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WESTERN FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF RECRUITMENT AND MOBILIZATION MECHANISMS

by

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Syria has become a beacon for foreign fighters. Estimates in 2015 indicate that over 20,000 men and women have gone there to fight for various insurgent groups. This conflict is unique due to the unprecedented number of Westerners fighting. The central purpose of this study is to better understand recruitment and mobilization mechanisms as they pertain to fighters from Western nations. Why are these men and women leaving the relative safety of the West to enter a violent internecine conflict? What will happen if they decide to return home?

To answer these questions, this thesis constructs 20 Western foreign fighter profiles from open source demographic, biographical, and motivational information, and then presents the findings. In particular, three variables—networks, anchoring, and group dynamics—are evaluated as critical drivers of recruitment and mobilization.

The findings of this research show that traditional social networks, such as kinship, occupational, and religious groups, are most effective at recruiting and mobilizing prospective foreign fighters. Also, the data shows anchored individuals rarely mobilize. Furthermore, group dynamics appear critical to the mobilization of foreign fighters into Syria. Finally, the findings do not support social media efficacy in recruitment or mobilization.

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WESTERN FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF RECRUITMENT AND MOBILIZATION MECHANISMS

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ABSTRACT

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

FSA	Free Syrian Army
ICSR	International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JAN	Jabhat al-Nusra
MOR	mode of recruitment
MOT	mode of travel
OSN	online social network
QAP	al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
QC	Quantum Communications
SMT	social movement theory
TSG	The Soufan Group
TSN	traditional social network
YPG	Kurdish People's Protection Unit

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Foreign fighter presence in military conflict is not a new phenomenon. The pace of integration of such fighters in a range of conflicts, however, has accelerated at a pronounced rate since the beginning of the Soviet–Afghan war of the 1980s. As a result, the debate regarding the presence of foreign fighters in conflict has entered a renaissance, especially given the existing strife within Syria and Iraq.

Scholars such as Thomas Hegghammer, Mohammed Hafez, and David Malet study the foreign fighter movement in order to better understand why it has resurged, and whether its pace can be stalled or reversed.[1] These studies, while recognizing the existence of Western foreign fighters, have placed considerable emphasis on understanding the presence of regional combatants—that is to say, fighters that have come from within the Arab and North African Muslim world. Less focus has been placed on understanding how Westerners, namely Europeans, Australians, and North Americans, have been convinced to leave their homes and enter an unforgiving internecine conflict. This thesis seeks to better understand why Westerners are volunteering in Syria and Iraq. How are they being recruited? What is the demographic profile of these fighters? What happens when they enter a conflict, and what happens when (or if) they come home? And last, given these questions, this thesis also seeks to provide policy implications and recommendations that result from the research.

B. SIGNIFICANCE

This thesis is critical on multiple fronts. More easily understood is the security implication of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq today. There is legitimate concern that these men and women are arriving in the Levant as, at best, idealists seeking meaning to

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[1] See for example Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010); Mohammed M. Hafez, "Martyrs without Borders: The Puzzle of Transnational Suicide Bombers," in *Ashgate Research Companion to Political Violence*, ed. Marie Breen-Smyth, 2012; David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2013).

their lives or, at worst, partially radicalized groups seeking to gain operational combat experience. The immediate effect is the further complication of the chaos enveloping Syria and Iraq. The tenuous security environment is a justifiable concern because the spread of Levantine sectarian war can impact some of the most travelled energy corridors in the world. Moreover, the rising discourse is how to address the issue of Western foreign fighters that decide to return home.

A less acknowledged aspect of this topic is the refinement of definitions. The terrorist narrative espoused by the United States, echoed by Europe, and acknowledged by the rest of the world readily conflates terrorists, jihadists, foreign fighters, and insurgents. While overlaps exist across these groups, there are distinctions, and expanding these definitions is critical for international policy makers to accurately and articulately address the diverse but related issues within Syria and Iraq. By conflating terrorists with foreign fighters, policy-makers reinforce the existing solutions of preventing and punishing and fail earnest attempts at dissuading and reintegrating these men and women.[2] There is clear evidence that many foreign fighters arriving in Syria and Iraq are neither radicals, nor terrorists.[3] Unfortunately, however, radicalization appears to accelerate once these prospective fighters arrive in country.[4] The continued advocacy of radicalization off-ramps, or the methods used to halt or reverse the radicalization process, appears to bear fruit. Labeling all foreign fighters as terrorists, on the other hand, instantly helps the cause of extremist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) or the Islamic State (IS), because the legal implications of the terrorist label are far more divisive than those of foreign combatants.

C.   LITERATURE REVIEW

While history is replete with examples of foreign fighters leaving their countries of origin to battle on behalf of foreign insurgencies, Abdullah Azzam has been credited

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2 Richard Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria" (The Soufan Group, June 2014), 9, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf.

3 Hafez, "Martyrs without Borders," 191.

4 "ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise among Western Europeans," *ICSR*, accessed September 15, 2014, http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/.

with fathering the transnational Muslim fighter.[5] Beginning in the early 1980s, Azzam initiated a distinctive shift in Islamic discourse, using the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a pretext to incite fervor for *jihad* against those who would defile Islam.[6] The ghost of Azzam still echoes in the present, where through a series of Muslim conflicts from Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, and now the Greater Levant, the call for *jihad* continues to bring foreigners into insurgent conflicts within the Middle East. In this relatively new field of foreign fighter research, scholars are struggling to understand the apparent rise in foreign fighters.

Before addressing the literature, however, there is the challenge of definitions; scholars have yet to agree upon what exactly makes a non-resident combatant a foreign fighter. This literature review begins with an exploration of definitions.

There is a confluence of terms to describe an individual who travels from one country to engage in war-related activities on foreign soil. The terms *security contractor*, *insurgent*, *jihadist*, *foreign fighter*, and *transnational terrorist* are often conflated thus complicating the origins, motivations, and objectives of these combatants. While academia seeks to avoid imprecise definitions, the West, and indeed the world, tend to loosely categorize a vast majority of these distinct military elements under the banner of terrorism. Identifying the unit of analysis, therefore, is critical to understanding the perplexities of foreign fighters and their distinct characteristics.

David Malet uses the terms *transnational insurgent* and *foreign fighter* interchangeably in his analysis of the foreign fighter phenomenon, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*.[7] Malet describes foreign fighters in simple terms as, "noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts."[8] This is a clear division from a standard definition of a terrorist: one who commits "a political act, [normally within the confines of an organized group], involving the death or

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5 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 85.

6 Malet, *Foreign Fighters,* 167.

7 Ibid., 9.

8 Ibid.

threat of death to non-combatants."[9] Malet further restricts this definition to exclude combatants who are typically paid for their services, such as members of state militaries or private security companies.[10] The body of literature suggests Malet's definition of foreign fighters may be sufficient for broad case-study analysis, but it fails to capture critical social aspects. While Thomas Hegghammer agrees with Malet's definition, he refines it by saying that the foreign fighter is also 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."[11] These definitional refinements permit a more nuanced analysis of the foreign fighter phenomenon; namely, in combination these factors allow mobilization—a central concern to researchers of foreign fighters—to exclude causal factors such as returning diaspora motivations, monetary compensation, and terrorist ambitions.[12] Definitions with respect to foreign fighters are presently moving targets. For example, groups such as IS are paying their foreign fighters, albeit at a subsistence level.[13] This change in behavior by IS, however, may be more of a reflection of how the group perceives itself and does not necessarily require a restructuring of the contemporary foreign-fighter definition.

A final contextual perspective requires the definition of *insurgency.* Both Malet and Hegghammer use the term to describe the physical space in which foreign fighters participate in their respective conflicts. Malet borrows the definition of civil war from Stathis Kalyvas's *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* to help define insurgency: "armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to

9 Jan Screiber, *The Ultimate Weapon: Terrorists and World Order* (New York: Morrow, 1978), 20, quoted in Katerina Dalacoura, "Islamist Terrorism and the Middle East Democratic Deficit: Political Exclusion, Repression, and the Causes of Extremism," *Democratization* 13, no. 3 (2006), 510.

10 Malet, *Foreign Fighters,* 9.

11 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 57–58.

12 Ibid., 58.

13 Maria Abi-Habib, "Splits in Islamic State Emerge as Its Ranks Expand," *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified March 9, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-feels-growing-pains-1425903933.

common authority at the outset of the hostilities."[14] This definition is sufficient for the purposes of this study. Further, these combined definitions of *foreign fighters* and *insurgency* provide the appropriate base to begin delving into the specifics of the foreign fighter phenomenon.

Foreign-fighter literature attempts to understand the foreign fighter phenomenon by engaging the issue of recruitment, mobilization, and volunteerism through the acquisition of data from three broad categories—demographics, Social Movement Theory (SMT) variables, and social networks.

After a period of over 34 years of transnational insurgent conflicts across the Middle East and the Balkans, there exists a wealth of information identifying details about these foreign fighters. The demographics data category seeks to uncover predictive patterns of who these volunteers are or who is recruited based upon readily collectable demographic and biographical information. For the second category, Social Movement Theory (SMT) variables are used to help determine why people volunteer and why they may be susceptible to recruitment. Framing by various insurgent groups, as informed by SMT literature, appears to be a critical mobilizer.[15] Additionally, factors such as group grievances, ideology, and moral outrage also fall under the SMT category.[16] With the exponential rise of information technology, some argue that online networks, to include social media, are potent facilitators in recruiting and mobilizing transnationally.[17] Others argue that traditional networks offer greater explanatory power and causality.[18] This third social networks category will explore how the literature views the role of online networks and traditional social networks with regards to recruitment, mobilization, and volunteerism.

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14 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 1 edition (Cambridge University Press, 2006), Kindle Edition, Location 457.

15 Malet, *Foreign Fighters,* 5.

16 Ibid., 4–6.

17 See for example Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, and Luke Gribbon, "Radicalization in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism," RAND Europe (2013), http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html.

18 Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 178–9.

The Soufan Group (TSG), a strategic security research and analysis firm based in New York City, released a comprehensive study in June of 2014 about foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict. Aside from the staggering numbers involved—over 12,000 fighters were believed to be in Syria with the initiation of this study—the research reveals that fighters had arrived from at least 81 nations, and that approximately 3,000 participants had come from the West.[19] Foreign fighter numbers have swelled to over 20,000 in 2015.[20] Part of the puzzle that TSG and other research institutions and academics have attempted to solve is determining the combined demographic profile of foreign fighters. The prevailing thought is that through analysis of these fighters—specifically their religion, age, socio-economic status, education, gender, and nationality—a general pattern will emerge that assists in solutions to mitigate the flow of combatants to conflict zones across the globe, or facilitate reintegration when they return home.

The first step in the process is tracking the demographics; as with all foreign fighter data, this is a difficult prospect. In the Syrian conflict, as well as other insurgencies, many foreign fighters are ideologically driven, and by virtue of their newly chosen profession, they are located in regions of relative chaos. These factors, among others, make the acquisition of data a challenge for researchers. Several scholars address this challenge. Marc Sageman, for instance, indicates that some foreign fighters may obscure their identities due to the clandestine nature of their operations. Even if access to some of these members is realized, Sageman states, "they do not grant access to their members, and their leaders' few interviews are well-orchestrated propaganda exercises with poor documentary value."[21] Moreover, Sageman indicates that there is evidence of acquired data not being representative of the larger sample of combatants.[22] Malet largely avoids delving into the individual realm, but instead attempts to focus more broadly on

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19 Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," 6.

20 Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: Hearing Before the House Committee on Homeland Security, United States House of Representatives, 114th Congress, 1st Session, on The Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror, February 11, 2015, 2, (2015) (statement of The Honorable Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center), http://www.nctc.gov/docs/Countering_Violent_Islamist_Extremism.pdf.

21 Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks,* 64–65.

22 Ibid., 64.

conflicts across recent recorded history that had foreign fighters as participants.[23] While admittedly demographics data-collection presents a challenge, it is not an insurmountable one.

Difficulties aside, the literature does converge into common demographic characteristics. While data is constantly changing, contemporary studies indicate that a sizeable majority of foreign fighters in present conflicts are between the ages 18–29, disenchanted, Muslim or recent converts to Islam, and with minimal cultural or ethnic ties to the regions of conflict.[24] Furthermore, these fighters are mostly men—although women are increasingly involved in Syria—from urban backgrounds that have minimal markers of extremism, criminality, or anti-social behavior.[25] Interestingly, earlier studies, such as Hegghammer's analysis of radicalization in Saudi Arabia, loosely agree with the demographics. Hegghammer's 2006 report noted that al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP) militants had similar age ranges (19–42) who also were predominately male, and from urban centers.[26] Ostensibly, then and now the fighters were, "unremarkable in the sense that they were neither society's losers nor winners."[27]

There are some deviations in the demographic data. Some combatants are more educated than others, and it appears that over time, ethnic and national diversity among foreign fighters has increased. While necessary to understand the nature of foreign fighters, demographics appear insufficient for explaining why these men and women leave the comfort of their homes for distant battle.

Social Movement Theory (SMT) is perhaps the most critical approach that investigates the foreign fighter phenomenon through framing influences. In the collection of theories that comprise SMT, framing processes are the complex group of ideas that lead to the conditioning of a group of people to the presence of a grievance (whether

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23 Malet, *Foreign Fighters,* 11.

24 Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," 16–18.

25 Ibid., 18.

26 Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 4 (2006): 42–44.

27 Ibid., 45.

actual or constructed), and wield the grievance as a tool to mobilize the group with the intention of overcoming the grievance.[28]

At the time of this writing, the contemporary view on foreign fighters is heavily focused on Afghanistan, Iraq, and now the Syrian conflict. The conjoining topics of Islam and foreign fighters have become so common that conflation is a topical hazard. Malet, in *Foreign Fighters* and his preceding works, in part seeks to disentangle Islam from foreign fighters by analyzing a range of case studies over the past two centuries.[29] By exploring events such as the Texas Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, and the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, Mallet's data reveals interesting information regarding foreign fighters in civil conflicts. Aside from data such as the number of transnational insurgencies appears to be rising, and that insurgencies that have foreign fighters win more often than those without, the ideological implications are profound; recruiters are most effective by employing frames that present local conflicts as existential threats to a larger transnational community.[30] Framing continues to be central to recruiting.

Malet concludes that, "regardless of the nature of identity shared [between foreign fighters and the insurgency they join], recruiters consistently frame the distant civil conflict as an eventual threat to the entire transnational community group, and they inform recruits that their own government is blind to the threat; it is therefore both their duty and in their self-interest to fight now while there is still time."[31] Depending on how the frames are delivered to their intended recipients, the line between recruitment and volunteerism blurs.

While Hegghammer does agree that individual recruits likely prescribe to some kind of ideological frame, he departs from Malet in that he suggests foreigners, rather

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28 Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes - toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, edited by Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

29 David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?: Historical Perspectives and Solutions," *Orbis* 54, no. 1 (2010): 97.

30 Ibid., 11–12.

31 Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 208.

than local insurgents, initialize the mobilization of transnational fighters.[32] Moreover, Hegghammer is not entirely convinced that ideology is the principle genesis of recruitment; particularly with regards to a transnational Muslim identity, Hegghammer is troubled by the apparent absence of long-distance foreign fighters prior to 1980.[33] Seeking answers to some of these questions, Hegghammer considers five hypotheses: (1) foreign fighters only join insurgencies that are religious, bloody, and involve foreign invasion; (2) insurgents that have established social networks across the greater Muslim community are more favorable to foreign fighter recruits; (3) government support is complicit in the acceptance of foreign fighters into a conflict; (4) advances in communications technology facilitates the mobilization of foreign fighters; (5) foreign fighters are an aberrant offshoot of Islamist movements; and (6) a combination of some or all of theses hypotheses provides an explanation for foreign fighter mobilization.[34] Hegghammer believes that no one hypothesis adequately explains the rise of foreign fighters after 1980, and instead proposes that a "qualitatively new ideological movement or subcurrent of Islamism" may be at fault.[35] His study concludes with several important implications for this thesis—some of which go against his initial hypotheses. The most critical of which suggests there are two key components for large-scale foreign fighter mobilization. The first being "an ideology [or frame] stressing solidarity within an imagined transnational community," and the second "a strong cadre of transnational activists."[36] Transnational activists are not always motivated by the desire for violent conflict. Examples such as the antinuclear movement of the 1980s and the Zapatista solidarity movement in the 1990s saw transnational mobilization without violence.[37] Framing in these examples was no less effective in mobilizing support.

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32 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," 64–65.

33 Ibid., 64.

34 Ibid., 65–71.

35 Ibid., 71.

36 Ibid., 90.

37 Sidney Tarrow and Doug McAdam, "Scale Shift in Transnational Contention," in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, ed. Donatella Della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 137–139.

Across the literature, framing reoccurs as a critical enabler for foreign fighter mobilization. Mohammed Hafez, for instance, suggests that there are three dominant and related narratives that are employed across a wide range of media and communication mediums. The first narrative presents the humiliation Muslims are facing in a given conflict, and implies that that the blame for this humiliation should be directed externally; the West is the commonly preferred target.[38] In conjunction with this first narrative, the second narrative provides scathing commentary on existing Muslim regimes, calling them inept and bound by servitude to the West.[39] The final narrative delivers a message of hope, indicating that Muslims will eventually be victorious in their struggle because of faith and impending military victory.[40]

In addition to framing, the shared factors of group grievances, ideological convictions, and moral outrage coalesce to form a potent recruitment driver. Moreover, more extreme groups adeptly use these shared factors to build the military capabilities of their respective units.

Hafez suggests three patterns for transnational recruitment that all fall under motivational frameworks. The first identifies fighters who, after the fall of the Taliban regime, sought to further their skills in additional conflicts.[41] Rejected from their countries of origin, many of these combatants already had previous jihadi experience and established ideological convictions. The second pattern of recruitment features Muslims who have no extremist ideology but rather are enraged by the plight of their fellow Muslims and volunteer in an effort to redeem their brothers and sisters.[42] Rage, common identity, and empathy as motivators do not only manifest themselves through a Muslim identity. There are examples noted by the ICSR in which British volunteers left for Syria not because they felt Islam was under attack, but rather because they were deeply

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38 Mohammed M. Hafez, "Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1 (January 2007): 96, doi:10.1080/09546550601054873.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Hafez, "Martyrs without Borders," 190.

42 Ibid., 191.

alarmed by the humanitarian crises and were driven to act.[43] The third and final pattern identified is known as top-down recruitment. Experienced jihadists or insurgents deliberately attempt to recruit potential fighters through the use of gatekeepers, or personnel placed in strategic locations to look for promising candidates, and direct recruiters that approach these promising candidates.[44] These gatekeepers and recruiters seek to build their existing body of fighters and prepare for conflicts against new rising opponents of Islam.

A subset of scholars increasingly speculates that online networks are a critical facilitator of recruitment and mobilization.[45] This view competes with earlier studies that suggest rather than technologies such as social media, it is traditional social networks (TSNs) that provide the most fertile recruitment and mobilization grounds.[46] The social networks category examines both TSNs and online networks.

Some contemporary arguments advocating the efficacy of traditional networks in recruiting have their beginnings in the information age. SMT scholars suggest that while there is much to be optimistic about with regards to the rise of information technology, that optimism may be misplaced. Although used within the context of political mobilization, Jeroen Van Laer offers that the use of technology can create communication cleavages between those who have access to the Internet, and those who do not.[47] This correlates well within the foreign-fighter spectrum; there are still vast populations without regular Internet access and thus recruitment and mobilization may be substantially limited by Internet calls for *jihad*. Analysis of the Sinjar records, a collection of nearly 700 foreign-fighter records recovered in Iraq in 2007, appears to corroborate the suggested meekness of the Internet with one study showing that of 177

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43 Domokos, Rees, and theguardian.com, "Jihad, Syria and Social Media."

44 Hafez, "Martyrs without Borders," 193.

45 For a summary see Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, and Luke Gribbon, "Radicalization in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism," RAND Europe (2013), http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html.

46 Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks,* 178–9.

47 Jeroen Van Laer, "Activists Online and Offline: The Internet as an Information Channel for Protest Demonstrations," *Mobilization: An International Journal* 13, no. 3 (2010): 348.

fighters, only six were recruited online; the rest were persuaded to fight by familial, social and religious networks.[48]

In 2015, with Syria's civil war spilling into Iraq, a renewed vigor arose to confront these peculiar challenges. Research in 2014–2015 demonstrates that there is an unequivocal rise in the influence of social media towards mobilizing and recruiting foreign fighters. A report published by the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR) studied 190 Western and European foreign fighters and determined that, at the time of publishing, social media was a critical tool both for recruiting and disseminating essential information.[49] 2014 research by the ICSR reaffirms social media's potency. Peter Neumann, a project lead for the ICSR, notes that there are several cases demonstrating that the Internet was instrumental in mobilizing foreign fighters into Syria.[50]

The approach to understanding the nature of foreign fighter recruitment and mobilization is anything but monolithic. Data acquired from the categories of demographics, SMT variables, and social networks provide a viable method to determine patterns and causal mechanisms as they relate to Western foreign fighter recruitment and mobilization.

D.   POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the literature review, there are four predominant hypotheses that are derived or expanded by evaluating the three proposed data categories: demographics, SMT variables, and social networks.

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48 Clinton Watts, "Foreign Fighters: How Are They Being Recruited? Two Imperfect Recruitment Models" (Small Wars Journal, June 22, 2008), 2, http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/foreign-fighters-how-are-they-being-recruited.

49 Joseph A. Carter, Shiraz Maher, and Peter R. Neumann, "#Greenbirds:Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks" (The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, August 1, 2014), 1, http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Infleunce-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf.

50 John Domokos, Alex Rees, and theguardian.com, "Jihad, Syria and Social Media: How Foreign Fighters Have Documented Their War - Video," *The Guardian*, accessed September 13, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/video/2014/apr/15/jihad-syria-social-media-video.

The first hypothesis, already existing in some capacity, seeks to test the role of ideology as an effective mobilizer. Incorporated into this hypothesis is Malet's supposition that transnational threat to an imagined community is a potent recruitment and mobilization driver.

H1: Ideology is the principal catalyst for the mobilization of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

While H1 is focused on broader ideological implications, the second hypothesis seeks to test the foreign fighter phenomenon by looking at more localized characteristics in the form of recruitment and mobilization mechanisms, or functions that directly recruit combatants. As discussed, scholars claim that traditional social networks (TSN), such as kinship, religious, and employment groups, provide considerable explanatory power with regards to foreign fighter recruitment and mobilization in previous transnational conflicts. This thesis tests that hypothesis by analyzing the Syrian and Iraqi insurgencies that persist still in 2015.

H2: Traditional social networks are the primary recruitment and mobilization mechanism for Western transnational foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

The ubiquity of information technology and mass communication has arguably had an unprecedented impact on information both entering and leaving insurgency battlefields. Although even a decade ago scholars were skeptical of how effective social media could be in recruiting and mobilizing combatants, there is a current broad-based consensus that social media's role requires further analysis. The third hypothesis seeks to test the efficacy of online social networks (OSN) as a recruitment and mobilization mechanism.

H3: OSNs are critical mechanisms that drive the recruitment and mobilization of Western foreign fighters.

The fourth and final hypothesis examines the role of group dynamics in the mobilization of Western foreign fighters. This thesis speculates that unanchored members of Western society, under the influence of group pressures, may be more likely to foreign fight. Furthermore, a common result of assembling like-minded extreme individuals is

group polarization. Legal scholar Cass Sunstein states that recruiters "attempt to inculcate a shared sense of humiliation, which breeds rage, and group solidarity, which prepares the way for movement toward further extremes."[51] A unified identity in the extremist context can be a salient motivator for members within a group.

H4: Group dynamic effects are critical to the recruitment and mobilization of prospective foreign fighters.

It is also a possibility that neither single hypothesis is sufficient in its explanatory power. An alternative hypothesis may combine some or all of the previously mentioned assumptions. Further still, there also remains the possibility that neither hypothesis, nor any combination of them, is sufficient to explain Western foreign fighter recruitment and mobilization.

E.   RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis will contribute to the existing body of empirical work on foreign fighters by constructing and analyzing profiles of Western recruits/volunteers who have participated in the conflict engulfing Syria and Iraq at the time of this thesis's publishing. These cases will be assembled by a combination of social network analysis and other open-source unclassified information. The author will collect as many profiles as randomly as possible. Next, these profiles will be sorted to select the most comprehensive and credible 20 profiles. For each case, the following information will be collected:

1. Name
2. Country of origin
3. Family country of origin
4. Age
5. Gender
6. Religion
7. Convert (Y/N)
8. Occupation
9. Education
10. Mode of recruitment/volunteering

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51 Cass R. Sunstein, "Why They Hate Us: The Role of Social Dynamics," *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 25, no. 2 (2002), 429.

11. Earlier history of activism
12. Social ties or affiliations prior to recruitment
13. Social ties or group affiliations inside Syria
14. Nature of activism in Syria (and mode of death)
15. Self-assessment of why the foreign fighter volunteered
16. External assessments (such as family or intelligence assessments) of why the foreign fighter volunteered
17. Mode of death
18. Anchored status
19. Mode of travel

The goal is that through the aggregation of biographical and other information, recruitment patterns and volunteer motivations may be further refined. Moreover, additional empirical data will contribute to existing information for use in continuing analysis and research.

The second chapter of this thesis uses Boolean searches in order to reveal the pattern of foreign fighter emergence and growth in Syria. The LexisNexis Academic database and Google were the two services used to generate data. LexisNexis Academic was limiting in that queries would only return up to 3,000 results. This became problematic for searches within 2014 because there was no accurate measure of article return. Furthermore, LexisNexis Boolean searches did not differentiate between terms in quotations (i.e. "foreign fighter") and terms without quotations, nor did it differentiate between plural constructs (i.e. "foreign fighter" versus "foreign fighters"). As such, only three unique searches were used: (1) Syria AND "Foreign Fighter," (2) Iraq AND "Foreign Fighter," and (3) "Foreign Fighter." Google Boolean searches were more discriminating and they recognized nuances between quotations and pluralized words. For consistency, the Google searches used were the same as the LexisNexis Academic searches. Although variations due to quotations and pluralized words returned different order of magnitude results, the data trends were similar across all searches.

F.   THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis continues with three additional chapters. Chapter II provides a macro-level background to the Syrian conflict and then traces the emergence and growth of foreign fighters in the regional conflict. Data searches with LexisNexis Academic and

Google are used to contextualize the trends. Chapter II also provides the most current data on Western foreign fighters along with analysis of that data. Chapter III contains a summary of findings regarding the biographical dossiers of 20 Western foreign fighters. The graphs and charts included provide an updated perspective on the foreign fighter phenomenon, and the included narratives provide context to the quantitative data. The core contribution to the foreign fighter research is manifested in these dossiers. Chapter III continues with a comparison of the newly researched dossiers with the existing secondary source literature on Western foreign fighter demographics. Conclusions are then drawn from the comparison. Chapter IV assesses the aforementioned four hypotheses and then concludes with policy implications and suggestions.

II.   THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AND THE RISE OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

The escalation of conflict in Syria and Iraq up to 2015 has grown concomitantly with the population of foreign fighters in the region. At the time of this research, surging foreign fighter populations continue to grow in Syria and Iraq, growing unrest has metastasized in Libya and Yemen, and there are increasing concerns of emerging Islamic State (IS) support in Afghanistan. While foreign fighters continue to represent both a minority of combatants in Syria and Iraq, and a small percentage with respect to each nations respective population, in the aggregate, their numbers are a threat. Foreign-fighter returnees and travel restricted aspiring jihadists have inflicted casualties across North America, Europe, Africa, and Australia. Multinational efforts to combat violent extremism in Syria and Iraq have shown some promise in the beginning of 2015, but as long as the numbers of foreign fighters with Western passports continue to increase, threats to the West will only escalate. In order to situate the research, this section will provide background on the contemporary Syrian conflict, and analyze the emergence, growth, and current status of foreign fighters within Syria.

A.   THE SYRIAN CONFLICT (2011–2015)

Syria's continuing civil war, and its systemic spread to Iraq, is bracketed by conflagration. On December 17, 2010, street vendor Mohammed Boazizi set himself ablaze after a culmination of bureaucratic humiliation, and the event was spread throughout the Arab world initially by the Facebook social media network.[52] The subsequent crumbling of the Ben Ali regime, and the beginning of the then nascent Arab Spring would sweep through the region. Today, in contemporary Syria, fires still burn, and groups such as IS herald the coming of continued "flames of war.'[53] Bashar al-Assad

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[52] Marc Fisher, "In Tunisia, Act of One Fruit Vendor Sparks Wave of Revolution through Arab World, *The Washington Post*, last modified March 26, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-tunisia-act-of-one-fruit-vendor-sparks-wave-of-revolution-through-arab-world/2011/03/16/AFjfsueB_story.html.

[53] Ryan Mauro, "ISIS Releases 'Flames of War' Feature Film to Intimidate West, last accessed modified September 21, 2014, http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/isis-releases-flames-war-feature-film-intimidate-west.

and his Alawi elite, along with other authoritarian rulers of the greater Middle East watched, adapted, and reacted to the fates of their contemporary despots, but ultimately actions by Assad were insufficient to stem the rise of dissent and eventual violence within his country.

At the outbreak of peaceful protests in March of 2011, Syria had long been a culture cloaked in fear and repression.[54] A Syrian scholar went as far as to describe his homeland as "the kingdom of fear, silence, and worshipping Leviathan."[55] Protest and collective action, however, was not born simply out of an emerging wave of Tunisian and Egyptian protest. Social movement scholars have long stated that three key factors of movement emergence—political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing—work over time; the political opportunity of Tunisia's unrest was seized by Syrians who had experience mobilizing.[56] Although protest to authoritarian rule can be traced as far back as the 1960s, it was the "Statement of the 99," in June of 2000, that established a modern foundation from which to build a vehicle of protest.[57] Ninety-nine scholars, seizing the moment of Hafez Al-Assad's death as an opportunity to speak out, decried the repressive government and called for reforms; this event would echo into 2011.[58] As such, Boazizi's self-immolation was but the ignition of a fuse that had long been strung across the entire region. Sadly, the protests devolved into regime atrocities, sectarian violence, and the rise of extremist groups. Foreign fighters and the problems they have created in Syria are but a microcosm of the entire conflict.

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54 Fotini Christia, "What Can Civil War Scholars Tell Us About the Syrian Conflict," in The Political Science of Syria's War (Washington, DC: The Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 8, http://pomeps.org/2013/12/19/political-science-and-syrias-war/.

55 Wael Sawah and Salam Kawakibi, "Activism in Syria: Between Nonviolence and Armed Resitance," in *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), Kindle Location 2945.

56 McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes," 2.

57 Sawah and Kawakibi, "Activism in Syria," Kindle Location 2988.

58 Ibid.

As of 2015, the Syrian conflict has long surpassed the 1,000 battle deaths commonly used as a threshold for defining a civil war.[59] Furthermore, while armed internal conflict in Syria may have begun as one between Assad's security apparatus and an organized armed insurgency such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the opposition is now characterized by its completely fractured nature. Late 2013 estimates compiled by the BBC suggested that there were over 1000 armed opposition groups operating within Syria—and now Iraq.[60] While the number of militant groups may be in constant flux, the number of combatants in Syria in Iraq has only increased. These groups span an ideological spectrum that runs from moderate, secular, and inclusive to abhorrent, ruthless and violent. Aside from the geopolitical concerns that cite regional stability and free flow of trade as impacted macro level variables, the conflict has also drawn unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters from across the world.[61] While foreign fighters in state level conflict are not a new phenomenon, the magnitude of fighters seen today, and most especially, the magnitude of Western foreign fighters is substantial and unprecedented.[62]

B.   FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Initial reports of foreign fighters in Syria originated from the Assad regime in late 2011 and early 2012.[63] These reports, however, drew pronounced skepticism from an international community that was receiving conflicting reports of foreigners supporting

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59 Fotini Christia, "Syrian Conflict," 8.

60 "Guide to the Syrian Rebels," *BBC*, last modified December 13, 2013, http://m.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003.

61 Richard Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria" (The Soufan Group, June 2014), 6, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf.

62 "Foreign Fighters Flow to Syria," *The Washington Post*, last modified October 11, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/foreign-fighters-flow-to-syria/2014/10/11/3d2549fa-5195–11e4–8c24–487e92bc997b_graphic.html.

63 Liz Sly, "As peace eludes Syria, fears of extremism rise," *The Washington Post*, Suburban Edition (April 23, 2012): A, A14; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 7, 2015].

Assad's regime.[64] As violence became more prevalent in Syria, spaces for militant groups to operate opened, and foreign fighters began entering at an ever-increasing rate. The following section analyzes the rise of foreign fighters in the Syrian civil war by tracing their emergence and growth beginning in 2011. The section concludes with an analysis of the current 2015 foreign-fighter data.

Specificity in tracing foreign-fighter growth is difficult to achieve but by utilizing the LexisNexis Academic Database and the Google search engine with key search terms, an approximate indication of foreign fighter progression in Syria becomes apparent. I used the Boolean search expression "Syria" AND "Foreign Fighter" across all available English language sources in yearly blocks beginning in 2011. In addition to utilizing LexisNexis Academic, similar searches were conducted using Google to verify the data trend.[65] The results are depicted in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The quantity of results provides preliminary insight into the growth of the foreign fighter phenomenon within Syria; the results also begin to blend with Iraqi news reports as the years progressed and the conflict began to erode the Syrian–Iraqi border. The LexisNexis searches yielded 67 articles in 2011, 495 articles in 2012, 1,117 articles in 2013, and over 3,000 articles in 2014.[66] 2015 results at the time of writing returned 1,761 articles.[67] An analysis of the results with particular emphasis on newspapers and news services with high circulation provides more detail to the evolution of Syrian foreign fighter presence.

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[64] "Syrian regime importing foreign fighters- FSA," *Asharq Alawsat*, November 28, 2011, http://www.aawsat.net/2011/11/article55244219/syrian-regime-importing-foreign-fighters-fsa.

[65] See Chapter 1, Section E for details on methodology.

[66] LexisNexis Academic will return only 1,000 relevant articles if the search terms used result in over 3,000 potential articles. Determining specific search result numbers over 3,000 is therefore not possible. Searches last conducted on April 7, 2015.

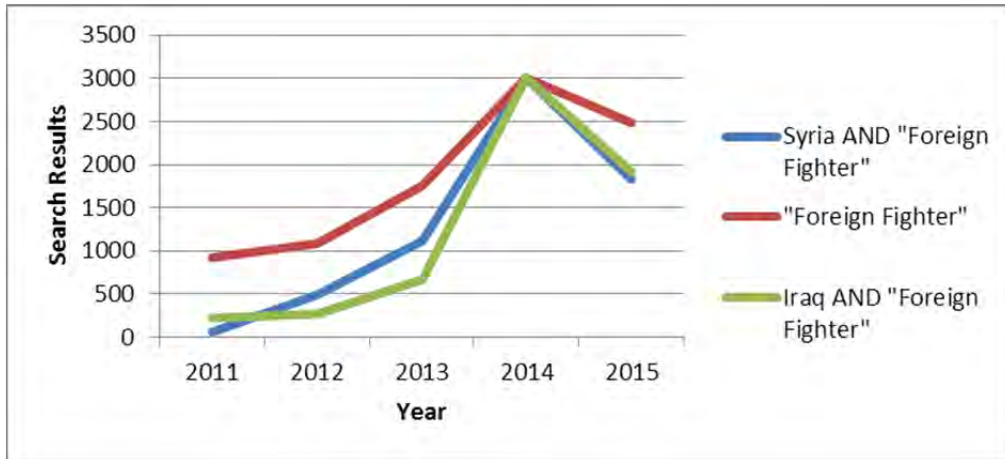[67] Search last conducted on April 7, 2015.

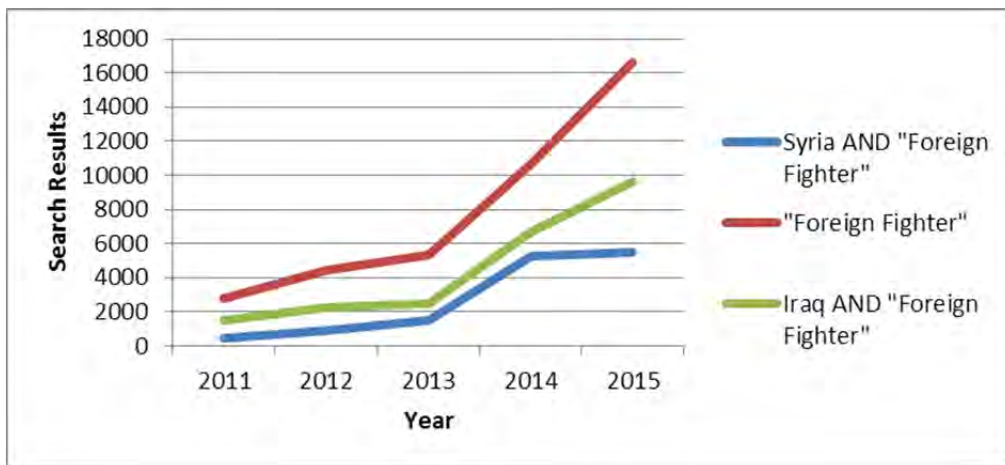Figure 1.   Foreign Fighter LexisNexis Search Results (2011–2015)

Figure 2.   Foreign Fighter Google Search Results (2011–2015)

1.   EMERGENCE

Of the 67 results for 2011, it was not until late November that articles began mentioning potential involvement of foreign combatants inside Syria. London-based Arabic newspaper *Asharq Alawsat* reported on November 28, 2011 that Free Syrian Army (FSA) personnel identified the Muqtada al-Sadr group, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), Hezbollah, and Amal Movement as groups active within Syria in support of the Assad regime.[68] While these organizations do represent foreign

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68 "Syrian regime importing foreign fighters- FSA," *Asharq Alawsat.*

involvement within Syria, they rest on the cusp of the Hegghammer–Malet definition of foreign fighters due to their state-related sponsorship and possible payment for services.[69]

In January 2012, *Guardian* reporter Ian Black travelled to Syria to make sense of the growing internal conflict. The conversations Black had with the residents of Damascus were foreboding. While hope among the locals remained high in the bourgeoning opposition, there was also concern of a rising Islamist threat.[70] A local Syrian lawyer was quoted as saying, "I have no doubt the regime will be toppled. The problem is that the longer it takes, the more powerful the Islamists will become. Those that advocate violence will gain ground. It's a question of time and cost: time is getting shorter but the price is getting higher."[71] Increased reporting on the role and presence of foreign fighters in Syria—to include the emergence of JAN—began to appear in April 2012.[72] In May, amid the growing concern regarding foreigners fighting in Syria, the *Sunday Times (London)* was one of the first newspapers to mention initial estimates of up to 150 foreign fighters; UN observers, however, were unable to corroborate the information.[73] The same UN observers, under the command of Norwegian General Robert Mood, temporarily ceased patrol operations in June due to escalating violence partially credited to the increase in foreign combatants.[74]

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69 See Hegghammer, "Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 57–58; Malet, *Foreign Fighters,* 9.

70 Ian Black, "Syria: beyond the wall of fear, a state in slow-motion collapse," *The Guardian*, January 16, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/16/syria-collapse-damascus-change.

71 Black, "Syria: beyond the wall of fear."

72 See Sly, "As peace eludes Syria, fears of extremism rise;" BBC, "Free Syrian Army denies western reports Jihadist elements have joined its ranks," BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political (April 11, 2012): <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 8, 2015].

73 See Hugh Macleod, Annasofie Flamand, and Rami Aysha, "Iraq-style chaos looms as foreign jihadists pour into Syria," *The Sunday Times (London)* National Edition 1 (May 13, 2012): News, 26; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 7, 2015]; Suzy Jagger, "Regime's web of lies holds grains of truth," *The Sunday Times (London)* National Edition 2 (May 28, 2012): News, 6; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 9, 2015].

74 Hala Jaber, "Jihadists involved in Syrian carnage; Foreign fighters are adding to the slaughter that has forced the UN to suspend its peace mission, reports Hala Jaber in Damascus," *The Sunday Times (London)*, Ireland Edition 1 (June 17, 2012): News, 19; available from LexisNexis Academic <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 7, 2015].

June also saw the rise of Sunni religious leadership across the Middle East issuing various *fatwas*[75] that instructed fellow Sunni Muslims to take up arms and travel to Syria to fight Bashar al-Assad.[76] Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi, a prominent Jordanian Salafi-jihadi sheikh, issued a representative statement in 2012 that captured the themes of many *fatwas* of the mid-2012 period: "Muslims in Syria have been oppressed by Assad's brutal and barbaric regime; therefore, according to Islam, it is obligatory for any able-bodied Muslim to support his brothers there."[77] Statements such as al-Tahawi's grew in frequency as the conflict escalated.[78]

Determining a discrete period for Syrian foreign fighter emergence is difficult to ascertain due to difficulty gathering data in the region. It is reasonable, however, to establish the second half of 2012—specifically May and June—as the temporal genesis of foreign-fighter discussion in international media, primarily due to the aforementioned religious decrees from Sunni religious leadership. Furthermore, the beginnings of theological legitimization by Muslim religious leaders in June of 2012 also represent the onset of foreign fighter growth within Syria. Also in June, a little known group, then known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), released a one-hour video entitled *The Clanging of the Swords;* the video was a call to arms and quietly revealed ISI to the world as a rising threat.[79]

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75 A fatwa is a religious decree made by a Muslim scholar.

76 Jaber, "Jihadists involved in Syrian carnage."

77 Suha Philip Ma'ayeh, "Jordanian Jihadists Active in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 10 (October 2013), 10, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/jordanian-jihadists-active-in-syria.

78 Jaber, "Jihadists involved in Syrian carnage."

79 Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015)*,* xx.

2. GROWTH

Concern with foreign fighters reached higher levels of international attention with the publishing of a United Nations Human Rights Council report in September 2012.[80] The report highlighted that foreign fighters were increasingly present in the Syrian conflict, and even more alarmingly, they appeared to have a radicalizing effect on anti-government local fighters.[81] Aaron Zelin, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, lends credence to UN concerns, stating that by mid-2012 there were approximately 700–1400 foreign fighters who had either attempted to reach Syria or were actively engaged in the conflict.[82]

While these numbers represented a small minority of combatants within Syria, reports at the beginning of 2013 supported an undeniable trend: foreign fighters were becoming a problem not only for Syria, but also for the nations that were supplying the fighters. A January 2013 the *Times (London)* article revealed Hezbollah acknowledgement of Assad regime support.[83] March saw additional English newspapers reporting on hundreds of British Muslims allegedly fighting within Syria; and some of these young men were being killed in the conflict.[84] A watershed moment for empirical foreign fighter research evaluation occurred a month earlier in February when the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR)

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80 Richard Hall, "Foreigners flood into Syria to join battle to overthrow Assad; UN investigators say number of human rights abuses by either side has risen dramatically," *The Independent (London)*, Fourth Edition (September 18, 2012): World, 29; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 7, 2015].

81 Hall, "Foreigners flood into Syria."

82 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Foreign Fighters Trickle into Syrian Rebellion," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 11, 2012, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/foreign-fighters-trickle-into-the-syrian-rebellion.

83 Nicholas Blanford, "Evidence mounts of foreign fighters taking up arms to aid Assad regime," *The Times (London)*, Ireland Edition 1 (January 23, 2013): News, 23; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 8, 2015].

84 See Richard Kerbaj and Malik Al-Abdeh, "Dead at 21: Britain's veteran jihadist," *The Sunday Times (London)*, National Edition 1 (March 3, 2013): News, 6; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 8, 2015]; James Kirkup and Andrew Hough, "'Up to 100' British Muslims fighting in Syria," *The Daily Telegraph (London)*, National Edition 2 (March 27, 2013): News, 12; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 8, 2015].

completed a yearlong study chronicling the rising foreign fighter problem in Syria.[85] The ICSR report, published in April, was the first to highlight the extent of Western foreign fighter participation, and it established a baseline from which to evaluate the continued growth of foreign fighters in Syria both from within the Middle East and from more distant nations. Acknowledging the limitations in obtaining accurate census information, ICSR estimated that approximately 5,500 foreign fighters had participated throughout the length of the entire conflict.[86] Moreover, the report highlighted initial motivations of these combatants: Assad and the alleged atrocities by his regime remained the primary reason for volunteerism.[87] April 2013 also saw a pronounced increase of scrutiny by states vis-à-vis the threat posed by returning foreign fighters. British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs William Hague highlighted the dangers of uncontested spaces within Syria as potential grounds for terror-based training camps.[88] Citing national security concerns, Mr. Hague stated, "We assess some of the individuals being trained will seek to carry out attacks against Western interests in the region or in Western states now or in the future."[89] Similar concerns appeared across global media. On April 17, 2013, the *New York Times* reported the arrest of six men by Belgian police for attempting to recruit fighters to Syria.[90] A continent away, concerns that Canadians could return as radicals was front-page news.[91] Jihadist groups such as JAN and IS had yet to fully enter the international media spotlight—but this would occur, and soon.

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85 Aaron Y. Zelin, "ICSR Insight: European Foreign Fighters in Syria," International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, February 2, 2013, http://icsr.info/2013/04/icsr-insight-european-foreign-fighters-in-syria-2.

86 Zelin, "European Foreign Fighters in Syria."

87 Ibid.

88 Damien McElroy, "Hague warns of threat from Syria fighters," *The Daily Telegraph (London)*, National Edition 1 (April 25, 2013): News, 16; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 8, 2015];April 25, 2013 Daily Telegraph

89 Ibid.

90 James Kanter and Rick Gladstone, "Belgian Police Arrest Six on Charges of Recruiting for Syrian Insurgency," *The New York Times*, Late Edition (April 17, 2013): A, 8; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 8, 2015].

91 Stewart Bell, "Conflict; Canadians at war in Syria could return as radicals," *The National Post (Canada)*, National Edition (April 27, 2013): News, A1; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 9, 2015].

The subsequent months leading into the summer of 2013 heralded the establishment of a second beacon of foreign fighter growth. This period of growth origination was characterized by the increased international attention drawn to jihadist groups operating in Syria, and also the justification of a Syrian jihad by prominent Sunni Muslim theologians.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the ISI, announced the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April, and concomitantly makes failed overtures to co-opt the better-known group JAN.[92] Operating as independent entities, JAN and ISIS begin driving international media attention. In May 2013, JAN forces overran oil fields in Syria and begin selling barrels for profit.[93] July and August thrust ISIS further into view with their freeing of approximately 500 prisoners—many of whom were convicted terrorists—in Iraq, and the conquering of Raqqa in Syria.[94] While the actions and advances by JAN and ISIS likely resonated with a minority of Sunni Muslims, the message reached global audiences.

In late May, statements made by prominent and respected Sunni cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi reached a more moderate Muslim audience.[95] With a following that numbered in the millions, Qaradawi's call for all Muslims to fight against Assad's regime was not only influential in and of itself, but his words also unshackled escalatory reservations of other prominent Sunni clerics in the region.[96] Following Qaradawi's statements, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, and Islamic clergy in Yemen voiced support of a Syrian jihad—and many others followed.[97]

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92 "Syria crisis: Al-Nusra pledges allegiance to al-Qaeda," BBC, April 10, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22095099.

93 Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, xix.

94 Ibid.

95 Thomas Hegghammer and Aaron Y. Zelin, "How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade," Foreign Affairs, July 3, 2013, Accessed April 10, 2015, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139557/thomas-hegghammer-aaron-y-zelin/how-syrias-civil-war-became-a-holy-crusade.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

The second half of 2013 continued to display a trend of increasing foreign fighter numbers, and larger Western involvement. What had started as a regional pull for fighters from within the greater Middle East was starting to shift into a global pull bringing in more fighters from Europe, Australia, and North America. The *Times (London)* reported in August of United States intelligence estimates indicating that up to 10,000 foreign fighters were, or had been, involved in Syria.[98] The same American source indicated that the fighter numbers could be as low as "a few thousand."[99] In December 2013, ICSR published a second comprehensive empirical study numbering foreign fighters in Syria in the realm of 11,000 combatants.[100] The ICSR report confirmed concerns in Western nations; more Westerners were leaving for Syria with numbers tripling from up to 600 fighters in April to 1,900 in December.[101] By the end of 2013, foreign fighters were no longer media outliers in the Syrian civil war, but rather they had created a narrative that ran parallel to the enduring conflict. Moreover, groups such as ISIS were recruiting fighters globally by disseminating sophisticated propaganda via social media platforms.[102]

2014 presented the continued trend of increasing foreign fighter participation in Syria. A report released in June by American security consultant firm The Soufan Group revealed that over 12,000 foreign fighters had gone to Syria, and approximately 3,000 of them had come from Western nations.[103] This updated benchmark represented a number that exceeded all foreign fighters who had participated in the 10-year Soviet–Afghan war

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98 Nicholas Blanford and Michael Evans, "Up to 150 Britons join rebels fighting to overthrow Assad," *The Times London*, National Edition 2 (August 19, 2013): News, 28; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 9, 2015].

99 Blanford and Evans, "Britons join rebels."

100 Aaron Y. Zelin, "ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans," International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, December 17, 2013, http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans.

101 Ibid.

102 Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," (The Soufan Group, November 2014), 51–56, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf.

103 Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," 6.

of the 1980s.[104] More disturbing, however, was that these combatants appeared to mostly join groups that espoused a violent and extreme ideology.[105]

Aside from increasing fighter numbers, 2014 introduced three major complexities into the foreign fighter problem. First, ISIS ascended to unprecedented levels of power resulting in substantial territorial control within Syria and Iraq. The increased ISIS presence and influence was reflected not only by territory gains and Baghdadi's declaration of a new caliphate, but also by increased propaganda attempting to recruit Muslims to Syria and Iraq.[106] Second, Western foreign fighters returning home and ISIS supporters living in the West conducted attacks in Belgium, Canada, and Australia.[107] These attacks reified Western government concerns of returning Syrian combatants. Methods to address Western foreign fighter returnees had gained newfound urgency and importance. The third and final complexity was the introduction of American and coalition combat power into Syria and Iraq in order to confront ISIS. Although foreign fighters represented but a small subset of groups such as ISIS, the efficacy of ISIS's media campaign showing foreigners burning passports and renouncing citizenship inexorably tied the threat posed by militant groups to the threat posed by their foreign combatants.[108] As 2014 came to a close, ISIS and foreign fighters were central to state security concerns across all continents; and further, these worries had materialized into bloodshed, continued recruitment efforts, and media headlines that indicated the flow of combatants to Syria had not abated. Figure 3 shows the growth from 2011–2015 based on media reporting and government estimates.

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104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

106 Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, xx–xxi.

107 Ibid., xx–xxii.

108 Shiv Malik, "French Isis fighters filmed burning passports and calling for terror at home," *The Guardian (London),* November 19, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/20/french-isis-fighters-filmed-burning-passports-calling-for-terror.
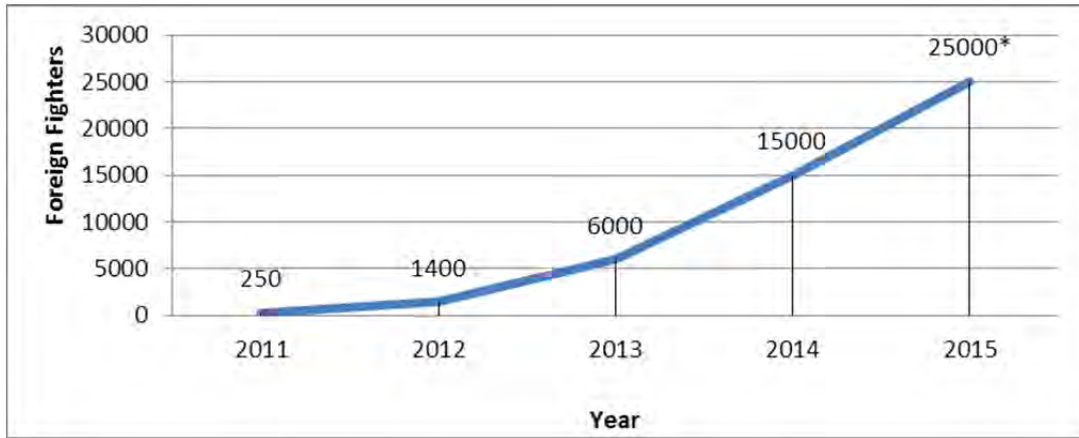
Figure 3.   Estimated Foreign Fighter Growth in Syria (* as of January 2015)

3.   FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN 2015

So what is the status of foreign fighters in Syria now? At the time of writing, the available figures, even with their acknowledged shortcomings, are harrowing. A February 2015 hearing before the United States House Committee on Homeland Security indicated that over 20,000 foreign fighters had traveled to Syria from 90 different countries.[109] Further, the assessment stated that a minimum of 3,400 of these fighters had come from Western nations.[110]

There are some critical implications that can be drawn from the macro data. The enduring nature of the threat posed by foreign fighters is not solely a contemporary issue, but rather is rooted in a pattern that can be traced as far back as the Arab–Afghan War of the 1980s. Written a decade ago in *Foreign Affairs,* Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds warned that the insurgency in Iraq, which included many foreign combatants, would produce blowback globally once the conflict came to an end.[111] Assuming that security conditions facilitating the emergence of stable state would come to fruition, Bergen and

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109 Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: Hearing Before the House Committee on Homeland Security, United States House of Representatives, 114th Congress, 1st Session, on The Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror, February 11, 2015, 2, (2015) (statement of The Honorable Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center), http://www.nctc.gov/docs/Countering_Violent_Islamist_Extremism.pdf.

110 Ibid.

111 Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds, "Blowback Revisited." Foreign Affairs. April 15, 2015. Accessed April 15, 2015. http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61190/peter-bergen-and-alec-reynolds/blowback-revisited.Top of FormBottom of Form.

Reynolds speculated that foreign fighters would then be left with the choice of pursuing conflict elsewhere or returning home.[112] Sure enough, the wave of foreign fighters and local jihadists in Iraq birthed the precursor to ISIS in the form of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).[113] Although the vast majority of foreign fighters in the mid-2000s Iraqi insurgency were from the Middle East, there still existed limited Western nation involvement. Mohammed Hafez studied the ideology of suicide bombers during the height of the insurgency, and his research indicated kinship and activist ties facilitated network activity in several European nations.[114] The perpetuation of foreign fighter waves originating with the Arab–Afghans suggests that the current war in Syria will produce a new generation of foreign fighters who seek another conflict. Furthermore, because the Syrian conflict has attracted unprecedented numbers of Western foreign fighters, the threat to Western nations will grow concomitantly with Western foreign fighter involvement. The same can be said for other global regions that are contributing fighters to Syria and Iraq. In a 2013 report, Thomas Hegghammer empirically grounded the threat of returning combatants. Hegghammer found that of 945 analyzed fighters, 107 returned to commit attacks in the West.[115] Applying the Hegghammer Factor to foreign fighter estimates gathered by the ICSR, Table 1 provides an approximation of threat severity.

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112 Ibid.

113 Stern and Berger, *ISIS,* xv-xix.

114 Mohammed Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007)*,* 195–207.

115 Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 10, doi:10.1017/S0003055412000615.

Table 1.   Western Foreign Fighter Population Data from ICSR, 2014

Nation	Foreign Fighter Population	Per Capita (Up to; per million population)	Per Capita (Up to; per ten thousand Muslim population)	Hegghammer Factor*
Austria	100–150	18.2	4.3	17
Belgium	440	42.3	7.1	48
Denmark	100–150	45.0	11.2	28
Finland	50–70	13.3	66.4	8
France	1,200	18.1	1.8	132
Germany	500–600	7.4	2.0	66
Ireland	30	6.2	5.6	3
Italy	80	1.3	0.8	9
Netherlands	200–250	14.8	3.0	28
Norway	60	11.7	5.1	7
Spain	50–100	2.1	0.9	11
Sweden	150–180	18.5	5.1	20
Switzerland	40	5.0	1.0	4
United Kingdom	500–600	9.4	2.1	66
Australia	100–250	11.1	5.1	28
Canada	100	2.9	0.9	11
United States	100	0.3	0.5	11

* The Hegghammer Factor is in reference to a 2013 study performed by Thomas Hegghammer indicating that out of sample of 945 foreign fighters, one in nine returned to the West to commit attacks.

The numbers of foreign fighters in the aggregate are substantial, but ICSR reports indicate that these figures likely contain some margins of error. Specifically, 2015 report figures represent Syria–Iraq conflict totals across the 2011–2015 periods.[116] As such, ICSR estimates that 5–10 percent of combatants have died, and 10–30 percent are no longer in Syria or Iraq.[117] Taking the ICSR estimates into account and applying the Hegghammer Factor yields over 400 men and women with North American, European, or Australian passports who would seek to commit violence in the West. Due to geographic isolation and the lower numbers involved, the potential impact on North America and Australia is considerably less than Europe. ICSR numbers, however, do not take into

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116 Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, January 26, 2015, http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s.

117 Ibid.

account those prospective foreign fighters who have been unable to leave their respective nations to go and fight within Syria and Iraq. An illustrative example is the case of Canadian Michael Zehaf-Bibeau; unable to acquire a passport for Syria, he proceeded on a shooting rampage in Ottawa on October 22, 2014.[118] Policy implications given this data will be explored in the final chapter of this thesis.

C.   CONCLUSION

The Arab Spring in Syria has devolved from a promising social protest in 2011 to a vitriolic and internecine sectarian conflict that has eroded state borders, killed thousands, and displaced millions. The increasing numbers of foreign fighters and the violence that they have committed both within the Middle East and abroad represent security concerns that are being actively addressed by both national and supranational institutions. The evidence in this chapter has culminated in a point of reference to understand the macro scope of this foreign fighter threat. Moreover, by tracing the emergence and growth of foreign fighters through the aforementioned search metrics, the data supports the supposition that the foreign fighter problem continues to grow. While admittedly the search metrics do not indicate causality regarding recruitment or mobilization within the foreign fighter problem, they do indicate a near exponential growth that, based on historical trends, should be a cause for alarm. The following chapter seeks to provide insight into potential causal mechanisms at the individual level by examining existing secondary source literature alongside newly collected data.

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118 Saeed Ahmed and Greg Botelho, "Who is Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, the man behind the deadly Ottawa attack?," CNN, last accessed April 15, 2015, http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/22/world/canada-shooter.

III. WESTERN FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA

A. INTRODUCTION

Analyzing the rise of the foreign fighter problem at the macro level is instructive in that it demonstrates a continuing trend of recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization of prospective combatants worldwide. There are, however, considerable difficulties in tracking the whereabouts of tens of thousands of people as they move across international borders and seek entry into Syria and Iraq. Global polities at the national and supranational level continue to levy a diverse set of tools to combat the flow of foreign fighters—and this is a necessary burden. As discussed in Chapter II, The Hegghammer Factor[119] suggests that at the beginning of 2015, approximately 400 Western foreign fighters may return to the West with the intention of causing harm to their respective populations. Individual foreign-fighter analysis may provide insight into patterns unique to Western nations, but a sufficient sample size is required to support such analysis.

Previous conflicts replete with foreign-fighter demographics and influence data have proved useful in identifying loose data trends of a generic foreign fighter. Although validating trends, such as age ranges, gender, or religion, are helpful for analysis, more detailed profiles in the aggregate can help identify or validate additional patterns in the areas of recruitment prevention, de-radicalization, and threat-severity assessment. Moreover, there is much promise with emerging big data analysis technology, particularly in the social media realm.[120]

This chapter is structured in three parts. The first section begins with a description of methodology, and then presents and analyzes 20 newly constructed foreign-fighter

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119 The Hegghammer Factor refers to studies done by Thomas Hegghammer that indicate approximately 11% of Western foreign fighters return to the West with the intention of committing acts of violence; See Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," American Political Science Review 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 10, doi:10.1017/S0003055412000615.

120 Anand Varghese, "Social Media Reporting and the Syrian Civil War," United States Institute of Peace (June 7, 2013), 2, http://www.usip.org/publications/social-media-reporting-and-the-syrian-civil-war.

profiles. The second section evaluates how the constructed profiles compare with existing Western foreign fighter data. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings.

B.   WESTERN FOREIGN FIGHTER DATA

This section is built on the analysis of 20 profiles I have constructed. While capturing traditional data that many other analysts focus on, such as age, gender, or country of origin, I also focus on three variables that I argue are critical to understanding foreign fighters: networks, biographical availability as measured by degree of anchoring, and group dynamics. The section begins with an explanation of my methodology and key variables.

1.   METHODOLOGY

As noted by previous endeavors in foreign fighter research, I acknowledge the difficulty of collecting and coding foreign fighter demographic, biographical, and influence information. While some of this data is readily available, personal narratives are by their definition subjective and thus difficult to confirm. Furthermore, social media sources tend to be ephemeral in nature due to corporate content policies.

I built the profiles by collecting a minimum of three news articles or media interviews for each foreign fighter. The primary tool used for profile searches was LexisNexis Academic with supplemental data from Google's search engine. Social media networks and blogging platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr were also searched for corroborating information. The focus of the searches was on North American, European, and Australian foreign fighters. While the profiles presented do not represent a true random sample of Western foreign fighters, I sacrificed randomness of data for specificity of information. Although this approach may present some limitations from a statistical standpoint, the challenges in acquiring robust foreign fighter data make it likely that these profiles are no less random than previous similar studies. Another potential limitation with my methodology is reporting biases. At the onset of the Syrian civil war, reporting on Western foreign fighters was likely underrepresented. This sample also includes foreign fighters who fought *against* extremist groups, such as ISIS, to

determine whether there are any common patterns that exist across the foreign fighter ideological spectrum.

Overall, I collected 117 profiles, of which 97 were discarded for lack of sufficient information. 20 core profiles were retained for this study. Of the 20 retained profiles, three were prospective foreign fighters who were arrested prior to travel, and two were aspiring foreign fighters who were obstructed from traveling and thus committed acts of violence in their respective nations. The remaining core profiles completed their journey into Syria. All core profile individuals will be referred to as foreign fighters by virtue of their demonstrated intent to fight in Syria.

2. ASSESSED VARIABLES

In addition to standard demographic and biographical data (e.g., age, gender, religion, nationality), this thesis sought to evaluate three variables—networks, anchoring, and group dynamics—in order to better understand foreign fighters and the nature of their recruitment and mobilization. These variables were readily extractable from the collected demographic and influence data.

a. Networks

Networks have long represented a necessary condition for foreign combatant entry into a conflict area. In his study of Iraqi suicide bombers, Mohammed Hafez argues that among many factors, mobilizing networks were critical for jihadists to engage in suicide operations.[121] Marc Sageman, in his seminal work *Understanding Terror Networks,* concluded that social networks, even those comprised of peripheral acquaintances, were more potent than ideology in recruiting and mobilizing individuals.[122] Thus networks behave as both a beacon to draw prospective combatants, and a vehicle to deliver them. Network effects are particularly critical for understanding how foreign fighters are recruited and mobilized from the West. Within the greater Middle East and North Africa—the origin of most foreign fighters in the Syrian

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[121] Hafez, "Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies," 96.

[122] Sageman, Understanding Terror Networks, 178.

conflict—unity of culture, religion, and language facilitate the existence of various institutions that can function as mobilizing networks. Western prospective foreign fighters are likely faced with scarcer options for mobilization.

In order to test for network effects, recruitment and mobilization mechanisms were categorized under mode of recruitment (MOR). The coding options for MOR included: (1) Traditional Social Network (TSN): the foreign fighter was recruited or mobilized through peer, family, professions, or religious networks; (2) Online: the foreign fighter was recruited or mobilized via online networks (e.g., chat rooms, social media platforms); (3) Volunteer: the foreign fighter made the decision to fight based on internal motivations and not due to a network-based influence.

b.   Anchoring

The second variable assessed was whether or not each respective foreign fighter was anchored. In the context of this thesis, a foreign fighter was coded as anchored if he or she was bound by obligation to a profession, spouse, child, or other family member. This definition is an adaptation of Scott Jasper's concept of "biographical availability."[123] This variable tested how anchoring impacted recruitment or mobilization. The entering supposition was that the more a person was anchored, the less likely they would be recruited since subsequent mobilization would result in the severance of existing bonds of obligation. Coding for the anchoring variable is binary with options being either "yes" or "no."

c.   Group Dynamics

The final critical variable tested was group dynamics. Abstractly, a common result of assembling like-minded extreme individuals is group polarization. According to legal scholar Cass Sunstein, recruiters "attempt to inculcate a shared sense of humiliation, which breeds rage, and group solidarity, which prepares the way for movement toward further extremes."[124] The physical manifestation of a unified identity should result in

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[123] Scott Jasper, *Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 173–174.

124 Sunstein, "Why They Hate Us," 429.

groups traveling to Syria with much greater frequency than individuals venturing alone. Previous studies support the impact of group dynamics in mobilization. In the context of Iraq's insurgency beginning in 2003, transnational suicide bombers overwhelmingly traveled in small groups, and rarely did they travel alone.[125]

In order to test for group-dynamic effects, mobilization to Syria was categorized under mode of travel (MOT). The coding for MOT was either "group" or "alone." A "group" coding indicated that the foreign fighter traveled or attempted to travel with a group. An "alone" coding indicated that the foreign fighter traveled or attempted to travel individually, and without any expectation of meeting a known in-group member during his or her voyage.

3. DATA RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section begins with the presentation and analysis of the demographic and biographical data. Network, anchoring, and group dynamic effects are then highlighted with respect to the constructed profiles. Narratives of some foreign fighters are also used to provide context to the data results.

a. *Demographics and Biographical Data*

The core profiles were comprised of citizens from the United States, Australia, Canada, France, and the Netherlands. As with previous studies, the majority of the foreign fighters were male, with only one of the 20 being female. The ages of the fighters ranged from 18–32 with a median age of 22 and a mean age of 23. It bears mentioning that many of the discarded profiles contained much younger individuals, with 16 being the youngest. While the sample age range is consistent with existing studies on foreign fighters, the average age of the group is younger. Previous foreign fighter mobilizations contained fighters with an average age closer to 27.[126]

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125 Hafez, "Martyrs without Borders, 191.

126 The average age of Iraqi foreign fighters profiles collected during the 2003–2007 insurgency was 27; see Mohammed M. Hafez, "Martyrs without Borders: The Puzzle of Transnational Suicide Bombers," in Ashgate Research Companion to Political Violence, ed. Marie Breen-Smyth, 2012, 189. QAP militants in Saudi Arabia during a 2007 study also had an average age of 27; see Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia," Middle East Policy 13, no. 4 (2006), 42.

All profiled combatants who fought with extremist groups were Muslims, with 38 percent of them converts to Islam. Of note, most converts to Islam experienced online effects in their recruitment. Future studies would benefit from understanding the links between conversion, recruitment, and online effects among Westerners.

Additionally, and validating the effectiveness of their propaganda, ISIS affiliation was attributed to most of the extremist foreign fighters. One combatant, however, was affiliated with JAN, and there were some foreign fighters with unknown affiliations. The most commonly cited reasons for foreign fighting were defense of Islam and moral outrage directed at either the Assad regime, or in the case of the anti-extremist fighters, ISIS and similar extremist groups.

There are other findings that require further scrutiny. Figure 4 shows that 43 percent of the sampled fighters are deceased, with 33 percent being killed in Syria and 10 percent being killed by law enforcement (LE) officials. This rate is considerably higher than the estimates put forth by King College's International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR).[127] There is some speculation as to the cause of this unusually high death rate. Some suggest that foreign fighters are disproportionately used as "cannon fodder" during initial assaults; although this premise is difficult to prove, existing interviews give some rationale to the higher death rates.[128]

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127 Neumann, "Foreign fighter total 20,000."

128 Eli Lake, "Foreign Recruits Are Islamic State's Canon Fodder," Bloomberg View, February 11, 2015, http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015–02–11/foreign-fighters-are-islamic-state-s-cannon-fodder.
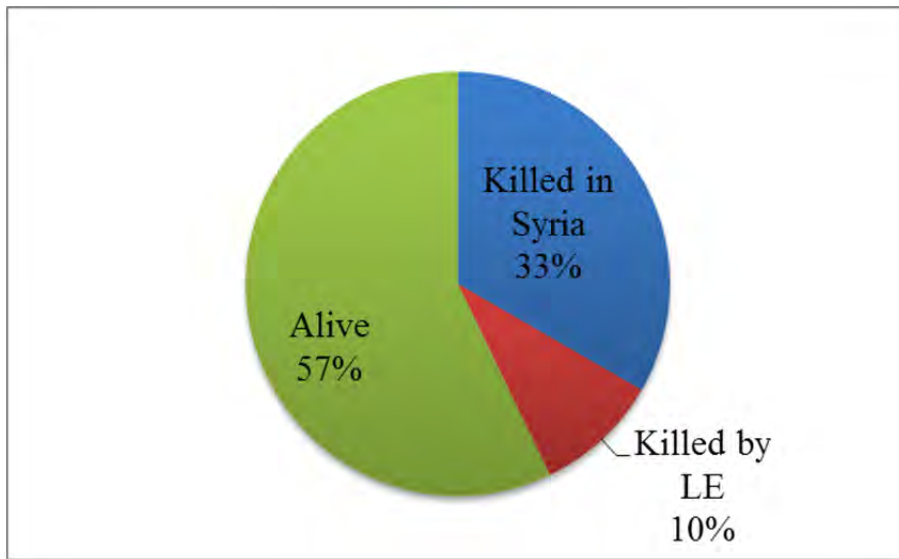
Figure 4.   Western Foreign Fighter Status

Another potential pattern emerged with regards to family country of origin. Ten of the 16 foreign fighters who espoused desire to join extremist groups came from families that had emigrated from Muslim majority nations in recent generations. Although the evidence is not conclusive regarding each sampled fighters' specific generation, there is warranted speculation that children of second- and third-generation Muslim families face a crisis of identity, and thus may face increased risk of radicalization.[129] Not understanding fully the reasons their parents brought them to their new home, and not identifying with the culture of their new nation, these men and women may be more susceptible to ideas that dichotomize East-West society and ideas. Future studies that are able to determine specific generational information would be useful in refining these findings.

Last, three profiles supported previous studies by Thomas Hegghammer. Canadian Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, responsible for shootings in Ottawa, and Abdul Numan Haider, the Melbourne stabbing perpetrator, were men who sought travel to Syria, but

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129 Peter G. Mandaville, Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001); Olivier Roy, Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004).

were obstructed by authorities in obtaining passports.[130] Both of these men confirm research indicating those who are obstructed from foreign fighting are often motivated to attack at home for lack of another option.[131]

Another Hegghammer research result demonstrated that foreign fighters who return to the West and commit attacks are often more deadly in their execution.[132] Mehdi Nemmouche, the Frenchman who was charged with killing four people at a Jewish museum in Brussels, may provide supporting data to this end.[133]

b.   *Networks, Anchoring, and Group Dynamics*

Regarding network effects, the MOR data results, which are shown in Figure 5, indicate that TSN influence was overwhelmingly the primary mode of recruitment. Although seven of the 12 TSN-impacted foreign fighters showed signs of online influence, the Internet was cited as a means to access information, and not as a driver of recruitment or mobilization. With only 15 percent of the foreign fighters recruited from online methods exclusively, this research confirms previous studies that indicate the Internet is more a purveyor and disseminator of information, and less of a direct recruiter, radicalizer, or mobilizer.[134] Proximate human networks appear crucial for recruitment and mobilization, but even virtual human networks via the Internet showed some limited success.

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130 See Mike Hagar, Tara Carman, and Matt Robinson, "Gunman battled crack addiction; Michael Zehaf-Bibeau was a Familiar Face in Downtown Eastside," The Vancouver Sun (British Columbia), Final Edition (October 24, 2014): News, A1; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 10, 2015]; Melissa Davey, "Abdul Numan Haider 'may not have been alone' in Endeavour Hills car park," The Guardian, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/25/abdul-numan-haider-may-not-have-been-alone.

131 Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," 11.

132 Ibid.

133 Anne Penketh, "Man Held Over Killings at Jewish Museum in Brussels Fought with Jihadists in Syria," The Guardian (London), Final Edition (June 2, 2014): International, 12; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 11, 2015].

134 von Behr, Reding, Edwards, and Gribbon, "Radicalization," xii.

Although there were five volunteers,[135] they were unique in that all of them had previous military experience, and four of them went to fight *against* ISIS.
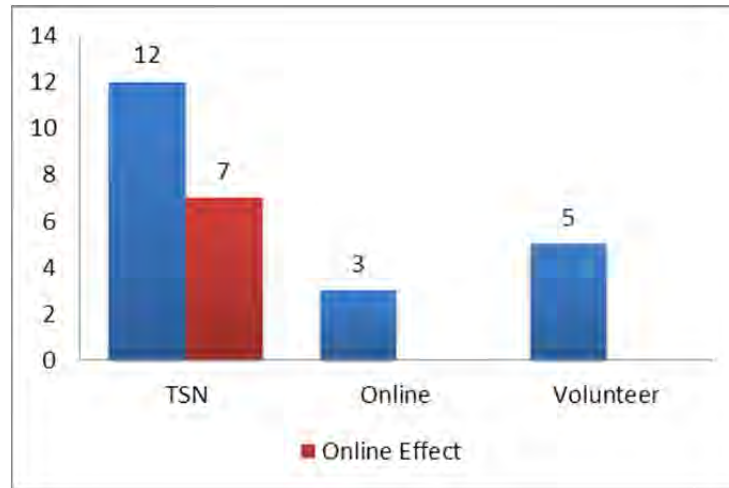

Figure 5.   Western Foreign Fighter Mode of Recruitment (MOR)

Anchoring also provided some telling observations. As is shown in Figure 6, there were zero instances of an anchored individual mobilizing or attempting to mobilize to go to Syria. Lack of anchoring is not unexpected, however, as the sample revealed some data trends: the foreign fighters were predominantly young, unmarried, unemployed, or students. This lack of anchoring is relevant as it may provide insight into targeted recruitment campaigns by groups such as ISIS. The evolution of ISIS, however, complicates the anchoring variable because ISIS's pseudo-state structure proclaims support to entire families, and not only to those members who would fight.

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135 Volunteer profiles did not have any strong indication of outside actor influence in effecting their mobilization to Syria.
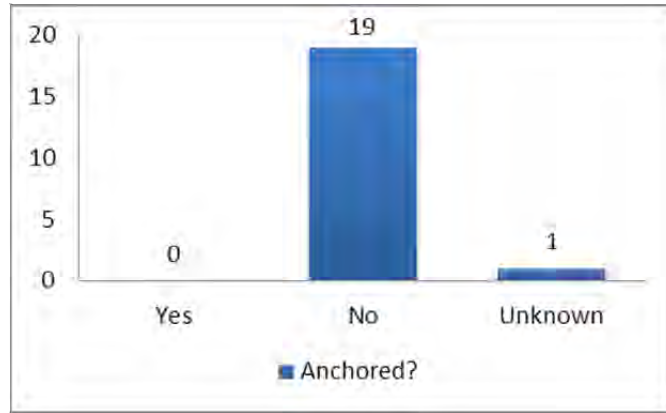
Figure 6.   Western Foreign Fighters Anchored Status

The final variable describes how the sampled foreign fighters traveled to Syria from a group dynamics standpoint. Figure 7 shows that a majority of the 20 foreign fighters were either recruited as a group, or traveled to Syria as a group. Interestingly, this majority included foreign fighters across the ideological spectrum, with some going to fight *against* ISIS, and some going to join ISIS and other similar groups. As mentioned earlier, the group-dynamics effects seen in this sample are consistent with existing foreign fighter literature.
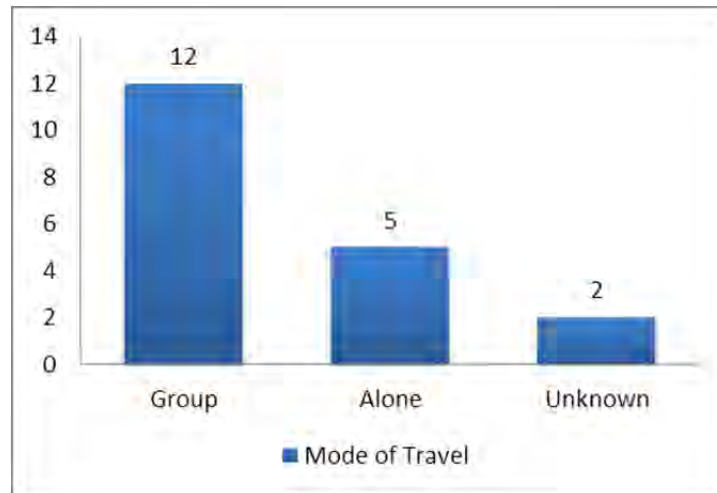

Figure 7.   Western Foreign Fighter Mode of Travel (MOT)

Some narratives help showcase how the three variables of networks, anchoring, and group dynamics function in the recruitment and mobilization of foreign fighters. Muhammad Mehdi Hassan was by all accounts a normal British teenager from Portsmouth.[136] Affected and inspired by the images of war in Syria, 19-year-old Hassan and a group of four other Bangladeshi converts to Islam left to wage jihad in October 2014.[137] Hassan and his group of friends were not, however, the first Portsmouth residents to leave for Syria. The evidence suggests that a network of like-minded individuals had formed several years prior. Ifthekar Jaman, a 23-year-old native of Portsmouth killed fighting with ISIS in 2013, was the first of this network to leave for Syria.[138] Another Portsmouth native, Mushudur Choudury, followed Jaman shortly thereafter.[139] By all accounts, a network of real-world social bonds had created a common identity among a small group of Bangladeshi-British men. Unencumbered by familial or professional obligations, and emboldened by a pre-existing social network, a self-labeled "Britani Brigade [of] Bangladeshi Bad Boys," of which Hassan was a member, traveled together to Syria.[140] Hassan and his cohort were killed in combat within a month of their arrival.[141]

These network and group dynamics effects are not isolated; similar stories have emerged from the British cities of Brighton and Cardiff.[142] According to ICSR director

136 Lizzie Dearden, "Teenage jihadist Mehdi Hassan is fourth Portsmouth man killed fighting for ISIS in Syria." *The Independent (London)*, accessed December 3, 2014, October 25, 2014, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/portsmouth-teenager-mehdi-hassan-killed-fighting-for-isis-in-syria-9817906.html.

137 Ibid.

138 Josh Halliday, Ewen MacAskill, and Karen McVeigh, "Family of British jihadist killed in Syria are arrested," *The Guardian*, Final Edition (October 15, 2014): Home Pages, 9; <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/lnacademic> [April 3, 2015].

139 Ibid.

140 Dearden, "Teenage jihadist Mehdi Hassan is fourth Portsmouth man killed fighting for ISIS in Syria."

141 Karen McVeigh, "Peer pressure lures more Britons to Syria than Isis videos, study finds," *The Guardian (London)*, November 6, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com.

142 Ibid.

Peter Neumann, "While online recruitment plays a role, people go because they know people who are in Syria. It's all about networks in the real world."[143]

There are also examples on the other side of the ideological spectrum. For instance, two British friends and former infantrymen James Hughes and Jamie Read fought alongside the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in late 2014.[144] Both men, outraged by the killing of aid worker Alan Henning, made contact with YPG-liaison and American foreign fighter Jordan Matson, and made their way together to fight against ISIS.[145]

While my sample size is relatively small, the results show there is merit in aggregating additional profiles to refine the data trends. Based upon the data I have collected, I can cautiously conclude that it appears Western foreign fighters overwhelmingly are mobilized or recruited through traditional networks, unanchored, and travel to Syria in small groups. Next, I examine the few existing studies on Western foreign fighters and compare their findings to my data and conclusions.

C.   WESTERN FOREIGN FIGHTERS: EXISTING STUDIES

There are many existing studies on previous foreign fighter mobilizations, but very few have attempted to de-construct the contemporary Syrian conflict, let alone analyze individual Western combatants. For instance, Mohammed Hafez documented transnational suicide-bombers during the Iraqi insurgency between 2003 and 2006.[146] Additionally, various institutions and academics have methodologically deconstructed the Sinjar records, a collection of approximately 700 foreign-fighter dossiers discovered by

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143 Ibid.

144 Mark Townsend, "Revealed: UK 'mercenaries' fighting Islamic State terrorist forces in Syria," *The Guardian (London)*, November 22, 2014.

145 "Ex-British soldier fighting Isis in Syria 'motivated by Alan Henning murder,'" *The Guardian (London)*, December 5, 2014.

146 Mohammed M. Hafez, Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007); Mohammed M. Hafez, "Martyrs without Borders: The Puzzle of Transnational Suicide Bombers," in Ashgate Research Companion to Political Violence, ed. Marie Breen-Smyth, 2012.

the American military in Iraq.[147] Thomas Hegghammer also researched militant Islamist recruitment in Saudi Arabia between 2002 and 2005.[148] These are but a small sample of previous foreign fighter scholarly work. Although contemporary Syrian foreign fighter data is still in its infancy, the reified threat of Western foreign fighters has begun to generate increased interest in analysis at the individual fighter level. It appears that patterns from previous foreign fighter individual studies may hold similar results for Western foreign fighters.

Michael Noonan and Phyl Khalil presented one of the first individual analyses of North American foreign fighters in a 2015 *Journal for Deradicalization* article.[149] The study analyzed 46 constructed Canadian and American profiles of foreign fighters whom had gone to Syria, and potential foreign fighters who for various reasons were unable to depart their respective nations.[150]

For the 26 foreign fighters who traveled to Syria, Noonan and Khalil establish five recruitment influencers: 1) Internet, 2) Religion, 3) National Corruption, 4) Boredom and 5) Romance.[151] Only nine of the 26 profiles, however, had sufficient information for categorization. Religious influence accounted for six of the nine cases.[152] An in-depth discussion of what accounts for religious influence, or any of the other factors, is beyond the scope of their article. Regardless, religion has long been a beacon for violence across all strata of society, and further, religious influence is a difficult metric to measure or code.

Noonan and Khalil also presented data regarding what happened to the 26 foreign fighters over the course of their collective experiences. The more salient information

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147 Palantir Blog, "Analysis of Al Qa'ida Foreign Fighters in Iraq: Analysis of the Sinjar Records," accessed on April 30, 2015, https://www.palantir.com/2009/02/sinjar.

148 Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia."

149 Michael Noonan and Phyl Khalil, "North American Foreign Fighters," Journal for Deradicalization 1, no. 1 (2015).

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid., 74.

152 Ibid.

indicated that 39 percent of the sampled fighters were killed, 35 percent were still fighting, and nine percent had returned home.[153]

The 39 percent death rate is consistent with the 38 percent death rate calculated for this thesis, and as such is also significantly higher than the 5–10 percent 2015 estimates by ICSR.[154] This is another data point that indicates Western foreign fighters are killed in Syria at a greater than average rate.

Noonan and Khalil then assessed how the 20 *potential* foreign fighters were radicalized. Again, unknowns were substantial, with only seven of the 20 profiles providing sufficient information for categorization.[155] Using the same influencers for recruitment, the authors attributed online radicalization to six of these fighters.[156] An explanation of how online means affected radicalization was not addressed. The authors claimed, "The Internet [appeared] to be a strong tool for radicalization." The role of the Internet in radicalization, however, remains highly debated.[157] This is not to doubt the veracity of Noonan and Khalil's data, but rather to show that the data is inconsistent with contemporary studies on online radicalization. For instance, a 2013 RAND report concluded that radicalization could not be attributed solely to online sources.[158] Moreover, this thesis also found very few instances in which radicalization or recruitment was attributed exclusively to online means.

In a separate 2015 study, Quantum Communications (QC), an American strategic consulting firm, analyzed ISIS combatants. Based on footage from 18 hours of media

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153 Ibid.

154 Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, January 26, 2015, http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s.

155 Noonan and Khalil, "North American Foreign Fighters," 74.

156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.

158 The 2013 RAND study reported that the Internet provided access to extremist information but evidence suggesting a causal relationship between Internet and recruitment was circumspect; See Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, and Luke Gribbon, "Radicalization in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism," RAND Europe (2013), xii, http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html.

interviews,[159] QC compiled 49 profiles of which nine were categorized as "Western external fighters" from the United States and Europe.[160] Only these nine will be analyzed for the purposes of this thesis. The methodological approach used for QC's study was an ego-ecological psycho-contextual analysis that gathered keywords from the interviews and used them to categorize aspirational information for all the sampled fighters.[161] There is some degree of subjectivity in this analytical framework, as the model does not simply take what each fighter says overtly in their interviews, but also codes their word selection in a way to approximate how the fighter perceives their social environment and social status.[162]

In order to structure the data, QC separated the foreign fighters into nine discrete "seeker" categories that summarized each respective fighter's internal motivation.[163] The seeker categories included: (1) Status, (2) Identity, (3) Revenge, (4) Redemption, (5) Responsibility, (6) Thrill, (7) Ideology, (8) Justice, and (9) Death.[164] Western external fighters overwhelmingly fell into two categories: identity seekers and thrill seekers, with the former category representing a sizable majority.[165] The definitions for identity and thrill seekers are worth quoting in their entirety:

> Identity Seekers: Need the structure, rules, and perspective that come from belonging to a group, because belonging defines them, their friends, and their interaction with society. They often feel like outsiders in their initial unfamiliar/unintelligible environment and seek to identify with another group. In this context, the 'Islamic Ummah'[166] provides a pre-packaged transnational identity.

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159 "Understanding Jihadists in Their Own Words," The White Papers 1, no. 2 (March 2015), Quantum Communications, 7, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/specialreports/565067-understanding-jihadists-in-their-own-words.

160 Ibid., 7.

161 For more information on the methodological approach, see "Understanding Jihadists."

162 "Understanding Jihadists," 7.

163 Ibid., 5.

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid., 10.

166 The term Ummah refers to the global Muslim community.

Thrill Seekers: Are filled with energy and drive. They want to prove their potential/power by accomplishing an arduous task or surviving a harrowing adventure. They are mostly in it for the opportunity to engage in action while enjoying a certain level of impunity for their acts.[167]

Additionally, QC refines its fighter profiles by establishing five influencing factors: (1) Personal, (2) Group, (3) Community, (4) Socio-political, and (5) Ideological.[168] In the case of the nine Westerners, ideology and sociopolitical environment were attributed most frequently in interviews.[169] The QC report defines their ideology influencer as "factors that are related to the fighter through which the individual perceives their reality, e.g., world view, religious duty, in addition to influential figures that contribute to the individual's perception and understanding of their reality."[170] The sociopolitical influencers are "factors related to the individual's perception of the different events outside their direct environment; and how these events affect them as well as the group with whom they identify.

While the sample of 49 profiles as a whole was helpful to understand foreign fighter motivations, the subset of nine Westerners was too limited. Moreover, the categorization lacks sufficient specificity or measurable metrics as they relate to recruitment or mobilization.

The QC report did identify that group identity—and by correlation, group dynamics and networks—appeared particularly salient for Western external fighters. The most that can be confirmed by QC's report is that it supports group dynamic and network effects data from this thesis.

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167 "Understanding Jihadists," 5.

168 "Understanding Jihadists," 12.

169 Ibid.

170 Ibid.

D. CONCLUSION

The individual Western foreign fighter data analyzed in this chapter contributes to existing research in five significant ways. First, influence and motivation factors identified by all studies reaffirm existing research. Namely, that it is very difficult to determine a comprehensive set of attributes and motivations that predispose someone to foreign fighting. John Hogan, director of the Center for Terrorism and Security Studies at University of Massachusetts Lowell has said, "four decades of psychological research on who becomes a terrorist and why hasn't yet produced any profile."[171] This trend appears to continue into the foreign-fighter domain.

Second, Noonan–Khalil's data regarding foreign fighter death rates was testable with the addition of more Western profiles, and indeed this thesis also concludes that the death rate for Western foreign fighters appears to be greater than the conflict-wide average. Whether Westerners die more frequently because they are deemed more expendable by leadership, or other factors, the information could be useful as one means of deterring prospective fighters from leaving the West. Conversely, however, true believers may see this statistic as a beacon for martyrdom.

Online radicalization effects are the third issue identified. Consensus on how the Internet impacts recruitment, radicalization, or mobilization varied. While Noonan–Khalil's data supports radicalization via online means, the profiles in this thesis does not support that premise. The paucity of profiles—their nine versus my 20 profiles in this study—is likely a contributing factor to Noonan–Khalil's conclusion about online radicalization effects. I agree with the 2013 RAND report and conclude that it appears the Internet can act as a behavior catalyst, but rarely does it function as the sole determinant of radicalization, recruitment, or mobilization.

A separate research effort that collects profiles of Internet recruited or mobilized foreign fighters may prove useful. Instead of placing too much credit on social media or other Internet methods, it would be beneficial to try and determine patterns among those

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171 Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 81.

recruited online. Such analysis may help identify other issues such as underlying societal maladies or grievances.

Fourth, this thesis finds that my core profile demographic data falls with the bounds of previous foreign fighter studies. Aside from the younger age median and mean, fighters were predominantly male and cited moral outrage or defense of Islam as their pivotal motivators. Outside of these general details, it appears unlikely that a general profile that captures the essence of a foreign fighter, Western or otherwise, will emerge. There are simply too many variables.

Last, the data gathered supports the importance of the three critical variables of networks, anchoring, and group-dynamics. The majority of the profiles experienced one or more network, anchoring, or group-dynamics effects. Expanding the application of these variables to more profiles will be beneficial in refining the results. Regardless, the data indicates that networks, particularly proximate social ones, are critical to recruiting and mobilizing foreign fighters. Further, individuals who are responsible for their family's livelihood, or who hold a steady job, are highly unlikely to mobilize regardless of their societal grievances. Additionally, and supporting the existing literature, Western foreign fighters are far more likely to travel to Syria in small groups instead of alone.

With the growth and current status of foreign fighters established, and conclusions derived from Western foreign fighter data, the final chapter will return to the original four hypotheses for evaluation, address implications, and conclude with suggestions for follow-on research.

IV. CONCLUSION

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the major findings of the thesis, formulates implications from the data, and makes suggestions for future research. In addition to the demographic, biographical, and motivational data presented, Chapter III proposed three critical variables—networks, anchoring, and group dynamics—to help refine the knowledge of Western foreign fighter recruitment and mobilization mechanisms. The data, comprised of 20 comprehensive Western foreign fighter profiles, was useful in providing preliminary answers to the four hypotheses presented in Chapter I. These hypotheses sought to determine principle drivers of recruitment and mobilization for Western foreign fighters by investigating the efficacy of (1) ideology, (2) traditional social networks (TSNs), (3) online social networks (OSN), and (4) group dynamics.

The chapter continues in three parts. First, data findings are reviewed within the context of the four hypotheses. The second section examines potential implications derived both from the research process and the presented data. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research within the foreign-fighter field.

B. HYPOTHESIS EVALUATION

1. H1: IDEOLOGY

H1 attempted to confirm previous theoretical research on foreign fighter motivations, namely, that ideology is a principal driver of recruiting and mobilizing prospective combatants.[172] The ideology hypotheses included the notion of a transnational threat against an imagined community. Trying to empirically validate ideology as a principal driver of recruitment and mobilization was problematic. Although approximately 50 percent of those profiled claimed that the defense of Muslims and Islam were central motivators, distinguishing between piety and propaganda was difficult

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[172] See David Malet, *Foreign Fighters*; Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters."

without direct access to the individual. Even then, extracting true motivations from a compelling individual frame was not a guaranteed outcome.

Prior history of activism, however, is a measurable variable that may indicate an individual is genuinely motivated from an ideological perspective. Nevertheless, of the 20 fighters sampled, two had a tenuous history of activism characterized mostly by criminality, and only one fit firmly within the activist milieu.

Furthermore, given the diffuse nature of radical ideology, one would expect a more random distribution of fighters in the nations sampled for this study. Instead this thesis found distinct cases where recruitment appeared to concentrate in cities where pre-existing radical networks resided. The city of Portsmouth in the United Kingdom, for example, was the home of five foreign fighters killed in Syria.[173] In another case, six Minnesota men were arrested for attempting to join ISIS.[174]

Given the data, although Western foreign fighters often prescribe to an ideological frame, other variables, such as networks and group dynamics, demonstrated greater recruiting and mobilizing potential.

2. H2: TRADITIONAL SOCIAL NETWORKS (TSN)

H2 questioned the efficacy of proximate TSNs in driving recruitment and mobilization to Syria and Iraq. TSNs can include networks made up of family, friends, religious members, or co-workers. TSN effects within the data set were compelling: 80 percent of the sampled Western foreign fighters were recruited or mobilized via some form of TSN.

The TSN types among the sampled individuals varied. In the United Kingdom, five members of the Portsmouth Dawah Team were killed in Syria.[175] This proselytizing group was connected to the Islamic Education and Research Academy (iERA), a Salafist

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[173] Dearden, "Teenage jihadist Mehdi Hassan is fourth Portsmouth man killed fighting for ISIS in Syria."

[174] "Americans Linked to ISIS," *CNN,* updated April 23, 2015, http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2015/04/us/americans-isis.

[175] Samuel Westrop, "UK Salafist Group Linked to British ISIS Fighters," *Gatestone Institute*, November 19, 2014, http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4892/iera-isis-fighters.

group with questionable preaching practices.[176] One sampled individual was likely radicalized via a Salafi prison network, which supports previous studies that note the impact of prison networks in recruiting and radicalization individuals. [177] Even family networks were effective. An American from a Chicago suburb convinced his two teenage siblings to write farewell letters and journey to Syria.[178] Military service networks facilitated the mobilization of two former British soldiers to go and fight *against* ISIS.[179] These examples are not all-inclusive, but they demonstrate the breadth of networks whose effects resulted in recruitment and mobilization.

Ideological conviction among prospective foreign fighters may draw everyone to the same table, but overwhelmingly, personal network effects appear to drive individuals to pack bags and board planes for a distant conflict.

3.   H3: ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS (OSN)

Discussion over social-media impact on various societal issues is pervasive in both the media and academia. H3 looked at online social network (OSN) effects as a distinct query within the networks variable. While OSN effects are most commonly attributed to social-media networks, the Internet and mobile devices also provide a wide range of tools that facilitate social interaction. Chat rooms and question sites such as Ask.fm remain active purveyors of extremist dialogue.[180]

Analysis of the data shows that in only 15 percent of cases, OSN effects drove recruitment and mobilization. These findings confirm previous studies that suggest the

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[176] Westrop, "UK Salafist Group Linked to British ISIS Fighters."

[177] Scott Sayare, "Suspect Held in Jewish Museum Killings," *The New York Times,* June 1, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/02/world/europe/suspect-arrested-in-jewish-museum-killings-in-belgium.html.

[178] Jason Meisner, "Officials: Siblings with Bolingbrook Teen in Bid to Join Islamic State," *Chicago Tribune,* November 3, 2014, http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/bolingbrook-plainfield/chi-prosecutors-2-siblings-joined-bolingbrook-teen-in-bid-to-join-isil-20141103-story.html.

[179] "UK Fighters in Syria 'Not Mercenaries,'" *BBC*, November 24, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-30172856.

[180] Caitlin Dewey, "Inside the battle for Ask.fm, the site where Islamic State recruited three American teens," *The Washington Post*, December 12, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/12/12/inside-the-battle-for-ask-fm-the-site-where-islamic-state-recruited-three-american-teens.

Internet is, at best, a catalyst for recruitment and mobilization, but not an independent causal mechanism. Despite OSN's minimal *direct* impact on recruitment and mobilization, at least 50 percent of all profiled individuals used the Internet as a means to access a TSN. The online realm has become a virtual gatekeeper effective at passing both extremist doctrine and the means to contact a local or online network. As such, although OSNs may not effectively recruit and mobilize individuals, they provide an anonymous method to access people with the relevant ideological or logistical knowledge. While there is cause for concern due to the ubiquity of Internet access in the West, malevolent OSN overtures to prospective foreign fighters are a double-edged sword since they are exploitable by law enforcement and intelligence organizations. Ultimately, although OSNs will continue to play a role in the dissemination of extremist content, the data thus far does not suggest causality in recruitment or mobilization for a majority of the analyzed cases.

4. H4: GROUP DYNAMICS

The fourth and final hypothesis evaluated the impact of group dynamics in recruitment and mobilization. The assumption was that for Westerners, as a subset of all foreign fighters, recruitment and travel to Syria and Iraq overwhelmingly required the psychological and physical support of a group.

While networks facilitate points of contact for sharing logistical and ideological information, group dynamic effects supplant individual fears and inculcate group members with a sense of solidarity.[181] Testing for measurable group-dynamic effects, however, was difficult due to the subjective nature of individual and shared identity. In order to determine some measure of group dynamic effect, this thesis assessed how individuals traveled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq. The majority of the sampled fighters—approximately 70 percent—departed their homes in the company of a small group of like-minded individuals. This figure provides an initial indication that group dynamics may indeed drive mobilization of prospective foreign fighters. Future studies would benefit from measuring other variables that relate to group dynamic effects. As an

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[181] Sunstein, "Why They Hate Us," 429.

example, social network analysis could be used to substantiate Donatella Della Porta's concept of "spirals of encapsulation," in which militants deepen their radicalization by surrounding themselves with similar people, and isolate themselves from out groups.[182]

Additionally, the anchoring variable was described within H4 because it measures the degree of availability among prospective foreign fighters. An individual was coded as anchored if he or she was bound by obligations at home to either family or profession. The speculation was that anchored individuals would be less susceptible to recruitment and mobilization. The converse assumption was that unanchored individuals, those that had no tethers to their place of residence, would be more likely to join and identify with extremist groups. From the available demographics and biographical data, 100 percent of the sampled fighters were unanchored, and thus notionally more susceptible to group dynamic effects. Again, the high percentage of foreign fighters traveling in groups may be an indicator that unanchored individuals are more likely to join groups, assume a group identity, and mobilize to Syria and Iraq.

C.   IMPLICATIONS

Although this thesis does not attempt to soothsay, there are several critical implications that result from both the trend data and the profile analyses. First, from a strategic outlook, foreign fighting is not a new phenomenon. In the realm of Islamic fundamentalism, Syria represents yet another foreign fighter wave whose genesis was 1980s Afghanistan.[183] As such, it is reasonable to expect that when the conflict in the Syria and Iraq is settled, another generation of unemployed foreign fighters will be left searching for an emerging conflict zone. ISIS appears prescient in this matter as they begin to send new recruits to a still politically fragile Libya.[184] Prescriptive policy is beyond the scope of this research, but there is a need to both recognize this future threat and to design appropriate measures to mitigate and contain the impact.

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[182] Jeroen Gunning, "From *Social Movement Theory and the Study of Terrorism*," in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda,* ed. Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (New York: Routledge, 2009), 168.

[183] Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 85.

[184] Dion Nissenbaum and Marie Abi-Habib, "Islamic State Sends Fighters to Libya," *The Wall Street Journal,* May 19, 2015, http://www.wsj.com.

Second, and more proximately, the trend data from Chapter II shows that the rate of foreign-fighter growth in Syria and Iraq continues to accelerate. While the preponderance of combatants come from the Middle East and North Africa, more combatants will come from the West. The Hegghammer Factor suggests that 11 percent of those who decide to fight in Syria and Iraq—as of 2015, that equates to approximately 400 foreign fighters—will return to the West with the intention of causing harm in their respective nations.[185] While in the aggregate these numbers may be alarming, they are mitigated by several factors. First, the data in this thesis suggests that Western foreign fighters die at a much higher rate than their Middle Eastern or North African counterparts. Second, for the majority of Western nations the numbers are small. For instance, according to Table 1 in Chapter II, France's 1,200 estimated foreign fighters represented 18 fighters per million French citizens, or 0.02 percent of France's Muslim population. With Canadian or American numbers between 100–200 foreign fighters, the percentages are far less. A 2014 Brookings Institute policy paper on the subject begins its title appropriately, "Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid."[186] Among several conclusions, the paper states "the threat of Westerners traveling to Syria and Iraq is not negligible, but nor should it be overstated."[187] As many terrorist attacks have shown, small numbers can have a strategic impact, but to call Western foreign fighters a grave national security threat is arguably hyperbole. National intelligence, law enforcement, and military organizations must remain vigilant but also recognize the scope of the problem set.

At the individual level, the final critical implication relates to foreign fighter age and religious conversion. With an average age of 23, the sampled fighters were disproportionately young when compared to the broader pool of historical foreign

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[185] Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," 10.

[186] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Brookings Institute*, Policy Paper 34 (November 2014).

[187] Ibid., 23.

fighters.[188] Also notably, 38 percent of Western extremist foreign fighters were converts to Islam. This percentage appears to be unusually high.[189] It is no surprise that groups like ISIS target younger prospective recruits, but the data gathered in this study demonstrates that their outreach appears to be effective in a limited capacity due to both this youth, and the unusually high conversion rate. Methods to counter these effects should seek to bridge rifts between Muslim communities and the nations to which they belong.

D.   FOLLOW-ON RESEARCH

If there were a clear consensus among scholars regarding recruitment and mobilization mechanisms, it would be that the issue is extremely complex. More specifically, identifying and then empirically validating a causal mechanism that reliably predicts a recruitment or radicalization outcome appears out of reach. The data is difficult to acquire, the potential available data is vast in quantity and unsorted, and adequate computational analysis is still an emerging technology. Previous studies led by Marc Sageman lend credence to this difficulty. Sageman et al. conclude in a 2009 study that it may very well be impossible to determine specific causal mechanisms due to the number of variables.[190] A parsimonious theory that clearly identifies these mechanisms may simply be restricted by current explanatory limits.

So how does this field of study move forward? A primary need is reliable data and data analysis. To support any hypothesis that provides causal mechanisms, the field needs more information from these men and women who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq. Excellent data would come from interviews asking probing questions as to how

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[188] The average age of Iraqi foreign fighters profiles collected during the 2003–2007 insurgency was 27; see Mohammed M. Hafez, "Martyrs without Borders: The Puzzle of Transnational Suicide Bombers," in Ashgate Research Companion to Political Violence, ed. Marie Breen-Smyth, 2012, 189. QAP militants in Saudi Arabia during a 2007 study also had an average age of 27; see Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia," Middle East Policy 13, no. 4 (2006), 42.

[189] Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, "From hip-hop to jihad, how the Islamic State became a magnet for converts," *The Washington Post,* May 6, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com.

[190] Office of Naval Research (Program Officer: Harlod Hawkins), "Theoretical Frames on Pathways to Violent Radicalization," ARTIS Research and Risk Modeling (August 2009), 5, http://www.artisresearch.com/articles/ARTIS_Theoretical_Frames_August_2009.pdf.

these people became foreign fighters. Aside from the subjective nature of this data, the reality of gaining access seems implausible due to various constraints; the current security environment and the availability of willing subjects remain considerable hurdles.

There are some other options that could help advance research on the matter. One possibility is to sample the Westerners who have gone to fight *against* groups such as ISIS. Although their numbers are small, since they have not been criminalized by their respective governments, these men and women would likely be more forthcoming in providing information about what drove them to leave the comfort of home.

There is also great promise within the fields of big-data analysis and data mining. I concur with perspectives posited in a 2013 United States Institute of Peace (USIP) report on the Syrian Civil War: the vast amount of available online data combined with emerging big-data analysis tools show great potential for determining causal mechanisms related to recruitment and mobilization.[191]

A methodological limitation of this thesis was the breadth of the selected profiles. By selecting North America, Europe, and Australia, this thesis attempted to reduce distinct cultures and political systems into a singular Western construct. This approach was useful during the research process due to the limited amount of available data. Future studies, however, might benefit from pursuing profiling methodology through a national comparative approach. By building profiles for individual Western nations, patterns may emerge that identify unique national trends affecting recruitment and mobilization.

A final closing perspective relates to integrative collaboration. Throughout the research process, data was difficult to acquire. Some of the more useful information was compiled in court records. Understandably, there are measures put in place to prevent the inadvertent release of information that may impede ongoing law enforcement or national

intelligence efforts. Regardless, all interested parties would benefit from mechanisms that

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[191] Varghese, "Social Media Reporting and the Syrian Civil War," 2.

facilitate collaboration between academia, law enforcement, and the intelligence community both at the national and international levels. This is not a Pollyannaish perspective, but rather one rooted in reasonable expectations of collaboration, protected by authentication or clearance measures. As research in the foreign fighter field addresses the fundamental complexities of human interaction and behavior, it would benefit from greater cross-institutional and interdisciplinary collaboration.

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