobilising people to join the fight had significance beyond the conflict in Spain. It would be portrayed as a demonstration of international comradeship and brotherhood, bringing together the working classes from various nations, as strongly desired by the Soviet Union.

The recruitment of foreign fighters into the Waffen-SS also seemed to have been organised in a centralised, top-down manner. Heinrich Himmler, the Reich Leader of the SS, aimed to recruit ‘Germanic’ volunteers from countries that were deemed racially similar to Germany, such as Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Belgium. For instance, in June 1940, soon after the occupation of the Netherlands, he issued a document titled ‘Guidelines for the Acquiring of Dutch Volunteers’ that outlined the various ways in which Dutch citizens could be recruited for the Westland regiment (Gingerich, 1997, p. 822). Centralised recruitment efforts in these ‘Germanic lands’ would follow from 1941 onwards. The urgency of such efforts grew when Hitler planned to attack the giant army of the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa. High casualty rates among the German armed forces were to be expected, so reinforcements were strongly welcomed. As such, the recruitment of foreign volunteers was deemed significant for the German war efforts, although the actual numbers of foreigners that the Waffen-SS managed to enlist remained low at that particular time.

The importance of organised recruitment in explaining the high numbers of foreign fighters was also noticeable in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion in 1979. There was no significant influx of foreigners during the first years of the war. Abdullah Azzam was disappointed at this lack of

engagement by Muslims worldwide and played a crucial role in mobilising fighters. He travelled to various countries to give lectures in order to convince people to join the jihad in Afghanistan. Equally important, he set up the Services Bureau to provide various forms of logistical support to foreign fighters and their families (Hegghammer, 2020, pp. 205, 245; Wright, 2006, p. 119). From 1985 onwards, thousands of fighters joined the conflict, which can at least be partially ascribed to Azzam's zealous recruitment efforts and the global dissemination of propaganda material (Hegghammer, 2020, p. 244).

There are also examples of foreign fighter mobilisations characterised by less organised recruitment. For instance, the recent conflict in Syria and Iraq seemed to have attracted large numbers of fighters who joined the battle independently and without being facilitated. Especially in the early years of the conflict, many foreign fighters departed in small groups to travel to the Syrian border themselves without having any connections to armed groups (Vidino, 2014, p. 221). Several of them turned up unannounced and were sometimes rejected by groups, although not every jihadist movement had a similar approach to scrutinising prospective fighters. For instance, Holman noted that IS initially had less strict procedures than Al-Qaeda-related groups (Holman, 2016, p. 6). The national cohorts of foreign fighters subsequently played an important role in mobilising sympathisers at home to also come and join the conflict, providing them with practical advice on how to do so (Bakker & De Bont, 2016; Coolsaet, 2015; Vidino, 2014). In addition, IS was well-versed in producing slick propaganda material that spread widely via the Internet and showed would-be fighters rosy pictures of life in the Caliphate and tried to convince them to find ways to travel there.

The role of the Internet in mobilising and facilitating people's travel to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq has been widely debated. While there has been ample evidence that the Internet has provided people with more opportunities to access propaganda material, most studies conclude that physical, face-to-face interactions are often indispensable for people to join extremist movements (Behr et al., 2013). There is little support for a scenario in which individuals 'radicalised' fully online and then decided to travel to a distant conflict without having prior physical contact with other individuals, although some exceptions do exist (Whittaker, 2018, p. 118).

Dispersed recruitment: what the map can tell us

As the conflict in Syria and Iraq attracted thousands of foreign fighters from a long list of countries across the globe, it is easy to forget that recruitment and mobilisation have mostly been clustered at the local level. Especially in the Western European context, where this type of data is available, large regional differences can be observed. Reynolds and Hafez studied the mobilisation in Germany and noted strong clusters: around half of the foreign fighters in their dataset came from the state of North-Rhine Westphalia (Reynolds & Hafez, 2019, p. 682). In the Dutch context, relatively large clusters departed from The Hague, Delft, Gouda, and Arnhem (Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016, p. 36). The Belgian cities of Vilvoorde and Mechelen stood out, while the same applied to Aarhus (Denmark) and Gothenburg (Sweden) (Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016, pp. 25, 29, 48). Similarly, in Austria and Switzerland, facilitation networks for foreign fighters were found in specific places, such as Vienna and Graz (Austria) and Winterthur in Switzerland (Saal & Lippe, 2021, p. 37).

Such differences could not be explained by the relative size of the Muslim population or by large differences in, for instance, socio-economic conditions, as these are relatively similar within countries in Western Europe. As such, they are another indication of the importance of local networks and recruitment efforts in explaining foreign fighter mobilisations.

Concluding remarks: where do we stand today?

There has been a strong increase in academic interest in the foreign fighter phenomenon after thousands of people travelled to Syria and Iraq to participate in the conflict. Many studies have focused on jihadist fighters, particularly those from Western countries. There is much to learn, however, from studying historical cases or adopting broader approaches that also aim to understand the who, why, and how of the radicalisation of foreign fighters. As with other forms of violent extremism, it has been difficult, if not impossible, to establish concrete profiles of these fighters. Scholars also continue to debate the importance of push and pull factors, for instance, focusing on ideology or socio-economic factors. As these questions have proven difficult to answer, other scholars have instead tackled the how question, looking at recruitment and mobilisation.

The ‘who, why and how’ questions have been central to many studies. This means that the ‘with what effects’ question has mostly remained unexplored, particularly beyond the (Western) countries from which fighters departed. Now that the initial wave of interest and strong policy-driven need to understand (Western) fighters have subsided, scholars could devote more attention to trying to investigate the effects of foreign fighters on the conflicts they join. Some authors have already tried to study such questions and discuss the tangible effects of foreign fighter involvement in conflicts (Chu & Braithwaite, 2017; Cragin & Stipanovich, 2019; Daymon et al., 2020; Moore & Tumelty, 2008; Rich & Conduit, 2014; De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2016). In addition, the assumption that returnees to Western countries would pose a significant threat does not seem to have materialised. Rather, there seems to have been a continuation of the relatively small threat posed by returnees in historical cases (De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2014b). As a result of this Western, threat-focused perspective, other questions have remained underexplored. Hopefully, now that the ‘acute’ phase of the foreign fighter issue from a Western perspective has (at least for now) ended, scholars can dedicate their attention to some of these underexplored questions.

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