

# Returning Western foreign fighters: The case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia

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ICCT Background Note  
June 2014

Authorities are increasingly worried about the large number of Western foreign fighters present in Syria. The fear is that these fighters will return radicalised, battle hardened and with extensive radical networks that might encourage them to commit a terrorist attack in the home country. The recent attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels – allegedly by a returned foreign fighter from Syria – seems to be a case in point. However, the conflict in Syria is not the first to attract foreign fighters. In this Background Note, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker investigate three historical cases of foreign fighting: Afghanistan (1980s), Bosnia (1990s) and Somalia (2000s). In this paper they aim to give insight into what happened to these foreign fighters after their fight abroad had ended. The authors distinguish eight possible pathways for foreign fighters that can help to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this complex phenomenon.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last two years, several Western countries have been confronted with dozens if not a few hundred nationals or residents joining violent struggles in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Motivations for joining such struggles are myriad but certainly, many have joined, what they call, the jihad<sup>1</sup> – regarded as a struggle for the sake of Allah - against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. There are growing concerns that these fighters might return battle-hardened, radicalised and with extensive radical networks that might inspire or even encourage them to attack the home country. This fear for returnees has motivated some countries to elevate the terrorism threat level, such as happened in the Netherlands in March 2013.<sup>2</sup>

Despite efforts to counter this development, the number of Western foreign fighters in Syria is still increasing. In April 2013, it was estimated that up to 600 Western Europeans had gone to Syria.<sup>3</sup> This indication has more than tripled in the latest report of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) which was published in December 2013. In this report, it was estimated that up to 2,000 Western Europeans have taken up arms against the Syrian regime.<sup>4</sup> The United States (US) and Canada are also increasingly confronted with this phenomenon, reporting a least dozens of cases, while Australia has recently put the number somewhere between 120 and 150 nationals fighting in Syria.<sup>5</sup>

While this development has clearly come as a surprise to many, it is certainly not the first time that Western Europeans have left to fight in a foreign struggle. The existence of foreign fighters, or transnational insurgents, who are defined in this article as “noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts”<sup>6</sup>, is nothing new.

In this paper we will look at three past cases of conflicts in the Islamic world that attracted Western foreign fighters: Afghanistan in the 1980s, Bosnia in the 1990s and Somalia in the 2000s.<sup>7</sup> These cases represent three different regions and three different contexts and phases of jihadism. Our main focus is on the question what happened to these fighters after the fighting in these three countries. What can we learn from these cases in relation to the current worries about returning Western foreign fighters? For each case we will give a short background of the conflict and that of the fighters and then proceed to the question what actually happened to these fighters after their initial reason for going – fighting in a specific conflict – was no longer valid. Finally, we will attempt to categorise the different pathways of those who joined the fight in these countries: what did they do after the fighting was over?

<sup>1</sup> This term refers to a violent form of the “lesser jihad”, see E. Bakker, “Jihadi Terrorists in Europe and Global Salafi Jihadis”, in R. Coolsaet, ed., *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge in Europe*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), p.69.

<sup>2</sup> National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, Ministry of Security and Justice, *Summary DTN 32*, 13 March 2013, <http://english.nctv.nl/publications-products/Terrorist-Threat-Assessment-Netherlands/index.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> A.Y. Zelin, “ICSR Insight: European Foreign Fighters in Syria”, *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*, 2 April 2013, <http://icsr.info/2013/04/icsr-insight-european-foreign-fighters-in-syria-2/>.

<sup>4</sup> A. Y. Zelin, “ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans”, *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*, 17 December 2013, <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>.

<sup>5</sup> For USA, see “FBI chief: more Americans joining Syrian war”, *Al Jazeera*, 3 May 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2014/05/fbi-chief-more-americans-joining-syrian-war-20145221539486269.html>; For Canada, see S. Bell, “Canadians fighting in Syria could pose immediate threat to national security when they return”, *The National Post*, 3 February 2014, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/02/03/canadians-fighting-in-syria-could-pose-immediate-threat-to-national-security-when-they-return-csis/>; For Australia, see M. Safi and N. Evershed, “Australians are fighting in Syria: how many have joined the conflict?”, *The Guardian*, 9 April 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2014/apr/09/australians-fighting-in-syria-how-many-have-joined-the-conflict>. It should be noted that these Western foreign fighters constitute a minority among the total number of foreigners that have flocked to Syria to join the battle against the Syrian regime. Most of the foreign fighters are from the wider Middle East, see Zelin “Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans”.

<sup>6</sup> This definition is put forward by David Malet in his book *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.9.

<sup>7</sup> Other examples of cases of conflicts in the Islamic world that have attracted jihadi foreign fighters include Chechnya, Iraq, Yemen and Mali.

## 2. Afghanistan and Jihad as an Individual Obligation

To understand the motivations that lead young Muslims to fight and die on the battlefields in other parts of the world, we must understand the changes in ideology that paved their way. The concept of the so-called violent “lesser jihad” has a long history in Islam. In modern times it was influenced by important Islamist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad abd-al-Salam Faraj.<sup>8</sup> Rather than adhering to the traditional interpretation of the concept of jihad as a collective obligation (*fard kifaya*), Qutb and Faraj transformed it into an individual obligation (*fard ayn*).<sup>9</sup> Both were supportive of the practice of *takfir*: declaring a fellow Muslim an unbeliever. Especially Faraj stressed the need to target the “near enemy” first. With this, he meant the apostate Muslim leaders whom he perceived to be obstacles hindering the formation of Islamic states with Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>10</sup>

However, while these two individuals contributed to a shift in thinking about jihad, it was not until the 1980s that large numbers of Muslims would bring this idea of jihad as an individual obligation into practice. It took a major geopolitical event – the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 – and the efforts of the Palestinian Sheikh Abdullah Azzam for this to happen.

In the year of the Soviet invasion, Azzam published a *fatwa* (religious ruling) called *Defence of the Muslims Lands: The First Obligation after Faith*, in which he called upon fellow Muslims to come to the help of the threatened *ummah*, the community of believers. These ideas were further articulated in his work *Join the Caravan* (1987), in which he gives sixteen reasons for fighting the jihad.<sup>11</sup> According to Azzam, the *ummah* is one body, “so that whichever region of the Muslims’ territory is exposed to danger, it is necessary that the whole body of the Islamic Ummah rally together to protect this organ which is exposed to the onslaught of the microbe”.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Azzam wanted to encourage Muslims from all around the world to come and fight in Afghanistan against the Soviet aggression and its local allies.<sup>13</sup>

The conflict in Afghanistan is without doubt the most well-known example of Muslim foreign fighting in recent history. This all started when local Afghan *mujahideen* – or persons who fight a jihad - fighting the Soviets and local Communists were joined by foreign fighters coming from many different countries. Azzam was a key figure in the recruitment efforts and organisation of foreign fighters. In 1984, he set up the Maktab al-Khadamat (MAK, the Afghan Services) that was responsible for coordinating all the money, men and weapons in the struggle against the Soviets.<sup>14</sup> Teaming up with his pupil Osama Bin Laden, Azzam mobilised thousands of foreign fighters that flocked to the conflict during the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> The great majority of these foreign fighters originated from Arab countries. Not all arrivals were hardened jihadists. Jason Burke notes that some “rich Gulf kids” only came during summer time to fight for a couple of weeks, if they would see any fighting at all, to return home after summer.<sup>16</sup> Most of the volunteers who arrived had no fighting experience at all and therefore first had to be trained in order to be of any worth in battle.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>8</sup> F.A. Gerges, *The far enemy: Why Jihad went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Gerges, *The far enemy* (2005) p.10

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> A. Azzam, *Join the Caravan* (1987) p.11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.21.

<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, Azzam fiercely disapproved of the notion of “takfir” and Faraj’s ideas of targeting the near enemy first. Rather, Azzam stressed the need to come to the help of the threatened *ummah*, what Fawaz Gerges calls the “defensive jihad” instead of the “offensive jihad” as propagated by others, including Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden. See Gerges, *The far enemy*.

<sup>14</sup> E. Bakker and L. De Boer, “The evolution of Al-Qaeda: Ideology, terrorists, and appeal”, *Clingendael Security Paper no.4.*, (The Hague: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, December 2007), p.9.

<sup>15</sup> J. Burke, *Al-Qaeda* (London: Penguin Books, 2007 [revised edition]), p.61. Burke notes that some estimates range up to 25,000, although that is “ludicrous”. David Malet talks about approximately 4,000 foreign fighters, see Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p.158.

<sup>16</sup> Burke, *Al-Qaeda* (2007) p.76.

<sup>17</sup> Only in 1987, Azzam and Bin Laden set up the first “foreign fighters only” training camp near the city of Khost, called al-Masada (the lion’s den). See M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p.35.

Given their lack of skills and varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds, it is not surprising that mixing foreign and Afghan fighters did not always go well. According to Evan Kohlmann, many foreign fighters were upper-middle class Arab men that knew more about engineering and business than fighting. “[T]hese ragtag guerrillas were often a liability to both themselves and any Afghan mujahideen unit willing to fight alongside them. The native Afghan ‘holy warriors’ were typically very suspicious of their new Arab allies, regarding these foreigners as ‘Gucci soldiers’”.<sup>18</sup> This mutual suspicion often impeded effective cooperation between the groups. The meagre accomplishments on the battlefield stood in stark contrast to the legacy these fighters were able to attain. According to Marc Sageman, this Arab foreign fighter contingent was able to “hijack the Afghan mujahideen victory for its own ends”.<sup>19</sup> The conflict also attracted a number of foreign fighters coming from Western countries and especially from the US. This can mainly be ascribed to the zealous recruitment efforts of Azzam, who regularly visited the country and even opened an office in Boston and New York. John Berger shows a number of well-documented cases of Americans fighting in Afghanistan, giving a conservative estimate of 150 individuals.<sup>20</sup> Recruitment of these individuals mainly revolved around Muslim humanitarian organisations, which were frequently visited by Azzam. In Brooklyn, the Al-Farook Mosque was the centre from which a large number of Americans departed to Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.1 After the Fighting

What happened to these foreign fighters after the Soviet Union withdrew its soldiers from Afghanistan in February 1989? According to Azzam’s rhetoric on the defensive jihad, it was time to go home: the oppressor had been defeated. Reality, however, showed a far more mixed and complicated picture. First of all, while the withdrawal of the Soviet Union signalled the end of the Soviet-Afghan war, it was not the end of the fighting itself. According to David Malet, the ten years that followed did not result in a decline in transnational insurgent activity. On the contrary, around 6,000 new foreign fighters arrived between 1987 and 1993, more than twice the number that actually fought the Soviet occupation.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this growth in terms of numbers, the foreign fighter movement was increasingly marked by splits about the future course of action.<sup>23</sup> The face of the jihad also irrevocably changed with the assassination of Azzam in 1989. On the one hand, these post-Soviet years were characterised by disputes and very different ideas about the goals, strategies and tactics within the movement. On the other hand, these years would also be remembered for the birth of what became known as Al Qaeda.<sup>24</sup> Its leader, Osama Bin Laden, envisioned an opportunity to establish a militant group that would overcome all internal divisions.<sup>25</sup>

So the end of the Soviet invasion coincided with and partly caused the determination of a number of foreign fighters to establish a base from which to continue activities, although it was not clear what this would imply. Initially this was only a small group of individuals who were close to Bin Laden and his affiliates and certainly not the majority of the foreign fighters who remained in Afghanistan. Some foreign fighters went home because they were satisfied with the withdrawal of the Soviet forces or conversely because they were disillusioned with the increased in-fighting and divisions in the first years of the civil war.<sup>26</sup> However, some also stayed: either because they wanted to continue the jihad or because they simply could not return home. Many

<sup>18</sup> E. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004), p.8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.59.

<sup>20</sup> J.M. Berger, *Jihad Joe: Americans who go to war in the name of Islam* (Dulles: Potomac Books, Inc., 2011), p.8.

<sup>21</sup> Burke, *Al-Qaeda* (2007) p.101.

<sup>22</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters* (2013) p.183.

<sup>23</sup> Burke, *Al-Qaeda* (2007) p.82.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>26</sup> T. Tawfiq, “Interview with Sheikh al-Mujahideen Abu Abdel Aziz”, *Al-Sirat Al-Mustaqeem* (The Straight Path), August 1994, reprinted at [http://caravansofmartyrs.atSPACE.com/html/Abu\\_Abdel-Aziz.htm](http://caravansofmartyrs.atSPACE.com/html/Abu_Abdel-Aziz.htm); B. Mendelsohn, “Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terror” (The University of Chicago Press, 2009), p.45.

were afraid to be arrested, incarcerated or executed by their governments.<sup>27</sup> According to Burke, not many of them were actually fighting in the years after 1989. Many fighters wanted to continue the jihad somewhere else or were involved in plots against a new enemy: the US.<sup>28</sup>

According to Berger, a number of Afghanistan veterans were involved in radical or even terrorist activity in and against the US. Most of these returned fighters played a role in recruiting new fighters. Berger looked at thirty cases of Americans who went to Afghanistan (he estimates that at least 150 Americans went there).<sup>29</sup> Of these thirty cases, only a small number are reported to have returned to the US. One of them was Clement Hampton-El who was one of the key figures of the 1993 World Trade Center Bombing. Another example is Wadih El Hage, a Lebanese convert who moved to the US. From there, El Hage went to Afghanistan on numerous occasions although, according to Berger, he never fought because of a deformed arm. In 2001, he was convicted for his role in the 1998 US Embassy Bombings.<sup>30</sup> Another example is that of Daniel Boyd, a convert from North Carolina who spent about three years in Afghanistan. When he returned, Berger notes that “outwardly he seemed to resume a normal life (but) he was quietly raising a family inculcated with his strict, militaristic reading of Islam, stocking his home with weapons and ammunition for what he saw as his inevitable return to jihad”.<sup>31</sup> Berger turned out to be right. In 2012, Boyd was convicted for recruiting both his sons to fight the jihad and for conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists and conspiracy to commit murder, maiming and kidnapping overseas.<sup>32</sup>

While these examples prove that a number of foreign fighters from Afghanistan indeed returned and, in some cases, posed a threat to their country, a larger number of foreign fighters stayed in Afghanistan or continued their fight elsewhere, many of them in Bosnia.

### 3. Bosnia

After Afghanistan, many veterans were looking for a new theatre to fight the jihad. Many of them thought Bosnia to be a suitable location, which was in many aspects a godsend to the jihadist movement.<sup>33</sup> This was also the first time relatively many Western foreign jihadi fighters participated in a conflict although their number remained low compared to other foreign fighters who came to Bosnia. The infighting in Afghanistan and the pressure from the Pakistani government that ordered foreign fighters to leave in 1993 made the opportunity to move to Bosnia very attractive. It fitted all the requirements of a defensive jihad that could solve ideological disputes and could help to restore the image of the mujahideen which had been tarnished by the chaos in Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup>

The total number of foreign fighters who went to Bosnia is estimated to be as many as 5,000.<sup>35</sup> The first fighters who arrived after the start of the conflict in 1992 mainly joined the Bosnian civil defence forces. Although they were very motivated to fight, they generally lacked any significant military experience and were therefore not very successful.<sup>36</sup> Kohlmann depicts these first arrivals as essentially driven by chivalrous notions of helping the oppressed. This stands in strong contrast with the second wave of arrivals: the Arab commanders from

<sup>27</sup> Burke, *Al Qaeda* (2007) p.103.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. This shift in focus can be mainly explained by the increased dominance of Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri in the foreign fighter movement, at the expense of Abdullah Azzam who would later be killed.

<sup>29</sup> Berger, *Jihad Joe* (2011) p.8.

<sup>30</sup> “United States of America v. Mohamed Sadeek Odeh, Mohamed Rashed Daoud Al-Owhali, Wadih El Hage, 01-1535-cr(L)”, 24 November 2008, [http://www.asser.nl/upload/documents/DomCLIC/Docs/NLP/US/Appeal\\_verdict\\_24-11-2008.pdf](http://www.asser.nl/upload/documents/DomCLIC/Docs/NLP/US/Appeal_verdict_24-11-2008.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Berger, *Jihad Joe* (2011) p.22.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Attorney’s Office – Eastern District of North Carolina, *North Carolina Resident Daniel Patrick Boyd Sentenced for Terrorism Violations*, 24 August 2012, <http://www.fbi.gov/charlotte/press-releases/2012/north-carolina-resident-daniel-patrick-boyd-sentenced-for-terrorism-violations>.

<sup>33</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe* (2004) p.16.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.xii.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.16.

Afghanistan who entered the country later in 1992 and 1993.<sup>37</sup> After some initial exploration missions, Bosnia was deemed to be a suitable place for bringing in foreign fighters.<sup>38</sup> These were characterised by Kohlmann as “young men, galvanized by hateful religious and political ideologies [...] [and] determined to turn the global tide against the ‘infidel’ regimes”.<sup>39</sup> Many fighters were incorporated in the regular Bosnian army as a separate battalion within the Bosnian Armed Forces. This unit “El Mudžahid” became known for its ruthless behaviour such as demolishing Catholic churches and committing indiscriminate killings.<sup>40</sup>

There were also Western fighters in Bosnia. Some were “self-recruited” foreign fighters who were outraged by the images and stories of the conflict and managed to join the fight in Bosnia without outside help. Others, who seemed to have formed the majority, were part of radical Islamist groups and were recruited to fight. Especially important in this regard were firebrand clerics throughout Europe who used mosques to meet young Muslims and introduce them into the global jihadist scene.<sup>41</sup>

In Bosnia, tensions arose between the local Muslim population and the mujahideen. The foreign fighters were seen as an uncontrollable force responsible for many horrendous atrocities, such as the decapitation and mutilation of both soldiers and civilians.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.1 After the fighting

The Dayton Agreement which officially ended the conflict did not signal the end of the mujahideen’s violence. Some of the mujahideen leaders made plans to attack NATO forces that would be sent to Bosnia to enforce peace.<sup>43</sup> In October 1995, a suicide bomber destroyed the police headquarters in the Croatian town of Rijeka in retaliation to the arrest of one of the leaders of al-Gama al-Islamiyya – an Egyptian Sunni Islamist movement – by the Croatian authorities.<sup>44</sup> The perpetrator, the Canadian John Fawzan, thereafter got the “dubious distinction of carrying out the first successful suicide operation in Europe on behalf of an Islamist organisation”.<sup>45</sup>

In Bosnia itself, the question surfaced what to do with all these foreign fighters who were still present. The fighters were very hostile towards the Western peacekeepers who by then had arrived.<sup>46</sup> The Dayton Agreement in fact ordered all foreign fighters to leave Bosnia within thirty days after UN troops had arrived. There were at least hundreds – estimates range from 400 to 3,000 – mujahideen who had come to Bosnia during the conflict. To circumvent this issue, the Bosnian government decided to issue thousands of passports, birth certificates and other documents that provided the Bosnian nationality to these foreign fighters enabling them to stay.<sup>47</sup>

At this point, the foreign fighters could choose what to do. According to Kohlmann, many of them left Bosnia once the fighting ceased, including a number of British citizens, but there were also a number of “die-hards” who felt betrayed by the Dayton Agreement and wanted to continue fighting the jihad.<sup>48</sup> An example was 18 year-old British student Sayyad al-Falastini who refused to leave and died in a failed suicide attack directed at a Croatian target.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp.18-19.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.85.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.120.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.86.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.153.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.152.

<sup>45</sup> M. Taarnby Jensen, “Jihad in Denmark: An Overview and Analysis of Jihadi Activity in Denmark 1990-2006”, *DIIS Working Paper no 2006/35*, (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2006), p.18.

<sup>46</sup> Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe* (2004) p.158.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.163.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

The exact number of foreign fighters who were present in Bosnia remains hard to assess. Bosnian sources reported the presence of 3,000 foreign combatants in Bosnia.<sup>50</sup> It is estimated that around one thousand remained in Bosnia after the war.<sup>51</sup> However, in the years after the conflict and especially after the 9/11 attacks, the pressure on the Bosnian authorities to expatriate these fighters increased, as it was regarded a springboard for terrorist activity in the West.<sup>52</sup> As a result, more than thousand citizenships were revoked.<sup>53</sup>

As happened after Afghanistan, some of the foreign fighters who went to Bosnia indeed became implicated in terrorist activity in the West. Perhaps the most well-known case is Andrew Rowe, a British-Jamaican who fought in Bosnia.<sup>54</sup> Rowe was arrested in 2003 on the French side of the Channel tunnel with traces of high explosives in his socks. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison after being convicted of terrorism related activities.<sup>55</sup> Police also investigated his links to the French Lionel Dumont, a convert like Rowe, who also went to Bosnia to fight. Just like Rowe, Dumont did not immediately return home but met with Islamist radicals in at least ten countries.<sup>56</sup> With the help of another Bosnia fighter, Christophe Caze, also a French convert, they set up the so-called Roubaix Gang. The other members of the network were Algerians who had convinced Dumont and Caze of the necessity to attack French targets because of the events in Algeria. In 1996, the members of the group placed a car-bomb near the meeting place of the G7 but the police disabled it and arrested the culprits.<sup>57</sup>

The vast majority of foreign fighters, however, did not return home to take part in a terrorist attack. As described by Karmen Erjavec and Jennifer Mustapha, in the years after the Dayton Agreement, almost a third of the foreign fighters stayed in Bosnia as naturalised Bosnian citizens. For instance, Abdullah Ali, an African American convert raised in Washington DC, was actually not only a Bosnia veteran but also fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s. After his experience in Afghanistan, Ali returned to the US where he led an ordinary life. When he saw the atrocities in Bosnia, more than ten years later, he decided to leave again and help. Ali explained that “I’m not a terrorist, I’m not an aggressor, I’m not a war junkie. I didn’t think I was coming here like the saviour of the world. I just wanted to be part of what was taking place here, and to show that they were not alone. And for them to know that they weren’t forgotten”.<sup>58</sup> After the fighting, Ali settled down in Bosnia where he now lives with his family while he still frequently visits the US.<sup>59</sup>

Berger explains that the Western attitude towards the conflict in Bosnia actually “opened up the pool of recruits to a much wider range of American Muslims, some of whom did not share the rabid anti-Americanism of ideologues such as Omar Abdel Rahman [the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing]. They saw no conflict between being an American and helping Bosnian Muslims”.<sup>60</sup> However, Berger also provides examples of Americans who were indeed implicated in terrorist activity, among them Christopher Paul. This convert, who would become known as “Abdul Malek Kenyatta”, travelled to Pakistan where he met several Al Qaeda members and fought in Bosnia. In 2008, he was convicted for providing explosives training to a terrorist network in

<sup>50</sup> K. Erjavec, “The ‘Bosnian war on terrorism’”, *Journal of Language and Politics* 8, no.1 (2009), pp.5-27, pp.7-8.

<sup>51</sup> K. Erjavec, “The ‘Bosnian war on terrorism’” (2009), pp.7-8; J. Mustapha, “The Mujahideen in Bosnia: the foreign fighter as cosmopolitan citizen and/or terrorist”, *Citizenship Studies* (2013), pp.1-14. Mustapha Speaks of numbers between 600 and 3,000.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> F. Egerton, *Jihad in the West: The Rise of Militant Salafism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.121. Bosnia was not the only place where Rowe fought: he is suspected to have travelled to Afghanistan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco.

<sup>55</sup> H. Muir, “British Muslim convert jailed for terrorism offences”, *The Guardian*, 24 September 2005,

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/24/terrorism.politics>.

<sup>56</sup> F. Egerton, *Jihad in the West* (2011), p.121.

<sup>57</sup> P. Nesser, “Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994-2007: Planned, Prepared, and Executed Terrorist Attacks”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 10 (2008), pp.924-946, p.929.

<sup>58</sup> Berger, *Jihad Joe* (2011), p.89.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



Germany “in order to assist them in preparing to conduct attacks using explosives on targets in Europe and in the US”.<sup>61</sup>

Madrid was one of the European key centres for recruitment for fighting in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995. This revolved around the Abu Bakr mosque, led by the Spanish-Syrian Imam Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas, a.k.a. Abu Dahdah. Dahdah recruited several Muslims to fight in Bosnia, where they were brought into contact with Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, a.k.a. Abu Musab al-Suri. Al-Suri would become known by publishing a 1600-page work titled “Call to Global Islamic Resistance” and has been typified as “al-Qaida’s leading theoretician and strategic thinker; he is particularly credited for being its post 9/11 principal architect” because he propagated a more individualised, less-sophisticated form of jihad.<sup>62</sup> While the Abu Dahdah network disintegrated after a wave of arrests in 2001, some of its members such as Amer Azizi and Said Berraj were later involved in the 2004 Madrid Bombings.<sup>63</sup>

#### 4. Somalia

Another country that has attracted many Western foreign fighters is Somalia. One of the groups that draws foreign fighters is Al Shabaab, an affiliate of Al Qaeda, having vowed allegiance to Bin Laden and, more recently, Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>64</sup> Al Shabaab is a relatively newcomer on the Somali battlefield which has existed since the early 1990s. After the dictatorial regime of Siad Barre was overthrown in 1991, the country slipped into total chaos and has not recovered since.<sup>65</sup> In 2000, Islamist groups rose to power, led by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), whose aim was to end the chaos and diminish the power of local warlords while implementing a strict form of Sharia law.<sup>66</sup> Ethiopia, concerned by the rise to power of the ICU which was threatening the legitimacy of the Transitional Federal Government (TGF) - backed by the United Nations, the African Union and the Arab League - decided to intervene in 2006.<sup>67</sup> The Ethiopian intervention invoked notions of the defensive jihad and formed a rallying call for mujahideen to fight the infidels. In this conflict, Al Shabaab soon emerged as the most violent split-off from the ICU, endorsing the global jihad of Al Qaeda.<sup>68</sup>

Al Shabaab has been quite successful in attracting foreign fighters from all over the world. In one particular aspect, these fighters are somewhat different from the foreign fighters in Bosnia and Afghanistan. Many foreign fighters who joined Al Shabaab were in fact members of the Somali Diaspora in the West. Reports indicate that the first wave of foreign fighters who went to Somalia after the Ethiopian invasion was mainly driven by “‘traditional’ nationalistic motives’”.<sup>69</sup> Many came from the US and Canada, but also from the United Kingdom (UK), Scandinavia and some from Germany and the Netherlands.<sup>70</sup>

As in Bosnia, firebrand clerics played an important role in inciting foreign fighters to join the fight. Two examples are the efforts of Anjem Choudary in the UK and of Fouad Mohamed Qalaf – an Afghanistan veteran –

<sup>61</sup> “USA v. Christopher Paul”, The United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio: Eastern Division. 2:07cr:87, Indictment, 11 April 2007, [http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case\\_docs/585.pdf/](http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/585.pdf/).

<sup>62</sup> W. Zackie, “An Analysis of Abu Mus’ab al-Suri’s “Call to Global Islamic Resistance””, *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no.1 (2013), pp.1-18, p.1.

<sup>63</sup> J. Jordan and N. Horsburgh, “Mapping Jihadist Terrorism in Spain”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 3 (2005), pp. 169-191, p.183.

<sup>64</sup> D. Shinn, “Al Shabaab’s Foreign Threat to Somalia”, *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011), pp.203-215, p.207; “Al-Shabaab Joining al-Qaeda, monitor group says”, *CNN*, 10 February 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/09/world/africa/somalia-shabaab-qaeda/>.

<sup>65</sup> See D. Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge of Somalia’s Al-Shabaab”, *Middle East Quarterly* XVI, no.4 (2009), pp.25-36; Shinn, “Al Shabaab’s Foreign Threat to Somalia”.

<sup>66</sup> L. Vidino, R. Pantucci and E. Kohlmann, “Bringing Global Jihad to the Horn of Africa: al Shabaab, Western Fighters, and the Sacralization of the Somali Conflict”, *African Security* 3, no.4 (2010), pp.216-238, p.220.

<sup>67</sup> Shinn, “Al Shabaab’s Foreign Threat to Somalia”, p.206.

<sup>68</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge of Somalia’s Al-Shabaab”, p.25.

<sup>69</sup> It is estimated that there are around one million Somalis living outside Somalia. See “Somalia’s global diaspora”, *Al Jazeera*, accessed on 6 January 2014, <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/somalias-global-diaspora-0022000>; Vidino et al., “Bringing Global Jihad to the Horn of Africa”, p.228.

<sup>70</sup> M. Taarnby and L. Hallundbaek, *Al Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalisation Processes in Europe*, (Danish Ministry of Justice, 2010), p.39.

in Sweden. The latter was associated with the Bellevue mosque in Göteborg that had been frequently visited by Al Shabaab leaders.<sup>71</sup> Besides mosques, centres for asylum seekers have been mentioned as locations where people were recruited. In the Netherlands, in 2009, a Somali man living in one of these centres was arrested because of recruiting for Al Shabaab.<sup>72</sup>

Some of the Western foreign fighters made a career in Al Shabaab. An example is Omar Hammami, also known as Abu Mansur al-Amriki, a Syrian-American Christian convert from Alabama. He was without doubt the most notorious Western foreign fighter, mainly because of his frequent appearances on the Internet. While this increasingly irritated many within Al Shabaab, Hammami had also been a strategic asset for the organisation for years as a recruiter, posting propaganda videos in English. He is believed to have motivated more than thirty young men from Minneapolis and Toronto to fight with Al Shabaab.<sup>73</sup> Though apparently successful in recruiting new foreign fighters, Hammami was eventually assassinated by Al Shabaab.<sup>74</sup> He was not the only one. Moreover, many were killed during battle, such as Ruben Shumpert, who died in an air strike in 2008.<sup>75</sup>

### 5.1 After the fighting

When Ethiopian forces left Somalia in January 2009, some of the fighters believed there was no longer a reason to continue fighting. Several of them returned to the US, often against the will of Al Shabaab's leadership. In fact, some who tried to do so were killed by the organisation.<sup>76</sup> One who managed to leave Somalia unharmed was Moe Abdullah Mohammed, a Somali who moved to Canada in 1989 and joined Al Shabaab after the Ethiopian invasion. In an interview back home, he said his motivation was purely to fight off the invading troops. After the Ethiopian troop withdrawal, Mohammed claimed to have left the country within 24 hours, saying that "My war is over. I took up this gun and I took up this fight to get the Ethiopians out. Now they left the land, and my war is over, it is time for me to go home and take care of my wife and my son; I have never spent one night with him".<sup>77</sup> Mohammed is now the founder of "Generation Islam", an organisation that tries to de-radicalise young people in Canada, who he feels are being recruited and brainwashed by radical Islamists.<sup>78</sup> It should be noted that others who went to Somalia to fight the Ethiopians stayed and continued to fight on the side of Al Shabaab.

Although these accounts are almost impossible to verify, it can be argued that many of the foreign fighters who returned had grown disillusioned with the cause and were not involved in terrorist attacks in their country. Some were, however, involved in terrorist activities elsewhere. The most infamous case is the attack on the Westgate mall in Kenya. In 2013, a (still unknown) number of members attacked a shopping mall in Nairobi, killing 67 people. Al Shabaab's spokesman for military operations, Sheikh Abulaziz Abu Muscab, said this was a retaliatory attack for the deployment of Kenyan troops in Somalia in October 2011.<sup>79</sup> One of the alleged participants in the attack was a British female foreign fighter suspected to have joined Al Shabaab: Samantha Lethwaite.<sup>80</sup>

Evidence from the US and Canada seems to confirm the idea that some Western foreign fighters were indeed mainly motivated by nationalist sentiments; when the Ethiopian troops left the country, so did many of

<sup>71</sup> See Vidino, "Bringing Global Jihad to the Horn of Africa"; Taarnby and Hallundbaek, "Al Shabaab" and Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia".

<sup>72</sup> "Asielzoeker Dronten betrokken bij jihad", *Het Parool*, 12 November 2009,

<http://www.parool.nl/parool/nl/224/BINNENLAND/article/detail/267264/2009/11/12/Asielzoeker-Dronten-betrokken-bij-jihad.dhtml>.

<sup>73</sup> C. Putzel, "American Jihadi: Abu Mansour", *Vanguard*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lecMcLIY6Ds>.

<sup>74</sup> "US-born 'jihadist rapper' Omar Hammami reportedly killed in Somalia", *The Guardian*, 12 September 2013,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/12/jihadist-rapper-omar-hammami-killed>.

<sup>75</sup> Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia", p.212.

<sup>76</sup> Putzel, "American Jihadi".

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> H. Mohamed, "Q&A: Al-Shabab defends Nairobi attacks", *Al Jazeera*, 25 September 2013,

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/2013923628350977.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Lethwaite is also known as the 'White Widow' because of her marriage to Germaine Lindsay, one of the 2005 London Bombers who died in this suicide attack.

the fighters. This is especially the case with regard to members of the Somali Diaspora. Some of them have returned disillusioned and successfully reintegrated into society. The most radical individuals, however, seem to be the ones who stayed in Somalia.

## 5. Visualisation of Foreign Fighter Pathways

What do these three case studies show us about the fate of these Western foreign fighters after the fighting? Before trying to answer this question it should be noted that research into foreign fighters is hampered by a lack of empirical data and that the evidence is mainly anecdotal. It is simply impossible to systematically trace all returning fighters or even a large proportion of them. We only know about a handful of cases, while it is clear that a couple of thousand fighters from Western countries have joined foreign struggles since the 1980s. This could support the idea that “no news is good news”, but we know too little to draw real conclusions. However, when looking at the different anecdotal evidence, it is clear that there is no standard foreign fighter. They differ very much in background, motivation and what they do after the fighting is done. Based on the cases presented in this paper, we distinguish eight possible outcomes, choices or pathways for foreign fighters after the fight. Sometimes, the pathway might be the result of a rational choice between different options. In other cases, there are only few options and the pathways are decided by or the consequence of sheer coincidence. The first option or outcome (pathway or p1) is being either killed in battle, or being killed by their own organisation because they want to return or because they criticised these organisations. The second option or outcome is staying in the country, to become a regular citizen or resident and to live in peace (p2). The third option or outcome is to stay in the country and become involved in terrorist activity (p3). The fourth option is to return to the home country/another Western country and reintegrate (p4). The fifth option is to return to the home country/another Western country and become involved in terrorist activity (p5). The sixth option is to travel to a non-Western country and continue to fight and remain committed to the global jihad (p6). The seventh option is to go to a non-Western country and be involved in terrorist activity (p7). The eighth option is to travel to a non-Western country and peacefully integrate (p8).

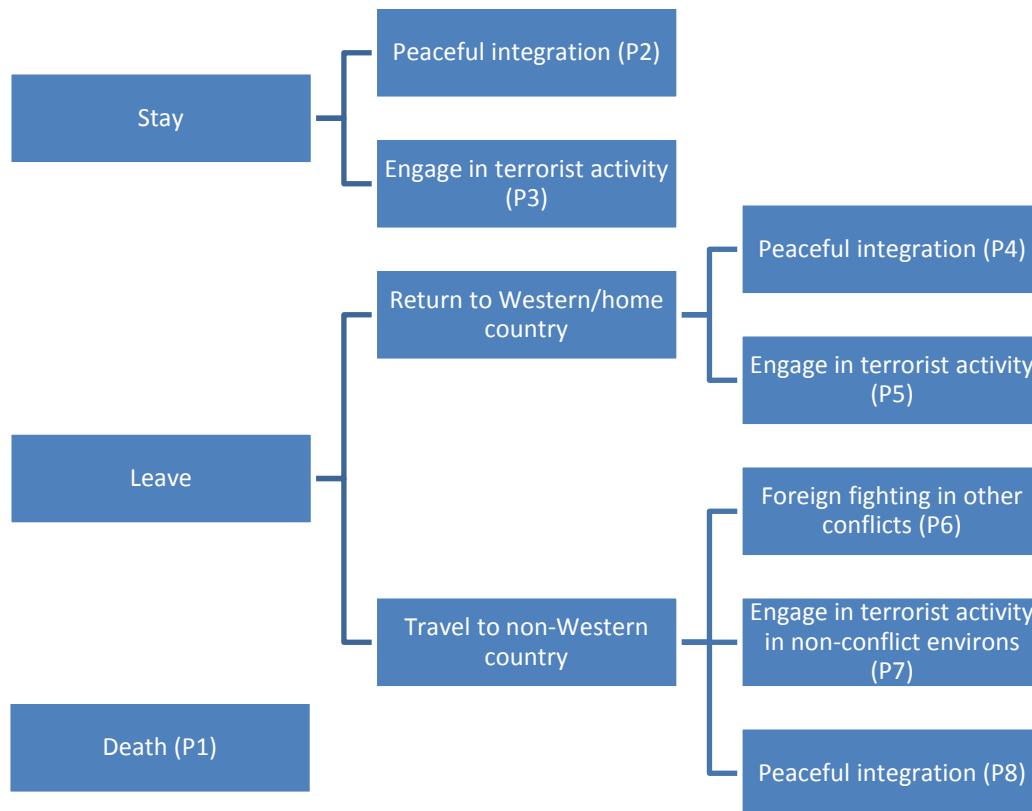


Fig. 1. Visualisation of different foreign fighter pathways

## 6. Conclusion

There are examples of persons for each of these eight options, but it remains unclear which pathways are more likely than others. However, the case studies presented do not seem to support the idea that most foreign fighters become involved in terrorist activity back home although examples of this do exist. More research is needed into the different options. Basically, we need more data in order to answer the question what happened to foreign fighters after their initial reason for going – fighting in a specific conflict – was no longer valid. The case studies and the idea of eight possible options or pathways, however, do help to look into the phenomenon of Western foreign fighters in a more structured and more nuanced way. This is very much needed in the current debate about the potential threat of returning foreign fighters from Syria and elsewhere. The study of the cases of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia shows that there are large differences, both between the conflicts, between the local and the foreign fighters as well as between individual foreign fighters in these conflicts. If we want to better understand the possible threat posed by foreign fighters, we first of all must get a better picture of these differences and understand them. Future research should be aimed at improving our understanding of how and why foreign fighters eventually take a certain pathway after the fight. In addition we need to know more about the how the authorities in Western countries can best respond to these different trajectories and perhaps even influence the choices and options of (returning) foreign fighters. More insight into this subject could also help to formulate more adequate policy responses and more specific threat assessments with regard to returnees. As the historical study has shown, not all will come home to stage an attack or in any other way support the violent jihad. Although there is reason for concern with regard to the (potential) high numbers of returning Western foreign fighters from Syria, only having an eye for the worst-case scenario is a too narrow focus to look at this multifaceted phenomenon.

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