



December 2013

## Foreign Fighters in Syria

This past year saw a marked increase in the involvement of foreigners in the fighting against the Syrian regime. Most join Al-Qaeda- and global jihad-affiliated organizations, gain military experience, and undergo radicalization and jihadization. They are liable to import continue terrorist and subversive activities to their countries of origin when they return (the "Afghanistan model").



Foreign fighters join the ranks of the jihad in Syria (NI.media.rbth.ru website)

## Number of Foreign Fighters

1. This study analyzes the phenomenon of foreign fighters participating in the fighting in Syria, most of them in organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad. It examines the numbers of foreign fighters coming from the main countries of origin, profiles the fighters and illustrates their potential for terrorism and subversion upon their return to their home countries. It is a continuation of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center's September 2013 study of the Al-Nusra Front and other organizations in Syria affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global

jihad.<sup>1</sup> **Analyses of the individual countries and regions from which the fighters come will be issued in the near future.**

2. In the civil war in Syria, which has lasted for almost three years, two main organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad gained a foothold, and most of the foreign fighters join them. The most prominent is the **Al-Nusra Front** (Jabhat al-Nusra), a branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria, under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri. Its main competitor is a jihadist organization called the **Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria**, a branch of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. As of December 2013, the two organizations have a combined membership of an **estimated 9,000 fighters**. Salafist-jihadi organizations not affiliated with Al-Qaeda also operate in Syria. They collaborate with the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in fighting the Syrian regime, logistically and in administering areas taken over by the rebels (the so-called "liberated areas").

3. Our overall estimate of the number of foreign fighters in Syria is **between 6,000 and 7,000, from dozens of countries,<sup>2</sup> and the number continually rises**. Most of them (an estimated 6,000) have remained in Syria and participate in the fighting, primarily in the ranks of the **Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State**. Some of them (an estimated 1,000) either returned to their countries of origin or were killed or wounded in the fighting, or captured by the Syrian army. We estimate the number of foreign fighters killed at about **500-700, that is, between 8% and 10% of the total number**.

4. **Most of the foreign fighters come from the Arab world**. We estimate their number at **about 4,500, from Libya, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia**. Others come from Western Europe and other Western countries, especially young men who are **second and sometimes third generation Muslim immigrants** (especially Europeans of Moroccan extraction). **We estimate their number at more than 1,000.<sup>3</sup> Most of them come from Belgium, Britain, France, Holland and Germany**. A third group is represented by fighters who come from Muslim countries and Muslim regions in Asia, and they number an estimated 500. Among them are

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad participating in fighting the regime in Syria, see the September 19, 2013 bulletin ["The Al-Nusra Front \(Jabhat al-Nusra\) is an Al-Qaeda Salafist-jihadi network, prominent in the rebel organizations in Syria."](#)

<sup>2</sup> We have identified almost 50 countries from which the foreign fighters come. According to the updated estimate of Aaron Y. Zelin (December 17, 2013), they come from 74 different countries.

<sup>3</sup> According to other estimates, the number of European fighters in Syria is between 1,500 and 2,000, in our assessment, an exaggeration.

skilled operatives, some with previous military-terrorist experience gained in **Chechnya and Pakistan**.

5. **There are still relatively few Israeli Arabs and Palestinians** fighting in Syria. An estimated **15-20 are Israeli Arabs**, there are **dozens of Gazans whose number has risen sharply**, and several score from **Lebanon and Syria** (especially from the Eyn al-Hilweh refugee camp in south Lebanon), and a few individual fighters from Judea and Samaria. Among the fighters from Jordan, those of Palestinian extraction are prominent. **Most of the Palestinian fighters join the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations.**



An American fighter calling himself Abu Dujana al-Amriki, killed in the fighting in Syria. He appears in an Islamic State video; behind him is the Al-Qaeda flag. He says that "...this is a message for the people of the West from the jihad fighters in Syria. We have come from all nationalities to defend our land, this Islamic land, to spread the Sharia of Allah on the face of the earth and to sacrifice our lives and souls for jihad. We have come to kill all those who stand in our way. This flag [of Al-Qaeda] will yet wave over the capitals of [all] the countries in the world]. With this simple weapon [pointing to the rifle he carries] we will liberate our lands and our people and bring Islamic law [the Sharia] to rule over the entire earth..." (Weaselzippers.us website

## The Potential Danger of Foreign Fighters

6. The foreign fighters in the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front and Islamic State are a **potential threat to international security**. Some of them, having gained military experience and skills, and undergone Islamic jihadization and radicalization, **are liable continue their terrorist and subversive activities when they return to their countries of origin**. In addition, some of them may join already extant terrorist **networks** and become a catalyst for Islamic radicalization. Upon return they may be handled by Al-Qaeda and global jihad organizations, exploiting the personal relationships formed in Syria with other fighters. However, it is possible that only a

small number of the returning foreign fighters will be enlisted into the ranks of the global jihad and will attempt to promote terrorism and subversion in their countries of origin. However, in our assessment, **it is sufficient for Al-Qaeda and global jihad organizations to create a network of skilled manpower in order to carry out terrorist attacks**, as happened after the war in Afghanistan.

7. Analysis of the foreign fighters indicates that **the potential level of danger is higher for Western European countries** (especially those with large communities of Muslim immigrants). That is because of the following factors: the relatively large number of fighters from Western Europe; their hostility to the West and its values they absorb while in Syria (often intensifying their own feelings of deprivation and frustration); Syria's geographical proximity to Western Europe; the relative logistic and operational ease of maintaining contact between the leadership of Al-Qaeda and global jihad organizations in Syria and the terrorist and subversive networks in Europe; and the legal, political and societal difficulties encountered when combating Islamic terrorism on European soil. Moreover **Al-Qaeda and the global jihad are liable to activate the veterans of the war in Syria for terrorist acts not only in Europe itself but in other Western countries as well, such as the United States** (as they were activated in the United States during the events of September 11, 2001).

8. Another potential threat is that **returning foreign fighters will be employed for terrorist and subversive purposes in Arab or Muslim countries** (especially in the Middle East and Central Asia). Some groups of foreign fighters have already finished their fighting in Syria and returned to their countries of origin. The countries involved would include Arab countries not yet affected by the regional upheaval (such Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Persian Gulf) but which support the rebels; Arab countries that have been affected but which were not taken over by Islamist organizations and which lack an effective central administration (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia); and countries and areas where the embers of Islamist jihad still smolder (Chechnya and various Muslim communities under Russian rule).

9. **The State of Israel is also liable to be exposed to such threats, even if not necessarily in the near future (since the first priority of Al-Qaeda and the global jihad organizations is to overthrow the Assad regime). That is the result of the fact that a limited number of Israeli Arabs and Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, Judea and Samaria have joined the fighting.** Fighters who fought in Syria may

endanger Israel in the following ways: Israeli Arabs, veterans of the war in Syria, may be handled for espionage, subversion and terrorism; Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, Judea and Samaria may undertake subversive and terrorist missions (jihadists returning to the Gaza Strip may endanger both the de-facto Hamas administration and Egypt); and their presence of veterans of the Syrian war may increase the operational capabilities of Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist networks along Israel's borders (Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip).

10. **Thus the issue of foreign fighters has become a global problem** shared by the West, Israel and the Arab-Muslim world. Western countries which in the past underwent the trauma of the "Afghanistan alumni" exploited by Al-Qaeda for terrorist purposes are aware of the dangers, but so far **they have not developed effective methods to deal with them** (in the fields of monitoring, prevention, legislation and punishment). **The returning foreign fighters are a ticking time bomb which can only be defused by international cooperation and joint systems to neutralize their terrorist-subversive potential.**

## Methodological Remarks

11. **This study is a comprehensive examination** of the foreign fighters in Syria, and is based on an analysis and the cross-referencing of a large amount of information from various Arabic and Western open sources. Some of the sources dealt with the Syrian civil war in general, and some related to the specific details of each of individual countries involved. In our study we used publications issued by think tanks and experts in Western countries, mainly the United States and Great Britain. Especially helpful were the articles written by Aaron Y. Zelin from the Washington Institute, who monitors the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria and runs the "Jihadology" website. We found useful information on websites reporting on foreign fighters killed in Syria, especially those sites affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad. The analysis of the foreign fighters killed in Syria also provided valuable information about the live foreign fighters.

12. There were, however, many difficulties in analyzing the phenomenon of foreign fighters:

1) **Dynamics:** The Syrian civil war is far from over and **the numbers of foreign fighters are not static**. During the second half of 2013 there was a significant increase in the number of foreign fighters who joined the rebels. On the other

hand, groups of foreigners finished their fighting tours, returned to their home countries and were replaced by new groups, while other fighters were killed, wounded or captured.

2) **Monitoring:** The authorities in the countries of origin, mainly Western countries, are faced with many difficulties in monitoring the passage of the fighters to and from Syria (related to monitoring, legal, political and societal issues). On occasion information arrives only after the foreign fighters have been killed.

3) **Secrecy:** The foreign fighters and the networks supporting them usually try to hide the fact that they have gone to Syria, especially to fight in the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front and other organizations affiliated with the global jihad. The Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations are usually careful not to reveal the true identities of the fighters and in most cases they use either nicknames or false names. In many instances the fighters do not tell their families why they are really leaving the country, either for personal reasons or reasons of security (in some cases the family only finds out that the fighter has gone to Syria or after he dies in the fighting and information about him is posted on the Internet).

4) **Distribution of fighters among the various units:** Generally speaking the fighters are spread among many different military units operating in various geographical areas. One exceptional example was the concentration of foreign fighter in an organic unit of several hundred commanded by a Chechen jihadist (Abu Omar the Chechen), most of whose members were Chechen or other foreign fighters.<sup>4</sup> Many units have fighters from many different countries together with local Syrian fighters.

5) **Transfer between military units:** Some of the foreign fighters join the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front or other Salafist-jihadi organizations. In other instances they join the Free Syrian Army and other nationalist Syrian organizations, but transfer from one to another. Many of them, for a variety of reasons (a more attractive extremist ideology, better conditions, higher motivation and morale), eventually find themselves in organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad for a variety of reasons: more attractive, extremist ideology; better conditions (including pay); better military capabilities in comparison with other

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<sup>4</sup> Such a unit was called *katibat al-muhajirin* (battalion of immigrants, that is, foreign fighters). As the unit increased in number it was called *kataib al-muhajirin* (immigrant battalions) and eventually *jaish al-muhajirin wal-ansar* (army of immigrants and supporters). In this study they will be called the *immigrant unit*. According to Aaron Y. Zelin, this military unit is linked to the Islamic State, but in our assessment is also affiliated with the Al-Nusra Front.

rebel organizations; the influence of veterans of other Islamic combat zones; and higher motivation and morale.

6) **Large number of countries:** The foreign fighters come from scores of countries (We have counted almost fifty but according to another estimate there are more than seventy.). However, the hard core comes from the Arab-Muslim world with others from Muslim communities in Western European and other countries around the globe. Sometimes there are only isolated foreign fighters from each country and sometimes several hundred, and in certain instances more than a thousand.

## Terminology

13. Generally speaking, the Western media refer to the young men who join the ranks of the rebels as **foreign fighters** or **jihad fighters**, or sometimes **jihad volunteers**. Most of them go to Syria because of religious, sectarian or jihadist ideological motivation. Thus they are not mercenaries in the classical sense, since they are not paid or receive extraordinary benefits.

14. However, the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations use their own complimentary terminology rooted in the early days of Islam.

1) **Al-ghurabaa:** Literally, foreigners (singular *al-gharib*). The term comes from the oral Islamic tradition of Muhammad (the *hadiths*), according to which "Islam began as an alien growth within a non-Muslim space and it will again be an alien growth [to break forth again]. Blessed be the foreigners." Thus, as the first Muslims were a tiny minority, aliens among masses of non-Muslims, in the fullness of time their numbers grew, and so Islam will break forth again after it is again an alien growth among masses of non-Muslims. According to the hadith, "blessed be the foreigners [*al-ghurabaa*]," hinting that paradise will be their reward. According to Islamic exegesis, the renewal of Islam is one of the signs that the end of days is approaching, when heresy becomes prevalent and as a result Islam rises again. **Thus the term *ghurabaa* refers to the fighters in Syria as the vanguard of the renewed Islam.** The analogy is made between the first Muslims and the foreigners fighting in Syria to glorify the foreign fighters as pioneering the renewal of Islam (Ar.islamway.net website).

2) **Al-muhajirun/muhajirin:** Literally, immigrants. The term refers to the first small group of Muslim believers who supported the prophet Muhammad and migrated with him from Mecca to Al-Madinah, and were the nucleus of the Islamic nation. Currently, in the wake of the influence of the jihadist ideologue

Sayyid Qutb, who was executed in Egypt in 1966, the term has acquired the secondary meaning of **Islamists who leave Muslim society to found a new nation, on the grounds of the claim that other Muslims are not sufficiently orthodox in their beliefs are in effect like infidels**. By implication and analogy, the foreigners fighting in Syria are like the first Muslims who pioneered the spread of Islam.

3) **Al-ansar**: Literally, supporters. The term refers to those who supported Muhammad in Al-Madinah and stood by him when he emigrated from Mecca. **They are counted among the first converts to Islam and were instrumental in spreading Islam**. In the Syrian context *al-ansar* refers to the **vanguard** helping to spread Islam in Syria and beyond.

## The Structure of The Study

### 15. This study contains the following sections:

#### 1) The appearance of foreign fighters in Islamic arenas of confrontation

#### 2) The estimated number of foreign fighters

- i) Overall estimate
- ii) Estimates provided by Western think tanks and experts
- iii) Monitoring fatalities

#### 3) Overall profile of the foreign fighters

- i) Overview
- ii) Motivation
- iii) Preparing for jihad in Syria
- iv) Military capabilities
- v) Suicide bombers
- vi) Countries of origin
- vii) Center vs. outlying districts
- viii) Age
- ix) Religion
- x) Education

#### 4) Arrival in Syria

- i) Recruitment
- ii) Journey
- iii) Length of stay
- iv) Distribution of foreign fighters to various units
- v) Return to country of origin

## vi) Difficulties in monitoring and oversight

16. In this section of the study we have collated the overall findings of research done on foreign fighters. The individual studies of foreign fighters in their countries of origin are in preparation and will be issued in four aspects in the near future:

- 1) Western countries
- 2) The Arab world
- 3) Muslim and non-Muslim countries in Asia
- 4) Israeli Arabs and Palestinians

## The Appearance of Foreign Fighters in Islamic Arenas of Confrontation

1. Young men leaving their countries of origin to fight in Islamic arenas of confrontation as foreign fighters is today an accepted matter of fact. It is also an aspect of internal Islamic confrontations or the confrontations between radical Islamic groups and Western countries. However, **it is a relatively new phenomenon in the Islamic world, first seen in the 1980s in Afghanistan**. It has been estimated that since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan **between 10,000 and 30,000 foreign fighters** have been involved in fighting in Islamic arenas in places from Bosnia in the West to the Philippines in the East.<sup>5</sup>

2. The foreign Muslim fighters either arrive in the arenas of confrontation on their own initiative or are sent by various individuals and networks. Their primary – but not exclusive – motives are religious or ideological. The issue has not been extensively researched and there is a lack of in-depth studies offering detailed explanations of their motivation, its extent or characteristics. The literature contains many descriptions of foreign fighters who were involved in Islamic arenas of confrontation but the fundamental questions have not yet been answered: what is the scope of such fighters, why are their numbers continually increasing, is there something inherent in Islam that propels them, what distinguishes foreign fighters and makes them leave their countries of origin to fight someone else's wars, and what dangers do they present when they return?

3. In "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters, Islam and the Globalization of Jihad" Thomas Hegghammer discusses the phenomenon of foreign fighters and regards them as an **"intermediate...category lost between local rebels...and international terrorists..."**<sup>6</sup> He argues that "the foreign fighter phenomenon represents **a violent offshoot of a qualitatively new subcurrent of Islamism...**which emerged in the 1970s as a result of strategic action by marginalized elites employed in nonviolent international Islamic organizations...based in the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia" (ITIC emphasis throughout).<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s, however, certain developments changed the situation: the oppression and exile of Muslim Brotherhood activists in Egypt, Iraq and Syria, the establishment of a global network of Islamic organizations, and the

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters, Islam and the Globalization of Jihad" *International Security* Vol. 35 No. 3, Winter 2010/2011.

<sup>6</sup> Hegghammer, "The Rise," p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

establishment of new universities in Saudi Arabia that employed the educated Muslims exiled from Egypt. **In the 1970s they devoted their activity to areas beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia in order to promote popular pan-Islamism while exploiting oil money, technological developments and the lack to government oversight, which gave them great ideological influence.**

4. According to Hegghammer, **the activists based in the Hijaz sought "political relevance and increased budgets,...and propagated an alarmist discourse emphasizing external threats to the Muslim nation. They also established a global network of charities for the provision of inter-Muslin aid...[that] enabled Arab activists in 1980s Afghanistan to recruit foreign fighters in the name of inter-muslin solidarity. The 'Arab Afghan' mobilization, in turn, produced a foreign fighter movement that still exists today."**<sup>8</sup>

5. **The most obvious contemporary instance of foreign fighters is the civil war in Syria. It attracts a growing number of foreign fighters from the Middle East and the Arab-Muslim world, who join the ranks of the rebels against the Assad regime. They are similar to the foreign fighters who in previous decades went to Afghanistan,<sup>9</sup> Bosnia, Chechnya and Iraq, or recently, in Somalia. Most of the foreign fighters in Syria find their way to the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations, while some of them join more moderate Islamic or even Syrian nationalist groups, including the Free Syrian Army. While in Syria, some foreign fighters leave one group for another, but they often wind up in jihadist networks even if that was not their initial intention.**

6. Western scholars claim that the civil war in Syria is **the third largest enlistment of foreigners in an Islamic arena since the beginning of the 1980s** (after Afghanistan and Iraq). What is different, they state, is **the speed of enlistment and arrival**, the fastest among all the Islamic arenas of confrontations, and that **what was achieved in Afghanistan in ten years and in Iraq in six , was achieved in Syria less than three** (Flash-intel.com website, June 2013).

7. According to an article by Aaron Y. Zelin of the Washington Institute,<sup>10</sup> the rate at which foreign fighters are enlisted is unprecedented, compared with Iraq and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 56-57.

<sup>9</sup> It is difficult not to compare the influx of foreign fighters to Syria with the invasion of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the middle of the 1980s. Despite the fact that there were only a few jihadists fighting in Afghanistan, they received military training and ideological indoctrination which began the narrative of Al-Qaeda and sowed the seeds for the global jihad which struck the United States on September 11, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Who Are the Foreign Fighters in Syria?" Washington Institute, December 5, 2013

Afghanistan. According to an article by **Shiraz Maher**, senior research fellow of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICRS), **Syria today has the greatest attraction for young Muslims from all over the world, who want to participate in jihad**. The attraction is so great, he says, that **jihad organizations in North Africa and Somalia, such as Al-Qaeda, have issued appeals to Muslims asking not to be forgotten, because they also need foreign fighters** (BBC.co.uk website, October 15, 2013)

## The Estimated Number of Foreign Fighters



The unit of immigrants composed mainly of Chechens (Channel4.com, June 14, 2013). Fighters from Arab and other Muslim countries also serve in the unit. Center: The unit commander, known as Abu Omar the Chechen.

### Overall Estimate

8. Foreign fighters and terrorist organization/Muslim militia operatives participating in the civil war in Syria come from locations throughout the Arab-Muslim and Western worlds. **Some of them (the Sunnis) fight against Bashar Assad's regime and others (the Shi'ites) fight in support of it**. Some of them come to Syria on their own initiative because of ideological, religious or political solidarity with one of the sides, while others are sent by organizations or with the encouragement of various countries.

9. In our assessment, there are **between 6,000 and 7,000 foreign fighters** in the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front and Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, out of the organizations' **more than the 9,000 fighters** (as of December 2013).<sup>11</sup> We estimate number of Syrian jihadists in the two organizations at 2,000, that is, between 20% and 22% of their fighters. Most of the foreign fighters are located in Syria and participate in the fighting against the regime or have logistic roles. A minority have returned to their countries of origin, were killed or wounded, or were taken prisoner by the Syrian regime.

10. **In 2013 there was a rapid increase in the number of foreign fighters.** In our assessment that was the result of a combination of **the religious-ideological attraction** of the Salafist-jihadi organizations and the **ease of reaching Syria** (because of its geographical location in the heart of the Middle East and its proximity to Europe and the Muslim countries of Central Asia). In addition, **it is difficult for the countries of origin to prevent the fighters from leaving**, despite the inherent dangers clear to local administrations. However, it is unclear whether the numbers of foreign fighters in Syria will continue to grow.

11. On the other hand, in our assessment, **an estimated 7,000-8,000 Shi'ite foreign fighters and operatives** are fighting on the side of the Syrian regime (according to Aaron Y. Zelin from the Washington Institute, there are no more than 10,000). They include several thousand Hezbollah operatives supporting the regime and **closely coordinating with Iran**. The rest are mostly **Iraqis who belong to pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias** (most of them organized in a military unit called the **Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade**). There are also foreign fighters from the Shi'ite communities throughout the Arab-Muslim world (including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen). Employing Hezbollah operatives and Shi'ite foreign fighters **is part of Iran's overall strategy, which uses proxies to support the Syrian regime instead of high-profile direct aid and involvement.**

12. The Shi'ites fighting for the Syrian regime illustrate a **fundamental difference** between the civil war in Syria and past examples of foreign fighters who went to Islamic arenas to fight. **In Syria there is an approximate numerical balance between the foreign fighters who came to fight against the regime and those who came to fight for it.** In other Islamic confrontations (Afghanistan, Bosnia,

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<sup>11</sup> To the 9,000 fighters can be added jihadist organizations not affiliated with Al-Qaeda but which cooperate with the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State.

Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia) Sunni Muslims were the only ones who came from abroad to carry out their jihad duty to fight the infidel (whether the infidel was represented by the local regime or Western armies). **The balance between Sunnis and Shi'ites in Syria illustrates the complexity of its civil war, its religious-sectarian nature, the foreign interests involved and the difficulty in ending the war.**

## Estimates Provided by Western Think Tanks and Experts

13. American and British think tanks and experts following the war in Syria deal mainly with the Sunni and jihadist foreign fighters opposing Bashar Assad's regime. According to most Western estimates, **there are approximately 5,000-6,000 foreign fighters.** However, in our assessment, the updated number is higher, because since the figures were issued the number has grown by several thousand. That is because of the rapid influx of foreign fighters into Syria during the second half of 2013. On the other hand, those who have returned to their countries of origin or were killed or wounded should be subtracted from the total number (in our assessment, approximately 1,000 foreign fighters).

14. Some Western estimates are the following:

1) According to an updated article by Aaron Y. Zelin posted on December 17, 2013,<sup>12</sup> there are **between 5,000 and 10,000-11,000 foreign fighters, but he believes that the real number is more than 8,500).** According to the data, **Syria has become the second largest target for foreign Islamist fighters in the history of modern Islam.** The largest was the jihad in Afghanistan, which in the 1980s attracted an estimated 10,000 foreign fighters, although over a period of more than ten years and not within such a short time as in Syria.<sup>13</sup>

2) A study carried out by the **International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation** (ICSR) in Britain indicated that since the beginning of the confrontation between **2,000 and 5,000 foreign fighters went to Syria** to fight against the regime. Based on those figures, between 135 and 590 of them were Europeans, who make up 7%-11% of the total number of foreign fighters. According to the study, the rate of enlisting Muslims in the Arab-Muslim world is rapid and can be compared with the confrontations in Iraq (2000), Bosnia (1990) and Afghanistan (1980s) (Aaron Y. Zelin, ICSR, April 2, 2013). The data are not

<sup>12</sup> <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Hegghammer and Aaron Y. Zelin, "How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade," *Foreign Affairs*, July 7, 2013.

longer relevant in view of the number of foreign fighters who arrived in Syria during the second half of 2013,

3) **American experts estimate that there are approximately 6,000 foreign fighters in Syria** (as of July 2013). In our assessment more than 600 of them have been killed since the beginning of the year. The main organizations they join are the Al-Nusra Front and the immigrant unit, the military framework established by the Chechens (Washington Times, July 2, 2013).

15. **The significant arrival of foreign fighters in Syria began in the second half of 2013 when their influx became more rapid.** In our assessment the main reason was Hezbollah's victory in the battle for Al-Qusayr, which in the eyes of the jihadists and with a view to the religious-sectarian aspects, was not just an achievement for the Syrian regime but also a victory for Shi'a over Sunna. The defeat at Al-Qusayr provoked strong responses in the Sunni Muslim world. Sunni clerics, headed by **Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi**, appealed to Sunni volunteers to go to Syria to support the jihad fighters. In our assessment, he and others like him did not mean for the volunteers to join the Al-Nusra Front, but rather other rebel groups, especially those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, it is likely that many foreign fighters found their way to the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State, which have greater ideological attraction for foreign Muslim fighters.

## Monitoring Fatalities



The pictures of 32 foreign fighters killed in fighting the Syrian regime, documented on the dedicated Facebook page (Rightsideneews.com website, April 24 2013). In our assessment most of them belonged to jihadist networks affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

16. Monitoring the fatalities of the foreign fighters is important because it helps ascertain their overall number and contributes to constructing a profile of the foreign fighters and their countries of origin. It is difficult to arrive at exact number of fatalities because the organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the other jihadist organizations do not customarily provide consistent information of foreign fighters killed (for reasons of morale and secrecy, among others). In addition, some of the organizations, mainly the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State, report fatalities using nicknames and do not give full names or details which would enable identification.

17. With the aforementioned limitations in mind, and following conclusions and an evaluation of information given by the countries of origin about foreign fighters killed in Syria, **we estimate the number of fatalities at between 500 and 700, that is, approximately 8%-10% of the total number of foreign fighters** (as of December 2013).<sup>14</sup>

18. At the end of November 2012 the Syrian government gave the UN Security Council the names of **142 foreign fighters** who had been killed between September and November 2012. The Syrian intention was to move the UN to declare that the presence of foreign forces in Syria was international terrorism. The list included the names of foreign fighters from **19 Arab-Muslim countries**: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Chad, Chechnya, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait Lebanon, Libya, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen. **Most of the names were Saudi Arabian and Libyan.** There were also **11 Afghans**, who died in northern Syria (Syriasurveyblogspot.co.il, December 1, 2013). However, the Syrian report did not include the names of foreign fighters from Western countries. In addition, during the fighting in 2013 hundreds of foreign fighters were killed in Syria, so that **the list presented by the Syrians at the time was early and partial.**

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<sup>14</sup> According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (June 2013), since the fighting in Syria began 2,219 foreigners fighting alongside the rebels were killed (Newobserver.com website, June 7, 2013). In our assessment the number is an exaggeration. On the other hand, according to the Facebook page of The Foreigners in the Syrian Revolution, which is devoted to documenting the foreign fighters in Syria, **300 were killed in Syria, most of them from Middle East countries** (as of April 2013). In our assessment, the number is too low because it is not current.

## Profile of Foreign Fighters



Foreign fighters in Syria (SANA, June 19, 2013)

### Overview

19. An examination of the foreign fighters in Syria reveals that they are a **heterogeneous group who come from dozens of countries around the world (close to 50, in our assessment)**. Most of them are **Sunni Muslim Salafist-jihadists** who joined to participate in jihad and help establish an Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria. However, they also include opponents of radical Islam who support the establishment of a democratic Syria. The ways in which they are recruited, come to Syria and are trained are also **not uniform**.

20. Despite numerous methodological difficulties, we have profiled the foreign fighters according to information gathered during the fighting in Syria and in their countries of origin, taking into account the limitations noted above. We made extensive use of publications about foreign fighters killed during the fighting, which not only revealed personal details but also enabled us to draw conclusions about the phenomenon as a whole.

### Motivation

21. In our assessment most fighters join the rebel ranks **for ideological reasons**, especially those who join groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda. they absorbed the **Salafist jihadi worldview in their countries of origin, either locally** (visits to Salafist-jihadi mosques, influence from local clergy) **or on individually** (exposure to jihadist media,

especially websites). For this type of fighter, **toppling the Assad regime** usually involves realizing the **vision of establishing a jihadist Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria and the Middle East as a whole.**

22. Some of the fighters are **motivated by sectarian-religious considerations, regarding the civil war in Syria as a struggle between Sunni and Iranian-led Shiite Muslims, who are perceived as aiming to take control of the Arab-Muslim world.** Hezbollah's victory in the campaign of Al-Qusayr, the publicity given by Hezbollah to the sectarian-religious aspect of the fighting, rumors of massacres perpetrated against Sunni Muslims, the Syrian Alawite regime's use of chemical weapons against the Sunni population, **all feed the sectarian-religious character of the Syrian civil war.** A number of Sunni religious authorities, especially the most senior **Sheikh Dr. Yusuf Abdallah al-Qaradawi, who fan the ethnic fires in the Muslim world,** play an important role in increasing sectarian-religious motivation. These authorities, who appeal to Muslim fighters to go to Syria in order to help the jihad fighters, do not necessarily mean that the fighters should join groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda, **but in many cases fighters motivated by sectarian-religious considerations find their way to the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi groups.**



23. There are other motives: **the desire for adventure**; the desire to help **overthrow the Assad regime, which has a negative image, as opposed to the heroic image of the Western-supported rebels**; identification with the suffering of the Syrian people and the desire to provide humanitarian aid (although in some cases the humanitarian factor hides the actual ideological motives of the fighters and keeps them from having problems with the authorities in their countries of origin). The fighters' motives were expressed by **Abd al-Rahman Al-Hatini** from the city of Zliten in Libya, a member of an Islamic military framework called **Liwa' al-Ummah**. He said his unit included fighters from various countries with various motives, from the desire to provide humanitarian aid to the rebels to the desire to participate in jihad. He also said he was in Syria to protect his Syrian brethren, who suffer from injustice. Another fighter of Lebanese descent said he was in Syria in response to Hezbollah's sectarian intervention in the Syrian civil war ([www.middleeastmonitor.com](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com), May 22, 2013).

## Preparing for jihad in Syria

24. In most cases, the **foreign fighters come to Syria without prior military training**, but there are exceptions. For example, fighters from Tunisia (and possibly from other North African countries) underwent brief military training near the Libyan border and were then sent to Syria.

25. We found that **physical training before departure for Syria exists in the Netherlands** and probably also in Great Britain and in other European countries. In an interview with Dutch newspaper **De Volkskrant**, **Abu Fidaa**, the official spokesman for the Dutch jihad fighters in Syria, said that many of the young people who went to Syria **participated in an initial training program that included physical training**. Others took **survival-training courses** in the Ardennes in Belgium. The preparations were carried out in small groups, and training was limited to groups of two or three not to attract the attention of the Dutch authorities. Abu Fidaa said that it was the duty of every Muslim to live a healthy life and prepare himself physically to be ready at all times to help and protect the weak and helpless. Moreover, **lessons on how to prepare for the Syrian jihad are available online**, and two popular books that can be downloaded from many websites. Special Facebook pages have been set up by Dutch Muslims to provide those who join with information on personal and group training (From a study conducted by the Kronos research firm, March 13, 2013).

## Military capabilities

26. There are **two types of military fitness among the fighters:**

1) **Fighters with no military experience:** Apparently **most of the fighters who come to Syria are young and have no military experience.** Upon arrival in Syria some of them undergo accelerated military training for approximately six weeks, and then acquire experience fighting Assad's forces. Some hold support positions that do not require military knowledge or experience. Some are dispatched on suicide bombing attacks that require a high level of motivation but no extensive military training. According to **Abu Abd al-Razzaq**, a Libyan who fought with the Al-Nusra Front in Aleppo, many of the Europeans who joined them required more training than Arabs. He added that a few fighters from Western countries were rejected because they were not sufficiently fit to join in the fighting. He added that they **helped in other ways when they returned to their countries of origin** (www.thedailybeast.com, August 4, 2013).

2) **Operatives with military experience or experience in terrorist activity:** The ranks of the rebels, especially jihadist groups, have been joined by jihad operatives with military-terrorist experience from other Muslim battle arenas. Examples include operatives dispatched by **Al-Qaeda in Iraq**; the arrival of jihad fighters who acquired military-terrorist experience **in Libya or Chechnya**; or fighters dispatched by the **Taliban in Pakistan**. Other examples include the **Egyptian fighters from the jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia** or Palestinians who belong to **Salafist-jihadi groups operating in the Gaza Strip**, some of whom have military-terrorist experience.

27. **The military contribution of foreign fighters:** The foreign fighters provide a significant military contribution to the Al-Nusra Front and other groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad: **The chain of command of organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad in Syria consists of foreign operatives** who fought in other combat zones: **Iraq** (where the founders of Al-Qaeda in Syria came from), and other war zones such as **Libya, Chechnya and Afghanistan**. According to Aaron Y. Zelin, fighters of the immigrant unit fought decisively during the takeover of the Menagh military air base (August 2013). In addition, foreigners also fought zealously in the Latakia region in the summer of 2013, where they were involved in cleansing Alawite villages (interview given by Zelin to the Carnegie Middle East Center, December 5, 2013). The "contribution" of the fighters is **noticeable in**

**suicide bombing attacks carried out by organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda**, taking advantage of the high motivation and religious fervor characteristic of the Salafist-jihadi fighters. Conversely, many fighters who lack military skills, and many who are very young or old, are assigned to non-military logistical positions or to positions in the areas of advocacy and governance. In exceptional cases, young fighters (under the age of 18), who were of no military benefit, were returned to their countries of origin.

28. Among the foreign fighters who become suicide bombers, **the percentage of Saudis and Jordanians is high** (although the suicide bombers also include other nationalities). Among the **Saudis**, over 10 operatives who carried out suicide bombings in 2013 were identified (the figure may be higher). Among **the Jordanians**, six suicide bombers were identified, at least three of Palestinian descent, who carried out suicide bombing attacks in 2012-2013. We have no unequivocal explanation for the relatively high proportion of Saudis and Jordanians. Perhaps it is due to the relatively large numbers of fighters from these countries and their ideological fervor.

29. There is a high level of interaction between the Arab and Muslim foreign fighters on the one hand, and the European foreign fighters on the other, during their stay in Syria. **Particularly striking are the ties between the European foreign fighters and Chechen operatives who possess extensive military-terrorist experience.** These ties may strengthen the possibility that after they return to their countries of origin, those who fought in Syria will carry out attacks against “soft targets,” similar to the terrorist attack at a shopping center in Kenya (from a study of Dutch foreign fighters in Syria conducted by Kronos, March 13, 2013).

## Suicide bombers

30. **Using suicide bombers** against targets associated with the Syrian regime, a tactic copied from Afghanistan and from Al-Qaeda in Iraq,<sup>15</sup> **has become a trademark of the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State** (although it is also used by other jihadist organizations). The modus operandi with the most painful results for the Syrian regime was the **detonation of car bombs by suicide bombers near**

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<sup>15</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, suicide bombers were used mainly for nationalistic purposes (by Palestinians or by Hezbollah in Lebanon). The conflicts in Afghanistan, and even more so in Iraq, have made suicide bombing attacks a central modus operandi of the global jihad and have taken on a transnational aspect. More than 1,300 attacks have been carried out in Iraq since the American-led invasion in 2003, out of more than 3,100 suicide bombings worldwide since 1980, according to data collected by the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism (AP, December 14, 2013).

**facilities and camps associated with the regime. Using car bombs trickled from Syria into Lebanon, culminating in an integrated suicide attack against the Iranian embassy in Lebanon. In our assessment, organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad are liable to use Syrian foreign fighters as suicide bombers against the West, Israel and Islamic Arab countries.**

31. Quantitatively, the Al-Nusra Front is **the rebel organization that carried out the greatest number of suicide bombing attacks in Syria**. Between the announcement of its establishment in January 2012) and the end of December 2012, **the organization claimed responsibility for 43 of the 52 suicide bombing attacks carried out against the Assad regime (longwarjournal.org)**. Between the beginning of 2013 and the end of March 2013, **16 more suicide bombing attacks** were carried out in Syria, and the Al-Nusra Front claimed responsibility for 14 of them (longwarjournal.org). Between the end of March and May 2013, the Al-Nusra Front claimed responsibility for **three other suicide bombing attacks**. In the second half of 2013, in our assessment the organization carried out additional suicide bombing attacks whose number is unknown to us.

32. Insofar as we know, no in-depth study has been conducted to date on the countries of origin and personal profiles of the suicide bombers in Syria. Based on our information, we are of the opinion that among the foreign fighters who become suicide bombers, **the percentage of Saudis and Jordanians is high** (although the suicide bombers also include other nationalities). Among the **Saudis**, over 10 operatives who carried out suicide bombings in 2013 were identified (the figure may be higher). Among the **Jordanians**, six suicide bombers were identified, at least three of Palestinian descent, who carried out suicide bombing attacks in 2012-2013. We have no unequivocal explanation for the relatively high proportion of Saudis and Jordanians. Perhaps it is the result of the relatively large numbers of fighters from those countries and their ideological fervor. We have also identified (a small number of) suicide bombers **from Western countries**. In one case, an **Israeli Arab** who joined the ranks of the global jihad was offered the opportunity to carry out a suicide bombing attack in Syria or a terrorist attack in Israel, but he refused.

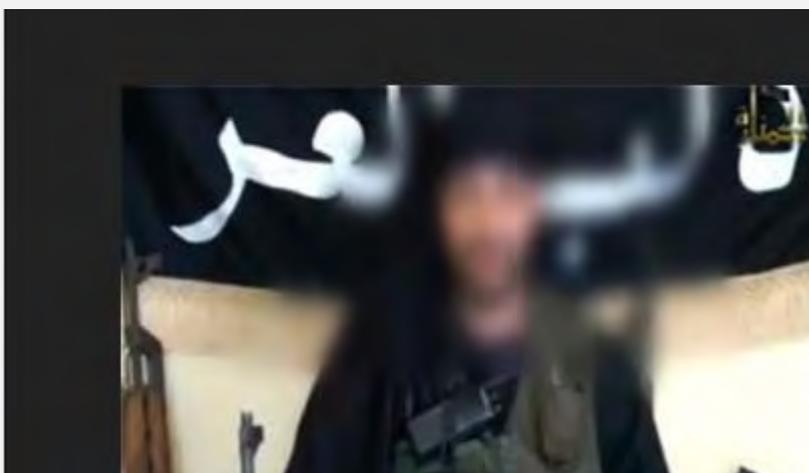
33. Following are two **examples of suicide bombers from the West**:

- 1) A video on the Internet shows **Rashid Wahhab, 33, aka Rashid Muhammad**, a suicide bomber who was **killed serving in the Al-Nusra Front**. Wahhab, married with one child, **came to Syria from Spanish North Africa**. In the video

he glorifies martyrdom in the name of Allah and asks his mother to be proud of his actions. He is shown getting into a car which he detonated at the Al-Nayrab military base in northern Syria, causing the deaths of an estimated 130 people. According to the Spanish authorities, three Spanish nationals have been killed in suicide bombing attacks in Syria (philly.com, July 24, 2013).

2) A video uploaded to the Internet shows the suicide bomber who carried out the suicide bombing attack at a Syrian army checkpoint in September 2013. The attack was allegedly carried out near the airport in Deir ez-Zor and killed 30 Syrian soldiers. The suicide bomber, known as **the Australian Abu Osama**, is shown with his face blurred, standing next to a truck loaded with explosives and reading verses from the Qur'an. He then says goodbye to his friends. Australian police have apparently identified him as an Australian from Brisbane. His family denied the identification and claimed it was a mistake and that he was alive and in Turkey. However, the family refused the French News Agency's request to fly to Turkey and meet with him (www.abc.net.au, November 12, 2013).

## suicide bombers



Rashid Wahhabi, who appeared in the video of the suicide bombing attack at the Al-Nayrab military base in northern Syria. The flag of the Al-Nusra Front is visible in the background (philly.com, July 24, 2013).



The suicide bomber aka the Australian Abu Osama, in a video shot before the suicide bombing attack and uploaded to YouTube (September 2013).



Walid Ali Mohammad Yahya Aal Madawi al-Asiri, aka Abu Dajjanah, a Saudi with a degree in Sharia studies. He carried out a suicide bombing attack with a truck full of explosives for the Al-Nusra Front (according to another version, for the Islamic State) in a Syrian army camp in Homs, on May 24, 2013 (youtube.com, syriasy.blogspot.com).



Mashari Abdullah al-Qasami al-Anzi, a Saudi Arabian doctor from Riyadh, who blew himself up in a car bomb on the outskirts of Aleppo on November 14, 2013. He belonged to the Islamic State (sudanyiat.net, syriasy.blogspot.com; shaghor.com)



Imad al-Natour, a Jordanian from Irbid, of Palestinian descent. He carried out a suicide bombing attack in a Syrian army building in Daraa on November 10, 2012. He belonged to the Al-Nusra Front (jihadblog.net).

Amin Hassan Al-Juyus, from Al-Mafraq, Jordan, possibly of Palestinian descent. He carried out a suicide bombing attack against the Syrian army on the outskirts of Damascus, on May 21, 2013. He belonged to the Al-Nusra Front (Shaghor.com, facebook.com).

## Countries of origin

34. Foreign fighters who fight alongside the rebels come from at least 50 countries which can be divided into four groups:

- 1) **The Arab world:** We estimate their number at about **4,500** and they are the **largest group of foreign fighters** (about 75% of the foreign fighters). The group consists primarily of a hard core of **Iraqi operatives from Al-Qaeda in Iraq**, veterans of the war with the United States; “**veterans of the revolutions**” and **upheavals in other Arab conflict arenas** (Libya, Tunisia, Egypt) and **countries that have remained free of regional upheavals** (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria and the Gulf States). The Arab states prominent in sending fighters to Syria are Libya, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq.
- 2) **Muslim countries and Muslim regions in non-Muslim countries (Russia):** We estimate the number at **nearly 500 fighters** (about 8% of the foreign fighters). The **presence of fighters from Chechnya** and northern Caucasus is particularly prominent in this group, **and their number is estimated at 100-200**. Some of them possess military experience and they established **the immigrant unit**, an Al-Qaeda-oriented unit **in which Chechen operatives are prominent**. Prominent as well are groups of operatives from Pakistan sent by the

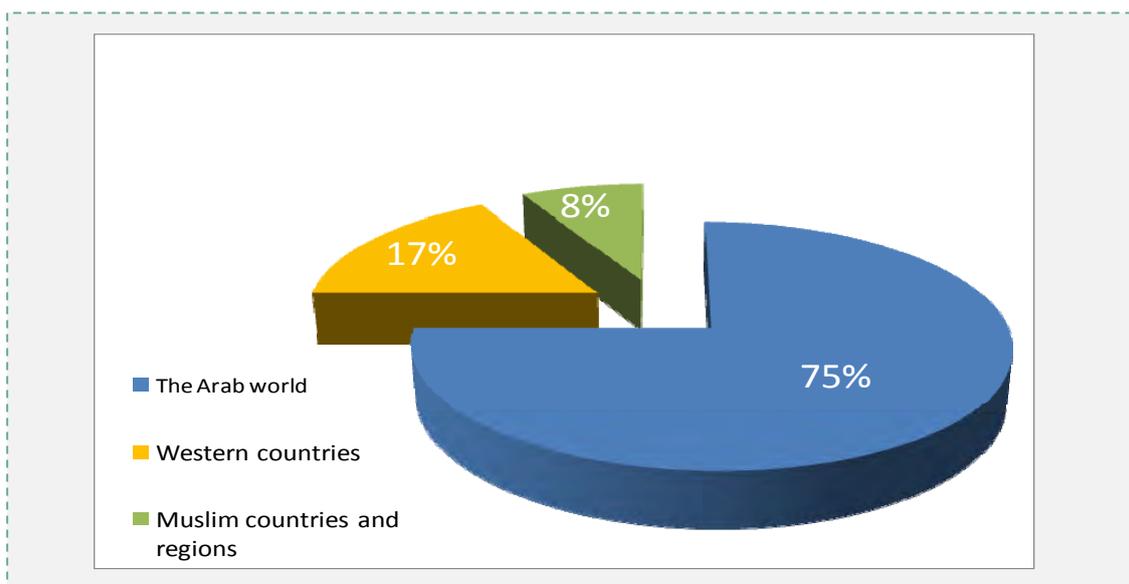
**Pakistani Taliban** and by a Pakistani Salafist anti-Shiite organization by the name of **Lashkar-e-Jhangvi** (the Army of Jhangvi). Foreign fighters in Syria also include fighters from Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Muslim republics of Central Asia.



A foreign fighter dressed in typical Pakistani garb (right), which has become popular among the foreign fighters in Syria (<http://syriasurvey.blogspot.co.il>, December 1, 2012)

3) **Western countries, and European countries in particular:** We estimate the number of foreign fighters from European countries at **over 1,000**, i.e., 17% of the foreign fighters (according to several other European estimates, the numbers are higher, as many as 2,000). Notable among European countries are **Belgium, Britain, France, the Netherlands and Germany**. There are foreign fighters from the **United States and Canada**, but so far on a limited scale (a few dozen from each country).

35. **Israeli Arabs and Palestinians:** Recruitment of Israeli Arabs into the ranks of the rebels in Syria is still **limited**. In our assessment, **around 10-20 foreign fighters** have departed for Syria so far (some of whom died in Syria); several dozen Palestinian members of Salafist-jihadi groups in **the Gaza Strip** have also joined the ranks of the rebels, as well as several dozen Palestinians **from refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria** and a small number of Palestinians from Judea and Samaria. **In addition**, the high proportion of **Jordanians of Palestinian descent** who joined the ranks of the rebels is marked.



Estimated distribution of foreign fighters (based on a working assumption that there are about 6,000 foreign fighters in Syria)<sup>16</sup>

## Center vs. outlying districts

36. In our assessment, the proportion of foreign fighters who come from outlying areas center), the **central government is weak** and **Islamist influence is strong**. Examples include Turkey, Jordan and Tunisia. In Europe as well we found several examples of foreign fighters who came from Muslim communities in provincial areas.

## Age

37. Most of the foreign fighters are young, aged 18-30, most of them in their early to mid-twenties (23-26) (the average age of foreigners fighting against the US in Iraq was around 24). Most of them are single, but a few have families. In addition, there have been reports about only a small number of young (under 18) and older (in their forties) foreign fighters.<sup>17</sup>

## Religion

38. Most of the fighters who joined the ranks of the rebels are **Sunni Muslims**, some with a Salafist-jihadi worldview, from the Arab-Muslim world. Fighters who come from

<sup>16</sup> The overall estimate of foreign fighters stands at around 7,000. However, in our assessment, around 1,000 foreign fighters have been killed, injured or have returned to their countries of origin, so that actually there are around 6,000 foreign fighters in Syria.

<sup>17</sup> At one time, Syria submitted a list of foreign fighters who were killed on its territory between September and November 2012. The average age in the list (based on the ages of 51 foreign fighters) was 39, which is relatively old. A large number of those killed were married with families (syriasurvey.blogspot.com, December 1, 2013). However, an examination of the ages of the foreign fighters by name, who arrived in 2013, reveals that most of them are young.

Western countries are mostly Sunni Muslims who are second and even the third generation Muslim immigrants; among them **fighters of Moroccan descent are prominent**. However, there are also members of Turkish, Syrian, Pakistani, Lebanese, Kurdish and Albanian communities. Among the European foreign fighters **young people who converted to Islam and underwent a process of Islamic radicalization** have also been identified.

## Education

39. Among the foreign fighters we found a large group of middle class **intellectuals and professionals, some with college degrees**. There were also reports of **college students who abandoned their studies and went to fight in Syria**. However, the foreign fighters also include many who are uneducated and unskilled. The number of educated fighters versus the number of those who are uneducated or have only an elementary education cannot be determined..

## Arrival in Syria

### Recruitment

40. According to American and European experts, no organized global network has yet been identified for recruiting fighters into the ranks of Al-Qaeda in Syria and making the logistical arrangements involved in dispatching them (News.yahoo, June 4, 2013). However, **there are local networks in various countries** that recruit fighters and send them to Syria. There are Arab-Muslim countries where organizations, networks and local clerics (some of whom are Salafists or affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad) operate. They play an important role in identifying operatives, sending them to Syria and taking care of their logistical needs.<sup>18</sup> **There are also local networks in several European countries** (most prominently Belgium) that recruit fighters and provide logistical and financial support for sending them to Syria.

41. Various methods are used to persuade fighters to go to Syria:

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<sup>18</sup> During the fighting against the US Army in Iraq there was an organized recruitment network that dispatched fighters to Iraq. A report written by the West Point Combatting Terrorism Center revealed the regional network that was used by Al-Qaeda to send foreign fighters to Iraq. A similar network existed in Libya ([www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca), April 18, 2013).

1) **Incitement by clerics to join the jihad fighters in Syria** from senior clerics **in mosques and the media**. Some of the clerics are not affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Most prominent is **Sheikh Dr. Yusuf Abdallah al-Qaradawi**, who called on Sunnis throughout the Muslim world to join the jihad against the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, which supports the regime (May 31, 2013). Similar incitement accompanied by fundraising campaigns **has come from Salafist Muslim clerics in Muslim communities in Western countries**. On the other hand, there are also clerics who publicly object to fighters' traveling to Syria.

2) **Sending messages and disseminating information on the Internet:** There are jihadist websites on the Internet providing information about the activities of jihadist groups. Recruitment is often carried out in closed forums of jihadist organizations that identify and recruit forum members who, in their opinion, are qualified to join the fighting ([www.rightsidenews.com](http://www.rightsidenews.com), April 24, 2013). Social networks also serve as a platform for recruiting foreign fighters. For example, a message was posted on the Facebook page commemorating dead foreign fighters, encouraging young Muslims to join the jihad on the grounds that it was the personal duty of every Muslim. At the end of July 2013, a website in five languages, including German, was launched, promoting what it called "social jihad" ([www.spiegel.de](http://www.spiegel.de), October 21, 2013).

3) **Islamic charities, some of them Salafist-jihadi, and networks set up ad hoc in order to recruit opponents to Syria** operate in the Arab/Muslim world (especially Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia) and in Muslim communities around the world, and preach joining the jihad in Syria. In some cases, the networks are involved in fundraising, acquiring weapons and making logistical arrangements to dispatch foreign fighters. To avoid trouble with the local authorities, they do not expressly identify with the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist groups, and often employ the vague description of assisting the "jihad warriors." **Such networks have been uncovered in several European countries. The most prominent group was a jihadist network in Belgium called Sharia4Belgium, against the local authorities took steps.** Similar networks have been set up in **the Netherlands, Denmark and the UK**, and an attempt was made to set up a similar group in **Italy**.

4) **Recruitment by foreign fighters staying in Syria, or by veterans of the fighting who have returned to their countries of origin:** In some cases, they had prolonged combat experience and became acquainted with the situation in Syria, and in some cases they spent short periods of time (several months) in

Syria. Because they know how to get to Syria and have direct contact with the rebel groups, they serve as advisors to new foreign fighters, either at the behest of the organizations in Syria or on their own initiative. **There have also been cases where foreign fighters staying in Syria encouraged their friends to join through social networks or by uploading videos to the Internet.**

### Examples of Sharia4 groups that work to recruit foreign fighters into the ranks of global jihad groups in Syria<sup>19</sup>



Belgium (<http://www.barenakedislam.com>)

Italy (<http://sharia4italy.blogspot.com/>)



France (<http://www.islamisation.fr>)

TheNetherlands (<http://www.barenakedislam.com>)

<sup>19</sup> Sharia, i.e., Islamic law, that is, imposing Islamic law over the various countries.



Pakistan (<http://globalshariahgroups.weebly.com>) Indonesia (the network's Twitter page)



Spain (<http://www.religionenlibertad.com>)

The US (<http://www.shariah4usa.com>)

## Journey

42. Syria lies in the heart of the Middle East, in geographical proximity to Europe and the Muslim countries of Central Asia. It can be reached easily and relatively inexpensively, making it **easier for foreign fighters to reach Syria from their countries of origin than the more distant combat arenas of Afghanistan, Iraq or Somalia**. It is also **easy for foreign fighters to return to their countries of origin**. European countries find it difficult to prevent foreign fighters from departing. Even the

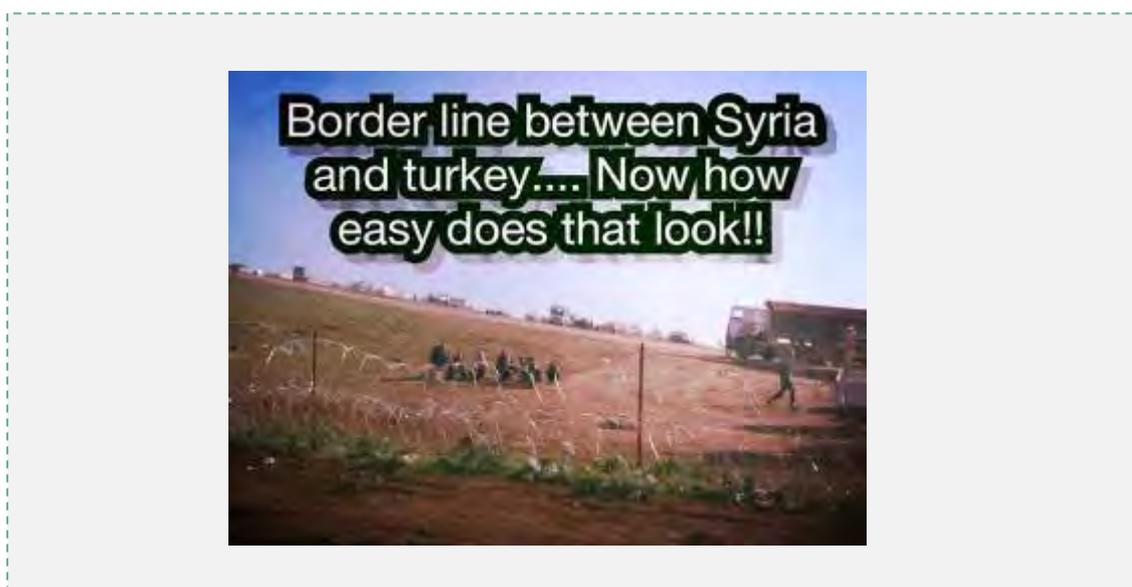
authorities in the Arab-Muslim world generally do nothing to curb the flow of foreign fighters.

**43. The Netherlands can serve as a case study of how European foreign fighters reach Syria.** Most of the Dutch foreign fighters reached Syria through Turkey, while a small number used other routes (to Egypt and from there via Jordan to Syria; to Cyprus and from there via Lebanon to Syria). At the end of November 2012, three Dutch foreign fighters planning to leave for Syria through Turkey were detained in Rotterdam. According to the prosecutor general's office, they made reservations to fly to Turkey (probably to Istanbul) with a connecting flight to the Syrian border. Two made their reservations to Turkey via **Brussels** (in our assessment, to cover their tracks and make it difficult for local security services). To reduce the chance of being followed, the three men were instructed to purchase tickets at the airport immediately before departure (From a study conducted by the Kronos research firm, March 13, 2013).

**44.** The travel instructions for Dutch foreign fighters, which were distributed during the first quarter of 2013, shed light on how they reached Syria: They were instructed to purchase last-minute return tickets to Istanbul (in Frankfurt or Brussels). The instructions emphasized that **they were not to fly directly to Turkey from the Netherlands** but rather via Germany or Belgium. In the case of a group, the members were to go through passport control individually **and separately from one another**. After arrival in Istanbul they had two alternatives: **the first** was an hour-long flight to **Adana**, and the second (considered safer) was an eight-hour bus ride. Arriving in Adana, the foreign fighters were instructed to contact the "brethren" (i.e., local contacts). They were allowed to stay in a hotel and take a bus the next day to **Antakya** (From a study conducted by the Kronos research firm, March 13, 2013).

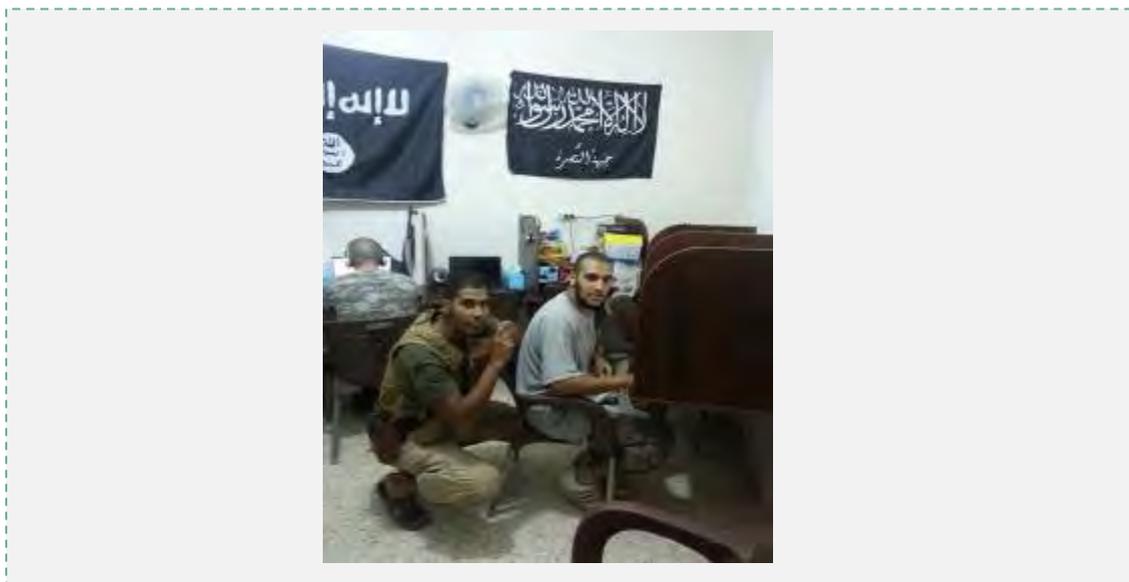
**45. Thus Turkey serves as a lifeline for Al-Qaeda and global jihad organizations operating in Syria.** Most of the foreign fighters who join the ranks of the rebels, especially organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda, go to Syria via Turkey, which has a long, open border with Syria (approximately 900 km, or about 560 miles in length). A small number of foreign fighters go to **Syria via Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, where they encounter difficulties**. That is because Hezbollah in Lebanon, which supports the Assad regime, dominates Lebanon, and the authorities in Iraq and Jordan have reservations regarding jihadi foreign fighters who join the ranks of Al-Qaeda.

46. The foreign fighters pass through Turkey easily because the Turkish authorities turn a blind eye. Recently, however, the Turkish government has begun to take action against members of Al-Qaeda and the global jihad passing through the country en route to Syria.<sup>20</sup> **Getting to Turkey via Europe is convenient and inexpensive.** Most foreign fighters travel to Turkey **by air** on commercial flights. Turkey also can be reached overland without a passport or visa (an ID card is sufficient). Some foreign fighters **take steps in their countries of origin to conceal their departure**, both for fear of the local authorities and because they don't want their families to know that they have left for Syria.



Shukri al-Khalifi and Muhammad al-A'raj, two British nationals killed in Syria, seen together in an Internet café in Atmeh, near the Turkish-Syrian border. The flag of the Al-Nusra Front is visible in the background ([www.vice.com](http://www.vice.com))

<sup>20</sup> That is apparently due to increasing domestic and foreign (the US and the West) criticism of Turkey. However, in reality the measures taken by the Turkish security forces on the ground **are still not effective enough** and, in our assessment, cannot curb the passage of foreign fighters into Syria.



An image posted by a British fighter on his Facebook page to illustrate how easy it is to move from Turkey into Syria ([www.vice.com](http://www.vice.com))

47. Some foreign fighters who come to Turkey stay in **safe houses** in the southern part of the country and from there are transported to the Turkish-Syrian border. They also use the safe houses when they return from Syria. In some cases, they have the telephone numbers of Al-Nusra Front operatives and contacts of other jihadist groups. The foreign fighters are met at the border by operatives from the Al-Nusra Front and other groups, who receive them and equip them with weapons and uniforms. They undergo 45 days of rudimentary military training, after which they are sent to the various units. Advanced training is also provided, but only for those with combat experience.

48. The **border crossings along the Turkish-Syrian border are controlled by the rebels**. According to many reports, the **Bab al-Hawa** and **Bab al-Salam** border crossings in the western sector of the Turkish-Syrian border, and the **Jarabulus** and **Tell Abyad** border crossings in the central sector, **have been controlled by the rebels since the second half of 2012**. Control of the crossings is divided between the Free Syrian Army and the organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda or Islamic organizations or other Salafist Islamic organizations. **That facilitates the virtually undisturbed passage of foreign fighters from Turkey to Syria and their return to Turkey and from there to their countries of origin at the end of the fighting.**

49. **The Bab al-Hawa crossing** is the main crossing between Turkey and Syria. **At the beginning of December 2013, power struggles occurred there between Islamist groups and the Free Syrian Army.** The Islamic Front, an organization of

Salafist rebel groups some of which collaborate with the global jihad, took over the crossing's facilities previously controlled by the Free Syrian Army. The facilities had been used by Western countries to deliver aid to the rebels. According to one version, the Islamic State tried to capture an arsenal of the Free Syrian Army at the crossing, which requested the assistance of the Islamic Front to secure the site. The media reported that following the power struggles the US and Britain suspended deliveries of aid to the rebels through northern Syria. Nevertheless, in our assessment, **it is doubtful whether such power struggles will significantly disrupt the passage of foreign fighters from Turkey to Syria.**

50. Zvi Barel, correspondent for Israel's Haaretz daily newspaper, visited the Bab al-Hawa crossing<sup>21</sup> during the second half of 2013. He wrote that during his visit, a young Syrian offered to take him to Syria by motorcycle, not through the official crossing but by dirt paths and bypasses created by those who crossed the border illegally. The correspondent asked who would be waiting for them on the other side, and the young Syrian asked him whom he wanted. "If you want the Jabha [i.e., the Al-Nusra Front], I can bring them to you. If you want the Ahrar [i.e., an Islamist military framework called the Ahrar al-Sham Movement] – it will cost you a little more, as they are a little far away. If you want the Free [Syrian] Army, it's not a problem, they are nearby. The price is only 50 dollars."

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<sup>21</sup> "Unsolved Islamist Puzzle," Hebrew, Haaretz, December 20, 2013

## Syrian-Turkish border crossings controlled by the rebels



The Bab al-Salam crossing  
(Facebook.com).  
The Jarabulus crossing (Facebook.com)  
The Tell Abyad crossing (Kulik.com;  
Youtube.com)

The Bab al-Hawa crossing  
(Facebook.com). On the wall is the  
emblem of the Islamic Ahrar Al-Sham  
movement, a Salfist-jihadi military  
framework that cooperates with the Al-  
Nusra Front

## Distribution of foreign fighters to various units

51. Most of the foreign fighters are dispersed after their arrival in Syria among the military frameworks of the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations. Some are sent to other organizations. One notable exception is the immigrant unit, an organic unit of foreign fighters affiliated with the Al-Nusra Front, in which the Chechen foreign fighters are prominent.

52. Some of the foreign fighters prefer to serve **in the various military frameworks with members of the same nationality**. According to Dutch operatives who fought in Syria, they behaved like “one big family” with the “big brothers” looking after the younger ones. **Jordi De Jong**, a Dutch foreign fighter who returned from Syria, told a Dutch journalist that there were homes in Aleppo where foreign fighters were housed, including the Dutch foreign fighters. Some were ordinary houses and others were described as luxurious villas. According to the foreign fighter, each foreign fighter could choose whether to stay with a group from his own country or join the Arab-based units (From a study on Dutch foreign fighters in Syria, conducted by Kronos, March 13, 2013).

53. **Personal equipment of a foreign fighter from Holland. The equipment includes a Kalashnikov, a Makarov pistol, two hand grenades – one for attack and one for defense, a knife, a Casio watch and a Qur'an in Arabic and Dutch (The picture was taken about an hour before the fighting near Homs on May 25, 2013) (From a study conducted by Kronos, March 13, 2013).**

54. According to statements from foreign fighters, they are not always welcomed by the local fighters **because many of them lack military skills**. They also do not speak the language and are unfamiliar with the terrain and the local culture, and they are often ordered to perform various logistical duties, such as preparing food, supplying water and food, serving in hospitals, providing services at refugee camps, etc. Therefore the pictures often distributed online, showing foreign fighters wearing keffiyehs and holding weapons, are merely for the sake of appearance. In reality, they have supportive roles and do not take part in the fighting. **However, after brief military training, most of them do join in the fighting, acquire military experience and absorb jihadist ideology, and are often utilized for showcase operations such as suicide bombing attacks. That is the baggage they are expected to return with to their countries of origin.**

### Length of stay

55. It appears to us that most of the foreign fighters come to Syria **for a short period of several months**. Some college students take advantage of their summer vacation to travel to Syria and return to their studies with the start of the school year. They then return to their countries of origin and are replaced by other foreign fighters, **in an ongoing process. But there are also foreign fighters who come to Syria for a longer period, sometimes for years**. The long stay is prominent mainly among **“professional” jihad operatives** who have already taken part in fighting in other conflict arenas (prominent among them are those who fought in Chechnya, Libya and Iraq). Some of these operatives attain senior command positions in the Al-Nusra Front, the Islamic State and in additional jihadist organizations fighting in Syria.

### Return to country of origin

56. **Over the past year there was a noticeable process of groups of foreign fighters in Syria returning to their countries of origin after a round of combat**. In our estimation, one must take into account that **at least some of the returnees were instructed by senior jihadist organization operatives to carry out acts of terrorism and subversion in their countries of origin.**

57. For example, the case of **Hikmat Hussein Masarwa**, a 29-year-old Israeli-Arab resident of Taybeh. Masarwa went to Syria in November 2012 to participate in the fighting. He went to Syria **via Turkey** and joined the global jihad operatives. In Syria he received light weapons training. **While in Syria he was offered the opportunity to carry out a suicide bombing attack in Syria or, alternatively, in Israel, but he refused.** He was arrested in Israel and sentenced to 30 months in prison (ISA, Haaretz, April 10, 2013; Reuters, July 8, 2013).

58. The Netherlands and Belgium other case studies for the return of veterans of the fighting in Syria to their countries of origin in Europe. In October 2013, an investigative report by a journalist from Volkskrant exposed the **return of a group of 25-30 former foreign fighters in Syria to the Netherlands and Belgium.** Some of them said that the situation in Syria was far more complicated than they had anticipated. They noted that there were many sides in the conflict and complained about having been ordered to fight other Muslims. While some of them were disillusioned, **others returned imbued with jihadi ideology** and motivation to continue the jihad war in the West (From a study conducted by Kronos, March 13, 2013).

### **Difficulty in monitoring and supervising the movement of the foreign fighters**

59. Government and defense officials in the foreign fighters' countries of origin, especially Western countries, **are aware of the potential dangers posed by the foreign fighters, and particularly the danger that veterans of the fighting in Syria who return to their countries of origin will become agents of terrorism and subversion. They may also join local networks affiliated with radical Islam or terrorism. In some cases, the local authorities try to monitor the foreign fighters and take action against networks that dispatch them. In certain cases they take action against foreign fighters themselves, provided they can prove that they have joined terrorist organizations.** However, **a number of countries, particularly Arab countries, ignore the potential risk,** possibly desiring to overthrow the Assad regime and, at the same time, to export their own Salafist-jihadi operatives to the fighting in Syria.

60. However, there are three main reasons for the basic difficulties in monitoring and supervising the foreign fighters traveling to Syria: **the ease of travel to Syria;**

**Turkey's turning a blind eye** (it supports the rebels and is hostile to the Assad regime), **and legal – and sometimes internal political and societal – difficulties**, especially in the West. However, it is easier for the various countries to monitor foreign fighters who return from Syria to prevent them from engaging in terrorism and disseminating jihadist ideology.

61. In most Western countries, especially in Europe, travelers abroad are not obligated to register or report in advance. Moreover, Western countries are hostile to the Assad regime and support the rebel organizations (especially the Free Syrian Army). The foreign fighters also enjoy the support of local Muslim communities. **In many instances foreign fighters traveling from Western countries to fight in Syria do not break any local law.** To prosecute the foreign fighters returning from Syria, there must be conclusive proof of a connection between them and organizations that are officially recognized as terrorist organizations and have been outlawed. From a legal standpoint, that is hard to prove and, **therefore Western countries find it difficult to prosecute and convict even those who served in terrorist organizations affiliated with al-Qaeda and the global jihad.**

62. However, during the past year, especially in Europe, there has been some primary **preventive activity, the result of fear** of the return of foreign fighters to their countries of origin. There have been **attempts to monitor** foreign fighters, foreign fighters who returned from Syria and were involved in military activity were arrested and prosecuted, there is **inter-country cooperation** with regard to foreign fighters and **action has been taken against local Islamic networks or figures involved in inciting, recruitment and logistical support for foreign fighters.** In our assessment, these are **tentative, initial steps that are far from providing an effective response to the potential risks posed by the phenomenon of the foreign fighters.**