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Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980-2015)

Dr. Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters

Since the 1980s, several conflict zones around the world have attracted tens of thousands of unpaid combatants with no apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity. This paper focuses on the conflicts that in the past 35 years have triggered Muslims worldwide to leave their home country and become a so-called foreign fighter. It focuses on the question why there are huge differences in the number of transnational insurgents. Connected conflicts like Afghanistan (1980-1992), Bosnia (1992-1995), Iraq (since 2003) and Syria (since 2011) each attracted several thousands of foreign fighters, whereas other conflicts like Chechnya (1994-2009), Somalia (1993-2014) and Afghanistan after 2001 could not count on more than a few hundred foreign combatants. Some have argued this is merely a coincidence, but no one has so far addressed this issue thoroughly. This study tries to gauge the validity of the explanatory factors that are relevant to understand why some conflicts attract far more foreign fighters than others. It concludes that accessibility to the battlefield, the cohesion of the insurgent group and the chances of success are all relevant to explain the divergence in foreign fighter presence.

About the Authors

Dr. Isabelle Duyvesteyn is Professor of International Studies/Global History at the Institute of History at Leiden University and Special Chair in Strategic Studies at the Institute of Political Science both at Leiden University in the Netherlands. She holds a PhD from the War Studies Department, King's College London and an MA in History of International Relations from Utrecht University. Previously she has worked at the Royal Military Academy in the Netherlands and the Netherlands Institute for International Relations. She has written several books and contributed to among others: *Security Studies, Civil Wars, Small Wars and Insurgencies and the Journal of Strategic Studies*.

Bram Peeters is Senior Editor of *Internationale Spectator*, the online magazine published by Clingendael, the leading Dutch think tank on international affairs. As an award winning journalist, he is specialised in foreign reporting. Since 2000 he has travelled extensively to Eastern Europe, the Americas and Africa from where he published stories in Dutch media such as Groene, Trouw, NRC and FD, but he has also contributed to Belgian, Danish and Spanish newspapers and magazines. Bram also works as a Lecturer at the School of Journalism in Utrecht and holds a MA degree in International Relations (*cum laude*).

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Contact

ICCT – The Hague
Zeestraat 100
2518 AD The Hague
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 342 0300
E info@icct.nl

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1. Introduction

With well over 30,000 foreign fighters, the conflict in Syria and Iraq is currently argued to be the conflict that has attracted the most foreign fighters in modern history.[1] Why do some conflicts attract more individuals willing to fight without significant pay and without any apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity with the Muslim side? Some have argued that the attraction is completely incidental, while others have suggested it is the role of the Internet that has increased the foreign-fighter recruitment over time.[2] Yet others have attributed charismatic leadership, the chances of success, and government facilitation in accessing battle zones to attracting willing foreign fighters.[3] This article is the first attempt to assess the value of these claims based on comparative case studies.[4] Most attention in the literature and in policy circles is focused on the returnees. In light of the recent attacks against the editorial board of the Paris-based Charlie Hebdo magazine, perpetrated by at least one jihadi veteran, this attention is logical. There are several other similar incidents that have drawn significant attention, such as the attack on 24 May 2014 by Frenchman and Syria veteran Mehdi Nemmouche, who killed four at a Jewish museum in Brussels. This article will focus on the seven most significant conflicts that have attracted foreign fighters since the start of the global jihadist movement confronting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.[5] It aims to examine the significance of the factors most likely to explain the differences in foreign-fighter mobilisation in different battle arenas, based on currently available sources.

Recently, Thomas Hegghammer has shown that the conflicts in Afghanistan (1980–1992), Bosnia (1992–1995), and Iraq (2003–2010) attracted several thousand foreign fighters, whereas other conflicts that were well-known for the presence of foreign combatants, like Chechnya (1994–2010) and Somalia (2006–2010), only attracted around 300 to 400 fighters respectively.[6] Even in Afghanistan, after the American invasion in 2001, there were never more than 1,000 foreign fighters.[7] How could the considerable differences in foreign-fighter mobilisations be explained in these conflicts? We find that three factors in particular can explain why some conflicts attracted far more foreign fighters than others; the group cohesion, the access to the battlefield, and the chances of success. Furthermore, we find that a strong recruitment effect comes from the war itself. Instead of seeing recruitment as a phase that precedes the outbreak or initial escalation of conflict, foreign fighters communicate back their experiences, which act as a motivation to join for those fence sitters at home.

The article will proceed as follows: In the first part, the existing insights – the explanatory claims regarding differences in foreign-fighter mobilisations between conflicts – will be presented and discussed. Subsequently, the research design – the cases and the methods – will be detailed, followed by the description of seven cases of foreign-fighter mobilisations, i.e. the first Afghan war (1980–1992), Bosnia (1992–1995), Somalia (1993–2015), Chechnya (1994–2009), Afghanistan (2001–2014), Iraq (2003–2015), and Syria (2011–2015). The comparison and analysis will follow and the study will conclude with a short discussion.

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[1] P. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s", *ICSR Insight*, 25 January 2015, http://cache.nebula.x3.secureserver.net/obj/RDJFOUQyRjZCMjNERkFEMjA4MkE6OTc1OWJmNmNlOWEzMzkxOWEzYzRiNTU2MzFlNzNiMGU6Ojo6.

[2] T. Helfont, "The Foreign Fighter Problem: Recent Trends and Case Studies", *FPRI*, November 2010, http://www.*FPRI*.org/articles/2010/11/foreign-fighter-problem-recent-trends-and-case-studies.

[3] T. Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad", *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2010/2011), pp.53-94.

[4] T. Hegghammer's conceptual focus of his 2010 article was on the movement formation, not on general mechanisms of foreign-fighter mobilisation or predictions of rates of recruitment. Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters".

[5] See, for example, Lorenzo Vidino's "*Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad*", Lawrence Wright's "*The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*' and Fawaz Gerges', "*The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*".

[6] Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters", p. 61.

[7] Ibid.

2. Mobilisation of Foreign Fighters

Several studies have argued that the life cycle of foreign fighters can be disaggregated into several phases; a pre-war mobilisation phase, a war stage, and a post-war period.[8] In studying the first phase or pre-war phase, attempts have been made to provide answers regarding the volunteers' motivations. Christopher Hewitt and Jessica Kelley-Moore sought to identify the sources of jihadism in the Muslim world by examining the characteristics of the countries of origin of foreign fighters in Iraq. Their findings certainly do not support the idea of jihadism being caused by the political and economic failures of the Muslim world.[9] The war phase itself has also triggered scholarship, exploring ways in which transnational insurgents, once they arrived, influenced domestic struggles. Post-2003 Iraq has provided examples of foreign fighters promoting sectarian violence and indiscriminate tactics.[10] Furthermore, Kristin Bakke has recorded the effect of foreign fighters jeopardising the strength of insurgent movements by bringing in new ideas.[11] A predominant focus in the existing research lies in the last phase of the cycle due to the threat of returning fighters, especially Western jihadists, who have always been a minority in any foreign-fighter contingent. These ideas about the life cycle are enlightening to understand *when* foreign fighters might mobilise. They do not offer any particular help in explaining the diverging numbers of recruitment, which is the present focus.

Those studies that do look more closely at foreign-fighter mobilisation itself outline a series of factors that are deemed relevant in explaining the process of recruitment. These factors are many and varied. Our specific aim is to look at the factors that could help to explain the *numbers* of recruits and which can be investigated based on presently available and accessible research material. Several scholars have put forward the idea that mobilisation might be incidental. Although, according to Lorenzo Vidino, ethnic ties have some predictive power with regard to where a volunteer ends up fighting. In many cases, the destination reflects the accessibility of a particular place at a particular time, and the instructions of the volunteers' contact people.[12] "The whole experience of foreign fighters is often shaped by coincidences largely beyond the control of the 'wannabe' foreign fighter".[13] Furthermore, in 2010, The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute concluded that there is no single pathway to becoming a foreign fighter, nor is there a static profile of the fighters themselves. "Ideology, social circumstances, adventure seeking, political grievances, and so on, all appear to impact individuals' choices in this regard. Foreign fighters' socioeconomic circumstances also appear to be highly variable (…)."[14] Coincidence might very well be an important factor in the mobilisation of foreign fighters, but it hardly seems a satisfactory explanation when looking at the hugely diverging numbers of foreign fighters in different conflict zones over the past 30 years.

There are four sets of factors that appear repeatedly in the literature which could possibly explain the differences in the mobilisation of foreign fighters in different conflicts. These factors relate to the characteristics of the group, the group's message, the location and access to the battlefield, and the reasons for participation, e.g. a high chance of success.

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[8] Stephanie Kaplan, Ph.D. candidate in MIT's Political Science department and a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, suggested this during the ''Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks'' panel discussion from the *FPRI*'s ''The Foreign Fighter Problem'' conference held at Washington, D.C., on 27 September 27.

[9] C. Hewitt and J. Moore, "Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A Cross-National Analysis of Jihadism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2009), pp. 211-220. This is indeed a wider finding in the scholarship about terrorist recruitment where there are few or no links between poverty and lack of education and mobilisation. I. Duyvesteyn, "The Role of History and Continuity in Terrorism Research", in: Magnus Ranstorp, *Mapping Terrorism Research* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 51-75.

[10] M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, 2007), p. 71.

[11] K.M. Bakke, "Help Wanted?: The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies", *International Security*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2014). B. Rich and D. Conduit, "The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2015), pp. 113-131.

[12] Comments made by Lorenzo Vidino, during the *FPRI*'s ''The Foreign Fighter Problem'' conference held in Washington, D.C., on 27 September 2010.

[13] *FPRI*, "The Foreign Fighter Problem".

[14] F.J. Cilluffo, J.B. Frank and M. Ranstorp, "Foreign Fighters: Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones", *The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute*, October 2010.

Firstly, the group; a significant factor that presents itself is a pull from the local forces within the conflict to attract foreigners. David Malet, in an analysis of historical foreign-fighter insurgencies and recruitment patterns, compared jihadists with other foreign-fighter movements. He found that transnational recruitment occurs when local insurgents attempt to broaden the scope of conflict so as to increase their resources and maximise their chances of victory.[15] The idea of local fighters initiating the mobilisation, also suggested by Hegghammer, does not align with the evidence that most recruitment and mobilisation was carried out external to the local conflict. Foreign-fighter recruitment was generally initiated and handled by other foreigners, not locals or local parties involved in the conflict.[16] A factor often mentioned in the literature is the role of influential, charismatic group leaders as an essential part of recruitment. Fawaz Gerges found in his interviews with former jihadis that personalities, not ideas or organisations, form drivers behind these movements.[17] This idea is supported in all the cases we examined, as influential and charismatic leaders were present in each. In order to assess the role of charismatic leadership methodologically, a way of measuring the effect of charismatic leaders on their subjects in each of the cases would have to be examined. This would be extremely difficult, and combined with a lack of sources, precludes inclusion in this study. Group cohesion is another aspect that has been suggested to help explain reasons for foreign-fighter mobilisation. Each group shares some identity markers with the forces fighting in the country. However, there are also differences that may sometimes be important determinants for how foreign fighters are received by the locals.[18] Sometimes the level of "otherness" can be greater than the commonalities, potentially rendering foreign volunteers a divisive factor rather than a "force multiplier".[19] This factor of group cohesion in explaining differences in degrees of mobilisation will be explored further below.

Secondly, what is the group doing to attract or welcome the foreign fighter? Here, the roles of the message and the medium are highlighted. Malet found that records from vastly different past cases indicate that insurgencies recruit foreign fighters by framing distant civil conflicts as threatening a transnational identity group with which the recruit is closely affiliated. Recruitment messaging emphasises, among other things, the necessity of defensive action to preserve the existence of the community.[20] In all conflicts we aim to dissect, the recruitment messaging was strong and enough channels were available to transmit the message, discounting this factor as a possible explanation for the differing degrees of recruitment. The way the message is transmitted has also been suggested to be of importance, particularly with regard to the role of the Internet. The Internet is not a constant factor throughout the periods of investigation, being non-existent in the 1980s. Furthermore, there is evidence that the reliability of recruitment still requires physical contact at some stage of the process, as was the case for al-Qaeda in Iraq. Here, 600 captured personnel records from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) indicated that foreign fighters overwhelmingly joined the jihad via jihadi sympathisers (33.5 percent) and personal social networks (29 percent) in their own country.[21] The so-called Sinjar records demonstrate that despite the extra effort required, al-Qaeda in Iraq still preferred to recruit through physical contact rather than online because of the personal trust that could be established.[22] In order to gauge the extent to which this factor influences the amount of foreign fighters mobilised for different conflicts, the variation in strength of the messages calling fighters for jihad must be considered. It is also important to consider the variation in access and exposure to different mediums in order to communicate with those prospective foreign fighters. As there are no indications that the messages or calls to jihad

[15] D. Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (New York: 2013).

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

[17] F. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: 2005), pp. 35-42.

[18] B. Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighter – Recent Trends", *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (*FPRI*), Spring 2011, p. 192.

[19] Ibid,.

[20] D. Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2010.

[21] J. Felter and B. Fishman, "Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records", *Combating Terrorism Center*, 2007.

[22] J. Felter and B. Fishman, "Becoming a Foreign Fighter: A Second Look at the Sinjar Records", in Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout*, pp. 45–46. Malet, "Foreign Fighters", p. 283. This is also confirmed by the many studies focusing on the role of networks to explain engagement in battle: Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want", *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2008), pp. 78-105.

are significantly different among the conflicts being examined, for the purposes of this study this factor will be considered consistent. The medium of the Internet as a generic factor will be excluded for consideration in this study since it would require fine-grained data regarding individual access and exposure to different mediums in comparison to that of the Internet to substantiate such an argument. This will be a challenge we leave for future research.

Thirdly, where are they located? The proximity and accessibility of the battleground is the focus here. It would seem logical to choose the battlefield that is closest to the place of residence of a foreign fighter. Yet geographic proximity is no guarantee for successful facilitation into conflict zones.[23] The proximity of the Syrian battleground to the West is said to explain the arrival of Western volunteers in Syria. It is, however, interesting to note that in the first Afghan war, the most prominent recruiter Sheikh Abdullah Azzam mentioned 'over 300,000 kilometres of open borders' permitting easy entry for the thousands of volunteers that indeed would arrive.[24] Yet the same open Afghan borders were never crossed by comparable numbers when another superpower invaded the country about 20 years later. Detailed data would be required to assess the validity of this explanation for individual mobilisation paths, which does not exist at present. A related factor that could also explain differing degrees of foreign fighter recruitment between conflicts is the role of national governments in obstructing or enabling foreign fighters to arrive on the battlefield. The latter can take the form of some degree of state sponsorship or support, by providing material resources or turning a blind eye when recruits leave the country to fight in another. Obstruction can take the shape of physical barriers to prevent fighters from entering a conflict zone. This factor of the accessibility of the battle zone will be considered in detail below.

Finally, how do foreign fighters view their chances of success? As Clinton Watts stated, "Despite all their macho bravado, no foreign fighter wants to join a fight where al-Qaeda is getting its ass kicked".[25] This idea possibly applies to the other cases. Are foreign fighters indeed "human after all" by favouring playing for a winner? Is the chance of success an influencing factor when it comes to joining an insurgency abroad? This will be considered below when looking at the evidence the case studies present.

The who, where, and why factors when it comes to group cohesion, battleground access, and the chances of success will be considered in detail below to explain the diverging levels of foreign-fighter mobilisation in the jihadi wars of modern history. We propose a cross-case analysis of the most significant cases to gauge the relevance of these factors. We will dissect seven different conflicts: The first Afghan war (1980–1992), Bosnia (1992–1995), Somalia (1993–2015), Chechnya (1994–2009), Afghanistan (2001–2014), Iraq (2003–2015), and Syria (2011–2015). These are the conflicts we deem most significant. There are others such as Sudan and Mali but the foreign fighter phenomenon there has been negligible. We aim to see whether the three factors of group cohesion, battleground access, and the chances of success prove significant. This study will be based on short, written case studies relying mostly on secondary sources, in some cases predominantly newspaper reports, due to a lack of reliable alternative sources. Since there is a paucity of reliable data, this study has inherent shortcomings. We deem, however, that this area of investigation requires further academic input and view this as a valuable contribution and a launching point for further studies.[26]

Foreign fighters will, for the purposes of this study, be defined as those individuals foreign to the country where the fighting takes place, who are willing to fight without contract or (significant) pay and without any ascertainable link to the conflict except for religious affinity with the Muslim side. These foreign fighters are engaged in what we have termed "jihadi wars"; those armed conflicts in which one of the main issues is allegedly the desire to protect the interests of the Muslim faith. These interests can be defended against outsiders, such as

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[23] F.J. Cilluffo, J.B. Frank and M. Ranstorp, "Foreign Fighters: Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones", *The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute*, October 2010, pp. 19-20.

[24] D. Malet, "Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts", Ph.D. dissertation George Washington University, 2009, p. 234.

[25] C. Watts, "Hammami Thinks the Grass Might be Greener in Syria", *Selected Wisdom*, 15 January 2013, http://selectedwisdo m.com/?p=931.

[26] See also: Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighter".

in the case of Bosnia and Chechnya or against co-religionists with a differing interpretation, i.e. Shia or anti-Salafi strands in the cases of Iraq and Syria. The term jihadists or jihadis is applicable to the fighters but it is important to note that many jihadis can be home grown and will stay in their home country to fight for a mainly domestic cause.

We aim to investigate the extent to which the factor of access to the battlefront plays a role in whether or not foreign fighters decide to come and fight by looking at the practices of states in facilitating or obstructing the movements of fighters. The access can be free or limited to varying degrees. The cohesion of the group that the foreign fighter intends to join will be assessed based on both group cohesion as described in the literature and the reported perception of a group's cohesion by the prospective jihadist. The final factor, the chances of success, will be similarly investigated, focusing on the perceived chances of being victorious. The cross-case comparison in particular will highlight the differences and similarities in the factors that facilitate or impede foreign fighter mobilisation in jihadi battle arenas.

In the following sections, the conflicts will be presented in chronological order: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. For each conflict the three factors will be dissected in the following order: Access to the battleground, internal dynamics and the cohesion of the group, and chances of success. In the summary, evidence will be presented to show the extent to which these factors are relevant in explaining why some conflicts in the past 35 years attracted far more Muslim foreign fighters than others.

Location	Date	Foreign Fighters	Sources	Alternative estimates
Afghanistan	1978-1992	5,000-10,000	Hegghammer, (2013)[27], Hegghammer/Zelin[28]	25,000, Burke[29] / 3,000-4,000, Hafez[30] / 40,000 Malet[31] / 3,000, Wright[32]
Bosnia	1992-1995	1,000-3,000	Hegghammer, Erjavec[33]	5,000, Kohlmann[34], 4,000, Malet[35] + Aubrey[36]
Somalia	1993-2014	250-450	Hegghammer	200-1,000, *Homeland Security*[37] / 200-300, Shinn (2011)[38], 300 to 1,200, *Washington Post* (2010)[39]
Chechnya	1994-2009	200-700	Hegghammer, Bakke[40]	1994-1999: <100, Moore & Tumelty[41], 1999 onwards 200, Vidino[42]

[27] T. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 107, no. 1 (2013), pp.1-15.

[28] T. Hegghammer and A. Zelin, "How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade", *Foreign Affairs*, 7 July 2013.

[29] J. Burke. *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: 2007), p. 58.

[30] M. Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 32, no.2 (2009), p. 75.

[31] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 245.

[32] L. Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (United Kingdom: Penguin, 2006), p. 105.

[33] K. Erjavec. "The 'Bosnian War on Terrorism'", *Journal of Language and Politics*, vol. 8, no.1 (2009), pp. 7-8.

[34] E. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network* (Oxford: 2004), xii.

[35] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 320.

[36] S. Aubrey, *The New Dimension of International Terrorism* (2004), p. 194.

[37] Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, "Foreign Fighters".

[38] D. Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia", *FPRI*, Spring 2011, p. 25.

[39] S. Raghavan, "Foreign fighters gain influence in Somalia's Islamist al-Shabab militia", *The Washington Post*, 8 June 2010.

[40] K. Bakke, "Copying and Learning from Outsiders? Assessing Diffusion from Transnational Insurgents in the Chechen Wars", presented at the workshop "Mobilizing across Borders: Transnational Dynamics of Civil War," *Peace Research Institute, Oslo*, 20-21 August 2010, pp. 16-17.

[41] C. Moore and P. Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 31, no. 5 (2008), p. 418.

[42] L. Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad* (New York: 2006).

Afghanistan	2001-2014	1,000-1,500	Hegghammer	2,000-3,000, Jane's World Armies[43]
Iraq	2003-2014	4,000-6,000	Hegghammer, *the Economist*[44]	1,000-5,000, Gerges (2005)[45], 2,000 Vidino (2005)[46], 800-2,000, *Brookings* (2007)[47], 900-3,000 Hewitt & Moore (2009)[48]
Syria	2011-2014	12,000-30.000	*ICSR[49], Soufan Group* [50] UN Security Council[51]	

Table 1: An Estimate of Foreign Fighters in Seven Conflicts Between 1979-2014, Primarily Based on Hegghammer's Data from 2010 and Updated by the Use of Others Sources

2.1. Afghanistan 1980–1992

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to aid a beleaguered communist regime but its presence invigorated a resistance movement.[52] The movement was soon taken over by Islamists who successfully reframed the war as one for an uncorrupted Islamic society rather than for control of the government.[53] From 1984 to 1989 there was a gradual influx of volunteers inspired by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, one of the fund-raisers and recruiters for the Afghan jihad.[54] The conflict in Afghanistan became the first episode in recent history to attract thousands of Muslim foreign fighters under the banner of a defensive jihad.[55]

The Arab Afghans were, however, nothing more than 'a drop in the ocean' as estimates of Arab volunteers in the Afghan conflict have ranged from 3,000–4,000 volunteers at any one time.[56] In comparison, estimates of the numbers of Afghans on the battlefield at any given moment during the war against the Soviets put the number at around 200,000.[57] The mujahideen recruited to Afghanistan therefore had little impact on the course of the civil conflict but Arab Afghans did develop a template for mobilising Muslims in defence of Islamic movements.[58]

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[43] B.G. Williams, "On the Trail of the 'Lions of Islam': A History of Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 1980-2010, The Foreign Fighter Problem: Recent Trends and Case Studies", *Foreign Policy Research Institute* Conference, 2010, p. 226.

[44] *The Economist*, "Two Arab Countries Fall Apart", 14 June 2014, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across.

[45] F. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: 2005), p. 260.

[46] Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe, p.* 264.

[47] *The Brookings Institution*, 'Iraq Index; Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq', 1 October 2007, www.brookings.edu/iraqindex.

[48] C. Hewitt and J. Moore, "Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A Cross-National Analysis of Jihadism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2009), pp. 211-220.

[49] *ICSR*, "Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans", 17 December 2013, http://icsr.info/ 2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans.

[50] R. Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria", *Soufan Group*, June 2014, http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria.

[51] *The Guardian*, "Foreign Jihadists Flocking to Iraq and Syria on 'Unprecedented Scale' – UN", 30 October 2014, http://www. theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/30/foreign-jihadist-iraq-syria-unprecedented-un-isis?CMP=share_btn_tw.

[52] Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq", p. 75. Malet, *Foreign fighters*, pp. 223-224.

[53] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, pp. 225-226.

[54] Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq", p. 75.

[55] M. Farivar, "The Foreign Fighters and Me", *the New York Times*, 2 April 2014. J. De Roy van Zuijdewijn, "Fearing the Western Muslim foreign Fighter", MA thesis Utrecht University, January 2014, http://leidensafetyandsecurityblog.nl/article s/fearing-the-western-Muslim-foreign-fighter

[56] Ibid., p. 75.

[57] P. Bergen, "After the War in Iraq: What Will the Foreign Fighters Do?", in Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (CTC, 2010), p. 99.

[58] O. Roy, *The Lessons of the Soviet/Afghan War* (London: 1991), p. 84. Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq", pp. 73-94.

2.1.1. Access to the Battlefront

Several governments played a role during the Afghan war as some enabled their citizens to fight in Afghanistan. According to Hafez, many governments subsidised the volunteers.[59] Sheikh Abdullah Azzam was welcomed in the Gulf and given plenty of opportunities to raise awareness of what was happening in Afghanistan, collect donations, and recruit volunteers. He was given funds to open up the *Services Bureau* in Peshawar.[60] The Saudi government reportedly even paid 75 percent of airline tickets to Pakistan for jihadis.[61] The Egyptian president Sadat openly encouraged the Egyptian Muslim Brothers to join the jihad.[62] In this way, according to Malet, the governments of various Muslim countries permitted or actively facilitated recruitment for the Afghanistan war, hoping to simultaneously gain favour with the United States (an ally and supporter of the mujahideen's fight against the Soviets), domestic legitimacy by supporting Islam, and take the opportunity to "unload militants and troublemakers".[63] Hegghammer believes the Arab Afghans were not actively supported by governments, but they enjoyed a friction-free recruitment environment in the Gulf countries and in the West. The Arab governments' tolerance for open recruitment would last until the early 1990s.[64]

2.1.2. Internal Cohesion

The differences between the Arab volunteers and the local Afghan mujahideen were undeniably there. To begin with, local commanders could not easily integrate Arabs into their Pashto or Dari-speaking local units.[65] Many Afghan commanders even saw the foreigners as "nuisances, only slightly less bothersome than the Soviets".[66] Often they were regarded as "superfluous" and weak by the hardened local mujahideen.[67] This could arguably have affected the flow of foreign fighters as the fence sitters probably at some point would hear of the suspicion native Afghan warriors' suspicion. Here however, bin Laden played an important role behind the scenes. Bin Laden had observed that many Afghans treated the volunteers as "glorified guests", not as real mujahideen.[68] He suggested to Azzam that "we should take on the responsibility of the Arabs, because we know them better and can provide more rigorous training for them".[69] So despite the internal disagreement, the number of volunteers arriving would increase as they were trained separately in their own Arab sanctuaries on the Pakistani border and in Jalalabad and Khost inside Afghanistan.[70]

Eventually, in the early 1990s, even within the Arab-Afghan contingent, there was hardly any unity (Wright speaks of "an endless parade of selfish internal squabbles").[71] To maintain a sense of purpose among the recruits, the transnational-foreign-fighter movement needed to regroup and refocus its message of threat against the *ummah* (nation), now that Communist Soviets had been defeated. The leadership now looked for another conflict that could be easily framed as a one-dimensional war to protect the faithful from murderous infidels, and it soon located one in Bosnia.[72]

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[59] Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq", p. 75.
[60] Ibid., p. 75.
[61] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 244.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 241.
[64] Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters", p. 68.
[65] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 245.
[66] Ibid., p. 249.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Wright, *The Looming Tower*, pp. 101-102.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq", p. 77.
[71] Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe,* 27-28.
[72] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 256. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe, pp.* 27-28.

2.1.3. Chances of Success

A handful, possibly a few dozen, but certainly no more than 100 Arab volunteers came to aid the Afghans between 1979 and 1984.[73] Most foreign fighters only arrived after the Afghan mujahideen had already achieved considerable successes in the fight against the Soviet army. So the chances of winning could be considered high. However, according to Wright "it was death, not victory, that summoned many young Arabs to Peshawar", as martyrdom was the product that Azzam sold.[74] However, there are quite a few controversies regarding this idea. For example, Malet quoted a pro-jihad analyst who at the time stated that "most of the Arab youth coming for training and participation for the limited time period they have, return to their countries, because they are students or clerks, and have to go to work. Many come during summer vacations or long holidays".[75] In *A Message to Every Youth*, Azzam indeed concluded by exhorting readers to take advantage of the free time afforded them by their university holidays to follow the path of true Islam.[76] Hafez quoted Michael Knights of *The Washington Institute* who also talked about 'vacationing' students from the Gulf. "The vast majority of Saudi 'Afghan Arabs' saw the jihad as a colourful adventure (…)".[77] Factoring in Hegghammer's argument that the foreign-fighter death rate was low (between two and six percent), and average tours short, one can indeed conclude that many volunteers, or at least the jihad "tourists", regarded their chances of success to be considerable.[78]

2.1.4. Conclusion

In summary, the three factors of access to battleground, group cohesion, and chances of success do seem to explain why many hundreds left their home countries to fight in Afghanistan, and thousands did so to train in the Arab camps. The governments of various Muslim countries permitted or actively facilitated recruitment for the struggle in Afghanistan, which was seen by many recruits as an adventure or at least a fight that could be won. There was internal disagreement on a large scale, but the volunteers nevertheless arrived in increasing numbers as they were housed separately in their own Arab training camps. Internal squabbles among the Arab Afghans were resolved by focusing on a new enemy in a new arena that would (at least temporarily) unite them.

2.2. Bosnia 1992–1995

The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina came into existence in March 1992 but the Muslim-led Bosnian government was soon outgunned, outmanned, and almost entirely on the defensive against ethnic Serbs. This grave predicament captured the attention of sympathetic Muslims elsewhere in the world, particularly in the Middle East.[79]

The first officially claimed action by Muslim foreign fighters in Bosnia occurred in September 1992, when a group of 55 mujahideen attempted to open a supply line to Sarajevo.[80] At the forefront of the movement of Arab volunteer soldiers to Bosnia were the mujahideen veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan.[81] In 1993 Arab, Turkish, and Pakistani fighters made their way to join the *Kateebat al-Mujahidin* ("Holy Warrior Brigade" or "Battalion of the Holy Warriors") led by a veteran of the Afghan conflict who went by the nom de guerre Emir Barbaros, (known also as Abu 'Abd al-'Aziz).[82] According to Kohlmann, thousands of young men driven by a sense of religious chivalry travelled to Bosnia ostensibly in the hope of defending the ancient and threatened Muslim

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[73] Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq", p. 75.

[74] Wright, *The Looming Tower*, pp. 106-107.

[75] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 238.

[76] Ibid., p. 233.

[77] Hafez, 'Jihad after Iraq', p. 76.

[78] Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters", p. 63.

[79] Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, pp. 17-20.

[80] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 261.

[81] Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, pp. 17-20.

[82] B.G. Williams, "Allah's Foot Soldiers: An Assessment of the Role of Foreign Fighters and Al-Qa'ida in the Chechen Insurgency", *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder* (London: 2007), pp. 159-160.

community in the Balkans.[83] The *Kateebat al-Mujahidin* was integrated into the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina's Third Corps, where more than 4,000 mujahideen would manage to win significant battlefield victories and had a telling impact on the overall progress of the Bosnian civil war until the implementation of the Dayton Accords in 1995.[84]

2.2.1. Access to the Battlefront

As the Afghan civil war intensified following the Soviet withdrawal, in 1993 the Pakistani government took the decision to close down the Arab guesthouses that, for a decade, had facilitated entry into Afghanistan. Pakistan threatened any illegal foreign fighters who attempted to remain in Pakistan with official deportation.[85] According to Malet, this edict went largely unenforced, although Kohlmann mentioned a senior Egyptian jihad leader who had said, "all of them [are] closed, Sheik, nothing is left open … even the Base [Al-Qaeda] is closed completely and they all departed from here … except for special situations".[86]

The displaced men faced a serious problem because return to their countries of origin meant certain arrest, torture, and likely death. Although many Arab Afghans had returned home shortly after the fall of the Communist regime in Kabul, a large number experienced difficulty in their repatriation. While their departure for Afghanistan was generally blessed by the regimes in their countries, upon their return the repatriates came up against strong opposition from the authorities because they feared that the "Afghanis" would rapidly turn into a threat against them, due to their military experience and fundamentalist worldview. Therefore, in the majority of the Maghreb countries, as well as in Egypt and Jordan, the authorities took steps to prevent the return of the fighters and the joining of the ranks of radical Islamic opposition in their states.[87]

Moreover, there was a significant push factor. A Saudi spokesman for the Arab Afghans in Jeddah explained in the media, "the Algerians cannot go to Algeria, the Syrians cannot go to Syria or the Iraqis to Iraq. Some will opt to go to Bosnia, the others will have to go into Afghanistan permanently".[88] His assessments were predictably accurate and a number of prominent Arab guerrillas left South Asia destined for a new life of exile and 'holy war' amidst the brutal civil conflict in the Balkans.[89] So even if the Pakistani edict went largely unenforced, it coincided with the availability of just the type of conflict that the al-Qaeda leadership had been seeking for the de-territorialised Afghan-Arab fighters who had become "a stateless, vagrant mob of religious mercenaries".[90]

2.2.2. Internal Cohesion

As in Afghanistan, the Muslim foreign fighters clashed with local insurgents over their culture, as some Arabs complained that the Bosniaks were not really Muslims because they drank and danced.[91] In general though, it seems the Arab Afghans were very much appreciated because of the successes; local soldiers who had fought with the mujahideen were impressed by their bravery and their ability to strike terror in the hearts of Serbian fighters, "who cringed at the sound of war cries to Allah".[92] The Islamic warriors were admired as martyrs. "They came here to be killed", said Elis Bektas, a 22-year-old platoon leader in the Bosnian Army to a reporter.[93] "They are very good fighters", said another Bosnian. "They have no fear for their lives".[94]

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[83] Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, pp. 17-20.
[84] S. Aubrey, *The New Dimension of International Terrorism* (2004), p. 194.
[85] Ibid., pp. 17-20.
[86] Ibid. Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 258.
[87] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 258.
[88] Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, p. 16.
[89] Ibid., p. 16.
[90] Wright, *The Looming Tower*, pp. 163-164.
[91] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, pp., 261-262.
[92] *Newsweek*, "Help from the Holy Warriors".
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

The mujahideen were even fully integrated into the Bosnian army command structure and would have a telling impact on the overall progress of the Bosnian civil war.[95] The proof can be found in the fact that the Bosnian government did not put serious pressure on the Arab fighters to leave after the war.[96]

2.2.3. Chances of Success

By the fall of 1992, a new base for jihad was quickly growing in the Balkans. With the help of influential clerics and Al-Qaeda military commanders, the foreign Bosniak brigade was coalescing around various disparate elements in the international Arab-Afghan network. The mujahideen war machine so familiar in Afghanistan had been successfully transported many hundreds of miles westward in the heart of Europe.[97]

The Arab fighters would indeed claim many victories. In October 1992, a group of Arab mujahideen teamed up with local Bosnian army soldiers in a bold operation to 'liberate' the international airport in the suburb of Butmir and surrounding environs south of Sarajevo from the tenacious grip of nearby Serb troops and armour.[98] The October battle, though arguably successful, developed into quite a legendary tale which was memorialised and made relatively famous in a widespread propaganda and fundraising video. The video documented dramatic scenes of frontline combat and interviews with Arab survivors who discussed the events that took place near Sarajevo. One of the mujahideen was Abu Zubair, a 24-year-old Saudi and cousin of bin Laden, one of the most famous of a group of "notable Mujahideen personalities" to participate in these celebrated combat operations.[99]

Another success was later achieved in Podsijelovo, where according to many eyewitnesses, in less than one hour, the mujahideen were able to seize control and silence Serbian artillery positions.[100] Soldiers from the Bosnian army claimed that the mujahideen had overwhelmed Serb trenches, killing sixty, and disabling three Serb battalions.[101]

2.2.4. Conclusion

In summary, the three factors of access to battleground, group cohesion, and chances of success seem to adequately explain why as many as several thousand mostly Arabs joined the war in Bosnia. Many Arab Afghans had to leave their bases in Pakistan as the Pakistani government ordered the closure of Arab mujahideen offices and threatened foreign fighters with deportation. In other words, Bosnia came at the right time for the mujahideen in Afghanistan where the civil war degenerated into intra-mujahideen factional fighting. The mujahideen war machine from Afghanistan had been successfully revived as the Arab fighters were in a position to claim many victories, proving their capability of success. They were, regardless of ideological differences, generally appreciated by Bosnian soldiers and civilians.

2.3. Somalia 1993–2014

With the government's collapse in 1991, Somalia was about to experience a period of enormous upheaval including civil war, a U.S.-led humanitarian intervention, attacks on UN and U.S. forces and eventually the withdrawal of the UN mission in 1995. This was also a period when a few Arab veterans now organised as al-Qaeda first attempted to forge cooperative relations with Somali Islamists. From 1992 to 1994, al-Qaeda unsuccessfully attempted to train and indoctrinate Somali militias while goading them to attack Western and United Nations forces.[102] No more than

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[95] Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 261.
[96] Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's Jihad in Europe*, p. 161.
[97] Ibid., p. 30.
[98] Ibid., pp. 57-58.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid., p. 130.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., iii.

about a dozen Arabs were reported to have trained at the camps and participated in the incursion into Ethiopia in 1995.[103]

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the subsequent U.S.-led offensive to remove the Taliban from power and prevent al-Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a base, Somalia gained attention as a possible site for al-Qaeda to regroup.[104] In July 2006, bin Laden made a specific call for Muslims to support the Sharia court movement, united in the Islamic Courts Union (ICU).[105] The same year the youth militia wing al-Shabaab had already begun to organise an influx of new foreign fighters.[106] In 2008, the first Somali-American suicide bomber blew himself up in northern Somalia.[107]

Still, al-Shabaab complained that too few foreign fighters joined their brothers in Somalia.[108] The non-Somali contingent possibly numbered only about 200 to 300 by 2011.[109] In February 2012, al-Shabaab officially merged with a Zawahiri-led al-Qaeda.[110] The merger, instead of demonstrating the group's strength, signalled a downward spiral for al-Shabaab. The latest research suggests that the already small number of Western members is decreasing.[111]

2.3.1. Access to the Battlefront

Al-Shabaab's rise to prominence is, according to Nir Rosen, tied to decisions taken by the U.S. and its regional allies in pursuit of the Bush Administration's global war on terrorism.[112] Following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. deemed Somalia a potential refuge for al-Qaeda due to the 10-year power vacuum. It prompted Washington, together with African allies, to arm and fund various Somali warlords. In 2004, some warlords together formed the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). However, the TFG failed to transcend the predatory warlord politics that had prevailed for 15 years, and in 2006 the ICU seized control of Mogadishu. The U.S. then backed an Ethiopian invasion to restore the TFG to power. This led to an insurgency against the Ethiopian occupation and legitimised the more militant outlook of al-Shabaab.[113]

Another important event was the U.S. government designating al-Shabaab as a terrorist organisation in March 2008 (the European Union would do so in April 2010). Al-Shabaab had not directly targeted the U.S., and was focused entirely on a national, not international struggle.[114] When in May of 2008 the U.S. launched a tomahawk missile attack and killed al-Shabaab leader Aden Hashi Ayro, the organisation announced it would start targeting all Western personnel and interests, as well as any countries in the region collaborating with the U.S. Fears that al-Shabaab would make good on its pledge to widen its war into the broader region were realised when in late October 2008 it executed five synchronised suicide bombing attacks against local government, Ethiopian, and UN compounds.[115] The American drone attacks and air strikes that followed, killed al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane among others, but could possibly also have created more insurgents rather than eliminate them.

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[103] L. Hallundbaek and M. Taarnby, *Al-Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalisation Processes in Europe* (2010), p. 28.

[104] K. Menkhaus, "Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America", Hearing before the *Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*, 11 March 2009.

[105] S.J. Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012* (Oxford: 2013), p. 41.

[106] Ibid*., p.* 44.

[107] R. James, "A Brief History of Al-Shabab", *Time*, 7 December 2009, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599, 1945855,00.html.

[108] R. Paz, "The Youth are Older: The Iraqization of the Somali Mujahidin Youth Movement", *The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements* (PRISM), Occasional Papers, vol. 6, no. 2 (2008), http://www.eprism.org/images/PRIS_M_no_2_vol_6_-_Millat_Ibrahim_-_Dec08.pdf.

[109] D. Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia", *FPRI*, Spring 2011, pp. 25-32.

[110] C. Watts, "The Three Versions of Al Qaeda: A Primer", *FPRI*, December 2013, http://www.*FPRI*.org/articles/2013/12/thre e-versions-al-qaeda-primer.

[111] S. Hansen, "An In-Depth Look at Al-Shabab's Internal Divisions", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2014), p. 9.

[112] N. Rosen, "How Did al-Shabab Emerge from the Chaos of Somalia?", *Time*, 20 August 2010, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2010699,00.html.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Menkhaus, "Violent Islamic Extremism".

[115] Ibid.

At the same time it can be argued that once labelled as a terrorist organisation, the American government had more instruments to prevent at least American recruits from leaving for Somalia. In 2009, in one of the broadest domestic terrorism investigations since September 11, American federal officials charged 14 people with recruiting an estimated 20 Americans to join the radical Islamist group since late 2007.[116] So while U.S. policies might have facilitated the rise of al-Shabaab, they also led to the killing of many (foreign) fighters as well as preventing other foreigners joining the fight. In short, there were several internal and external prohibitive factors preventing access to the battlefront.

2.3.2. Internal Cohesion

Al-Qaeda failed to gain traction in Somalia in the early 1990s partially because their arguments about fighting a foreign occupier did not resonate with locals because al-Qaeda itself was too seen as a foreign force.[117] In the end, "al-Qaida's members fell victim to many of the same challenges that plagued Western interventions in the Horn. They were prone to extortion and betrayal, found themselves trapped in the middle of incomprehensible (to them) clan conflicts.'[118] 'The Somalis treated us in a bad way", one of the Arabs complained. "Due to the bad leadership situation there, we decided to withdraw".[119] At one point al-Qaeda operatives were so frustrated that they listed going after clan leaders (to eliminate the most quarrelsome allies) as the second priority for jihad after expelling Western forces.[120] In turn, the Somalis were despised by the al-Qaeda team who considered them as greedy, corrupt, unreliable, and prone to outright banditry.[121]

The Islamic Courts Union was not too fond of foreign fighters either, as the last thing Somalia needed was more teenage gunmen.[122] Moreover, many foreigners were unaccustomed to the hardships of living in the bush and were quite often a liability and many spoke the Somali language poorly.[123] Also, racism is mentioned as an important dividing force between Arab and African jihadists running below the surface, which affected their ability to unite effectively to fight a common cause.[124]

Foreign fighters in Somalia were generally characterised as "jihadist tourists" by local fighters, who also questioned the foreigners' fighting capacity and competence.[125] According to American jihadist Hammami in 2008 "the Muhajireen were welcomed at the airport by the Islamic Courts with terrible statements like: 'We don't need the Muhajireen' and they tried to send them back".[126] According to a Somali colonel, the foreigners were liked by the locals simply because they brought money, yet their austere form of Islam did not win them any sympathy.[127] Beheadings were singled out as particularly repulsive to the population of Mogadishu.

Al-Shabaab reportedly eagerly embraced any foreign recruit, although there are many reports about foreign fighters leaving because of internal disagreement. At least 100 foreign al-Qaeda fighters working in Somalia with al-Shabaab were believed to have fled the country in 2012 for Yemen due to leadership squabbles and government advances towards their strongholds.[128] At least one al-Shabaab commander confirmed this exodus by stating: "Yes,

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[116] James, "A Brief History of Al-Shabab".

[117] *Combating Terrorism Center*, "Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures", p. 64.

[118] *Ibid.*, iii.

[119] Wright, *The looming tower*, pp. 187-188.

[120] *Combating Terrorism Center*, "Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures", p. 6.

[121] Hallundbaek and Taarnby, *Al-Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalisation Processes in Europe,* p. 27.

[122] Ibid., p. 31.

[123] Ibid., p. 31.

[124] Cilluffo, Frank and Ranstorp, "Foreign Fighters".

[125] Ibid.

[126] Hallundbaek and Taarnby, *Al-Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalisation Processes in Europe,* pp. 29-30.

[127] Ibid., p. 32.

[128] R. Nuune, "To Flee or Not to Flee: Where are the Foreign Fighters?", *Somali Report,* 2 September 2012, http://www.som aliareport.com/index.php/post/2749.

it is true that those brothers left us and went to Yemen due to some minor internal misunderstandings amongst ourselves".[129]

Disagreements more than once led to outright infighting. In 2011, a top al-Qaeda figure working with al-Shabaab was killed at a checkpoint shoot-out that was widely believed to be a setup by his al-Shabaab rival.[130] A year later a UK-born jihadist was killed by a U.S. drone strike, but reportedly it were his fellow Somali jihadists who supposedly led the drone to its target.[131] As several other foreign jihadists were killed, this too likely prompted the above mentioned exodus as these foreign fighters no longer trusted their Somali counterparts who were possibly conducting an internal purge.[132]

Hammami himself after publicly considering moving to Syria, detailed in early 2013 how al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda betrayed him and sought to kill him. The reason was that Hammami suspected al-Shabaab leader Godane of killing off al-Qaeda leaders and foreign fighters that had travelled to Somalia.[133] Omar's prophecy came true when after highlighting the disagreements within al-Shabaab on Twitter and YouTube, his own organisation killed him in September 2013.[134]

2.3.3. Chances of Success

The downing of two American helicopters in Mogadishu in October 1993 was not the work of al-Qaeda foreign fighters, but was presented as such. The subsequent departure of the U.S. military from Somalia in 1994 was perceived as a tremendous success by al-Qaeda.[135] Perhaps this encouraged a number of Arabs who participated in the incursion into Ethiopia in 1995. However, the Somali jihadis miscalculated their Ethiopian adventure in 1996. By 1997, many of the Islamists – including foreigners – had been killed or injured, the training camps were dismantled, and a short-lived terror campaign in Ethiopia had come to an end.[136]

Ten years later however, al-Shabaab enjoyed considerable success in Somalia. The attention from bin Laden was also significant in raising awareness. Somalia appeared as the third-most-important battle front and promised a swifter victory than both Afghanistan and Iraq, since the only real opposition at the time came from Ethiopia.[137] By mid-2008, al-Shabaab was without question the strongest militia force in southern Somalia.[138] Two years later, however, al-Shabaab had militarily become very weak. "While its forces operate in more territory than anybody else, they do not control much of it, on occasion meeting their match in rival Islamist militias".[139]

Consequently, a year later, the foreign fighters in the organisation would suffer heavily. A field researcher working for Stig Hansen found 38 Western and non-Arab Asians (including Chechens), 123 Africans, one American, and two Arabs in Mogadishu hospitals after the battles in June 2011.[140] The body count of dead al-Shabaab fighters

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[129] Ibid.

[130] Menkhaus, "Al-Shabab's Capabilities Post-Westgate".

[131] R. Pantucci, "Bilal al-Berjawi and the Shifting Fortunes of Foreign Fighters in Somalia", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 6, no. 9 (2013), p. 16.

[132] Menkhaus, "Al-Shabab's Capabilities Post-Westgate".

[133] C. Watts, "American Foreign Fighter Details How al Qaeda's Nusra Betrayed Him In Syria'" *Selected Wisdom*, 12 February 2014, http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=1048. C. Watts, "Hammami Thinks the Grass Might be Greener in Syria", *Selected Wisdom*, 15 January 2013, http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=931.

[134] O. Hammami, "Urgent Message to Whoever it Might Reach", 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAr2srINqks. B. Roggio, "Shabaab Kills American Jihadist Omar Hammami and British Fighter", *The Long War Journal*, 12 September 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/shabaab_kills_americ.php?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=shabaab-kills-american-jihadist-omar-hammami-british-fighter##ixzz35BxFrLrY.

[135] Hallundbaek and Taarnby, *Al-Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalisation Processes in Europe,* p. 27.

[136] *International Crisis Group*, 'Somalia's Islamists', Africa Report N°100, 12 December 2005, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/somalia/Somalias%20Islamists.pdf, p. 9.

[137] Hallundbaek and Taarnby, *Al-Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalisation Processes in Europe,* p. 30.

[138] Menkhaus, "Violent Islamic Extremism".

[139] N. Rosen, "Somalia's al-Shabab: A Global or Local Movement?", *Time*, 20 August 2010, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2010700,00.html.

[140] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia,* pp. 135-137.

conducted by the field researcher indicated the same international diversity. As Hansen stated, the foreign fighters were not always good soldiers.[141]

2.3.4. Conclusion

In summary, it is especially the internal disagreement that likely explains why no more than a few hundred foreign fighters travelled to Somalia in the last two decades. Somalia has not been a welcoming place for foreigners seeking to advance a narrative of global jihad. The first al-Qaeda fighters were just like the Americans and Ethiopians – seen as outsiders – and the foreign jihadists that would arrive in the last eight years were not welcomed by local fighters who questioned the foreigners' fighting capacity and competence. Many that did fight would be killed. If not by the Ethiopian army, then by their fellow Somali insurgents.

2.4. Chechnya 1994–2009

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Chechen Republic declared its independence which would lead to two wars. After the first, Chechnya gained de facto independence, but during the second, Russian federal control was restored. The conflict has today come to an uneasy stalemate, with violence dwindling since 2005.[142] It has been suggested that over the course of the two wars, 500 to 700 transnational insurgents fought in Chechnya, indicating an increase over time, from the 80 to 90 who were reported to be active in the first war.[143]

These numbers of foreign fighters can be considered low compared to the thousands who visited Afghanistan and Bosnia. Especially when one could argue, as Vidino did, that by the late 1990s, "no other major conflict involved Muslims, adding to Chechnya's attractiveness to (…) jihadis seeking the battlefield".[144] In 2006, the then-leader of the Islamist branch Doku Umarov claimed that the influence of Arab fighters was exaggerated. "I can count around five of them", he said in an interview.[145] By 2007, Russian sources put the number of insurgents in Chechnya at somewhere between 1,000 and 1,200 and stated that the size of the foreign component in this "army" was probably no more than 100.[146]

2.4.1. Access to the Battlefront

Moore and Tumelty concluded in 2008 that the foreign fighter influence in Chechnya has been in gradual decline since its heyday between 1999 and 2002.[147] This decline of Arab influence in Chechnya can partially be attributed to Russian special forces who have conducted a particularly effective counterinsurgency campaign against the foreign fighters in the last decade. Through a system of intelligent targeting, they have methodically hunted down the Arab leadership. According to Moore and Tumelty, "the effect of removing a small number of key players has had strategic impact, with a dramatic drop in Chechnya's profile in the Islamist narrative internationally and a commensurate reduction in funding, as repeatedly highlighted by Chechen commanders in their appeals to the Muslim world".[148] This had a prohibitive effect on the access to the battle arena.

Russia also managed to keep its borders closed for those who wished to fight in Chechnya. For example, several members of the Hamburg cell involved in 9/11 had seriously considered travelling to the Caucasus to fight alongside Saudi native Khattab. However, an important al-Qaeda operative discouraged the group, stressing the

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[141] Ibid.

[142] K. Bakke, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies", *International Security*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2014), pp. 163.

[143] Bakke, "Copying and Learning from Outsiders?", pp. 16-17.

[144] Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, pp. 204-210.

[145] Bakke, "Copying and Learning from Outsiders?", p. 29.

[146] Williams, "Allah's Foot soldiers", p. 172.

[147] Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters", p. 427.

[148] Ibid.

difficulty of crossing the Russian border, and helped them organise their trip to the al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan instead.[149]

As Chechnya was controlled on three sides by Russian forces, the only way to enter the enclave was to partake in a perilous hike over the helicopter-patrolled Caucasus Mountains via neighbouring Georgia or "roll the dice and attempt to bribe one's way through Russian forces in neighbouring Dagestan".[150] In other words, due to Russia's control over the border, joining the fight in the encircled republic was a great risk. Many Arabs were killed or arrested on their hazardous journeys to Chechnya, and the biographies of dozens of jihadis reveal their desire to fight in Chechnya but show their failure to do so.[151]

2.4.2. Internal Cohesion

Regarded by the rebel leadership as something of an anomaly, the foreign fighters in Chechnya were not so much welcomed as fighters, but "exploited for their ability to attract finances and materiel, through purported charities, Islamist political parties and large one-off donations from wealthy individuals in the Gulf States".[152] Although, with roughly only 80 foreigners their military influence was negligible within the larger war effort. The foreign fighters' militant ideas and religious influence began to percolate through war-torn Chechen society after August 1996, in part hastening the divisions in Chechen society and ultimately inspiring some of the events that led to the resurgence of the Russo-Chechen war in 1999.[153] In that war, again the Arab involvement was supposedly designed specifically to attract financial support to the resistance from the Middle East.[154]

This could very well be true considering the remarkable fact that Afghan veteran Emir Khattab, who had established training camps in the eastern part of the republic, *refused* to allow large numbers of foreign fighters to enter Chechnya – on explicit instruction from the Chechens – following the beginning of the second war.[155] During the earlier stages of the second war, manpower was not an issue for the resistance and therefore most of those foreigners who entered the area used up vital resources and could contribute little to the war effort, particularly as most were reportedly poorly trained.[156]

Especially after the 9/11 attacks when they had to counter more effective Russian information warfare, the Chechen rebels sought to regulate the number of foreign fighters, and where possible only accepted those with adequate military experience.[157] Khattab's limitations on the numbers of fighters proved highly controversial, particularly following the collapse of the Taliban regime in late 2001, when hundreds of foreign fighters and al-Qaeda personnel were forced to seek sanctuary elsewhere.[158]

2.4.3. Chances of Success

Although the first Chechen war showed it was possible to once again fight the Russian army with success like in Afghanistan, it would soon become clear it was hard to win the second Chechen war, let alone to leave the battleground alive. According to Tumelty, Chechnya was well-known as one of the more difficult jihadi fronts, "where the climate is extremely harsh and, due to linguistic and physical differences and their dearth of local knowledge, the Arab fighters would be prone to death or capture".[159]

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[149] Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, p. 206.
[150] Williams, "Allah's Foot Soldiers", p. 161.
[151] Ibid. Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters", p. 422.
[152] Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters", p. 418.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid., p. 426.
[155] Ibid., p. 421.
[156] Ibid., p. 421.
[157] Ibid., p. 422.
[158] Bakke, "Learning from outsiders", p. 17. Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters", p. 422.
[159] P. Tumelty, "The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 4, no.2 (2006), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=658.

Although reliable numbers do not exist, only a minority of those who made it to Chechnya in the late 1990s returned alive.[160] Hegghammer stated that the death rate of foreign fighters in late-1990s Chechnya was more than 90 percent.[161] Perhaps it is for this reason that Islamist websites encouraged those interested in fighting in Chechnya to first acquire military training in Afghanistan.[162]

2.4.4. Conclusion

In summary, the factors above could explain why no more than a few hundred foreign fighters made it to Chechnya in the last 20 years, starting with the first Chechen war in 1994. In order to avoid disagreement with the local insurgents, large numbers of foreign fighters were simply not allowed to enter Chechnya as they often lacked adequate military experience. Even if they were welcomed, the Russian government made it extremely hard for fighters to cross the borders of the enclave, deterring many possible recruits. The ones that did make it to the battlefield, would most of the time not live to tell the tale.

2.5. Afghanistan 2001–2014

Throughout the 1990s, it is estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 individuals travelled to Afghanistan to train for jihad in different theatres.[163] At the moment of the 9/11 attacks, many of the foreigners had left again but according to *Jane's World Armies*, by 2001 bin Laden was still able to field a predominantly Arab fighting force of approximately 2,000 to 3,000 fighters.[164] The total number of foreign fighters in Afghanistan on the eve of 9/11 was even estimated by some to be at 12,000 (mostly Pakistanis and Arabs), approximately a fourth of the Taliban's army made up of around 45,000.[165]

Anne Stenersen argued in 2011 that the campaign of the foreign fighters in Afghanistan has gone through two stages up to 2006: the first from September 2001 to March 2002, when foreign fighters united with bin Laden and the Taliban leader Mullah Omar to take part in an all-out armed confrontation with the United States and their allies. The second from March 2002 to around 2005–06, a period which was spent hiding and regrouping outside Afghanistan's borders, mainly in Pakistan. One of the main findings of Stenersen's study is that there was little migration of foreign fighters from abroad to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan in 2001–2006.[166]

From 2005, a third stage started as the insurgency in Afghanistan exploded, widening both the scope and intensity of the conflict. In this period, foreign fighters became increasingly involved in offensive operations inside Afghanistan.[167] While Iraq took centre stage, war with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan endured with "a steady trickle of foreign fighters" who continued to travel to Pakistan to fight the U.S. in eastern Afghanistan.[168] By the end of 2011, foreign fighter recruitment appeared practically non-existent with many leaders killed by drone strikes, but perhaps also because young men in North Africa and the Middle East saw opportunities in the Arab revolutions at home.[169] It was widely believed that by 2012, no more than 50 to 150 foreign fighters were present in the region.[170]

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[160] Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters", p. 63.

[161] Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?", p. 6.

[162] Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters", p. 422.

[163] J. Burke, *The 9/11 Wars* (London: 2011), pp. 39-40.

[164] Williams, "On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam", p. 226.

[165] Ibid.

[166] A. 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 & Terrorism*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2011), p. 175.

[167] Stenersen, "Al Qaeda's Foot Soldiers", p. 175.

[168] Watts, "The Three Versions of Al Qaeda".

[169] J. Burke, "Al-Qaida Leadership Almost Wiped out in Pakistan, British Officials Believe", *The Guardian*, 25 December 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/25/al-qaida-leadership-pakistan-africa?CMP=twt_gu. C. Watts, "Al Qaeda's Foreign Fighter Recruitment – Not Dead, but Dying", *Selected Wisdom*, 6 January 2012, http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=511.

[170] Williams, "On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam", p. 236.

2.5.1. Access to the Battlefront

Days before the American invasion, Taliban leader Mullah Omar proclaimed: "Osama bin Laden will be the last person to leave Afghanistan' and warned his people not to be 'cowards".[171] Two months after the 9/11 attacks, local tribal leaders and Taliban notables from the area gathered in Jalalabad to hear bin Laden make a rousing speech about resistance.[172] Then again, the jihadists faced the largest army in the world. A month after the resistance speech, bin Laden gave permission for a general withdrawal to his troops.[173] He himself, as well as al-Zawahiri, were gone leaving subordinates to lead any remaining fighters to safety.[174]

Many of those foreign volunteers and militants, who had fled Afghanistan in November and December 2001, had first sought sanctuary in cities in Pakistan, exploiting the relationships with local groups built up over previous years. However, urban centres had proven far from safe, and with cooperation between American agencies and the Pakistani intelligence services, a series of raids rounded up many of the most senior, or at least most notorious, al-Qaeda figures.[175]

The influence of Pakistan's government was also important because for years the Pakistani army could not enter the autonomous FATA region, providing the fleeing fighters a safe haven and the perfect chance to regroup in order to get involved in cross-border attacks.[176] However, increasing substantially in 2008, drone strikes on Pakistani Taliban sanctuaries began inflicting a significant toll on al-Qaeda and the Taliban. "For the first time, al Qaeda's key leaders, while not defeated, were pinned down in Pakistan and the leadership losses started to slow al Qaeda's global coordination".[177] The influence of the U.S. government was crucial because the vast majority of foreign fighters in Afghanistan were killed, captured, or forced to flee the U.S. army and its drones.

2.5.2. Internal Cohesion

The Taliban refused to hand bin Laden over but that did not mean they were not having problems with their Arab guests. In 1996 and 1998, bin Laden issued fatwas calling on Muslims to kill Americans, even civilians.[178] Mullah Omar responded by ordering bin Laden not to issue any more threats against the West. Many in the Taliban movement felt that the Arab terrorists represented a threat to their regime.[179]

After the U.S. invasion, the Afghans and Arabs collided again. In Kunduz, the Taliban and their foreign allies were dug in and prepared to fight to the finish. As the U.S. air force bombed and strafed them mercilessly – hundreds died in the bombardment – the local Taliban began to defect to the Northern Alliance.[180] At this time, the foreign fighters killed some 300 to 400 Afghan Taliban who attempted to give themselves up.[181]

Disagreement was also caused by the invasion in general as well as by post-9/11 security measures, as it restricted the mobility and communication of al-Qaeda leaders. The result was a weakening of what had been the organisational "glue" in the al-Qaeda network, namely the strong personal relationships and the ideological unity. "In 2002, the various local branches of the Al Qaeda network were strategically disoriented, and it seemed that old ideological debates and dividing lines started reappearing. Not everyone agreed that the liberation of Afghanistan was the most important issue".[182]

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[171] Ibid., p. 227.
[172] Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, p. 62.
[173] Ibid., pp. 65-66.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, p. 74.
[176] Williams, "On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam". Stenersen, "Al Qaeda's Foot Soldiers".
[177] Watts, "The Three Versions of Al Qaeda".
[178] Ibid., p. 225.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Williams, "On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam", pp. 228-229.
[181] *The Guardian*, "Doomed Arab Units Prepare for Final Battle Against the Odds", 20 November 2001, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/20/afghanistan.terrorism4.
[182] T. Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism after the Iraq War", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 60, no.1 (2006), p. 14.

Many European volunteers who arrived in Pakistan seeking to join the fight had been frustrated to find that the local groups were suspicious of them, fearing they may have been sent by foreign intelligence services. Some even spent months in an apartment, unable to get training, let alone fight for the cause for which they had left their homes.[183]

2.5.3. Chances of Success

Did the Afghan and foreign fighters ever stand a chance? Not according to Taliban leader Omar. On the eve of war he told his followers that they were facing an extremely powerful enemy and that defeat and death were probable (though the forces of Islam would eventually prevail in the very long term).[184] On November 13 2001, the Northern Alliance was in possession of Kabul. The major force of foreign mujahideen, which some feared would defend the city, simply did not exist as the bulk of the Arab fighters were already heading towards the Pakistani border.[185] "We left in small groups and in any vehicle we could find. We did not know where we were going and we were scared of the missiles", remembered one young Pakistani volunteer with the Taliban.[186]

The battle of Tora Bora is considered by some as heroic, however, the fighting was "scrappy in the extreme".[187] Though there was a hard core of militants determined to seek martyrdom, many of those who filled the defences hid in the mountainsides, and stayed only for a couple of days, sometimes even just a few hours, before moving out of Afghanistan.[188] Later on, the remaining foreign fighters were either imprisoned or dug into the mountain positions in the southern Paktia province, where an estimated 1,000 insurgents took heavy casualties under intense aerial bombardments. By mid-March the foreign fighters and Taliban made their escape and, like bin Laden before them, slipped over the border into the tribal regions of Pakistan.[189] However, the American drones would catch up with many of them.

2.5.4. Conclusion

In summary, all of the above factors seem to explain why a relatively low number of foreign fighters were drawn to the latest conflict in Afghanistan. Even though Taliban leader Mullah Omar had proclaimed that bin Laden would be the last person to leave Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda leader would in fact leave two months after the invasion, ingloriously. Other top leaders too were forced into hiding. Meanwhile, the vast majority of foreign fighters in Afghanistan had either been killed, captured or also forced to flee to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Even here, foreign fighters suffered heavy losses due to targeted drone operations that eliminated key leadership figures, and hampered their planning and communications efforts.

2.6. Iraq 2003–2014

Bin Laden and al-Qaeda's leadership were likely quite surprised when only just over a year after being chased from Tora Bora, the U.S. invaded Iraq. Foreign volunteers had been seen in Baghdad before the war in Iraq, but they did not carry out any significant attack in the first weeks of the war in 2003.[190] Only after the fall of Saddam's regime, when American forces thought that the difficult part was over, militants from throughout the Middle East (about 2,000 in the first 18 months) moved into the country with the intention of waging jihad against "the infidel occupier".[191]

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[183] Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighter – Recent Trends", pp. 200-201.
[184] Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, p. 57.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid., p. 64.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Williams, "On the Trail of the "Lions of Islam", p. 231.
[190] Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe*, pp. 264-265.
[191] Ibid.

Unlike the Arabs in Afghanistan, the foreign fighters in Iraq had considerable strategic influence on the war. In August 2003, fighters following the Jordanian leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi bombed the United Nations' headquarters in Baghdad, prompting the UN to withdraw.[192] In 2004, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to bin Laden and changed the group's name to what would become known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which transformed first into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), then the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also translated as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: ISIL) and is since July 2014 also known as Islamic State (IS).[193] His foreign fighters would appear in the battles of Fallujah in 2004 and engaged coalition forces in several counterinsurgency operations.[194]

Tribal disaffection, the surge in Coalition and Iraqi Forces in 2007–2008, and AQI's self-destructive penchant for violence, however, contributed to a decline of the number of foreign fighters entering Iraq.[195] The number declined from 120 arrivals per month in 2007 to between 40 and 50 in 2010.[196] Many found no mission upon arrival and waited in the desert for months before returning to their home countries.[197]

Al-Qaeda in Iraq would, however, rise again when the U.S. forces departed in 2011. As the Sunni Muslim community became marginalised due to Prime Minister al-Maliki's focus on consolidating Shiite power, AQI's popularity again grew.[198] In 2012, the group adopted its new moniker ISIS as an expression of its broadened ambitions as its fighters would cross into neighbouring Syria to challenge both the Assad regime and secular and Islamist opposition groups there.[199] By the summer of 2013, there were about 30 to 40 suicide attacks per month, committed by foreigners.[200] Run by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi jihadist, ISIS was in September 2014 thought have up to 31,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria.[201] A UN Security Council report stated in October that 15,000 foreigners had travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside the Islamic State and similar extremist groups.[202]

2.6.1. Access to the Battlefront

The U.S. government was obviously influential as it invaded Iraq and catalysed AQI's ascension in Iraq. Historically repressed by Saddam Hussein's secular regime, Iraqi jihadist forces were weak prior to the war.[203] Moreover, the way U.S. troops operated – using harsh interrogation and imprisonment methods against transnational insurgents – became a central point of recruitment messaging. 'The reason why foreign fighters joined Al Qaeda in Iraq was overwhelmingly because of abuses at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and not Islamic ideology,' said an American major who personally conducted 300 interrogations of prisoners in Iraq.[204] Ironically, also the departure of American troops had a considerable effect on the mobilisation of foreign fighters as afterwards, tensions between Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish political blocs accelerated in Iraq's fractured government enabling AQI to recover.[205]

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[192] P. Bergen, "After the War in Iraq: What Will the Foreign Fighters Do?", in Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (CTC: 2010), pp. 104-105.

[193] A. Zelin, "Al-Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part I)", *The Washington Institute*, 10 September 2013, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-in-syria-a-closer-look-at-isis-part-i.

[194] Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq", pp. 86-87.

[195] Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout, Combating Terrorism Center* at West Point (CTC, 2010), p. 6.

[196] Bergen, "After the War in Iraq", p. 115.

[197] C. Watts, "Foreign Fighters: How Are They Being Recruited? Two Imperfect Recruitment Models", *Small Wars Journal*, 2008.

[198] D. Byman, "The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq", Testimony at the *Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Subcommittee and the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee*, *House Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 12 December 2013, http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2013/12/12-resurgence-al-qaeda-iraq-byman.

[199] *Council on Foreign Relations*, "Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria", 12 June 2014, http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state-iraq-greater-syria/p14811.

[200] B. McGurk, "Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to U.S. Interests", Testimony at *House Foreign Affairs Committee,* 4 February 2014, http://london.usembassy.gov/terror071.html.

[201] *BBC*, "Islamic State Fighter Estimate Triples – CIA", 12 September 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29169914.

[202] *The Guardian*, "Foreign Jihadists Flocking to Iraq and Syria on 'Unprecedented Scale' – UN", 30 October 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/30/foreign-jihadist-iraq-syria-unprecedented-un-isis?CMP=share_btn_tw.

[203] Celso, "Cycles of Jihadist Movements", p. 241.

[204] P. Cockburn, "Torture? It Probably Killed More Americans Than 9/11", *The Independent*, 26 April 2009, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/torture-it-probably-killed-more-americans-than-911-1674396.html.

[205] A. Celso, "Cycles of Jihadist Movements and the Role of Irrationality", *FPRI*, 17 February 2014, p. 244.

Another important development was the way the United States portrayed Zarqawi. In his speech to the United Nations on Iraq, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell called him the leader of a "deadly terrorist network" and a "collaborator" of bin Laden.[206] President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney would also portray Zarqawi as the world's most dangerous and prolific terrorist, preaching and practicing jihad.[207] Even Zarqawi's biographer told Gerges that by exaggerating Zarqawi's military strength and blaming most attacks in Iraq on foreign terrorists led by Zarqawi, the United States unwittingly turned him into a '"hero and symbol of resistance in the eyes of the Arabs".[208] Although at the beginning of the American occupation, Zarqawi controlled fewer than 30 fighters, it was estimated in 2005 that he had thousands of followers, "thanks to U.S. media and government ingenuity".[209]

Saudi Arabia is another interesting player as some have argued that it has made great strides in recent years, detaining large groups of militants and supposedly rehabilitating former fighters.[210] However, former Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki said that Saudi Arabia "clearly interfered" in Iraqi internal affairs as it was facilitating the entry of foreign mercenaries into Iraq.[211]

The largest proportion of foreign militants in Iraq – up to two-thirds by some estimates – came indeed from Saudi Arabia.[212] Most reached Iraq through Syria. Tolerating, if not actively assisting the passage of volunteers across their territory served several of the Syrian intelligence services' interests: it fuelled the insurgency in Iraq and therefore made a U.S. intervention against Damascus less likely, and at the same time it provided a useful card to play in any potential negotiations with Western states or even Israel.[213]

More recently, the influence of the U.S. government is once again crucial. Interestingly, Secretary of State John Kerry said that stopping the flow of foreign fighters joining ISIS would be far more important than airstrikes in the mission to stamp out the extremist group.[214] The UN Security Council adopted in September 2014 a U.S.-drafted resolution compelling states to prevent their nationals joining jihadists in Iraq and Syria.[215] Yet the airstrikes were just as important for the recruitment of foreign fighters as they were not very convincing. After six weeks of American airstrikes, the Iraqi government's forces scarcely budged ISIS fighters from their hold on more than a quarter of the country and although the airstrikes appeared to have stopped the extremists' march towards Baghdad, ISIS was by the end of 2014 still dealing humiliating blows to the Iraqi Army.[216]

2.6.2. Internal Cohesion

Although at least many hundreds of foreign fighters had travelled to Iraq by 2004, it was not enough according to Zarqawi who stated that "their numbers continue to be negligible as compared to the enormity of the expected battle".[217] One of the reasons why many jihadists did not answer the call to battle was "confusion over the banner" but Zarqawi also expressed frustration with the local population as they refused to offer their houses as "a base for launching [operations] and a place of movement and battle".[218] Perhaps Iraqis were not always very welcoming

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[206] C. Powell, "A Policy of Evasion and Deception", full text of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations on Iraq, *Washington Post*, 3 February 2003, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/nation/transcripts/powelltex t_020503.html .

[207] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p. 259.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Ibid.

[210] Watts, "Foreign Fighters: How Are They Being Recruited?".

[211] *BBC*, "Iraqi PM Nouri Maliki accuses Saudis of 'Interference", 25 April 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27164281.

[212] Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, pp. 169-171.

[213] Ibid.

[214] *CBS News*, "Kerry: Stopping Foreign ISIS Fighters More Important Than Airstrikes", 15 September 2014, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/kerry-stopping-foreign-isis-fighters-more-important-than-air-strikes.

[215] *BBC*, "Islamic State Crisis: UN Aims to Stop Jihadist Recruits", 25 September 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29356038 .

[216] D. Kirkpatrick and O. Al-Jawoshy, "Weeks of U.S. Strikes Fail to Dislodge ISIS in Iraq", *The New York Times*, 22 September 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/23/world/middleeast/isis-iraq-airstrikes.html?_r=2&assetType=nyt_now.

[217] M. al-Zarqawi, "Letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Osama bin Laden", *CFR Primary Sources*, 1 February 2004, http://www.cfr.org/iraq/letter-abu-musab-al-zarqawi-osama-bin-laden/p9863.

[218] Zarqawi, "Letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi".

because Zarqawi had labelled many Iraqis as unbelievers.[219] In 2006, a letter from al-Zawahiri instructed Zarqawi to control his violence against Shiites and civilians as it was creating a backlash against al-Qaeda.[220]

Foreign-fighter supply lines to Iraq remained strong throughout 2007, but al-Qaeda in Iraq's excessive violence combined with the decimation of the group by U.S. Special Forces resulted in the group's decline among Iraqi Sunni tribes fed up with their indiscriminate killing.[221] The fact that these tribes and nationalist insurgents became less willing to host foreign fighters and even turned against AQI in the Anbar Awakening, substantially reduced the stream of foreign fighters into Iraq in 2007 and 2008.[222]

2.6.3. Chances of Success

One of the major themes Hegghammer found in jihadist writings on Iraq is that the prospects of victory were considered higher than on any other jihad front.[223] Prominent ideologues cited several different reasons for this, but most point out that the enormous costs and commitments undertaken by the U.S. in Iraq, represented a significant strategic advantage for the jihadists. In September 2004, al-Zawahiri described how Iraq had become a quagmire for the United States: "America's defeat in Iraq […] has become a matter of time, God willing".[224]

By 2008, however, a growing number of foreign fighters were leaving or attempted to flee Iraq as U.S. and Iraqi forces had weakened al-Qaeda and forced its members from former strongholds.[225] In 2010, the number of foreign fighters entering Iraq declined and more foreign fighters were trying to leave the country.[226] Prior to the 2011 U.S. military disengagement, AQI (or ISI) was in retreat and written off by most analysts as a defeated organisation.[227]

Yet on the verge of strategic defeat as U.S. forces departed from Iraq, former al-Qaeda fighters regrouped into a large and growing force, contributing to the surge in violence in Iraq and the broader region.[228] If ISIS can consolidate its presence in cities like Mosul, it has taken a giant step towards its goal of creating an Islamist caliphate that straddles Iraq and Syria, which is the most significant act by a jihadist group since 9/11.[229] The conflict in Iraq can be considered as a magnet for foreign fighters.[230] The air strikes might have changed the public's perception that ISIS is on the march, but did not seem to have disrupted the flow of foreign fighters by the end of 2014.[231]

2.6.4. Conclusion

In summary, most of the above factors enabled the mobilisation of thousands of foreign fighters who entered the Iraqi conflict zone after 2003. After initial widely publicised successes, many foreign fighters left the country after local insurgents turned against them, but in the recent years the same factors seem to explain why many more returned, and a new series of victories has attracted new foreign recruits.

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[219] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, pp. 257-258.
[220] A. al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi (English Translation)", *CTC*, http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2.
[221] Watts, "The Three Versions of Al Qaeda".
[222] Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq", p. 86.
[223] Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism after the Iraq War".
[224] Ibid, p. 23.
[225] J. Michaels, "Military: Foreign Fighters Getting out of Iraq", *USA Today/MilitaryTimes.com*, 21 March 2008, http://www.militarytimes.com/news/2008/03/gns_foreignfighters_032008.
[226] Bergen, "After the War in Iraq", p. 115.
[227] Celso, "Cycles of Jihadist Movements", p. 244.
[228] Byman, "The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq".
[229] *BBC, "*Iraq Conflict: ISIS Militants Seize New Towns", 13 June 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east27828 595.
[230] Byman, "The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq".
[231] *Foreign Policy*, "U.S. Strikes Haven't Beaten ISIS in Iraq. Can They Do So in Syria?", 23 September 2014, http://complex.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/09/23/us_strikes_havent_beaten_isis_in_iraq_can_they_do_so_in_syria.

2.7. Syria 2011–2015

The Syrian uprising began as a popular resistance against autocracy. Yet as the conflict dragged on, frustration with international inaction rose in tandem with the death toll, and a radical Islamist dynamic emerged within the opposition.[232] The uprising's first two prominent Salafi armed groups Jabhat al-Nusra and Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, unambiguously embraced the language of jihad and called for replacing the regime with an Islamic state based on Salafi principles.[233] Jabhat al-Nusra's leader stated that its fighters were "back from the various jihad fronts", most likely referring to Iraq as the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq at the hands of Sunni tribal fighters, U.S. forces, and the Iraqi army created a cadre of unemployed, frustrated and available fighters.[234]

By the summer of 2013, there were over 5,000 Sunni foreign fighters in the war-torn country, including more than a thousand from the West.[235] The previous record-holder, the 1980s Afghanistan war, also attracted large numbers overall, but it seems as though there were never more than 3,000 to 4,000 foreign fighters at any one time in Afghanistan.[236] The EU's anti-terrorism chief stated in late September 2014 that the number of Europeans joining Islamist fighters in Syria and Iraq had risen to more than 3,000.[237]

2.7.1. Access to the Battlefront

Many governments played crucial roles in the mobilisation of foreign fighters. Many Syrians blamed the lack of Western support for driving the rebellion into the arms of extremists. It can indeed be said that the embrace by local populations of extreme Islamist factions was neither ideological nor absolute; rather it has been driven by despair and necessity.[238] In this way, jihadists were benefiting from increasing disenchantment with the international community and increasing support pouring in from the Gulf.[239]

Iran's role in assisting pro-government forces in Syria is quite direct, as Iran has not just assisted existing groups but created them. Saudi Arabia and Qatar appeared to have at least tacitly encouraged and supported some of these same opposition organisations in their efforts.[240] The potential to overthrow Assad, Iran's most important Arab ally, represented for Saudi Arabia "the best chance in a decade (…) to roll back Iranian power".[241] According to reports dated April 2012, the Saudi Kingdom offered death-row inmates a full pardon and financial payment in exchange for their commitment to fight jihad in Syria.[242] At the same time, the Saudi government issued a royal order in February 2014 declaring that any citizen who fights in conflicts abroad will face three to 20 years in jail.[243] A month later, the Saudis released a royal decree designating Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda in Iraq as terrorist organisations.[244]

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[232] C. Lister and P. Smyth, "Syria's Multipolar War", *Foreign Policy*, 6 November 2013, http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/10/31/syrias_multipolar_war#sthash.VR3qhxhK.dpbs. E. O'bagy, "Jihad in Syria", *Institute for the Study of War Middle East Security Report 6*, September 2012 http://www.understandingwar.org/re port/jihad-syria, p. 39.

[233] *International Crisis Group*, "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition", Middle East Report N°131, 12 October 2012, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.pdf, p. 4.

[234] E. Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (Oxon: 2013), pp.94-95.

[235] T. Hegghammer, "Syria's Foreign Fighters", *Foreign Policy*, 9 December 2013, http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/12/09/syrias_foreign_fighters.

[236] Hegghammer, "Syria's Foreign Fighters".

[237] *BBC,* "Islamic State Crisis: '3,000 European Jihadists Join Fight'", 26 September 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29372494.

[238] Hokayem, p. 99.

[239] O'bagy, "Jihad in Syria", p. 38.

[240] B. Rich, "Radicalising Syria: How the Rebels Are Becoming More Islamist", *The Conversation*, 28 July 2013, http://theconve rsation.com/radicalising-syria-how-the-rebels-are-becoming-more-islamist-16309.

[241] J. Skidmore, "Foreign Fighter Involvement in Syria", *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT),* January 2014, http://i-hls.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Foreign-Fighter-Involvement-in-Syria.pdf.

[242] G. Ingersoll, "REPORT: Saudi Arabia Sent 1,200 Death Row Inmates to Fight in Syria", *Business Insider,* 23 January 2013, http://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-sent-inmates-against-assad-2013-1#ixzz35jkuX7QX.

[243] A. Zelin, "The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria", *CTC*, 28 April 2014, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-saudi-foreign-fighter-presence-in-syria.

[244] Zelin, "The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence".

Perhaps, though, the simplest explanation as to why Syria has been attracting so many war volunteers, is that at first no one was stopping them. A British fighters' Facebook status mocked the ease with which foreign jihadists can cross the Turkish border into Syria: "1 hour flight from Istanbul, 30min drive from hatai and bing bang boom ur in!!"[245] "It's so easy", said a Syrian who smuggles travellers into Syria, in a *Washington Post* interview. "If the Turkish government wants to prevent them coming into the country, it would do so, but they don't".[246]

It is not just the border crossing which does not provide an obstacle; the risk of legal sanctions at home also seemed lower for travellers to Syria than for their predecessors. In the beginning, few, if any, European countries seemed to be systematically prosecuting foreign fighters returning from Syria.[247] The reason for the late response by governments was simple; many states, including in the West, supported the same side of the conflict that the Sunni foreign fighters were joining.[248]

2.7.2. Internal Cohesion

Initially Jabhat al-Nusra and its foreign fighters gained a level of popular support. The group employed a cautious strategy, making efforts to avoid alienating the Syrian population and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This strategy included avoiding civilian targets and taking care to minimise civilian casualties when methods like suicide bombings were employed, downplaying sectarian rhetoric.[249] Their growing popularity also reflected general disillusionment with the lack of international support as a rebel commander said: "We don't want al-Qaeda here, but if nobody else helps us, we will make an alliance with them".[250]

Yet as Jabhat al-Nusra gained strength in Syria, fissures began to appear in its relationship with its "parent" organisation, ISI. The tension was made public in April of 2013 when al-Baghdadi released a statement that Jabhat al-Nusra and ISI were officially merging under the name Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).[251] This claim was quickly rebuffed by the head of Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Julani, who overtly acknowledged his allegiance to al-Qaeda.[252] Al-Qaeda's chief al-Zawahiri tried to calm the dispute by announcing that Jabhat al-Nusra would remain responsible for jihad in the Syrian arena and ISIS would keep to Iraq. ISIS however refused to accept al-Zawahiri's decision and continued its expansion into Syria. Along the way, it trampled over other Syrian rebel groups, including radical Islamists.

This provoked a backlash, and opposing rebel groups mounted a counteroffensive. By 2014, the rift between ISIS and the Syrian opposition had resulted in infighting causing the death of hundreds of jihadists.[253] In February 2014, members of ISIS were believed to have carried out the suicide attack that killed the leader of a rival coalition of Islamist rebel groups.[254] In response, al-Zawahiri took the unprecedented step of publicly expelling ISIL from al-Qaeda.

Amid the confusion, many Syrian jihadists left Jabhat al-Nusra for ISIS, but the bloody infighting reportedly also caused hundreds of foreign fighters to abandon rebel ranks. [255] The outflow of foreign militants was, however, still small.[256]

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[245] A. Roussinos, "Jihad Selfies: These British Extremists in Syria Love Social Media", *Vice*, 5 December 2013, http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/syrian-jihadist-selfies-tell-us-a-lot-about-their-war.

[246] Hegghammer, "Syria's Foreign Fighters".

[247] Ibid.

[248] Ibid.

[249] V. Szybala, "Al-Qaeda Shows its True Colors in Syria", *Institute for the Study of War*, 1 August 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/al-qaeda-shows-its-true-colors-syria#sthash.47MKBklv.dpuf.

[250] Ibid.

[251] Szybala, "Al-Qaeda Shows its True Colors in Syria".

[252] Ibid.

[253] Mendelsohn, "Collateral Damage in Iraq".

[254] B.M. Jenkins, "Brothers Killing Brothers; The Current Infighting Will Test al Qaeda's B*RAND*", *RAND*, 2014, http://www.*RAND*.org/pubs/perspectives/PE123.html.

[255] Zelin, "Al-Qaeda in Syria". S. Jones and E. Solomon, "Disillusioned Foreign Fighters Abandon Rebel Ranks in Syria", *Financial Times*, 18 March 2014, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a26ffc5c-adfc-11e3-bc07-00144feab7de.html#axzz2zW6bpDgB.

[256] Jones and Solomon, "Disillusioned Foreign Fighters".

European intelligence analysts estimated the number of militants leaving Syria to be small, while at the same time fighters were still coming, mostly to join ISIS, as Jabhat al-Nusra reportedly has become more reticent when it comes to integrating unknown recruits.[257] At the same time, ISIS is "very willing" to take foreign fighters even those who do not speak Arabic or are without military training.[258] Westerners simply arrive, ask for a gun, and often seem to get one.[259]

2.7.3. Chances of Success

Who would not want to fight a ruthless dictator whose time was running out? Even in December 2013 the head of Jabhat al-Nusra claimed that the rebels would "achieve victory soon" against Assad's forces.[260] Although the chances of success for Jabhat al-Nusra now seem to have diminished, it is important to note that by 2013 the group was one of al Qaeda's best-armed affiliates in the world resembling a small army rather than a rag-tag group of guerrilla fighters.[261] ISIS too displayed an immediate tactical efficacy over moderate local forces, often acting as the vanguard in major offensives.[262]

Given that rebels control large portions of territory along the northern border, it was actually possible to take part in the jihad while avoiding both combat and deadly enemy raids. Jihad in Syria is by no means risk-free, but it is less dangerous for foreign fighters than many previous conflicts, as there are many safe heavens.[263] Indeed, some of the volunteers are determined to fight, but others seem to be little more than jihadi tourists who stay out of harm's way while taking photos of themselves and boasting to their friends back home via social media.[264]

ISIS' recent display of power in Iraq will likely strengthen its hand over al-Qaeda in Syria and beyond. According to many observers, ISIS has supplanted al-Qaeda as the leader of the global jihadi movement.[265] As Barak Mendelsohn has stated: "it is lost on few radical Islamists that Baghdadi's forces -- merely 5,000 men -- defeated 90,000 soldiers on a march towards Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate for 500 years".[266] And "as money and manpower breed success, success will breed more success".[267]

It is therefore no surprise the foreign fighters continued to arrive throughout 2014, despite the air strikes. "If you associate yourself with something powerful, you are yourself empowered".[268]

2.7.4. Conclusion

In summary, all of the above factors are relevant for explaining why the number of foreign fighters in Syria since 2011 exceeds that of any previous conflict in the modern history of the Muslim world. The influence of governments was crucial in the sense that they hardly tried to stop the foreign fighters. The journey to the war zone was therefore

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[257] Hennessy, "The Return of Europe's Foreign Fighters". Jones and Solomon, "Disillusioned Foreign Fighters".

[258] J. Carter, S. Maher and P. Neumann, "#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks', *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalism*, 26 April 2014, http://icsr.info/wpcontent/uploads/2014/04 /ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Infleunce-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf.

[259] T. McCoy, "How ISIS and Other Jihadists Persuaded Thousands of Westerners to Fight Their War of Extremism", T*he Washington Post*, 17 June 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/17/how-isispersuade d-thousands-of-westerners-to-fight-its-war-of-extremism/.

[260] *BBC*, "Al-Nusra Front Leader Rejects Syria Peace Talks", 19 December 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middleeast -25449796.

[261] S. Jones, "The Terrorist Threat from Syria", Before the *Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence*, 22 May 2013, http://www.*RAND*.org/content/dam/*RAND*/pubs/testimonies/CT300/CT3 88/*RAND*_CT388.pdf .

[262] B. Rich, "Radicalising Syria: How the Rebels Are Becoming More Islamist", *The Conversation*, 28 July 2013, http://theconve rsation.com/radicalising-syria-how-the-rebels-are-becoming-more-islamist-16309.

[263] Hegghammer, "Syria's Foreign Fighters".

[264] B. M. Jenkins, "The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War", *RAND*, 2014.

[265] *The Washington Post*, "Al-Qaeda Disavows Any Ties with Radical Islamist ISIS Group in Syria, Iraq", 3 February 2014, http://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.

[266] B. Mendelsohn, "Collateral Damage in Iraq; The Rise of ISIS and the Fall of al Qaeda", *Foreign Affairs*, 15 June 2014, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141567/barak-mendelsohn/collateral-damage-in-iraq.

[267] Ibid.

[268] R. Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria", *Carnegie Council,* 23 September 2014, http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20140923/index.html.

as simple as a jihad trip can get. Once present on the ground, the chances of successes were there, if not in Syria then in Iraq where ISIS started to realise the reestablishment of the Caliphate, something which al-Qaeda has only aspired to.

3. Analysis

This study has focused on the conflicts that in the past 35 years have attracted Muslim foreign fighters. Since 1980, in the seven conflict zones in total more than 50,000 combatants mobilised with no apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity with the Muslim side. Partly for this reason, these insurgencies have drawn considerable attention from scholars and media but also from those Islamists leaders who wish to globalise local conflicts and promote the jihadist narrative.

So far, explanations as to why there are huge differences in the number of transnational insurgents who actually joined the fight are scarce. Connected conflicts like Afghanistan (1980–1992), Bosnia (1992–1995), Iraq (since 2003), and Syria (since 2011) each attracted several thousands of foreign fighters, whereas other conflicts like Chechnya (1994–2009), Somalia (1993–2014), and Afghanistan after 2001 could not count on more than a few hundred foreign combatants. Some have argued this is merely a coincidence.

This study has tried to offer a first preliminary explanation by looking at three factors that were deemed most relevant to explain why some conflicts attract far more foreign fighters than others. These factors were firstly, influence of governments – what role do opponents and supporters have in obstructing or enabling foreign fighters to arrive on the battlefield? Secondly, internal cohesion – how are the foreigners received by the local population, but more importantly local insurgents; are the fighters welcomed or distrusted? Finally, the chances of success – is there a chance of winning or at least make it back alive?

Although the seven conflicts were presented chronologically, it is perhaps more interesting here to first take a look at the "less popular" conflicts in Somalia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan (after 2001) where all three factors seem to have been significant for the relatively poor result in terms of foreign-fighter mobilisation (see table below).

In Somalia, it is internal disagreement in particular that can explain why no more than a few hundred foreign fighters travelled to Somalia in the last two decades. Somalia has never been a clear-cut case of a holy struggle, let alone a welcoming place for foreigners seeking to advance global jihad. The first al-Qaeda fighters were, just like the Americans and Ethiopians, seen as outsiders and the foreign jihadists that would arrive in the last eight years were not welcomed by local fighters who questioned the foreigners' fighting capacity and competence. Many that did get to fight were killed. If not by the Ethiopian army, then by their fellow Somali insurgents.

Chechnya was, likewise, not a very welcoming place. First, their leader (a foreigner himself) refused to allow large numbers of foreign fighters to enter Chechnya, in order to avoid disagreement with the local insurgents, as the foreigners often lacked adequate military experience. Even if they were welcomed, the Russian government made it extremely hard for fighters to cross the borders of the enclave, deterring many possible recruits. The ones that did make it to the battlefield, would most of the time not live to tell the tale.

Afghanistan is a rather strange case as many foreign fighters were already present on the ground when the U.S. army invaded in 2001. Yet, all factors were crucial for the relatively low number of foreign fighters who would join to fight. Even though Taliban leader Mullah Omar had proclaimed that bin Laden would be the last person to leave Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda leader would in fact leave two months after the invasion. Other top leaders too were forced into hiding. Meanwhile, the vast majority of foreign fighters in Afghanistan had either been killed, captured, or also forced to flee to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Even here, foreign fighters suffered heavy losses due to targeted drone operations that eliminated key leadership figures and hampered their planning and communications efforts, and in this way, their ideological unity.

	Somalia 1993-2014	Chechnya 1994-2009	Afghanistan 2001-2014
Access to the battlefront	Obstructive (Ethiopia)	Obstructive (RUS)	Obstructive (U.S.)
Chances of success	Limited	Limited	Limited
Internal cohesion	Limited	Limited	Limited

Table 2: Conflicts With a Relatively Low Turnout of Foreign Fighters (< 1000)

These three factors explaining the low numbers in these three conflicts, also offer an explanation for the high turnout in the remaining four. The governments of various Muslim countries permitted or actively facilitated recruitment for Afghanistan in the 1980s, which was seen by many recruits as an adventure or at least a fight that could be won. There was a large degree of internal disagreement with local insurgents, but the volunteers would nevertheless arrive in increasing numbers as they were housed separately in their own Arab training camps. Internal squabbles among the Arab Afghans were resolved by focusing on a new enemy in a new arena that would unite them.

That arena was the Bosnian war in which the Pakistani government played an important role, as it ordered the closure of Arab mujahideen offices, forcing many of them to find another base. The mujahideen war machine from Afghanistan was successfully transferred. The Arab fighters claimed many victories, proving their capability of success. They were, regardless of ideological differences, generally appreciated by Bosnian soldiers and civilians.

That was not the case in Iraq where local insurgents turned against foreign fighters who, under the leadership of al-Zarqawi, labelled whole segments of Iraqis as unbelievers and attacked Shiites and civilians. This fragmentation was likely the reason why foreign-fighter flows to Iraq decreased around 2008. Before this occurred, however, the Iraq conflict had become the most pressing single issue on the global jihadist agenda, partly thanks to widely publicised military successes. In recent years the same factors seem at play as many more fighters returned for new victories that were used in a PR-campaign to attract new foreign recruits.

These victories are now connected to the conflict in Syria where all three factors are relevant to explain the record number of foreign fighters. Governments, at first, hardly tried to stop the foreign fighters. The journey to the war zone was therefore as simple as a jihad trip can get. Once present on the ground, the chances of success were there as ISIS started to realise the reestablishment of the Caliphate, something which al-Qaeda only aspired to. The chances of dying were real, but could be avoided. For once, most of the local insurgents welcomed foreign fighters and even when they started to fight among themselves, the foreigners could avoid the infighting by crossing into Iraq and playing for a winner. Here, the boldest jihadist group achieved unparalleled successes, which were quickly used to attract new foreign recruits.

	Afghanistan 1980-1992	Bosnia 1992-1995	Iraq 2003-2014	Syria 2011-2014
Access to the battlefront	Permissive (various Arab countries)	Permissive (Bosnia)	Permissive (U.S., Syria, Saudi Arabia)	Permissive (Turkey)
Chances of success	Large	Large	Large	Large
Internal cohesion	Limited	Significant	Limited	Limited

Table 3: Conflicts With a Relatively High Turnout of Foreign Fighters (> 1000)

4. Discussion

This cross-case analysis shows that the diverging levels of Muslim foreign fighter recruitment in the most recent and relevant conflicts, can largely be explained by three factors, 1: the access to the battlefront, 2: internal cohesion or group unity, and 3: chances of success.

First of all, the role of governments, the passive support for combatants from governments or, the opposite, government obstruction of foreign-fighter recruitment), is essential when comparing the conflicts with a relatively poor turnout (less than 1000 transnational insurgents) to the ones with a large turnout (more than 1000). In the latter category, governments from various countries played even largely a permissive role. The political leaders of different Muslim countries permitted or actively facilitated recruitment for the struggle in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Twenty years later, Saudi Arabia allegedly facilitated the entry of foreign mercenaries into Iraq.[269] Indeed, the highest proportion of foreign militants in Iraq came from Saudi Arabia.[270] Most reached Iraq through Syria, as the Assad regime tolerated or actively assisted the passage of volunteers across its territory to protect its own interests.[271] When this backfired, the Syrian government was not able to stop the flow of foreign fighters arriving from Turkey as the Syrian army had lost the frontier zone. Meanwhile, the Turkish government did not prevent volunteers from entering the neighbouring warzone. In Bosnia during the 1990s, the Bosnian government fully integrated the foreign mujahideen into its army and never put serious pressure on the Arab fighters to leave.

The restrictions put in place by governments in the conflicts with a relatively poor turnout is again essential as many successfully prevented foreign fighters from gaining a strong foothold. In Chechnya, Russia managed to keep its borders tightly closed for those who wished to fight in the encircled republic. Those Arab fighters that did make it to Chechnya were subsequently also hunted down by Russian special forces who conducted a particularly effective counterinsurgency campaign.[272] Likewise in Somalia, where the borders were porous, the Ethiopian government sent in its troops to kill a great number of foreign fighters who would, from 2008 on, also be on the run from U.S. drones. The drone strikes together with U.S. military troops chased away most foreign fighters that were in Afghanistan in 2001. Creating barriers to entering the battlefield has many times before been described as a highly effective manner to contain and de-escalate an insurgency.[273]

Connected to the chances of success, is the factor labelled in this study as internal cohesion. For example, AQI's self-appointed ability to decide who is a true Muslim and who has not degenerated into mass killing and social alienation in Iraq and damaged their standing with other Sunnis. In other cases, the ideological zeal to destroy apostate forces and the creation of Islamist enclaves often alienated the local population. Kristin Bakke has shown that mobilising supporters is harder and more costly if the local community does not voluntarily support the insurgents. Organisational cohesion may suffer if there are cleavages within the local population the movement claims to represent.[274] Many foreign fighters are not welcomed because of their inexperience. Added to their extremist ideas about what the essence of the struggle is and how it should be fought, this can cause resistance and divisions within the domestic insurgent movement itself, leading to further division.

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[269] *BBC*, "Iraqi PM Nouri Maliki Accuses Saudis of 'Interference'', 25 April 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27164281.

[270] Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, pp. 169-171.

[271] Ibid.

[272] Y. M. Zhukov "Counterinsurgency in a Non-democratic State: The Russian Example", in: P. B. Rich and I. Duyvesteyn (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 286-300.

[273] P. Staniland, "Defeating Transnational Insurgencies: The Best Offense is a Good Fence", *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2005), pp. 21-40. J. Record, *Beating Goliath; Why Insurgencies Win* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2007). R. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgencies; Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966).

[274] K.M. Bakke, "Help Wanted?: The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies", *International Security*, vol. 38, no. (2014), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ins/summary/v038.38.4.bakke.html, p. 153. See also for the role and significance of actor cohesion in civil conflict: K.M. Bakke, K.Gallagher Cunningham and L.J.M. Seymour, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics,* vol. 10, no. 2 (2012), pp. 265-283.

The question of why some conflicts can count on thousands of Muslim foreign fighters and others do not count more than a couple of hundred has been the main puzzle of this contribution. Some scholars have argued that the foreign fighter's "life cycle" can be divided into a pre-war mobilisation phase, war stage, and post-war period, the last one receiving most attention because of feared terrorist attacks in the jihadist's country of origin. This contribution has focused on the war phase itself and its large-scale influence on mobilisation. Especially in the digital age, there is an ongoing development as foreign fighters communicate back to peers at home via email, social media and jihadi web forums. When they do so, they are communicating about the accessibility, internal cohesion and chances of success, adding to further mobilisation.

Engaged foreign fighters, who are knowledgeable about the internal cohesion of their groups and chances of success in the field, can convince fence-sitters at home to join them. The other way round, the negative experiences of foreign fighters also influence the choice of emerging recruits as complaints about infighting or strategic defeats can dissuade other potential foreign fighters at home from following their path.

These findings could help policy makers realise that allowing disenchanted foreign fighters to return provides the opportunity to publicise the numerous tales of mistreatment of jihadis, hypocritical ISIS leaders, or brutal fratricide in order to promote internal turmoil. As others have already stated: what counter-narrative is more powerful against ISIS' poisonous message than that of a disillusioned fighter?[275]

Regarding the chances of success; as celebratory statements and videos by ISIS increase the appearance of success (which will inspire new recruits), it would be wise to counter these by utilising figures about casualties on their side, plus reports on military defeats and territorial losses as well as publications on the limits of Islamic State expansion.[276]

The findings could also help policymakers understand why aspiring jihadists travel to Syria, to fight in a bloody civil war between Muslim parties and, for example, not to Mali, where a Western power is fighting Islamist groups. Interestingly, in the winter of 2013, jihadi Internet forums briefly lit up with calls to support al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and affiliated groups in repelling the French intervention in Mali.[277] However, AQIM and its affiliates were on the run at a time when the Syrian revolution continued to pick up steam, which likely convinced many fickle foreign fighters to join a campaign on the rise rather than one in decline.[278] At the same time, it will be interesting to see whether the containment of ISIS as well as spreading news of ISIS mistreating citizens of the Islamic State and executing its own militants trying to return home will affect the flow of foreign fighters.[279]

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[275] S. Maher, "ISIS Defectors Coming Home: Should They Be Welcomed Back? Arguments For and Against", *Mirror,* 5 September 2014, http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/isis-defectors-coming-home-should4173302#ixzz3FYyCWTg S. B. Peeters, "Afnemen Paspoort Helpt de Jihadisten", *NRC Handelsblad*, 9 December 2014, http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/2 014/12/09/afnemen-paspoort-helpt-de-jihadisten-1449418.

[276] *BBC News*, "Islamic State Conflict: 10,000 Militants Killed in Nine Months", 3 June 2015. Foreign Policy, "Mapped: The Islamic State's Territorial Losses and the Beginning of a United Kurdistan", 7 July 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/ 07/mapped-the-islamic-states-territorial-losses-and-the-beginning-of-a-united-kurdistan/. F Itani, "The Limits of Islamic State Expansion", *Brookings*, 15 June 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/06/15-islamic-state-territorial-expansion.

[277] C. Watts, "Foreign Fighters and Ants: How They Form Their Colonies", *FPRI*, 16 July 2013, http://www.*FPRI*.org/geopoliticu s/2013/07/foreign-fighters-and-ants-how-they-form-their-colonies.

[278] Watts, "Foreign Fighters and Ant"'.

[279] B. Tufft, "ISIS Executes up to 200 Fighters for Trying to Flee Jihad and Return Home", *The Independent*, 29 December 2014, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-executes-at-least-120-fighters-for-trying-to-flee-and-go-home-9947805.html.

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*BBC, "*Iraq conflict: ISIS Militants Seize New Towns", 13 June 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27828595.

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