



Foreign Fighters in History

by Maria Galperin Donnelly

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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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About Foreign Fighters

Foreign volunteers intensify the conflicts to which they travel, and can destabilize the countries to which they travel next. To protect the international community against this foreign fighter fallout, the Transnational Threats Project (TNT) has launched a multi-year study to examine the threat. The study combines insights from TNT's on-the-ground field interviews with cutting edge research to illuminate this global phenomenon.

CASE STUDIES IN HISTORY

AFGHANISTAN, BOSNIA, CHECHNYA

Conflict-induced humanitarian crises eventually precipitate supranational struggles drawing worldwide volunteers.

The Islamic State group has mobilized tens of thousands of individuals from over 120 countries to fight in Iraq and Syria on behalf of the organization.¹ Although the scope and scale of the (mostly) Islamic State-inspired migration is unprecedented, the foreign fighter phenomenon has shaped military conflicts in recent history. As the Islamic State continues to shrink, and sheds fighters who joined the battle from abroad, lessons from previous conflicts featuring foreign fighters may be illustrative.

The “anti-Soviet Jihad” in Afghanistan in the 1980s was the first modern conflict to see high levels of foreign fighter participation. From that conflict, a global militant community established the funding networks, credibility, and battlefield proficiency operationalized in Bosnia and Chechnya a decade later.

1 Significant discrepancies in foreign fighter numbers result from the complexity of counting and tracking the flow of fighters into Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies, the United Nations, and other entities monitoring foreign fighters are unable to provide wholly accurate information on what was believed to be 38,500 fighters from 120 nations by the time foreign fighter flows began to slow in 2016. “Remarks by Lisa O. Monaco at the Intelligence Studies Project at the University of Texas-Austin,” *Lawfare*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/lisa-monaco-speech-university-texas>.

These conflicts follow similar patterns: conflict-induced humanitarian crises eventually precipitate supranational struggles drawing worldwide volunteers. After September 11, 2001, subsequent foreign fighter mobilizations evolve in how fighters migrate, fight, and communicate, but maintain the basic commonalities that shaped the first conflicts. The personal networks built in Afghanistan strengthened in Bosnia and Chechnya and were critical to shaping the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Returning fighters from previous conflicts moved on to found many of the terror networks that gave rise to current jihadi-salafi organizations such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Despite differences in space and time, common themes link each successive jihad. Each conflict was considered a defensive war on behalf of a local Muslim population, which enabled international supporters (both donors and fighters) to frame participation in the conflict as a religious duty. These conflicts were further linked by a common group of fighters who gained credibility and combat experience ultimately culminating in improved military effectiveness. As technology evolved, so too did the foreign fighters, and each conflict pioneered new approaches to waging “jihad through the media.”² Media outreach began with Afghanistan in the 1980s with flyers and newsletters for propaganda purposes, while today’s international militants broadcast their battles using video cameras and curated social media strategies. The fighters’ force-multiplying potential and military experience allowed them to change the nature of conflicts from national to supranational by situating local grievances within a pan-Islamic jihadist narrative.³

2 Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 5 (April 11, 2008): 417.

3 Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010): 56.

Foreign Fighters in Modern Times

Afghanistan, 1979

Key Judgments

- *Defending Muslims against a non-Muslim invader motivated volunteers to travel to Afghanistan.*
- *U.S., Saudi Arabian, and Pakistani assistance allowed recruiting networks to develop.*
- *The evolution of volunteers from international humanitarian workers to fighters helped establish the credibility and militant networks that would drive future conflicts.*

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to defend its communist proxy government in Kabul from a growing insurgency. Almost immediately, *madrassas* (religious schools) in Pakistan began a campaign to encourage foreigners to travel to Afghanistan to join the jihad.

At first, many of the Arab volunteers who traveled to Afghanistan with the help of Hijaz-based Islamic charities⁴ viewed themselves as humanitarian workers.⁵ These largely Arab volunteers sought to keep a low profile

and to help Afghan refugees who were residing in Peshawar, Pakistan, after fleeing the conflict. In contrast, volunteers arriving during the latter half of the war were fighters facilitated by Abdullah Azzam, an influential Palestinian *sheikh* who called upon all Muslims to defend Afghanistan.

As the Soviet invasion turned into a prolonged occupation, Peshawar became a hub for fighters to organize and mobilize across the border into Afghanistan. Facilitators like Azzam, who was publishing recruitment liter-

4 Ibid., 85.

5 A network of Islamic charities based in the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia was established by the Saudis in the 1980s to fund the Afghan mujahedeen. The elaborate network of donors, charities, and sponsors has since become a pipeline for terrorist group financing in conflicts from Chechnya to Palestine. (Juan Zarate, *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 67–69).

ature and teaching in Islamabad, relocated to Peshawar to assist.⁶ Azzam's extensive paramilitary experience and networks from his Islamic education in Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia gave him the ideological and operational clout to effectively mobilize foreign fighters against the Soviets.⁷ In 1985, Azzam reached an agreement with a local guerrilla coalition called the Islamic Unity of Mujahedeen allowing him to establish training camps and an office focused on facilitating the flow of fighters to the war.⁸ Azzam continued to call on Muslims to defend their brothers and sisters, declaring that it was "incumbent upon every Muslim today, capable of carrying a weapon, to march forward to jihad to aid their Muslim brothers in Afghanistan."⁹ Among the individuals who joined the fighters in Peshawar was a young Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden's personal wealth, connections to other funding networks, and friendship with Azzam allowed him to facilitate training and travel for the fighters.

Geopolitical competition also played a role in mobilizing fighters. The invasion, and subsequent occupation, of Afghanistan prompted the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan to counter Moscow's presence in the so-called "shatter-zone"¹⁰ by supporting local Afghan insurgents and their

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to defend its communist proxy government in Kabul from a growing insurgency. Almost immediately, *madrassas* (religious schools) in Pakistan began a campaign to encourage foreigners to travel to Afghanistan to join the jihad.

6 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 86.

7 Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, "Returning Western Foreign Fighters: The Case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia," ICCT Background Note, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague, 2014.

8 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 86.

9 Sheikh Abdullah Nassah al Waan to Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, "Defense of the Muslim Lands," accessed March 1, 2017, https://archive.org/stream/Defense_of_the_Muslim_Lands/Defense_of_the_Muslim_Lands_djvu.txt.

10 "Shatter-zone" refers to border areas between major powers, in this case in Afghanistan, in which conflict frequently erupts as major powers compete for influence. (R. McMaster, "Harbingers of Future War: Implications for the Army with Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster," May 4, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/harbingers-future-war-implications-army-lieutenant-general-hr-mcmaster/?block1>.)

foreign volunteers.¹¹ Rather than initiate a full-scale war with the Soviet Union, the United States, through the CIA, alongside Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), provided the local (mainly ethnic Pashtun) fighters with weapons, funding, and military training to combat the Soviet army.¹² The newly empowered mujahedeen fighters drew on a pool of volunteer jihadists reaching far beyond the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan in their fight against the Soviets.¹³

Azzam's grassroots efforts and abundant war materiel attracted foreign fighters from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Europe, and the United States to wage war against the *infidels* (nonbelievers) occupying Afghanistan.¹⁴ There is no consensus as to how many people traveled to Afghanistan, but estimates range from 10,000 to 35,000.¹⁵ Those who did travel to the battle were largely supported by private donations or non-governmental Islamic organizations.¹⁶ Despite mistrust and enmity among the "Afghan Arabs"¹⁷ and friction between the foreigners and their lo-

cal hosts, the volunteers' international connections helped them establish patronage networks and strong interpersonal bonds.

The departure of Soviet troops in February 1989 removed the *raison d'être* for many of the foreigners. Some fighters returned to their countries of origin, where they either demobilized or joined local causes. A further cohort attempted to follow Abdullah Azzam's vision of a vanguard that would "continue the jihad no matter how long the way is until the last breath and the last beating of the pulse or we see the Islamic state established."¹⁸ Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam founded Maktab al Khidamat (MAK, or "Bureau of Services"), which was subsumed into al Qaeda in 1988 and facilitated ongoing operations.¹⁹ Despite a limited military impact in Afghanistan, the battlefield skills and personal relationships fighters established provided credibility and the networks carried forward to other conflicts—including to that underway in Bosnia.

11 Ibid.

12 Brian Glyn Williams, "On the Trail of the 'Lions of Islam': Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 1980–2010," *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011): 216–39.

13 The term *mujahedeen* refers to those who participate in a struggle or fight against the enemies of Islam. The term popularly was used to refer to the guerrilla forces in the Soviet-Afghan war, but can be used to refer to those fighting in the name of Islam in any conflict.

14 In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to defend its communist proxy government in Kabul from a growing insurgency. Almost immediately, madrassas (religious schools) in Pakistan began a campaign to encourage foreigners to travel to Afghanistan to join the jihad.

15 West Point's *CTC Sentinel* estimated the number of foreign fighters in Afghanistan at 10,000. Mohammed M. Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans Phenomenon," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 4 (March 2008): 1–4, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/CTCSentinel-Vol1Iss4.pdf>. Peter Neumann and Thomas Hegghammer both estimate the number of foreign fighters in Afghanistan at 20,000. Peter Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, January 26, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>; Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 53–94. However, Ahmed Rashid estimated that the number of fighters in Afghanistan was closer to 35,000. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Second Edition, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010): 129.

16 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 62

17 The term "Afghan Arabs" refers to the primarily Arab mujahedeen who traveled to Afghanistan to help their fellow Muslims fight against the Soviets.

18 Evan Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network* (New York: Berg, 2004), 9.

19 Azzam was killed by an IED in Peshawar several months later. It remains unclear who was responsible for his assassination, but suspects include Ayman al Zawahiri, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, and Jordanian intelligence in coordination with the CIA. See also Williams, "On the Trail of the 'Lions of Islam,'" 219.

Bosnia, 1992

Key Judgments

- *Migrating fighters from Afghanistan brought funding networks, credibility, and military experience to the conflict.*
- *The influx of foreign fighters shifted the conflict from a national struggle to a supranational jihad.*
- *Foreign fighters began filming and distributing videos and using media more extensively as a recruiting tool.*

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the Balkans provided fertile ground for foreign fighters to continue fighting. Increased nationalist sentiment among Catholic Croats, Orthodox Christian Serbs, and mostly Muslim Bosniaks culminated in a wave of declarations of independence. Influenced by Slovenia and Croatia, which both declared independence in June 1991, Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence in March 1992. Bosnian Serbs refused to accept separation from Serbia and, backed by the Serbian military, took up arms against the Bosnian Muslims.²⁰ The overt religious nature of the war, atrocities committed against civilians, and the timing of hostilities made the con-

flict attractive for the former mujahedeen coming from Afghanistan.

The first Afghan Arabs arrived in Bosnia in April 1992, one month after the war in Bosnia began. The initial movement of fighters began slowly with the transfer of trainers and facilitators from Afghanistan under the guise of humanitarian assistance. However, it quickly increased in 1993 when the Pakistani government ordered training camps closed and threatened those remaining foreigners with deportation.²¹ One commander and associate of Osama bin Laden who fought in Afghanistan and arrived in Bosnia in April 1992, Sheikh Abu Abdel Aziz “Barbaros,” quickly established the El Mudžahid Battalion and began moving fighters from Peshawar to Bosnia.

20 “The Balkan Crisis: A Brief History,” CNN, 1997, <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1997/bosnia/history/>.

21 Mark Urban, “Bosnia: The Cradle of Modern Jihadism?,” BBC News, July 2, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33345618>.

Groups supporting foreign fighters blurred the lines between humanitarian and military aid to garner support in a more socially acceptable way.

As in Afghanistan, Muslim charities financed the movement of foreigners to Bosnia. The Al Kifah Refugee Center in Brooklyn, New York, raised funds in the United States for organizations led by bin Laden and Azzam during the Afghan war, and soon redirected its activities to Bosnia. Al Kifah and, later, the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), led by Enaam Arnaout, an associate of Osama bin Laden, operated openly in the West.²² Both organizations purported to raise money for humanitarian operations but instead laundered funds and directed money to arms trafficking and moved fighters to the conflict. The Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK) distributed leaflets in the United States encouraging those sympathetic to the plight of Bosnian Muslims to support the jihad through donations or by traveling to the conflict themselves. As in Afghanistan, groups supporting foreign fighters blurred the lines between humanitarian and military aid to garner support in a more socially acceptable way.

Instructors who came to Bosnia from the Peshawar camps created military-religious training facilities for Bosnian soldiers and fighters who had little combat experience or religious education. Thus, Bosnian Muslims came to identify with the greater Muslim world while building combat experience. In addition to involving Afghanistan war veterans, the conflict in Bosnia attracted new recruits as well. The Serbian military's ethnic cleansing pushed young, untrained individuals to view Bosnia, according to journalist Chris Hedges, as "a Muslim country, which must be defended by Muslims."²³ Young foreign fighters who joined the

22 Apart from Al Kifah Refugee Center and Benevolence International Foundation, the International Islamic Relief Organization, the Third World Relief Agency, and the Islamic Cultural Institute in Milan all played major roles in recruitment, finance, money laundering, and transportation for the mujahedeen fighters in Bosnia.

23 Chris Hedges, "Foreign Islamic Fighters in Bosnia Pose a Potential Threat for G.I.s," *New York Times*, December 3, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/03/world/foreign-islamic-fighters-in-bosnia-pose-a-potential-threat-for-gi-s.html>.

war gained credibility, connections, and experience similar to those who fought in Afghanistan.

There is no agreement on the numbers of foreign fighters who traveled to Bosnia. Figures range from 500–5,000 with a preponderance of estimates in the 1,000–2,000 range.²⁴ Influential clerics from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen endorsed the jihad in Bosnia and fighters traveled from their countries to fight.²⁵ Others came from the United States, Turkey, Iran, Jordan, and Syria, among other states. The multinational nature of the fighters and their unifying Muslim identity helped forge a new sense of religious identity and unity for the Bosnian Muslims with whom they fought alongside.²⁶

In an evolution from the war in Afghanistan, those fighting in Bosnia often filmed their military maneuvers and distributed videos on the nascent Internet. The use of media in the form of both sympathetic reporters and battlefield recordings represented an important enhancement for the global jihadi movement's messaging efforts.

The signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in December 1995 effectively ended the combat role of foreign fighters in Bosnia. The Dayton Accords required all forces "not of local origin" to withdraw from the country within 30 days.²⁷ Despite the relative relief that the end of the war would bring to Muslim civilians in Bosnia, many of the fighters were upset at the peace because it not only ended the war but also robbed them of the opportunity to become martyrs.²⁸ However, the end of the Bosnian conflict resulted in a quick shift of fighters from the Balkans to the North Caucasus with another chance to fight for their cause.

24 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 61.

25 Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Alison Pargeter, *The New Frontiers of Jihad: Radical Islam in Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

26 Hedges, "Foreign Islamic Fighters in Bosnia Pose a Potential Threat for G.I.'s."

27 State Department, *Dayton Peace Accords*, November 21, 1995, <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/dayton/52578.html>.

28 Urban, "Bosnia: The Cradle of Modern Jihadism?"

Chechnya, 1994

Key Judgments

- *A local struggle for autonomy was co-opted by an interconnected, well-financed, and growing group of mobile violent extremists.*
- *The fighters' extensive combat experience made them more militarily effective than in prior conflicts and sped acceptance among local forces.*
- *Enhanced information technology facilitated wider and more effective recruiting, the first example of "jihad through the media."*

In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, the Caucasus, like the Balkans, experienced political unrest as nationalist groups demanded autonomy. As the conflict in the Balkans ended, an ethno-religious struggle between Chechnya and Russia escalated. Chechnya was the only one of the Russian republics that refused to sign an understanding regarding its relationship with Russia. A Russian Air Force general, Dzhokhar Dudayev, was elected the head of the All-National Congress of the Chechen people in 1990; shortly thereafter Dudayev unilaterally declared the independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Russia attempted to overthrow Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev but was ultimately unsuccessful.²⁹

Chechnya was divided along various lines and loyalties but Dudayev, campaigning on a platform of independence, won the 1991 elections with 90 percent of the vote.³⁰

Repeated attempts to reach an agreement between Russia and Chechnya regarding Chechnya's status failed, and Russia moved troops to the Chechen border in October of 1992. Amid the instability, Sheikh Ali Fathi al Shisani, a Jordanian-Chechen and veteran of the Soviet Afghan War, moved to Chechnya in 1993. Sheikh Fathi became largely responsible for mobilizing foreign fighters to the republic.

Russian civilian leadership, working under the assumption that victory

29 Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 101–102.

30 *Ibid.*, 99.

could be achieved quickly, ordered its forces into Chechnya on December 10, 1994. Outnumbered, the Chechen forces adopted guerrilla tactics to combat the Russian military. The Chechen style of warfare exacerbated long-standing issues in the Russian military like low morale, poor supplies, and ineffective leadership—and eventually helped Chechen forces stave off a complete rout.

The invading Russian forces burned villages to the ground, raped local women, and killed thousands of civilians during the initial assault. Like in Afghanistan and Bosnia, the invading force's brutal tactics, in concert with the clear delineation between the Muslim population and the opposing power, galvanized the population and served as a catalyst for militant recruitment.³¹

Chechen historical resistance to the Russians was placed squarely within the canon of global jihad and the struggle quickly became *gazavat* or jihad.³² The Chief Mufti of Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov, declared the responsibility of Muslims to wage holy war against Russia and a Chechen commander, Shamil Basayev, began working with fighters arriving from abroad.

Using his connections to recruit in Afghanistan, Sheikh Fathi began facilitating the transport of fighters, among them prominent Saudi Arabian fighter Samir Salih Abdallah al Suwaylim who went by the *nom de guerre* Emir Khattab.³³ Khattab believed Chechnya was ripe for jihad, and capitalized on his reputation as an experienced fighter and respected leader to establish a foreign fighter unit among the Chechen rebels.

31 Ibid., xi.

32 *Gazavat*, or holy war, comes from the Arabic word "ghazi" or holy warrior. The term is roughly equivalent to jihad but historically associated with folk Islam and specifically in the Chechen context, with war against the Russians. Robert W. Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2011), 56.

33 Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya," 416.

**'In the modern age,
the media has become
more important than
rifles and guns'**

- *Emir Khattab*

Working initially under Shamil Basayev, Khattab observed local customs and treated traditions with respect. This approach, along with the sponsorship of Basayev, enabled him to establish credibility and acceptance among the nationalist Chechens.³⁴ As important to his success was Khattab's understanding of the power of media on a potential jihadi recruit. In a later interview, Khattab reflected that "in the modern age, the media has become more important than rifles and guns."³⁵ Khattab required all operations to be filmed and distributed, pioneering a critical form of jihadi media and propaganda. Emulating Abdullah Azzam's recruiting role from Afghanistan, Khattab directed media to a website called "Jihad in Chechnya," published by Azzam Publications.

Unlike Afghanistan and, to a lesser extent Bosnia, Chechnya did not draw thousands of foreign volunteers. The difficulty of travel to Chechnya prevented the movement of larger numbers of fighters, including figures such as bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri, from joining the conflict. In 1997, Zawahiri attempted to travel to Chechnya but

was stopped in his attempt by Russian security forces, which imprisoned him for six months in Dagestan.³⁶ In the wake of his attempt to join fighters in Chechnya, in 2001 Ayman al Zawahiri advocated for others to travel so that Chechnya would serve as a "hotbed of jihad (or fundamentalism as the United States describes it) and that the region would become the shelter of thousands of Muslim *mujahedeen* from various parts of the Islamic world."³⁷

Owing to prior conflicts in Afghanistan and Bosnia, those who did reach Chechnya between 1994–1996 were more likely to have extensive battlefield experience than foreign fighters in previous conflicts.

Over half of the Arab foreign fighters who fought in Chechnya had participated in wars in Afghanistan, Tajikistan,³⁸ or Bosnia.³⁹ The First Chechen War drew between 200–300 fighters who remained present in Chechnya as hostilities waned.⁴⁰ During the Second Chechen War the number of foreign fighters rose to 700 before sharply dropping. Fighters' roles and motivations were

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 417.

36 Lorenzo Vidino, "How Chechnya Became a Breeding Ground for Terror," *Middle East Quarterly* 12, no 3 (Summer 2005): 57–66.

37 Ibid.

38 The civil war in Tajikistan, which lasted from 1992 to 1997, broke out one year after Tajikistan declared independence. The conflict was primarily between the Moscow-backed government and a liberal and Islamist opposition that received significant support from foreign fighters.

39 Murad Batal al Shishani, "Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri and the Third Generation of Salafi-Jihadists," *Terrorism Monitor* 3, no. 16 (August 15, 2005), <https://jamestown.org/program/abu-musab-al-suri-and-the-third-generation-of-salafi-jihadists/>.

40 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 61.

largely determined by their nation of origin: Algerians built explosives and Moroccans worked as facilitators, whereas Turks and Jordanians were field commanders and foot soldiers.⁴¹ Although fighters from the Middle East constituted the bulk of the force, small numbers of North African, Turkish, and Central Asian fighters also participated.⁴²

Travel to Chechnya became easier as the conflict dragged on, in turn simplifying funding flows from Islamic organizations and Arab financiers, and facilitating movement from large Chechen diasporas, particularly that in Jordan.⁴³

Although the Russo-Chechen War was largely a nationalistic fight for Chechens, the supranational Islamic facet of the conflict grew due to the efforts of Sheikh Fathi and Emir Khattab.⁴⁴ This new sense of religious identity among Chechens following the end of the first war in 1996 later played a role in shaping the political structure of the de facto independent republic.

41 Vadim Zaitsev, “Наемники В Чечне” [Mercenaries in Chechnya], Журнал “Огонёк,” March 21, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1604045>.

42 Moore and Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya,” 418.

43 Ibid., 416.

44 Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), xiii.

WATERSHED

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

The September 11, 2001, attacks demonstrated not only al Qaeda's ability to execute spectacular, long-range attacks from their base in Afghanistan, but also highlighted the group's ability to operationalize their rhetoric in pursuit of the "far enemy." The successful strikes inside the United States lent the organization unprecedented credibility in the eyes of the jihadi community.

Bin Laden, in a framework developed by his late mentor Abdullah Azzam, saw his organization as a vanguard party, leading Muslims to an eventual restoration of the caliphate under the banner of the Prophet Muhammad [pbuh]. Protected by the Afghan Taliban regime, Osama bin Laden internationalized al Qaeda's agenda. In contrast to Azzam

who focused on national conflicts, bin Laden believed that al Qaeda had a duty to protect the broader, worldwide *ummah* (Islamic community) from aggression by the West—and from America in particular.⁴⁵ By provoking the American far enemy, bin Laden planned to ensnare the United States in a war against a Muslim regime that would then galvanize the Muslim world to rise up against the West. Giving credence to bin Laden's idea was the particular standing of Mullah Omar within Afghanistan. In April 1996, the Taliban in Afghanistan declared Mullah Omar *emir al mu'minin* (leader of the faithful), and Afghanistan a caliphate.⁴⁶

45 Quintan Wiktorowicz and John Kaltner, "Killing in the Name of Islam: Al-Qaeda's Justification for September 11," *Middle East Policy Council Journal* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2003), <http://www.mafhoum.com/press5/147S29.htm>.

46 The Arabic term *emir al mu'minin*, or leader of the faithful, has historically been applied to leaders with a claim to legitimacy among all Muslims, originating from the second caliph, Umar ibn al Khattab. The term has since been controversially used by leaders of various movements within Islam to gain broader support.

Afghanistan, 2001

Key Judgments

- *Prior funding and personal networks facilitated bin Laden's safe haven with the Taliban.*
- *The presence of foreign fighters before the start of the U.S.-led campaign in October 2001 and promotion of the Global War on Terror concept reestablished Afghanistan as a key supranational struggle.*
- *Osama bin Laden used media messaging to recruit fighters and inflame opinion against the United States.*

The United States began a campaign against al Qaeda and its Taliban regime hosts on October 7, 2001. By December 2001, the United States, its coalition partners, and local allies routed the Taliban and scattered al Qaeda members not immediately killed or captured during the fighting. However, persistent safe haven in rural Afghanistan and Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) allowed the Taliban and al Qaeda to regroup after the initial International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) campaign.

Like in Bosnia and Chechnya, fighters from preceding conflicts laid the groundwork to attract and employ foreign fighters upon the incursion of a "foreign invader."

As many as 10,000–20,000 foreign fighters were already present in Afghanistan having traveled there between 1996–2001, mainly seeking short-term training from one of the many foreign-run camps in the geographically and politically isolated country.⁴⁷

Crucial to the Taliban's determination to not surrender Osama bin Laden to the United States was the continued presence of Afghan Arabs and a close relationship between bin Laden and the Pakistani ISI. Many Afghan Arabs returned to Afghanistan after attempts to migrate to other jihads such as Chechnya and Somalia. Foreign fighters in Afghanistan differed from locals in their ideological zeal and their reluctance

47 Anne Stenersen, "Al Qaeda's Foot Soldiers: A Study of the Biographies of Foreign Fighters Killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan Between 2002 and 2006," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34, no 3 (2011): 174.

Rather than a minor far-off conflict, the war in Afghanistan came home on television screens each day.

to accept ceasefires due to the risk of deportation back to their home states.⁴⁸

Foreign fighters in Afghanistan after 2001, in contrast to those in the anti-Soviet jihad, had a range of combat experience. Fighters from the Middle East, North Africa, China (Xinjiang Province), and the former Soviet Union all participated in the conflict with a majority present in Afghanistan before September 11, 2001.⁴⁹ Unlike Afghanistan in the 1980s, and Bosnia and Chechnya in the 1990s, only a minority of fighters arrived after the start of the conflict and those who did come had a broad range of motivations and socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite the dissimilarities, the United States, like the Soviet Union before, found itself fighting a multinational group of ideologically motivated combatants.

Despite the differences in what brought the fighters to the conflict, trends like those in the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the conflicts in Bosnia and Chechnya, emerged. Fighters with prior experience, networks with other jihadi-salafis, and access to funds pulled a local conflict onto the global stage. Osama bin Laden's videos, broadcast around the world, calling on all Muslims to resist the far enemy represented an evolution of Khattab's concept of jihad through the media. The focus on a far enemy and the American response also elevated the fighters. Rather than remaining a minor far-off conflict, the war in Afghanistan came home on television screens each day. The whole of government response by the United States and the formation of a large coalition moved the conflict, and the fighters who were central to it, to the main stage of world affairs.

U.S. policy also played a role in attracting more foreign fighters to Afghanistan. By nesting the Afghanistan campaign into a wider Global War on Terror (GWOT), the United States reinforced Taliban and al Qaeda claims that the United States was fighting a war against Islam.⁵⁰ By aggregating seemingly disparate militant movements, the term GWOT likely provided al Qaeda with the notoriety and brand recognition to attract affiliate movements across the globe, most notably in Iraq.⁵¹

48 Gall, *The Wrong Enemy*, 16–17.

49 Stenersen, "Al Qaeda's Foot Soldiers."

50 David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 213–14.

51 Bruce Hoffman, "World: Analyst Assess the Global War on Terror," interview by Heather Maher, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, December 22, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/a/1073632.html>.

Iraq, 2003

Key Judgments:

- *Global War on Terror rhetoric and practices inflamed Muslim public opinion against the United States and stimulated recruitment.*⁵²
- *Al Qaeda brought its networks and “brand recognition” to bear. Jihadi veterans offered experience, credibility, and funding, but most recruits heralded a new generation.*
- *Sectarian conflict deepened the humanitarian crisis, pulling in more fighters.*
- *The Syrian government facilitated access to Iraq for new and veteran fighters.*

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and deposed Saddam Hussein. Like in Afghanistan, the United States failed to establish new governance structures after deposing of the regime. Illegitimate or absentee government and chaos undermined the initial military victories. The demobilization of mid-grade military officers under a de-Baathification policy fostered further disorder—pushing many, well-trained military professionals into the ranks of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).⁵³

52 Pew Research Center, “Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years (2001–2008),” December 18, 2008, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2008/12/18/global-public-opinion-in-the-bush-years-2001-2008/>.

53 As part of Saddam Hussein’s push to co-opt religiosity in Iraq, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, along with many other high-ranking Islamic State leaders attended the Islamic University of Baghdad, which was impossible to attend without being thoroughly vetted by the Baath party or having family members within the party. When the United States overthrew the Iraqi government, Baghdadi and his cadre of militant leaders had a preexisting network of individuals with a shared educational and religious background and mutual connections through which to form AQI/ISI and later the Islamic State. Baghdadi and others shared the Saddamists’ brutality, tradecraft, and deeply rooted hatred of the Shia. Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, 2nd ed. (New York: Regan Arts, 2016).

Almost immediately after U.S. and coalition forces invaded Iraq, foreign fighters appeared in country, reaching peak levels around 2007.⁵⁴ As many as 4,000–5,000 foreign fighters joined the conflict throughout the Iraq War, amounting to as much as 5 percent of the total Iraqi insurgency.⁵⁵ Of the almost 600 foreign fighter personnel records seized at Sinjar, Iraq, and analyzed by West Point’s Counterterrorism Center, from August 2006–August 2007, 41 percent of foreign fighters came from Saudi Arabia, while 18.8 percent came from Libya.⁵⁶ Small percentages of fighters from Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, and Jordan were also identified.⁵⁷

Information on routes taken by foreign volunteers is limited but for those cases where information is available, nearly half of the fighters coming from Saudi Arabia traveled to Syria before entering Iraq. Travel from Jordan to Syria appears to have been the second most popular route.⁵⁸ Known paths followed by North Africans moving to the con-

flict reveal that most fighters from the region transited Egypt before moving on to Syria to enter Iraq.

To bolster the number of fighters, President Assad also released militants from Syrian jails in 2004 and 2005, and ensured easy access for them and other militants heading to Iraq for much of the conflict. Hassan and Michael Weiss describe Assad’s attitude toward the jihadists as “useful agents for mayhem, for terror-in-reserve, for disrupting Bush’s nation-building experiment next door.”⁵⁹

Although exact data does not exist, the average age of most fighters was 24–25 years old, with many born after 1980. Though numerous experienced fighters may have arrived in 2003, the average fighter’s age suggests many had limited or no combat experience prior to Iraq.⁶⁰ For the small portion of fighters whose background information is known, it appears that the bulk of them were students. Others held jobs ranging from advanced professional roles (doctors, engineers, lawyers) to un-

Unlike many local fighters who fought for tribal, local, or national aims, foreign fighters brought global ideologies to the conflict.

54 David Lesch, “Walking a Fine Line: Foreign Fighters and Syria,” in *Foreign Fighters, Sovereignty, and Counter-Terrorism: Selected Essays*, ed. Michael Noonan (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2010), 68, https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ForeignFightersSovereigntyCounterTerrorism_Noonan.pdf; Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts and Bleedout: Al-Qa’ida’s Road In and Out of Iraq* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/bombers-bank-accounts-and-bleedout-al-qaidas-road-in-and-out-of-iraq>.

55 Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters,” 60–61.

56 Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, December 2007), 7–8, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-a-first-look-at-the-sinjar-records>.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., 20.

59 Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, 25.

60 Ibid., 16–17.

skilled, blue-collar labor (guards, drivers).⁶¹ Unlike many local fighters who fought for tribal, local, or national aims, foreign fighters brought global ideologies to the conflict. Crucial doctrinal differences emerged among the insurgent groups. The Jordanian leader of AQI, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, in stark contrast to both Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden, focused on fomenting sectarian strife.⁶² Where Azzam concentrated on the removal of what he saw as un-Islamic regimes and bin Laden fixated on the “far enemy,” Zarqawi, a Jordanian street-thug-turned-jihadi, focused on targeting and provoking the Iraqi Shia community. Zarqawi and AQI subscribed to an apocalyptic worldview wherein the end of days was approaching and an Islamic caliphate would battle both non-Muslims and Shiites at Dabiq.

In Iraq, Zarqawi targeted Shiites with the intention of provoking a disproportional response and sparking a sectarian civil war that would signal the end of days. The apocalyptic philosophy of AQI increased tensions between the group and al Qaeda core, bringing ideological differences into sharp relief. Zawahiri counseled his Iraqi affiliate to refrain from targeting Shia groups, against an overly harsh implemen-

tation of sharia law, and to hold off on declaring a state.

AQI refused, and launched a major campaign to target Iraqi Shia.⁶³ In February 2006, AQI bombed the al Askari⁶⁴ shrine in Samarra, Iraq, triggering sectarian civil war. The same year, despite Zarqawi’s death, AQI proclaimed statehood.⁶⁵

A concerted counterinsurgency effort in Iraq empowered Sunni tribes in Anbar Province in what is now known as the Anbar Awakening. The harsh implementation of sharia and excessive brutality that Zawahiri had warned Zarqawi to avoid alienated the Sunni tribes in Anbar. A surge of U.S. military personnel and an increasingly inclusive government enabled the Sunni tribes to reject AQI. This successful counterinsurgency campaign reduced AQI’s ability to find refuge in the Iraqi population in the west. The group nonetheless remained the dominant Sunni militant group in the theater.⁶⁶

61 Ibid., 17.

62 William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, repr. ed. (New York: Picador, 2016), 7.

63 The last journalist to interview Osama bin Laden, Pakistan’s Rahimullah Yusufzai, noted that Abu Musab al Zarqawi responded to al Qaeda senior leadership’s warning about the pitfalls of focusing on Shia instead of Americans by declaring “killing Americans is learned behavior, but killing Shia is innate.” Personal interview with Rahimullah Yusufzai by Thomas M. Sanderson, Peshawar, Pakistan, January 17, 2013.

64 The al Askari Shrine is one of the holiest mosques in Shia Islam, exceeded in importance only by the shrines in Najaf and Karbala.

65 McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 7.

66 Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqah al-Naqshabandia (JRTN)—a neo-Baathist militant organization—was also involved in the antigovernment campaign and was prominent in Mosul, Kirkuk, and Salah al-Din. JRTN was the prominent antigovernment insurgency among the Tribal Military Councils (Sunni tribal fighters) and played a role in welcoming the Islamic State into Mosul without alienating the population.

Syria, 2011

Key Judgments

- *Preexisting networks regrouped for the anti-Assad battle in Syria.*
- *Sectarian conflict, and a severe humanitarian crisis, attracted foreign volunteers, shifting the struggle from a purely national civil war to a supranational jihadist conflict.*
- *The Assad regime fomented militancy to justify a brutal crackdown.*

Although many fighters mobilized individually, existing regional networks facilitated the migration of other aspiring combatants to theater.

Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, in December 2010 set off protests and demands for regime change throughout the Middle East. The Syrian iteration of the Arab Spring began in March 2011 when security forces opened fire on a crowd of protesters in Deraa, an outpost on the Iraq-Jordan border. Empowered by uprisings in other Arab states, Syrians demanded Assad's departure but the regime's harsh crackdown initiated a full-fledged civil war by 2012.

Concentrating on holding ground in traditionally Alawi areas in the west, the Assad regime fomented instability in eastern Syria by freeing fighters it had imprisoned during their attempts to leave Iraq. After their

release from Sednaya Prison, the fighters activated global networks and campaigned to free their imprisoned compatriots in the region.

Owing to the newly released cadre, AQI launched a year-long "Breaking the Walls" campaign in July 2012, resulting in eight major prison breaks and the release of more than 500 prisoners detained during the Iraq war.⁶⁷ Those released quickly formed the core of al Qaeda in Iraq. The presence of terrorists and extremists provided credence to Assad's claims of fighting Islamists. Publicly grouping all protesters as terrorists, Assad initiated a harsh, widespread crackdown.

The gross violations of human rights committed by the Assad re-

67 Institute for the Study of War, "ISW Blog: Al Qaeda in Iraq's 'Breaking the Walls' Campaign Achieves Its Objectives at Abu Ghraib—2013 Iraq Update #30," ISW Blog, July 28, 2013, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2013/07/al-qaeda-in-iraq-walls-campaign.html>.

gime, the predominantly Shiite security forces in Iraq, and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria proved an effective recruitment issue for foreign fighters. Many recruits, as in the early days of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, were drawn by humanitarian impulses to protect their Sunni brothers and sisters. For these early volunteers, media reporting of the Syrian civil war triggered emotional responses and a sense of obligation to defend Syrian Muslims. Foreign fighters and would-be humanitarian workers began to mobilize as early as 2011 to help protect Syrians from the regime.

Although many fighters mobilized individually, existing regional networks facilitated the migration of other aspiring combatants to theater. Many transnational groups formed, or brought existing, alliances with local organizations. Jaish al Muhajireen wal Ansar (Army of Emigrants and Supporters), a group formed in the summer of 2012, united significant numbers of North Caucasian fighters in Syria. Led by Omar al Shishani, the Jaish al Muhajireen had a large membership from the groups active in Russia, including Imarat Kavkaz.⁶⁸ Similar groups such as Imam Bukhari Jamaat, Sabri's Jamaat, and Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad united Uzbeks⁶⁹ from affiliated groups such as the Islamic Jihad Union and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.⁷⁰

68 Imarat Kavkaz (also known as the Caucasus Emirate) is a militant Islamist organization established in the North Caucasus in 2007 with the goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate in Northern Caucasus. Members of the group split between support for Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State.

69 Imam Bukhari Jamaat (also known as Katibat Imam al Bukhari) translates as Imam Bukhari's Group and is a majority Uzbek group allied with Jabhat al Nusra. Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, which translates as the Battalion of Monotheism and Jihad, which is also allied with Jabhat al Nusra. Sabri's Jamaat translated as Sabri's Group, and also known as the Aleppo Uzbeks, fought alongside the Islamic State beginning in 2014. Caleb Weiss, "Uzbek groups part of new offensive in southern Aleppo," *Threat Matrix: A Blog of the Long War Journal*, June 7, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/uzbek-groups-part-of-new-offensive-in-southern-aleppo.php>.

70 The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (1998) and the Islamic Jihad Union (2002) both predate the Syrian civil war and were established in Central Asia. Though both groups were traditionally allied with al Qaeda and the Taliban, the IMU broke with tradition to pledge bayat to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. The IJU continues to support al Qaeda and its affiliates. Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Central Asian Groups Split Over Leadership of Global Jihad," *Long War Journal*, August 24, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/central-asian-groups-split-over-leadership-of-global-jihad.php>.

By 2013, many Arab governments and prominent Sunni clerics encouraged citizens to defend Syrian Sunnis. Among others, the influential Sunni cleric Yusuf al Qaradawi, speaking at a 2013 public rally in Doha, stated that Muslims had a duty to “support their brothers in Syria.”⁷¹ The support foreign fighters received throughout the Sunni Muslim world, coupled with existing sectarian strife and the actions of AQI continued the evolution of the Syrian civil war into a conflict with greater sectarian themes.⁷²

The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) estimates that over 8,500 foreign fighters traveled to Syria between late 2011 and December of 2013.⁷³ Europeans and Arabs were identified as making up the largest portion of foreign volunteers traveling to the country (approximately 80 percent), though Southeast Asian, North American, and African (non-Arab) volunteers were also identified as having traveled to the Syrian battlefields.⁷⁴ By December 2013, 74 countries were represented throughout the various opposition groups.⁷⁵ The increased chaos allowed AQI, now led by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, to spread into Syria as Jabhat al Nusra (Nusra Front) under the command of Abu Mohammed al Jolani.

71 The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (1998) and the Islamic Jihad Union (2002) both predate the Syrian civil war and were established in Central Asia. Though both groups were traditionally allied with al Qaeda and the Taliban, the IMU broke with tradition to pledge bayat to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. The IJU continues to support al Qaeda and its affiliates. Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “Central Asian Groups Split Over Leadership of Global Jihad,” *Long War Journal*, August 24, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/central-asian-groups-split-over-leadership-of-global-jihad.php>.

72 Transnational Threats Project research interview with fundraisers in Kuwait, 2011; and Thomas Hegghammer, “Syria’s Foreign Fighters,” *Foreign Policy*, December 10, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/09/syrias-foreign-fighters/>.

73 Estimates are between 3,000–11,000, though ICSR believes the “true figure” to be above 8,500. “ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise among Western Europeans,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, December 17, 2013, <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

Islamic State

Declaration and Call for *Hijra*: 2014

Key Judgments:

- *The declaration of a caliphate enabled the Islamic State to recruit more broadly based on a narrative of statehood.*
- *Territorial control provided for new revenue sources: taxation, oil proceeds, and extortion.*
- *The internet and social media expanded networks and recruitment globally.*
- *Extraordinary numbers of foreign fighter recruits served as a force multiplier.*
- *Proto-statehood made the Islamic State an easier target to degrade, reducing the space for foreign fighters to operate.*

Jabhat al Nusra was officially announced in January 2012, and by 2013 was one of the most powerful groups fighting in Syria. No official connection between al Nusra and al Qaeda or AQI was publicized due to internal concerns that nationalist Syrian fighters who viewed their conflict as a civil war would not support a supranational, global jihadi organization like al Qaeda.

Ideological differences also remained between Baghdadi's AQI and al Qaeda Core (AQC) under Za-

wahiri. When, in April 2013, Baghdadi moved to consolidate power by announcing the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (also known as ISIS, the Islamic State, or ISIL)⁷⁶ and that Jabhat al Nusra would be incorporated more directly into the Islamic State structure, Zawahiri countermanded him and ruled that al Nusra would remain independent. Critically, a key element of Baghdadi's subsequent rejection of Zawahiri's ruling was that the move to separate the two al Qaeda affiliates would prove

76 The first iteration of al Qaeda in Iraq (Tanzim Qaidat al Jihad fi Bilad al Rafidayn) rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006. However, the group continued to be commonly referred to as al Qaeda in Iraq, and the two names were used interchangeably until AQI/ISI transformed into the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham in April 2013. For the sake of clarity, this report uses AQI until 2013, and Islamic State thereafter.

After a peak of nearly 40,000 fighters by 2015, the flow of fighters to the Islamic State began slowing by February 2016. As the Islamic State lost territory, it could no longer portray itself as an invincible, rising power.

“ruinous for the mujaheds with us, especially the muhajirs,”⁷⁷ who had joined the Islamic State group.⁷⁸

Zawahiri effectively excommunicated the Islamic State, declaring in February 2014 that it “is not a branch of the al Qaeda group... does not have an organizational relationship with it and [al-Qaeda] is not the group responsible for their actions,” severing any remaining relationship between al Qaeda core and its erstwhile affiliate.⁷⁹ The split had wide-ranging implications across the global jihadist movement.

The *fitna*, or schism, between Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State extended to various allied groups of foreign fighters. JMA, Omar Shishani’s organization, split into two factions when Shishani pledged *bayat* (allegiance) to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. A significant portion of Shishani’s force was previously part of Imarat Kavkaz, a group tied to al

Qaeda and they refused to support the Islamic State.

Despite the schism, the Islamic State earned a series of military victories enabling it to capture Fallujah and Mosul and shifting the group from an insurgent organization to a proto-state in a “war of movement.”⁸⁰ The militant organization began administering territory, providing salaries, making marriage arrangements, and enforcing sharia law. The proto-state also began levying taxes and collecting extortion fees and oil revenues in their newly captured territory, providing them with significant revenue.

Several months later, in June 2014, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared a caliphate and himself as the caliph and *emir al mu'minin*.⁸¹ The declaration of the caliphate furthered the *fitna* with al Qaeda and was an important boost for propaganda and recruitment. The Islamic State produced videos and magazines depicting daily life in the

77 The Arabic word muhajir translates as immigrant, and is used to refer to fighters who have traveled to fight in a location other than their home country.

78 McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 93.

79 Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda Disavows Any Ties with Radical Islamist ISIS Group in Syria, Iraq,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html.

80 In a war of movement, “the goal of the insurgency . . . is to bring about the collapse of the established government or the withdrawal of the occupying power. . . . As the insurgency gains control over the country, the insurgent leadership becomes responsible for the population, resources, and territory under its control. . . . Based on the conditions set earlier, an effective resistance or insurgency establishes an effective civil administration, establishes an effective military organization, provides balanced social and economic development, mobilizes the population to support the resistance organization, and protects the population from hostile actions.” U.S. Army, “FM 3-24.2 (FM 90-8, 7-98) Tactics in Counterinsurgency” (Department of the Army, March 2009), <https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fmi3-24-2.pdf>; U.S. Army, “TC 18-01 Special Forces Unconventional Warfare” (Department of the Army, November 30, 2010), 18-01, https://www.apd.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_c/pdf/web/tc18_01.pdf.

81 Baghdadi’s proclamation of himself as *emir al mu'minin* was controversial within the Muslim world, as it has historically applied to leaders with a claim to legitimacy within Islam. Baghdadi’s use of the title was his attempt to legitimize the Islamic State and its apocalyptic worldview within Islamic theology.

caliphate and calling on Sunnis to travel (perform *hijra*) to join the state. Whereas previous conflicts focused on defeating those who invaded Islamic countries, ISIS made governance and creating a caliphate a priority, capitalizing on conditions of state failure and power vacuums created by the civil war in Syria and the Arab Spring more broadly.

The Islamic State's proto-statehood was both its source of strength and its most significant vulnerability. The territorial gains empowering the Islamic State led directly to a renewed U.S. intervention in the region, with a campaign of air strikes against the group in August 2014.⁸² Instead of the expensive, troop-intensive counterinsurgency campaign that was previously needed to roll back AQI's gains, the Islamic State's governance of territory and escalation to a "war of movement" allowed for the success of conventional tactics. An air campaign focused on decapitation of leadership, large troop movements, and the targeting of supply lines and financial reserves.

After a peak of nearly 40,000 fighters by 2015, the flow of fighters to the Islamic State began slowing by February 2016. As the Islamic State lost territory, it could no longer portray itself as an invincible, rising power. The loss of territory also reduced revenue flows to the group and undercut

its legitimacy rooted in its proto-statehood.⁸³ Along with deteriorating legitimacy, reduced revenue forced the group to cut salaries for foreign fighters in half.⁸⁴

The U.S. special envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State, Brett McGurk, stated that by February 2016, the number of foreign fighters with the Islamic State dropped from 35,000 to 25,000 total fighters. Further complicating Islamic State recruitment was the growing difficulty in traveling to the battle space. At its peak, the flow of foreign fighters across Turkish-Syrian border was as high as 2,000 people per month; by September 2016 the flow of fighters had dropped down to 50 per month.⁸⁵ The French government confirmed the decline in a report citing a sharp decrease in citizens traveling to Iraq and Syria in the first half of 2016.

As the proto-state continued to lose territory and new recruits, Islamic State leadership urged would-be fighters to remain in their home countries and "make it a month of calamity everywhere for the non-believers," rather than traveling to join the caliphate.⁸⁶ The sharp change in rhetoric indicated a shift back from a "war of movement" and a focus on building the caliphate to a more traditional terror-group structure and guerilla warfare.

82 Dan Roberts and Spencer Ackerman, "US Begins Air Strikes against Isis Targets in Iraq, Pentagon Says," *The Guardian*, August 8, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/08/us-begins-air-strikes-iraq-isis>.

83 Gold Coast Bulletin, "Fight against the Islamic State working, says bishop, as foreign fighter numbers drop," February 1, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/docview/1761352758?pq-origsite=summon>.

84 "U.S. Envoy Says Number of Islamic State Foreign Fighters Dropping," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, February 23, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-foreign-fighters-dropping/27569890.html>.

85 "U.S. Envoy Says Number of Islamic State Foreign Fighters Dropping," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, February 23, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-foreign-fighters-dropping/27569890.html>.

86 "Islamic State Calls for Attacks on the West during Ramadan in Audio Message," Reuters, May 22, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamicstate-idUSKCN0YC0OG>.

WHAT WE LEARNED

FOREIGN FIGHTER EVOLUTION

The mobilization of foreign fighters to the Islamic State was an evolution of past jihads that embodied important thematic shifts. Recruitment and jihad through the media moved decisively from traditional media to the internet, democratizing recruitment and expanding the pool of potential fighters. Demographically, the fighters in Iraq and Syria represented a new generation that, for the first time, included the mobilization of Muslim women. The sheer numbers of individuals recruited by the Islamic State demonstrate a fundamental change in the scope and nature of the conflict, as does the role of, and focus on, governance in the legitimacy of the movement. The focus on governance also profoundly shifted the insurgent group's funding sources and its ability to expand.

Recruitment and Propaganda

The scope and the enormous success of recruitment by the Islamic State represented the largest shift from previous conflicts. Whereas Afghanistan in the 1980s attracted thousands of fighters, they came almost exclusively from the Gulf states, North and East Africa, and Central Asia; in contrast, the Islamic State recruited heavily in Europe and North America. Globally, more than 120 countries have been represented.⁸⁷

Social media played a crucial role in attracting foreign fighters to the Islamic State. Sophisticated propaganda portrayed a glamorous life in the caliphate, depicted a heroic fight against the enemy, and captured the imaginations of vulnerable individuals

87 Remarks by Lisa O. Monaco at the Intelligence Studies Project at the University of Texas-Austin.

worldwide. Encrypted communications, the ease of connectivity, and instant global reach provided a large base of support. Previous conflicts and foreign fighters faced recruiting limitations due to less sophisticated communications capabilities and the limits of existing social networks.

In Iraq and Syria, social media exponentially expanded the potential pool of recruits. Connecting through various social networks, recruiters could pass information on how to travel to the battle space and what to expect. Although other militant groups, particularly Jabhat al Nusra, also used the internet and social media to great effect, the Islamic State attracted the greatest number of travelers. Through their social media campaigns, the Islamic State advertised (in various languages) a new model of governance in the Middle East, provided a sense of purpose for those who joined, and inspired unprecedented numbers of individuals to mobilize and leave their home countries.

Prior to the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014, the number of foreign fighters estimated to have traveled to Syria and Iraq, had grown to over 12,000 fighters hailing from 81 countries. In their publication *Dabiq*, the Islamic State called on “every Muslim professional who delayed his *jihād* in the past under the pretense of studying *Sharīah*, medicine, or engineering” to “now make his number one priority to repent and answer the call to hijrah, especially after the establishment of the Khilāfah.”⁸⁸

By September 2014, estimates ranged from 13,000–35,000 with a significant number of fighters joining extremist groups, highlighting an upward trend in the numbers going to the battlefield. According to a report by the Soufan Group in December 2015, the rise in foreign fighter flows was not geographically uniform throughout 2014 and 2015. The rate of new recruits remained relatively flat in North America but doubled across

Sophisticated propaganda portrayed a glamorous life in the caliphate, depicted a heroic fight against the enemy, and captured the imaginations of vulnerable individuals worldwide.

88 Dabiq, “A Call to Hijrah,” <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/09-2014/isis-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-3-the-call-to-hijrah.pdf>.

Western Europe from June 2014–December 2015. Over the same period, the rate of Russian and Central Asian fighters traveling to theater increased by 300 percent.⁸⁹

In Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia, media attention was critical to the recruitment of fighters.⁹⁰ News coverage spread awareness and catalyzed funding flows through preexisting networks. The spread of information and media remained central to the Islamic State's strategy. Like previous groups that filmed skirmishes to attract recruits, the Islamic State created sophisticated videos to connect with potential members.

Sophisticated videos glamorized life and combat in the caliphate and legitimized the state by elevating its messaging. Social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter allowed the Islamic State and other militant groups to craft their own message, free from the constraints of traditional news coverage. The direct link between the organization and its supporters allowed for more targeted recruitment of foreign fighters, as well as fundraising and public justifications of ISIS's actions. However, the high production value of the videos and other media, and their dissemination via online social networks, represent technological innovations on preexisting models rather than an entirely new idea.

Roles and Motivations

Motivations for travel to the Islamic State, and roles volunteers played once in theater, depended on the country of origin and shifted with the evolution of the proto-state. After the emergence

of the Islamic State, individuals traveling to join the group believed themselves to be engaged in a state-building enterprise and many came to begin anew. Unlike internal (nonforeign) fighters, many of whom were radicalized in prisons or joined for motives of revenge or status, foreign fighters more often sought to defend other Sunnis or to satisfy other identity-centric motivations.

Motivations for travel varied significantly between those living in Western Europe and the Arab world. More European fighters felt disillusionment with the West, as well as a desire to build a new state.⁹¹ Volunteers from majority-Arab countries were more likely to be motivated by a desire to protect fellow Sunnis even after the rise of the Islamic State. In contrast, the mobilization of thousands of European residents who moved away from relatively safe and comfortable lives to live in a new Islamist proto-state is a fundamental change from prior conflicts. The Western origins of many fighters also point to the generational shift—a large proportion of the fighters were young people who had not previously participated in any salafist jihad. Another critical evolution is the phenomenon of “jihadi brides.”⁹² Although women had previously held positions of influence, particularly privately, within jihadi-salafi movements, never before had a large cohort of Western women left the comforts of home to join the battle.

Shifting motivations among foreign fighters reflect changes in Islamic State messaging and operational performance in theater. Steven Metz's typologies of insurgents illustrate the psychological evolutions of foreign fighters who chose to take

89 The Soufan Group, “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq,” December 2015, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

90 R.W. Apple, “Thatcher Urges the Press to Help ‘Starve’ Terrorists,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1985, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/16/world/thatcher-urges-the-press-to-help-starve-terrorists.html>.

91 Quantum Communications, *Understanding Jihadists: In Their Own Words*, The White Papers, issue 2 (Beirut: Quantum Communications, March 2015), https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewjb3sf8mtTSAhUCslQKHWULCvAQFggaMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fnow.mmedia.me%2FPages%2FImageStreamer%2Fparam%2FDocId__3f9f8a57-06ab-4909-afbc-2db99976bafef%2F-white-paper-2---.pdf&usq=AFQjCNGT31TzdIvCB2avmL79nx6SjMdpKg&sig=zLy2xp47zAF99sLYxozcpQ

92 Katrin Bennhold, “Jihad and Girl Power: How ISIS Lured 3 London Girls,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/18/world/europe/jihad-and-girl-power-how-isis-lured-3-london-teenagers.html>.

up arms.⁹³ Consistent with other insurgencies, initial recruits tended to be “aggrieved” or “idealists,” many of whom were experienced fighters with prior jihadist connections or members of an ideologically committed new generation.

As the Islamic State developed, it, and the networks feeding it, attracted individuals who could be categorized as the “ambitious,” the “lost,” or the “thugs.” Criminal networks in Europe played a major role in facilitating the movement of fighters to and from the battle space.⁹⁴ After 2016, consistent with Metz’s typologies, new fighters joining the Islamic State were “survivors” for whom membership in the Islamic State was simply safer than nonmembership.

Though a preponderance of fighters came from the Arab world, a significant proportion came from Europe or from Russian-speaking Muslim communities. Many foreign fighters from Western Europe were, like the Afghan Arabs two decades earlier, inexperienced and their military effectiveness was initially minimal. However, they acted as force multipliers for the Islamic State playing the roles of recruiters, jailers, administrators, and other governance positions.

Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters tended to seek fighting positions on the front lines.⁹⁵ Other roles available to recruits included support activities—working as engineers, hackers, doctors, cooks, drivers, or religious police. Many Russian-speaking militants took on leadership roles because of their education levels and perceived (though not necessarily real) experience fighting against the Russian state.

Individual foreign fighters took on positions of importance within the Islamic State. Omar Shihani, previously the leader of Jaish al Muhajireen wal Ansar, became known as the emir of war for the Islamic State and was credited with planning successful, territory-expanding operations. Another Islamic State foreign fighter, Mohammed Emwazi, also known as “Jihadi John,” rose to prominence after appearing in graphic execution videos. Emwazi was not a commander in the Islamic State and instead worked as a jailer and executioner of American, British, and Japanese hostages as well as Syrian soldiers. His London accent drew global attention to the role of foreign fighters in the Islamic State.

Female foreign fighters in particular took on unique roles within the Islamic State. The Islamic State used female-only recruitment strategies and promoted the idea of finding love and marriage in the caliphate.⁹⁶ Women as young as 13 left their homes in search of belonging and identity, many with romanticized ideas of marriage to jihadi husbands and living a virtuous life among like-minded peers. In the United Kingdom, a conservative Islamic counterculture emerged among teens in which “Islam is punk rock. The head scarf is liberating. Beards are sexy.”⁹⁷ Once inside the organization, a marriage bureau (formerly run by Baghdadi’s third wife) and all-female morality militia ruled the lives of the caliphate’s jihadi brides.⁹⁸

The Islamic State highlighted the participation of foreign fighters in propaganda in what Dara

93 Steven Metz, “Psychology of Participation in Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, January 27, 2012, <http://smallwars-journal.com/jrnl/art/psychology-of-participation-in-insurgency>.

94 Peter R. Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West*, 1st ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

95 Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (September 2, 2016): 837–57.

96 Bennhold, “Jihad and Girl Power: How ISIS Lured 3 London Girls.”

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

Jabhat al Nusra downplayed the active roles played by foreign fighters and the significant portion of its leadership originating from outside Syria and Iraq.

Conduit and Ben Rich describe as the “dual roles of executioner and demagogue.”⁹⁹ Foreign fighters played major roles in some of the Islamic State’s more egregious actions such as the detention and torture of Kurdish child hostages in 2014 and the genocide of the Yazidi minority in Iraq.

In contrast, Jabhat al Nusra downplayed the active roles played by foreign fighters and the significant portion of its leadership originating from outside Syria and Iraq. Instead, Jabhat al Nusra focused on the long-game in Syria by building support within Syria’s nationalist opposition to become an integral part of the revolution rather than a supranational jihad, creating popular support networks that will far outlast Syria’s civil war.¹⁰⁰

Governance and Territory

Much of Islamic State media has focused on its existence as a proto-state. The group derived legitimacy and credibility from the declaration of the caliphate, Baghdadi’s

assumption of the title of emir al mu’minin, and the successful administration of populations and territory. The declaration of the state was necessary for the group’s success because of the apocalyptic ideology upon which it is based. Without territory to govern, the group would lose its *raison d’être*: being the army of black flags foretold in end-times prophecies.¹⁰¹ Though traditional media attention remains relevant, scholars such as Bruce Hoffman argue that sanctuary now functions as the oxygen for terrorism.¹⁰²

The use of the caliphate as a recruitment tool was far more effective for the Islamic State than for previous iterations of foreign fighters. However, the Islamic State was not the first modern organization to declare a caliphate to support their organizational goals. While the Islamic State went much farther in its administration and could symbolically raze a section of the Iraqi-Syrian border, the concept of the caliphate and the “leader of the faithful” was previously used in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

99 Dara Conduit and Ben Rich, “Foreign Fighters, Human Rights and Self-Determination in Syria and Iraq: Decoding the Humanitarian Impact of Foreign Fighters in Practice,” *International Community Law Review* 18, no. 5 (December 8, 2016): 431–54.

100 The Islamic State’s motto of “lasting and expanding” (*baqiya wa tamadad*) clearly identifies territory and an enduring presence as critical to its survival, legitimacy, and credibility. Lina Khatib, “The Islamic State’s Strategy: Lasting and Expanding,” Carnegie Middle East Center, June 29, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/29/islamic-state-s-strategy-lasting-and-expanding-pub-60511>; and Charles Lister and Thomas Sanderson, “Syria Battle-Space SITREP: Syrian Opposition Fighters/Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham with Charles Lister” (dialogue, CSIS, Washington, DC, August 24, 2016), <https://www.csis.org/events/syria-battle-space-sitrep-syrian-opposition-fightersjabhat-fateh-al-sham-charles-lister>.

101 McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*.

102 Bruce Hoffman, “The Global Terror Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration,” *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (November/December 2016): 1–7, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel_Vo-19Iss1117.pdf.

Similar to the Taliban before it, the Islamic State's administration of territory allowed the group to generate profits through taxation and extortion. Other groups like Jabhat al Nusra maintained their reliance on more traditional patronage networks.¹⁰³ The Islamic State's self-financing allowed it more independence in targeting and operations, but the associated financial infrastructure increased its vulnerability to targeting.¹⁰⁴ As it loses territory, the Islamic State may be forced to raise revenue elsewhere, potentially through the group's network of criminal actors.¹⁰⁵

What We Learned

The scope, scale, and wide cross-section of fighters' experience and motivations allowed for unprecedented growth in military effectiveness. Whereas in Afghanistan in the 1980s many Afghan Arabs came into direct conflict with local fighters and had an only marginal military impact, the Islamic State's recruits successfully filled roles in Iraq and Syria that ran the full gamut of military and civilian positions. However, despite continuous adaptations and evolutions of the supranational jihadist movement, core parallels remain.

The conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Iraq reveal a common pattern. Conflicts drawing large numbers of foreign fighters generally begin with a humanitarian crisis or civil war in which an aggressor commits atrocities against a Muslim population. The humanitarian disaster attracts volunteers who see an obligation for devout Muslims to defend their Muslim brothers.

These volunteers seek to defend their brothers and sisters against a group they perceive as the infidels—whether Shia, Western governments, or oppressive local regimes.

These fighters initially struggle to attain credibility in the battle space but over time, military success, external support, and alliances with local organizations tend to earn groups eventual acceptance. With their presence, the foreign volunteers place the conflict in a global context and often sharpen its sectarian nature. The infusion of international attention and manpower inevitably affects operational realities on the ground, the values of the organizations the foreigners join, and shifts the conflict from national to supranational.

The post-Arab Spring foreign fighter phenomenon seen in Iraq and Syria is not new. Before the Arab Spring, varying numbers of foreign fighters traveled to Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. They not only exacerbated those conflicts but built relationships and learned skills they would bring to bear in coming campaigns.

103 Karen DeYoung, "Kuwait, Ally on Syria, Is Also the Leading Funder of Extremist Rebels," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kuwait-top-ally-on-syria-is-also-the-leading-funder-of-extremist-rebels/2014/04/25/10142b9a-ca48-11e3-a75e-463587891b57_story.html; Dan Bilefsky and Maïa De La Baume, "Charity in France Is Accused of Being a Front for Financing Terrorism in Syria," *New York Times*, December 4, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/05/world/charity-in-france-is-accused-of-being-a-front-for-financing-terrorism-in-syria.html>.

104 Barbara Staff and Daniella Diaz, "First on CNN: Pentagon releases video of U.S. bombing 'millions' in ISIS cash," CNN, January 16, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/15/politics/us-bombs-isis-cash-money-iraq/>.

105 Other militant organizations have sought out greater integration into criminal networks as they lose traditional funding sources, and shift toward the realm of "for-profit" militancy, especially as boundaries between criminal and militant organizations disappear. See Thomas M. Sanderson et al., *Trends in Militancy across South Asia: A Region on the Brink* (Washington, DC: CSIS, April 2013), 20–28, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/130408_Sanderson_TrendsMilitancySouthAsia_Web.pdf.

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