



Zentrum für
EUropäische Friedens- und
Sicherheitsstudien

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Foreign fighters: An overview of existing research and a comparative study of British and German foreign fighters

Working Paper 8 | December 2014

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¹ The VOX-Pol Network of Excellence is funded by the European Union under the 7th Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under Grant Agreement No. 312827. The project focuses on researching the prevalence, contours, functions, and impacts of Violent Online Political Extremism and responses to it.

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Abstract

The current conflict in Syria is attracting an unprecedented amount of foreign fighters who have travelled there to join the rebels. Given the high and immediate policy relevance of the topic, the kinds of knowledge we have at the moment on foreign fighters is in the majority empirical and descriptive, rather than analytical and theoretical. So far, studies have gathered data on the numbers of foreign fighters having left Europe or the West in general (or more rarely countries in the Middle East), and their demographic and socio-economic profiles, as well as mapped the propaganda and recruitment strategies of the IS and affiliated disseminators, including the foreign fighters themselves. Efforts have also been undertaken towards establishing a definition of foreign fighters, notably as different to that of terrorists. Far less known are the reasons behind both the travel to, and the return from Syria, i.e. individual motivations. This is not due to a lack of interest in this topic, but rather due to issues of data validity. Studies usually rely on data such as socio-economic and demographic profiles and individual statements online, which can only offer limited information on individual subjective motivation. Nevertheless, a number of insightful theories on motivation have been proposed and these include those relating to grievance about the conflict and a willingness to help those suffering under Bashar al-Assad, issues about shared identity and ideology, as well as the idea of a jihadi 'subculture'.

The study here aims to provide a sample of British and German foreign fighters in order to gain an insight into their profiles. The results are interesting as many differences can be noted between the two country samples, especially relating to socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The German foreign fighters are less educated and coming from lower socio-economic strata than the British ones. Also a higher proportion of the German foreign fighters had been previously involved in crime, some in terrorism related offences. In terms of similarities, the majority of recruits from both countries are male, young, and were single at the time of leaving to Syria.

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Why the interest in foreign fighters?

The phenomenon of foreign fighters has recently gained more significance amongst policy makers and academics given the ongoing conflict in Syria and the growing numbers of foreign fighters that are flocking there. As such, this phenomenon is not new, since there have been previous waves of foreign fighters joining jihads in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bosnia. Furthermore, it is by no means confined to Islam (Hegghammer 2011, pp.53-54). For example the Spanish Civil War drew foreign fighters on both sides of the conflict, from communists fighting against “fascism” to Catholics enlisting to fight “communism”. Moreover, the Israeli war of independence attracted American Jews to come forth to Middle East and fight (Mendelsohn 2011, p.190). Since the start of the civil war in Syria, however, unprecedented numbers of Mujahedeen fighters have travelled there, resulting in an undoubtedly steep rise in Muslim foreign fighters since the 1980s. Since summer 2013, the amount of foreign fighters in Syria topped historical numbers of past conflicts involving Islamic overseas militants (Hegghammer 2011 pp.53-4; 2013a). The Washington Post recently collected empirical data from studies by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), the Soufan Group, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and from these estimates, calculated that 15,000 militants from 80 countries have involved themselves in the conflict (Washington Post 2014).² Moreover, the issue has become further exacerbated by the fact that the Islamic State (IS) has received a lot of media attention because of its geopolitical gains in Iraq and Syria, the apparently high number of Western recruits, the use of shocking violent tactics, and the extraordinary amount of money and sophisticated weaponry that the militant organisation possesses. However, foreign fighters are not just recruited by IS, there are other rebel groups in Syria such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Ahrar al-Sham, which boast an equally striking number of foreign fighters (Zelin 2013; Barrett 2014, p.6). Finally, the interest in foreign fighters is also triggered by reasons of internal (homeland) security, in particular the scenario of such individuals returning to their home countries to carry out terror attacks, or at least inspire others to do so. This has troubled the Western governments and there is a visible persistent worry of the potential of blowback and whether the jihadists will “come home to roost” with more military training, expertise, and increased hostility towards the West (see for example: Barrett 2014; Clingendael 2013; Lynch 2013; The Economist 2013; RAND 2014). This aspect does not seem to have been a concern at the times of the Spanish Civil war or the Israeli war of independence; in the case of Muslim foreign fighters, however, there seems to be evidence of Afghan veterans’ involvement in homegrown plots. Hegghammer (2013b) estimates that between 1990 and 2010, one in nine foreign fighters returned to attack the West, and that the returnees proved to be very effective operatives in jihadi plots in the West (pp. 10-11).

² The info graphic was published 11 October 2014. This is a collection of all the available data from three different sources and the figures of fighters from Western Europe obtained from the ICSR are in the high estimate category

Numbers, profiles and recruitment strategies

Most of the information and analyses available on the topic of foreign fighters are concerned with the number of Western foreign fighters in Syria.

In a comprehensive overview for governments on the issue of foreign fighters in Syria, Barrett (2014) provides numbers that the Soufan Group received from governments either publically or privately. The estimates provided by the states are based on information from social media, community sources, and investigations. Many states did not provide estimates, and in these cases, these states are only listed as countries that know of citizens fighting in Syria (Barrett 2014, pp. 10-13). Based on the data from the Soufan Group, around 2,391 fighters from Western countries are in Syria, with 2,041 of these fighters coming from the EU. France holds the top place in Europe with over 700 fighters, succeeded by the United Kingdom with an estimated 400 fighters. Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands follow with 270, 250, and 120 respectively (Ibid, p. 13). At the end of 2013, Zelin, writing for ICSR, estimated that Western Europeans made up 18% of the foreign fighter contingent. Using a low and high estimate gauge, Yelin calculated that the number of Western foreign fighters in Syria ranged from 396 – 1,937. Since an earlier estimate calculated in April 2013 by ICSR, the numbers had increased threefold from 135 – 590 (Zelin 2013a). It is important to note this sharp increase as the most recent figures from ICSR are one year old and it is likely that the current estimates would be significantly higher. German authorities announced in August 2014 for example a number higher than 400 individuals (FAZ 2014).

The ICSR has been compiling a database on Western foreign fighters as part of a multi-year project investigating the phenomenon in a series of publications. In a short insight on British foreign fighters written by Maher (2013) of ICSR, he presents a preliminary look at the profiles of these fighters. From the database, Maher finds that most British foreign fighters are male in their twenties, of South-Asian ethnic origin, university educated or were about to attend university, and have links to individuals or groups who have international connections.

Based on interviews with people who were close to five known Dutch foreign fighters, Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol (2014) created two fictional foreign fighters from the information gathered from the interviews, and in some cases open-source evidence, and outlined their path to radicalisation which led to the eventual decision to go to Syria. Even though the sample was relatively small, the authors note that it is clear that these individuals were young, came from lower class socio-economic backgrounds and deprived areas, had either Islamic immigrant or Dutch family backgrounds, and had encountered an influential preacher or group after a period of crisis (pp.107-8).

Barrett (2014) found that the typical age range of foreign fighters is between 18 and 29, however, there are also instances of 15-17 year olds as well as of people in their 30s. Compared to the Afghan jihad, which typically recruited 25-35 year olds, the age range is lower in the Syrian case. The majority of the fighters are men, however there is a small sample of women apparent. It was also found that 6% of foreign fighters from EU countries are converts, and many of the fighters from Western countries were second or third generation immigrants.

The large number of recruits joining the Syrian civil war points towards an impressive and effective recruitment strategy, which involves savvy use of social media and attractive propaganda. A number of analysts have observed this, and the wealth of information available on social media has allowed for new types of empirical analyses (see for example: Barrett 2014; Carter, Maher & Neumann 2014; Hegghammer 2013b; Weggemans, Bakker & Grol, 2014; Zelin, Kohlmann & al-Kouri 2013).

Social media allows for a wide-ranging sphere of influence from different disseminators: the fighter groups like IS; religious preachers and rebel supporters who are not necessarily involved in the conflict; and the foreign fighters in Syria themselves (Carter, Maher & Neumann, 2014; Towbridge 2014). The foreign fighter “campaign” has been assessed as highly professional and likened with marketing strategies. J.M. Berger specialises in social media and extremism and he has co-authored a forthcoming book with Jessica Stern on the threat of ISIS. On CBS News, Berger commented on the success of IS recruitment tactics: “Big corporations wish they were as good at this as ISIS is... This is a combination of an extremely ambitious military campaign with an extremely ambitious PR campaign. Social media is most of that PR campaign” (Berger quoted by Towbridge 2014). This type of propaganda strategy appeals to shared identities through framing and discourse more broadly. It is clear to see from the Rayat Al-Taweed Tumblr account that the Hollywood style slogans mounted on slick photography reflect a call of duty to protect fellow Muslims, and an attractive vision of being a hero and martyr for the pan-Islamic cause.³ According to TRAC (2014), Rayat Al-Taweed – meaning “Banner of God” – is effectively the “mouthpiece” for British fighters from London that support IS.

In the 2014 ICSR “#Greenbirds” report by Carter, Maher, and Neumann, the researchers sought to investigate the avenues through which foreign fighters in Syria receive information on the conflict and more specifically who inspires them (Carter, Maher & Neumann 2014, p.1). Using open-source information through Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, and software such as Palantir Torch, Node Excel, and Gephi to visualise and aggregate the data, the researchers compiled a database of 190 European and Western foreign fighters. This database was compiled over 12 months and continues to be updated for further research. To uncover what matters to this particular data sample, the researchers analysed their interests by looking at Facebook “likes”, and Twitter “retweets” and mentions (ibid, pp.9-12). The findings indicate that the foreign fighters do not necessarily receive their information from the official channels provided by the fighter groups, but rather through other disseminators and spiritual authorities who are sympathetic to the rebel cause in Syria, but who are not necessarily involved in the conflict themselves. The researchers believe that this popularity is due to the ability of these disseminators to provide a broad overview of the conflict without affiliating with a certain fighter group, as well as having the luxury of being outside Syria and able to access a variety of sources. Furthermore, the disseminators are more personal than the official fighter accounts as they interact with their users and do more than just broadcast messages from the fighter groups (ibid, pp.15-17). The aim of these disseminators is to offer guidance as well as to show that the rebels are supported in the West and to frame the foreign fighter jihad positively. The researchers acknowledge that these individuals are not necessarily directly involved in recruitment, however they play a key “cheerleading role” and offer religious legitimacy (ibid, pp.15-18). The ICSR study reveals a lot about the power of social media in the Syrian civil war. The way that the disseminators frame the conflict and the clear support they have from foreign fighters shows the effective role the Internet plays in radicalisation and recruitment.

³ See: <http://r-tawheed.tumblr.com/>

The report also outlines how the foreign fighters themselves bring their contribution to recruitment, either through direct appeals, or through offering an interesting insight into life on the front line. As Carter, Maher & Neumann (2014) aptly point out, the Syrian conflict is the first in which a striking number of Western fighters have been documenting their involvement in real-time (p.1). Therefore, the fighters are effectively extending the recruitment drive down from the top tiers of the rebel groups, to themselves and are able to encourage other young boys and girls back in their home countries to join the fighting in Syria.

Whilst many of the social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook have been taken down after requests by Western authorities, from those that were available at the time of research, it was clear to see that the fighters were actively promoting their lifestyle, often referring to it as a “five star jihad”. There were many images and referrals to “brothers” and camaraderie, as well as pictures of high class weapons.⁴ In addition to outward projection and boastfulness, the fighters offer an advisory platform for those who are considering coming to Syria. Websites like Ask.fm, allow anonymous messaging between would-be and existing Mujahedeen to offer guidance regarding crossing the Turkish-Syrian border and what to bring. There is ease of access from all angles; on the one hand, there is open informational access online, and on the other, it is genuinely not difficult to cross the border from Turkey to Syria. This certainly helps to explain the record numbers of foreign fighters in this conflict (Hegghammer 2013a).

Theorising foreign fighters: definition and motivation

Defining foreign fighters

As it stands, there is limited theoretical literature on the topic, with Hegghammer (2011) stating that “this type of activism remains notoriously understudied” (pp.54). This is because the concept is caught somewhere in between acts of international terrorism and local insurgency, and as a result, this actor category is often bound to a sub-division of general terrorism studies, where the existing literature tends to conflate Mujahedeen foreign fighters with transnational Islamic terrorists (ibid pp.54-8). Thus, Hegghammer argues that in order to better understand the phenomenon, it is important to establish a clear definition of this actor group, where an explicit distinction is made between, foreign fighters, local insurgents, and transnational terrorists (ibid p.55).

Malet (2013) defines foreign fighters as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict” (p.9). As Malet’s attempt lacks a strict criteria, Hegghammer develops this definition further by characterising a foreign fighter as “an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency, (2) lacks a citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid (Hegghammer 2011, pp.57-8). By building on Malet’s definition, Hegghammer limits the actor group by excluding paid mercenaries and soldiers, as well as returning diaspora members or exiled citizens who may benefit politically from the conflict.

⁴ See VICE, which has some original pictures taken directly from social media accounts: <http://www.vice.com/read/syrian-jihadist-selfies-tell-us-a-lot-about-their-war>

He further ensures that an unambiguous distinction is made between foreign fighters, local insurgents, and international terrorists (ibid p.58). Carter, Maher & Neumann dispute Hegghammer's idea that foreign fighters should be defined as those who are unpaid as some jihadist groups are known to remunerate their fighters. Therefore, they accept Hegghammer's definition under the condition that payment is not included as a factor (Carter, Maher & Neumann 2014, pp.9-10).

Why are they going?

Grievance

In another short insight from ICSR, using the information from the database, Zelin (2013b) writes that the most commonly cited motivations for foreign fighters are: the horrific nature of the conflict, the disproportionate power that Bashar al-Assad is using, and the lack of support from the global community. By analysing Twitter posts and comparing tweets about Gulf and Middle Eastern Politics to the Syrian Civil War over the same one month period, Barrett (2014) found that posts related to the Syrian Civil War and foreign fighters in particular showed a much higher level of response by retweets and comments than those posts about Gulf and Middle Eastern Politics. Barrett assumes that this result exemplifies that many people feel personally affected by the conflict and thus feel an obligation to do something about it (pp.18-20).

Identity

A second explanation for the motivation of Western individuals to join the jihad draws on analogies with previous waves, and revolves around the idea of collective identity, which in turn is rooted in either ideology or ethno-religious belonging. Hegghammer (2011) traces the origins of the Islamic foreign fighter movement back to the 1970s pan-Islamist identity movement in Hijaz, Saudi Arabia (pp.89-90). This movement is the product of the exiled Muslim Brotherhood activists from Egypt, Iraq, and Syria who established non-violent international Islamic organisations and universities mostly in the Hijaz region. These organisations set up global networks with the aim of distributing Muslim aid whilst at the same time, they were espousing powerful discourse about the outward threats that Muslim nations faced and the need to protect them. With oil money, new technologies, and "soft power" at their disposal, these activists were successfully able to promote their strong messages of pan-Islamism and inter-Muslim solidarity. This discourse and cultural framing in turn allowed for the first successful mobilisation of foreign fighters that went to fight in Afghanistan during the 1980s in the name of pan-Islamism (ibid, pp.56-7). In light of this, Hegghammer argues that the Muslim foreign fighter phenomenon today is traced back to this movement. The analysis is based on past foreign fighter mobilisations – notably the Afghanistan war in the 1980s – rare Arabic sources, and interviews with former fighters. Writing in 2013 as the number of foreign fighters drawn into Syria was escalating, Hegghammer (2013a) refers back to his theory of pan-Islamism, and argues that the high numbers of foreign fighters in this conflict is due to the increased ease of access to pan-Islamic propaganda on the Internet, which effectively reaches a larger audience. Thus whilst

the motivations remain the same as in the Afghanistan wars in the 1980s, the propaganda is more far-reaching and able to attract a greater number of people.

Malet (2009, 2013) also takes an identity approach, as he looks to historical examples of foreign fighter movements, including some which did not involve Islamic foreign fighters, like the Spanish Civil War, the Israeli War of Independence, and the Texas War of Independence. Related to Hegghammer's interpretation on the Hijaz movement and how powerful discourse was used to promote the protection of Muslims under threat, Malet argues that local wars can be framed in a particular way to show that a certain group is endangered. The aim of this is ultimately to encourage transnational members who share an identity with the group under threat to help fight the oppressor as their participation in the conflict is vital for the group's survival (Malet 2009, pp.99-100). Therefore, Malet's (2009, 2013) main argument is that local conflicts are often framed in a defensive way by recruiters to encourage outsiders who share some kind of affiliation with the insurgent group, be it religion, or ethnicity, to join the conflict and protect their shared identity.

Ideology

A third motivating factor relates to ideology. Barrett (2014) attributes some motivation to jihad and martyrdom. Given that Syria features in Islamist narrative as the land of jihad, it is unsurprising that recruiters have used this rhetoric successfully and this has undoubtedly a strong motivator for young Muslims who wish to become a martyr (p.18). However, Zelin (2013b) states that it is important not to assume that all foreign fighters are jihadists. In another short ICSR insight, using the data from the database, Zelin (ibid) found that foreign fighters join three distinct groups: those affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), independent local forces, and "so-called jihadists", whose ideology is similar to al Qaeda. Thus, ideologies differ amongst foreign fighters, and not all of them are jihadist in orientation (ibid).

Subculture

A fourth explanatory approach might revolve around the concept of subculture, a thesis already voiced in relation to 'regular' jihadis (i.e. the ones who have not travelled to Syria, see for instance Dantschke 2013; Hemmingsen 2015; PISOIU 2015). In the case of the foreign fighters, this would mean first of all that individuals join the Syrian jihad not primarily due to political or humanitarian reasons, but rather for the sense of adventure, the fame, the chance to be part of something exciting and exclusive, and to project themselves on a world stage. The jihadi subculture would also mean the pursuit a particular lifestyle, marked by a strong presence of various specific subcultural elements such as music, clothing and symbols. A cursory look over the kinds of postings foreign fighters spread on the social media would seem to support this thesis. Selfies depict poses with guns and weaponry and Hollywood style professional pictures with anti-Western and jihadi slogans. There is the propagation of lifestyle: 'jihadi hipster' with modern clothes and hairdos, gangsta cool, with villas, swimming pools and women, and testosterone kicks captured in lines such as 'real struggles need real men', all wrapped up in religiously inspired recipes encouraging polygamy, the hijab, and martyrdom. Traditional clothing combine with Western products, from crew necks,

zip jackets and hoodies to American caps or even cowboy hats, trainers and army clothing. Unsurprisingly, two of the most prominent European jihadis in Syria are two former rappers Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary from the UK, and Deso Dogg (Denis Cuspert) from Germany.

A sample of foreign fighters from the UK and Germany

This study sought to obtain a sample of British and German foreign fighters in order to capture their profiles. Based on a 2006 study on jihadi terrorists by Clingendael, and Sageman's 2004 publication *Understanding Terror Networks*, some of the listed variables were used and adapted for this study: name, sex, age, citizenship, ethnic origin, socio-economic status, education, faith as youth, occupation, family status, criminal record, date of travel to Syria, and any additional notes on radicalisation. The data was collected from media reports and, for the British foreign fighters, secondary sources from the 2013 #Greenbirds report. Initially, the intention was also to collect primary data from social media accounts, however many of these have been shut down to discourage further recruitment. Furthermore, since tougher measures have been put in place by Western authorities and governments, the foreign fighters have not been so open about their identities. Our sample comprises 54 individuals – 34 British and 20 German, in roughly equal shares deceased, and still currently in Syria or in custody. While clearly not representative for all the foreign fighters originating in these two countries, it yet allows for a few key observations:

- In both cases, the large majority of foreign fighters are male, while the female contingent is slightly bigger in the UK - 15% vs. 10 % in Germany;
- Also in both cases, the large majority of foreign fighters (88%) were aged between 16 and 30 when they left for Syria; 70% up to 25 years old in Germany and 77% in the UK;
- Virtually all of the foreign fighters in our sample (97% vs. 90%) are citizens of the respective country;
- The large majority were originally Muslim, whereas the contingent of converts is significantly higher in Germany: 40% vs. 12% in the UK sample;
- Most foreign fighters in both countries were single at the time of leaving for Syria 87% for the UK and 74% for Germany; in several instances however the individuals married once in Syria – something that applies to most women;
- In terms of socio-economic status, there is a clear discrepancy between the British and the German samples; the majority of British foreign fighters are middle-class, followed by poor background and working class, whereas the majority of the German foreign fighters are working class, followed by middle class and poor background⁵ (see Figure 1 below representing the distribution of a total of 41 on whom this kind of information could be found);
- As for education, in the UK sample (on information that could be found), one third of the foreign fighters were university educated or about to attend university. Around 15% attended a private or Grammar school⁶, and 93% had at least attended school

⁵ We defined the three categories in the following way: poor background: the person lives in a deprived area, is receiving state benefits, or has intermittent employment; working class – blue collar work; middle class – white collar work or if the individual went to private school.

⁶ Grammar schools are exclusive state schools

until 16⁷. In the German sample, from those that were known, 17% attended a Gymnasium, 25% attended a Hauptschule, and 17% attended a Realschule. From the sample, only one fighter attended university. This shows a high discrepancy between the education levels of the UK and German foreign fighters.

- Unsurprisingly then, there are some clear differences among the distributions by occupation, whereby in the UK most foreign fighters are students, followed by white collar and pupils, whereas in Germany most are blue collar workers, followed by pupils and individuals with no occupation (see Figure 2 below, representing the distribution of a total of 46 on whom this kind of information could be found);
- Only roughly a quarter of the total sample (50 on which this information could be found) had a criminal record, whereby the percentage was higher in the German sample: 35% as opposed to 17%. An interesting observation here was also the fact that some of the individuals had been previously convicted or investigated for terrorism related offences.

Figure 1 Distribution by socio-economic background

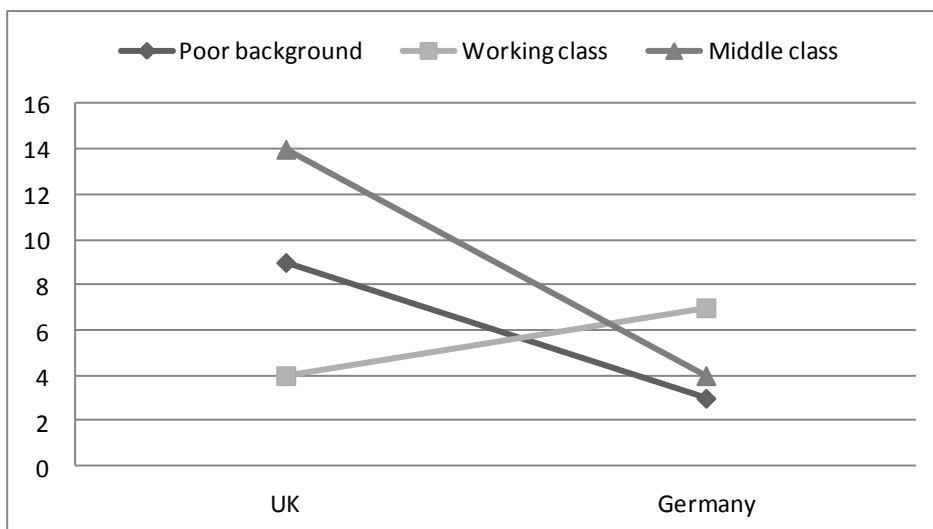
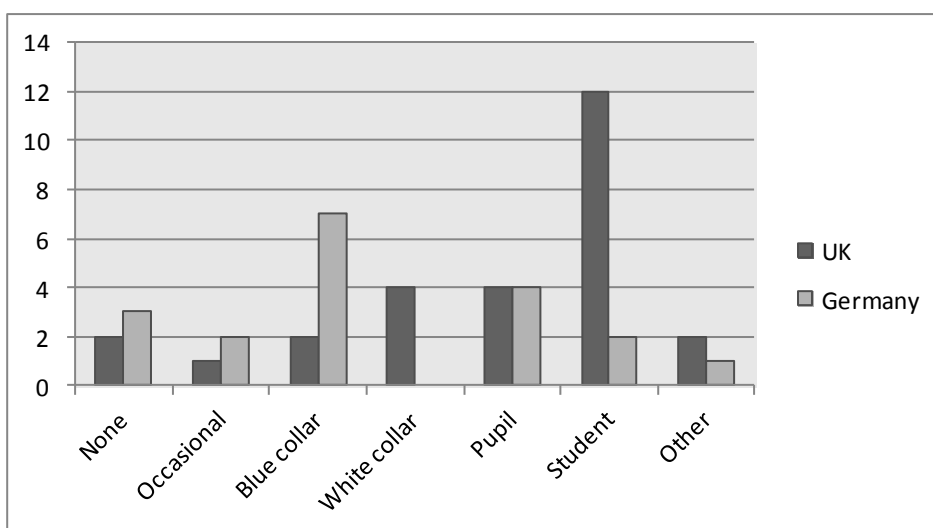


Figure 2 Distribution by occupation



⁷Attending school until 16 in the UK means completing first school degree (GCSEs)

These trends largely confirm the findings of a so far unpublished analysis of the German Gemeinsames Terrorismusabwehrzentrum (Common Antiterrorism Center Busse 2014). In comparison with other studies, there are clear similarities regarding the age range of the foreign fighters as most of those in the sample are young. This correlates with Maher's (2013) short ICSR insight, and the information that Barrett (2014) obtained from governments. Furthermore, as with Maher's (2013) British sample, many of the British foreign fighters in our database were of south-Asian ethnic origin, and either university educated, or about to attend university. Our findings also confirm Barrett's (2014) analysis that many fighters are second or third generation immigrants. However, our sample of Germans also showed a high percentage of Muslim converts. In comparison to the Dutch sample offered by Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol (2014), the profiles more closely match our German sample, rather than the UK sample. This is because the authors found that the boys came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with an even mix of Islamic immigrant, or Dutch origins. It is thus interesting that the UK fighters appear to represent a higher educational level standard and socio-economic status than the German and Dutch.

Conclusion

While the theoretical grounding on the topic of foreign fighters is limited, existing studies nevertheless offer some insight into numbers, profiles, recruitment strategies and possible motivational mechanisms. The study we conducted on a sample of British and German foreign fighters shows that the majority of recruits from both countries are male, young, and were single at the time of leaving to Syria. A series of differences were also noted between the two country samples, especially relating to socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The German foreign fighters are less educated and coming from lower socio-economic strata than the British ones. Also a higher proportion of the German foreign fighters had been previously involved in crime, some in terrorism related offences. This might involve the question whether imprisonment as opposed to other strategies such as re-integration in society might be the more adequate option for known jihadis. Overall, the results on the British and German sample broadly confirm others dealing with British and respectively Dutch foreign fighters.

In terms of motivation, by viewing the phenomenon through the lens of collective identity, Malet and Heghammer argue that careful framing of the local conflict encourages those from abroad to join their fellow men in the struggle to protect their shared identity that is under attack. Framing and discourse have proved to be central to the recruitment of jihadists in Syria. This is evident in the empirical studies discussed above, as well as from anecdotal accounts in the press. As the ICSR "#Greenbirds" report shows, foreign fighters are influenced and motivated through successful framing of the conflict by disseminators, as well as encouragement and legitimacy from spiritual advisors. Furthermore, positive framing directly from the fighters themselves has encouraged fellow Muslims to join the "five star jihad". This, along with the images and eulogies afforded to martyrs also drives the propaganda message that this is a "worthy cause" to protect Muslims under threat by the Assad regime. The subcultural aspect remains a relatively underdeveloped field of study, yet initial empirical observation warrant more intense preoccupation with this facet of the Syrian jihad.

The empirical studies also demonstrated the importance of open-source information and social media in tracking foreign fighters and determining their influences and motivations. The Syrian conflict is the first in which researchers have had access to this type of rich

information and data. However, due to the growing concern of the accessibility of these pages and their impact on online radicalisation and influencing more young people to go to Syria, Twitter and Facebook have taken many of the foreign fighter accounts down, which will undoubtedly affect further research that relies on this method. More problems for research arise because the nature of the conflict does not allow for the extraction of accurate numbers of foreign fighters, and much of the research on this topic has relied heavily on estimates.

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Annex: Empirical Studies on Foreign Fighters

There have been a number of empirical studies carried out on foreign fighters. This varies from providing estimates of the number of foreign fighters, assessing motivations and influences, evaluating return rates, and profiling the foreign fighters. The table below summarises the main aims, the data used, and the type of analysis from the studies presented. All the researchers involved in the empirical studies above acknowledged that their samples are not representative enough to draw up any concrete conclusions.

Study	Aim	Data Used	Type of Analysis
Barrett (2014) Soufan Group	Provide general context on foreign fighters and estimate the numbers that are out there. Report targeted at governments to offer suggestions for policy development on potential recruits and returnees	The report used information and estimates available from governments. The governments obtained this intelligence through social media, community sources, and investigations. Foreign fighters from all countries worldwide are considered where the information was available	Quantitative focus on number of foreign fighters. Brief analysis on who goes and why using sources from governments, social media, and traditional media sources
Carter, Maher, and Neumann (2014) ICSR	Identify Western and European foreign fighters through open-source material and investigate how they receive information about the conflict and who inspires them	The report used a database based on 12 months of data collected from social media profiles of 190 foreign fighters from Western and European countries. Contact was made with the foreign fighters in some cases, and also with the identified disseminators	Using platforms such as Palantir Torch, Gephi, and Node Excel, the researchers were able to visualise the data in order to analyse the foreign fighters' interests and who they followed
Hegghammer (2013b)	Provide basic estimates of Western jihadists' theatre choices and some evidence on the motivations. Further, empirically explore the conceptual distinction between foreign fighting and terrorism	Hegghammer collated secondary data from existing overviews on terrorist plots by other scholars, and identified the biographical data of each plotter through information gathered from Lexis-Nexus, World News Connection, and Google. For the number of foreign fighters, Hegghammer used secondary evidence of numerical estimates, and in some cases memoirs of former foreign fighters. The focus was on Western jihadists from Europe, the	Combining quantitative data and coded qualitative data, Hegghammer compared the theatre choices of Western jihadists. Using the qualitative data, the author also attempted to analyse motivations of foreign fighters. Furthermore, Hegghammer provided figures for the amount of domestic attacks that had been carried out by former foreign fighters

		USA, Canada, and Australia. The data sample is between the dates 1990-2010	
Weggemans, Bakker, and Groel (2014)	Identify why Dutch nationals get involved in fighting jihad abroad	The researchers closely investigated the life stories of five known Dutch jihadist foreign fighters who left to Syria between Summer 2012 and Autumn 2013. For each case, three to seven people who were close to the subjects during their radicalisation phase and the preparation for leaving for Syria were interviewed between November 2013 and April 2014. The topics discussed were related to character and personality, family situation, social network, meaning of life and religion, political ideas, and personal experiences. The interviews were also supplemented with available open-source information	Dutch foreign fighter profiling - by analysing the information available from the interviews and open-source outlets, and drawing up common variables, the researchers formed two composite fictional stories of Dutch men who left to go to Syria. The profiles involve young individuals, coming from lower class socio-economic backgrounds and deprived areas, with either Islamic immigrant or Dutch family backgrounds, and who came into contact with an influential preacher or group after a period of crisis
Zelin, Kohlmann, and al-Kouri (2013) The Washington Institute	Provide an overview and biographical information on Sunni foreign fighters in Syria. Assess where the majority originate from and which groups they are joining	Over eleven months, from July 2012 to May 2013, the researchers catalogued the biographies of 280 foreign fighters with photographic and video evidence to document their personal accounts. They obtained this data through password protected jihadi web forums, Facebook pages, and some regional media sources. The focus was on foreign fighters from the Middle East and North Africa, with very few Western foreign fighters accounted for	The researchers found that the majority of fighters sampled had joined up with the most hard-line groups. Compared to earlier studies of foreign fighters in Iraq, the results showed an increase of Lybian and Tunisian recruits (the former surpassing the Saudi Arabian ones), indicating an impact of the Arab Spring on regional politics.

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