Foreign Fighters Post Conflict:
Assessing the Impact of Arab Afghans and Syrian-Iraqi Foreign Fighters on Global Security

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ABSTRACT

Foreign fighters during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan did not play a big role in the actual conflict. However, they did develop critical skills and networks during this time that allowed some of these individuals to disseminate radical ideology and technical know-how, join in other jihadist conflicts, and establish terrorist organizations which severely impacted global security. By examining the post-conflict roles of foreign fighters in Afghanistan, it is possible to see potential paths that can be taken by foreign fighters currently in Syria and Iraq. Taking into account contextual changes, it is possible to use this information to assess the risk of post-conflict foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq on global security. Due to the technological and social changes, large swaths of ungoverned territory and the sheer number of fighters, the foreign fighters leaving this theater will be a risk to global security particularly in regions that lack the resources to monitor returned fighters.

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INTRODUCTION

The foreign fighter phenomenon is neither new nor unique to Syria and Iraq. However, due to contextual changes, this conflict is seeing a far greater number of foreign fighters from a more diverse background than previously seen. The threat of the foreign fighter does not solely reside in their ability to bolster troop numbers, but in their actions beyond the conflict. To understand the particular foreign fighter phenomenon of Syria and Iraq, this paper will focus on two questions: (1) what is the historical context of Islamist foreign fighters and their post-conflict roles and (2) what contextual and environmental changes have occurred that might affect the impact of foreign fighters during and after the Syria-Iraq conflict. The historical perspective allows for understanding the threat of the foreign fighter through previous experience while contextualizing the current phenomenon will improve the accuracy of the assessment of the potential foreign fighter threat. This combination of historical and environmental context will create a broad understanding of the contemporary movement and the way it may develop further.

This paper will first explore the advent of Islamist foreign fighter phenomenon through the Soviet-Afghan war. The Soviet-Afghan war connected radical Islamists and created a network of actors that would severely impact global security in the late-1990s and 2000s. Analyzing the activities of foreign fighters from the Soviet-Afghan war creates an understanding of the potential paths foreign fighters leaving Syria may take today. In examining the roles of foreign fighters after Afghanistan and taking into account environmental changes, the potential threat of foreign fighters in Syria is clearer thus giving the West an accurate threat assessment of the role current foreign fighters might play post-conflict.

This paper will then focus on the contextual changes that have allowed the use of foreign fighters in Syria-Iraq to be ubiquitous and more dangerous than the previous threat of foreign fighters. Foreign fighters will leave Syria and Iraq with a network of other extremists as well as with skills, knowledge, and credibility. Due to the overwhelming number of foreign fighters, an array of ungoverned and under-governed

regions, and the inability for governmental capacity to monitor all foreign fighters that return home, those foreign fighters that wish to continue their violent extremist activities beyond Syria and Iraq will have both the capabilities and space necessary to do so.

Framing the Issue

The issue of foreign fighters in the West has been strongly shaped by the Western media's preoccupation with the idea of the Western foreign fighter. Media reports tend to focus on the radicalization, movement, and actions of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, emphasizing the potential threat they bring with them when they return to their home countries.[1] While the post-conflict actions of foreign fighters, in general, is a cause for concern, by consistently framing the foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq as 'Western,' the public and policymakers alike overlook the global nature of this movement.

There are currently over 20,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, according to an estimate by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation.[2] Of those 20,000 fighters approximately 15-25% of them are Western[3], while a majority of fighters come for other areas around the world.[4] And while the Western fighters could pose a risk to Western countries, the capacity, infrastructure, and resources of Western countries independently, as well as their ability to coordinate, greatly reduces the ability of violent extremists moving from the Syrian-Iraqi battlefield to the West. There are many other countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast and Central Asia which are seeing higher numbers of citizens traveling to Syria and Iraq than the West yet lack the same capabilities to monitor and apprehend returnees that are planning violent attacks. Retuning foreign fighters will receive the most scrutiny from countries with the resources

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[1] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, 2014, "Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: the Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Brookings Institute*.
[2] Peter R. Neumann, 2015, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," *ICSR*.
[3] For definition, see page 5.
[4] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, 2014, "Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: the Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Brookings Institute*

and capabilities to monitor suspicious activities. In order to accurately assess the foreign fighter phenomenon, it is critical to assess the foreign fighter holistically and move away from a focus on Western foreign fighters.

Defining Terms

This paper will use Thomas Hegghammer's definition of foreign fighter which is "an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid."[5] These requirements allow for the separation of paid fighters whose motivations, and thus actions post-conflict, would differ from an ideologically motivated foreign fighter. There are two caveats to Hegghammer's definition which must be addressed. One, it is necessary to understand that the concept of the foreign fighter is rooted in the concept of the nation-state. To be a foreign fighter, as stated above, one must not have citizenship in the state in which they are fighting. However, many people do not acknowledge or recognize the borders of the nation-state system.[6] For example, a Pashtun fighter living in Pakistan would have a closer affinity to, and may not consider himself a foreign participant in, a Pashtun struggle in Afghanistan. In this example, identity association with the nation-state is weak, if it exists at all. "Different identity markers—province of origin, ethnic group, tribe, sub-clan or any other—can determine one's level of 'foreignness.'"[7] As for the second point, there are degrees of 'foreign-ness'.[8] A Lebanese citizen traveling to Syria may have stronger ties to the conflict, to individuals there, and have an easier time assimilating than an Arab from Morocco, who would also have an easier time than someone from Germany or Indonesia. Proximity to the conflict affects how foreign, and thus how difficult the integration, of a foreign fighter might be.

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[5] , Thomas Hegghammer, 2011, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35(3): 57-58.
[6] Barak Mendelsohn, 2011, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 192.
[7] Barak Mendelsohn, 2011, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 192.
[8] Barak Mendelsohn, 2011, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 192.

Defining the category of 'western' nations from other nations is important to understanding and disassembling the common framework that assesses the issue of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. This term has been used voraciously to discuss foreign fighters in the media and in governments across Europe and North America. The West is not a monolithic region but does distinguish combatants of different origins, and the environment to which they might return post-conflict. While lumping the rest of the world into one category is arbitrary, the point of doing is to emphasize the number of other foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and the problems that they may cause. Cases and examples utilized later in this paper will more specifically address regions and countries. A 'non-Western' categorization is an attempt to highlight the foreign fighter issue more broadly and place the risks in a global, integrated context. The countries denoted as 'the West' are extracted from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation's list of western Europe, along with the addition of the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, which is currently producing the best data on the number of foreign fighters and their countries of origins. Areas included in the term 'the West' are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States.

When the term 'Islamist' is used within this paper, it refers to the religious motivations of the foreign fighters. While what motivates individuals to become a foreign fighter varies person to person the terminology and rhetoric used by foreign fighters both in 1980s Afghanistan and present-day Syria are Islam focused, upholding Islamic principles, and protecting Muslims from the enemy.[9] Islamism conveys a political side of

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[9] See: Gilles Kepel, 2002, Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam, (Cambridge: Harvard Press); Mark Juergensmeyer, 2013, "Religion in the Global Jihadi War," *Gods and Arms: On Religion and Armed Conflict*, ed. Kjell- Ake Nordquist (Eugene: Pickwick Publications); Ryan Mauro, 2014, "Understanding Islamist Extremism," Clarion Project, https://www.clarionproject.org/understanding-islamism/islamic-extremism; Daniel L. Byman, 2015, "Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets," *The Brookings Institute*, http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2015/04/29-terrorism-in-africa-byman; *Dabiq Magazine*, https://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq ; *Inspire Magazine*, http://jihadology.net/category/inspire-magazine/; Seth Jones, 2010, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company); Cole Bunzel, 2015, "From Paper State to Caliphate: the Ideology of the Islamic State," *The Brookings Institution*, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf.

Islam and the implementation of Islam into a political system. This term is necessary in order to separate Islamist foreign fighters for other historical foreign fighters with different ideologies such as Communist foreign fighters. Islamist is defined here because this paper focuses on a subsection of foreign fighters: those that appear to be motivated by Islamic ideology and the need to defend Islam. This is also a reminder that foreign fighters are neither unique to this time period nor unique to Islamist conflicts.

AFGHANISTAN: UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The origin of Islamist foreign fighters is traced to 1980s Afghanistan. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, there was a call to arms by rebels within the country, a call of jihad, to expel the Soviet Union. The Soviet invasion "galvanized the rebellion that had emerged after the Saur Revolution into a genuine, broad-based national resistance movement."[10] These non-state actors were known as the mujahideen, which roughly translates to "soldiers of God."[11] The mujahideen were comprised of multiple, independent groups with a variety of beliefs and goals that fluctuated across a wide spectrum. This makes it difficult to simply categorize these fighters as they are not a monolithic group. The subgroups creating the mujahideen were uneasy allies with each other. Two unifying factors kept the [12]mujahideen together during the 1980s: (1) their desire to remove the Soviets from Afghanistan and (2) their intention of creating an Islamist government in Afghanistan, though what constituted an Islamist government also varied from group to group. As Steven Tanner states in his book on Afghanistan's military history, "[t]he Soviet[s] achieved that rarity in Afghanistan history: a unifying sense of political purpose that cut across tribal, ethnic, geographic, and economic lines."[13]

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[10] Shaista Wahab and Barry Youngerman, 2010, *A Brief History of Afghanistan, Second Edition* (New York: Checkmark Books), 162.

[11] Stephan Tanner, 2009, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War Against the Taliban* (De Capo Press: Philadelphia), 244.

[12] Lauren Stockbower, 29 JUN 2981, "Afghan rebels unite in stronger alliance, form 'government in exile," *Christian Science Monitor*, http://www.csmonitor.com/1981/0629/062946.html.

[13] Stephan Tanner, 2009, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War Against the Taliban* (De Capo Press: Philadelphia), 244.

It was from this environment, and within these groups, that the Islamist foreign fighter phenomenon developed.

When the Soviet-Afghan conflict started, there were few Arabs among the mujahideen and the idea of "long distant foreign fighter mobilizations… [was] rare."[14] Transnational jihad had not yet emerged as a popular and accepted part of extremist religious ideology. At this time, most jihadi organizations were focused internally on the enemy within their state, seeking local governmental and regime changes.[15] While foreign fighters were present in other wars in the Middle East which could be described in Islamic terms, such as the 1948 Arab-Israel war, travel to this fighting was dependent on "permission from parents, creditors, and political authority."[16]

At the beginning of the Soviet invasion, there was only a handful of Arabs in Afghanistan who were part of "humanitarian efforts and were mainly sponsored by Arab and Muslim governments, as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs),"[17] such as the governments of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The numbers of Arabs in Afghanistan began to increase when the attitude of transnational jihad changed under Sheikh Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, a Palestinian Sunni Islamic scholar. He would go on to help establish al-Qaeda with Osama bin Laden. Azzam, who was frustrated by the low number of foreign fighters, issued a fatwa declaring that the struggle in Afghanistan was a jihad and fighting in this conflict was the "a compulsory duty upon all."[18] His fatwa was then supported by Adb al-Aziz bin Baz, Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti, lending Azzam more credence.[19] Azzam's call for international jihad invoked images of traditional medieval jihad, recalling the glory days of Islam and fighting for the *umma*, the Muslim community.[20]

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[14] Thomas Hegghammer, 2011, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35(3): 53-54.

[15] Thomas Hegghammer, 2011, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35(3): 63.

[16] Thomas Hegghammer, 2011, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35(3): 75.

[17] Mohammed M. Hafez, 2009, "Jihad after Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (32)2: 75.

[18] Abdullah Azzam, 1979, "Defense of the Muslim Lands," *Archive.org*, trans. by Brothers in Ribatt in 1996.

[19] Abdullah Azzam, 1979, "Defense of the Muslim Lands," *Archive.org*, trans. by Brothers in Ribatt in 1996.

[20] Thomas Hegghammer, 2011, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35(3): 76.

These images appealed to young extreme Islamists who wanted to do their part to protect their community. Due to his influence, Azzam is now considered the spiritual father of jihad.[21]

This powerful call for jihad occurred in conjunction with "publications issued by international Islamic organizations (IIOs) … call[ing] for financial contributions,"[22] which highlighted the plight of the Muslims. These publications further incensed and encouraged potential foreign fighters to go to Afghanistan to protect their fellow Muslims. Azzam used existing charity organizations and his socio-religious connections to recruit foreign fighters to Afghanistan.[23] This movement marks "the emergence of a qualitatively new ideological movement or sub-current of Islamism that did not exist before the 1980s,"[24] one that focused on transnational jihad and gave birth to the Islamist foreign fighter.

There were an estimated 20,000 foreign fighters in total in Afghanistan in the 1980s.[25] These fighters came from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Pakistan in addition to small numbers of other foreign fighters such as "Central Asians from China (Uighurs presumably), Bangladeshis, Indians, a Westerner or Two, North Africans, among others."[26] Much like the population of foreign fighters in Syria, the foreign fighters in Afghanistan were predominately Arab; however, the Arab Afghans, as they were known, were not major players within this conflict. Even at its peak, the number of foreign fighters "did not amount to more than a few thousand at any given time."[27]

Foreign fighters were not considered an asset in Afghanistan. While the mujahideen wanted and needed foreign donations in order to operate, the foreign fighters

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[21] Bruce Riedel, 2011, "The 9/11 Attacks' Spiritual Father," *The Brookings Institution*.
[22] Thomas Hegghammer, 2011, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35(3): 78-79.
[23] David Malet, 2010, "Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions," Orbis 105-106.
[24] Thomas Hegghammer, 2011, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35(3): 71-72.
[25] Peter Neumann, 2015, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s." ICSR
[26] Brian Glyn Williams, 2011, "On the rail of the 'Lions of Islam': Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 1980-2010," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 217.
[27] Barak Mendelsohn, 2011, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 190

that joined the mujahideen were general seen as tourists and a liability due to their short tours of duty and lack of skills. [28] The Arab Afghans tended to be overzealous, undertrained, and ignorant of Afghan culture. They were ineffective, tended to "served in supportive roles in humanitarian agencies, media offices, political organizations and hospitals,"[29] and had limited impact on the outcome of battles.

After the Soviet-Afghan war ended and the Afghan civil war began, foreign fighters started to leave Afghanistan and begin their post-conflict lives. Regardless of their contributions on the battlefield, these foreign fighters gained valuable skills and connections that would have a far greater impact on global security than they did in assisting the Afghans in fighting the Soviets.

Life after the Soviet-Afghan War

Irrespective of this limited role in the Soviet-Afghan war, Arab Afghan foreign fighters impacted the global community in the 1990s and 2000s. From this war emerged two distinct categories of fights: those that demobilized and returned home and those that continued to wage jihad both at home and abroad. While the activities of a foreign fighter post-conflict are varied, those that chose to continue their jihad were coming for a position of prestige and experience. These fighters used their knowledge, training, and new-found credibility to spread a radical Islamic ideology. Some foreign fighters from the Soviet-Afghan war set up terrorist organizations, committed terrorist attacks, and fought abroad on other battlefields. As Tanner states: "These were Arabs who had joined the jihad in Afghanistan, emerged afterwards with training, weapons, and combat experience."[30] However not all foreign fighters continued this battle post-Afghanistan, many returned home and settled into an average life.[31] The path of a foreign fighter post-

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[28] Thomas Hegghammer, 2011, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35(3): 63.

[29] Barak Mendelsohn, 2011, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 190

[30] Stephan Tanner, 2009, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War Against the Taliban*, De Capo Press: Philadelphia, 273.

[31] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, 2014, "Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: the Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Brookings Institute*

conflict is neither linear nor set, as these veterans decided whether to return home to live a normal life to continuing violent extremist activities. As Mendelson says, "a fighter's importance is rarely linear, extending beyond his contribution on any given battlefield…Equally important, the role of foreign fighters keeps evolving."[32] By examining the post-conflict roles of foreign fighters from the Soviet-Afghan war, it is possible to assess areas of risk for current Syrian and Iraqi foreign fighters post-conflict.

While some foreign fighters remained abroad after the Soviet-Arab war, many fighters return to the country of origin if possible. However reception by the state varied widely and impacted the future course of these fighters. Governmental policies and responses to foreign fighters affect a foreign fighter's ability to reintegrate themselves into society. Some fighters are able to return home and re-assimilate into society. One example of reintegration policy was seen in the 1990s in United Arab Emirates (UAE) where returning fighters received social welfare stipends from the government. [33] This encouraged assimilation and integration into society where "others, such as those in Egypt and North Africa, faced far more suspicion."[34] Many Egyptian foreign fighters were not well received at home; they faced government oppression and imprisonment. Many Saudi Arabian foreign fighters were jailed and interrogated upon their return.[35]

As Holmer states, "[t]he choices these men and women make next… and the threat they may pose to their communities will be heavily determined by what options they have in this next state of their lives, and how they are treated upon return."[36] The governmental policies that dictate the future of foreign fighters upon return can play a critical role in disengaging foreign fighters from violent activities or limit the options to fighters who feel their only choice is to stay engaged with violent extremist groups. Another result of governmental policy is the creation of stateless foreign fighters. Some foreign fighters

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[32] Barak Mendelsohn, 2011, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 192.

[33] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, 2014, "Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: the Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Brookings Institute* 19.

[34] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, 2014, "Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: the Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Brookings Institute*19.

[35] Lawrence Wright, 2006, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage Books), 185.

[36] Georgia Holmer, 2015, "What To Do When Foreign Fighters Come Home," *Foreign Policy*, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/01/what-to-do-when-foreign-fighters-come-home-isis-islamic-state-syria-iraq/.

were unable to return to their countries of origin and "they became a stateless, vagrant mob of religious mercenaries."[37] As governments look toward the foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq, evaluating these past governmental policies and their effect on the disengagement of foreign fighters should be utilized to create a cohesive, effective policy on permanent foreign fighter disengagement. While giving returned fighters a stipend, as the UAE did, may not be the best policy choice, complete alienation or the inability to return home may lead those who want to disengage for the foreign fighter life style no option but to continue the fight.

As previously mentioned, some foreign fighters from the Soviet-Afghan conflict became nomadic, moving from conflict to conflict. This was "either because they wanted to continue the jihad or because they simply could not return home."[38] Veterans of the Afghanistan war were seen in Algeria, Chechnya, Bosnia, and the Philippines.[39] As Riedal shows, "[t]he blowback from the Afghan war was massive and enduring."[40]

Foreign fighters played a large role in Bosnia in the early 1990s as the conflict was adopted by Islamic fundamentalists as the newest holy war."[41] Foreign fighters arrived in Bosnia between 1992 and 1993 and, in total, there were approximately 5,000 foreign fighters in this conflict.[42] Many of these foreign fighters were veterans from the Soviet-Afghan war and included Saudi Arabians, Egyptians, Sudanese and Algerians.[43] Much like in Afghanistan, these Islamic foreign fighters "were seen as an uncontrollable"[44] and "their zeal to enforce a militant form of Islam that most Bosnian Muslims themselves do

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[37] Lawrence Wright, 2006, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, New York: Vintage Books. 185
[38] Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker, 2014, "Returning Western foreign fighters: The case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 3.
[39] Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, 2015, "ISIS and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon," *The Atlantic*, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/isis-and-the-foreign-fighter-problem/387166/; Paul Tumelty, 2006, "The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya," *The Jamestown Foundation*, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=658#.Vv5-UKQrKM8.
[40] Bruce Riedal, 2015, "Syria's Terror Blowback Threatens Europe and the United States," *The Daily Beast*,
[41] Chris Hedges, 1992, "Muslims from Afar Joining 'Holy War in Bosnia," *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/05/world/muslims-from-afar-joining-holy-war-in-bosnia.html.
[42] Evan Kohlmann, 2004, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network,* (Oxford: Berg Publishers), 16.
[43] Hedges, "Muslims from Afar Joining 'Holy War in Bosnia."
[44] de Roy van Zuijdewijn, Jeanine and Edwin Bakker. 2014. "Returning Western foreign fighters: The case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*.

not espouse"[45] caused tension between the local Muslim population and these outsiders. These men were used as shock troops during the Bosnia war and were "revered in the Arab world, and videotapes that [extolled] their bravery and dedication [were] sold on the street corners from Aden to Cairo."[46] With the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995, some foreign fighters decided to settle in Bosnia due to the government's willingness to issue residency documentation to them while others left to country for home or other battle fields. The Bosnian war, unlike Afghanistan, did give foreign fighters extensive field combat experience bolstering the number skills with which they left the conflict. Veteran fighters from Bosnia have been "arriving to Syria [with] military skills and war experience."[47] Veteran foreign fighters can be impactful in multiple conflicts, spreading their ideology and knowledge in many arenas, and prolonging conflicts by increase the number of combatants on a battlefield or by introducing new tactics, terrorism or excessive violence, into conflicts.

In Chechnya, Arab foreign fighters co-opted the secular-nationalist movement of the largely Muslim republic which claimed independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.[48] Although not numerically significant, "foreign Arab fighters have played an essential role in shaping the conflict far beyond their numbers."[49] When Russia invaded Chechnya in 1994, Akhmad Kadyrov who commanded Chechen guerilla forces called for "jihad against the Russians during the First Chechen War,"[50] which transformed the Chechen conflict from a separatist issue into a part of the global jihadist movement. As media attention on the conflict grew, it began to attract violent Islamist extremists such as Ibn al-Khattab who after developing his skills "in Afghanistan during the 1980s and

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[45] Chris Hedges, 1995, "Foreign Islamic Fighters in Bosnia Pose a Potential Threat for G.I.'s," *The New York Times*
[46] Chris Hedges, 1995, "Foreign Islamic Fighters in Bosnia Pose a Potential Threat for G.I.'s," *The New York Times*
[47] Vlado Azinović and Muahmed Jusić, 2015, "The Lure of the Syria War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent," *Atlantic Initiative*.
[48] Fred Weir, 26 FEB 2002, "A new terror-war front: the Caucacus," *The Christian Science Monitor*, http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0226/p01s04-woeu.html.
[49] Lorenzo Vidino, 2006, "The Arab Foreign Fighters and the Sacralization of the Chechen Conflict,"*Al-Nakhlah at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy*, http://fletcher.tufts.edu/~/media/Fletcher/Microsites/al%20Nakhlah/archives/2006/vidino.pdf.
[50] Joshua Yaffa, FEB 2016, "Putin's Dragon," *The New Yorker*, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/putins-dragon.

hon[ing them] in Tajikistan early the following decade, [he] made a qualitative contribution to the fight against the Russians."[51] Khattan, a Saudi citizen, travelled to Chechnya with eight other experienced Arab Afghans in 1995.[52] Foreign fighters in this theater were received with mixed feelings from the Chechen leaders, some welcomed them believing the "mujahideen were a great help and support"[53] while others feared that these foreign fighters would cause "a lot of trouble."[54] Ibn al-Kattab continued to develop his connections to al-Qaeda and recruit additional foreign fighters to Chechnya, producing propaganda that emphasized the plight of Muslims in Chechnya and the role of the conflict in the context of the growing global jihad.[55]

In 1996, the first Chechen war came to a close, Russia retreated and areas of Chechnya were then governed by guerilla leaders, foreign jihadists, and Akhmad Kadyrov who allied himself to Russia in opposition to Wahhabists "and their Chechen supporters because he saw their extremist views as a threat to the separatist movement."[56] In the interwar period, 1996 to 1999, foreign fighters gained influence and respect for their military skills and financial connections to Islamic charities.[57] Training camps were established and foreign fighters were brought in to teach "not only locals, but also… from other Muslim regions in the Caucasus, southern Russia, and central Asia."[58] These training camps show how a few foreign fighters can educate other fights, transferring their knowledge, skills, and ideology, creating a large impact on global security. As the Second Chechen War developed in 1999, foreign fighter tactics had clearly spread to the new conflict as terrorism became a favorite tactic of the Chechens.[59] While not an enormous par of First Chechen War foreign fighters along with "Arab financial and

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[51] Lorenzo Vidino, 2005, "How Chechnya Became a Breeding Ground for Terror," *Middle East Quarterly*, http://www.meforum.org/744/how-chechnya-became-a-breeding-ground-for-terror#_ftn4.
[52] Tumelty, "The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya."
[53] Vidino, "How Chechnya Became a Breeding Ground for Terror."
[54] Vidino, "The Arab Foreign Fighters and the Sacralization of the Chechen Conflict."
[55] Tumelty, "The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya."
[56] Mansur Mirovalev, 11 DEC 2014, "Chechnya, Russia and 20 years of conflict," *Al-Jazeera*, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/12/chechnya-russia-20-years-conflict-2014121161310580523.html.
[57] Vidino, "The Arab Foreign Fighters and the Sacralization of the Chechen Conflict."
[58] Vidino, "The Arab Foreign Fighters and the Sacralization of the Chechen Conflict."
[59] Preeti Bhattacharji, 8 APR 2010, "Chechen Terrorism," *Council on Foreign Relations*, http://www.cfr.org/separatist-terrorism/chechen-terrorism-russia-chechnya-separatist/p9181.

religious input has sustained and changed the dynamic of the Russo-Chechen wars,"[60] allowing for the rise of the Black Widows, the Second Chechen War, and terrorism.

As foreign fighters moved from conflict to conflict, they developed a network of jihadis and gained valuable training and experience. These fighters were transforming from zealot jihadis with no experience to battle hardened fighters. Islamist foreign fighters from Afghanistan continued to insert themselves in additional conflicts such as in Somalia and Iraq. As the example above shows, there are Islamist foreign fighters who travel from conflict to conflict which only increases their skills and credibility with others. "Some Islamists belonging to existing or future al-Qaeda affiliates fought alongside al-Qaeda in Chechnya, Bosnia, or even with other clusters around the world."[61]

While some foreign fighters entered new conflicts, other radicalized Islamists joined together to form new terrorist organizations and networks which allowed these groups to perpetrate terrorist attacks in multiple countries. From the foreign fighter phenomenon in 1980s Afghanistan came some of the most impactful and feared groups of the 1990s and 2000s, Al-Qaeda being the most infamous.

Al-Qaeda was established in 1988 by Osama bin Laden, a Saudi national who fought with the mujahideen against the Soviet Union. Osama bin Laden not only funded and worked to bring additional foreign fighters to Afghanistan but he also was one of the few well-known foreign fighters in the Soviet-Afghan conflict.[62] After fighting in Afghanistan, he worked with Islamist groups in Sudan. There he assisted in several terrorist attacks, including the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.[63] Due to his role is these attacks, bin Laden was forced out of Sudan in 1996.[64] He then returned to

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[60] Tumelty, "The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya."

[61] Jonathan Schanzer, 2005, "Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups & the Next Generation of Terror," *The Washington Institute*, 38-39.

[62] "A Biography of Osama bin Laden," *PBS Frontline*,

[63] Barton Gellman, 2001, "U.S. Was Foiled Multiple Times in Efforts to Capture Bin Laden or Have Him Killed," *Washington Post*.

[64] Barton Gellman, 2001, "U.S. Was Foiled Multiple Times in Efforts to Capture Bin Laden or Have Him Killed," *Washington Post*.

Afghanistan. Utilizing his close ties to the Taliban, Osama bin Laden established the base for Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.[65]

> "Afghanistan was the origin of the connection between the future al-Qaeda core leadership and local Islamist fighters from Egypt and elsewhere. When the jihad ended, the fighters returned to their respective home countries, but maintained strong connections with their brothers-in-arms. In this way, a global matrix was born."[66]

It was bin Laden's role as a foreign fighter that allowed him to foster this beneficial relationship with the Taliban. And bin Laden was not the only foreign fighter from Afghanistan to move into terrorism, "a majority of [al-Qaeda] operatives began their militant careers as war volunteers, and most transnational jihadi groups today are a by-product of foreign fighter mobilizations."[67] In 1998, al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for simultaneous bombings occurring at U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. These bombings killed more than 240 people.[68] In 2000, a bomb exploded near the USS Cole, killing 17 U.S. sailors and the two al-Qaeda operatives who committed the attack.[69] On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda committed a series of coordinated attacks on U.S. landmarks which killed 2,997 people[70] by hijacking four commercial airlines. The severity of the attacks, the global nature of the organization, and their ability to adapt has allowed Al-Qaeda to disproportionately affect global security and stability.

The rise in terrorism in Egypt in the 1990s can also be linked to Arab Afghan foreign fighters. As Schanzer states, "men from Egypt brought a degree of sophistication and organization to the jihad. Many of these fighters… eventually returned to their home

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[65] Seth Jones, 2010, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 83.

[66] Jonathan Schanzer, 2005, "Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups & the Next Generation of Terror," *The Washington Institute*, 35.

[67] Hegghammer, Thomas. 2011. "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad." *International Security* 35(3): 53.

[68] "Al-Qaida Timeline: Plots and Attacks," *NBC News*.

[69] "Al-Qaida Timeline: Plots and Attacks," *NBC News*.

[70] "September 11th Fast Facts," *CNN*, updated 2015.

countries and, using lessons from the battlefield, organized small jihadi organizations."[71] During the development and rise of al-Qaeda, "Afghan veterans in Egypt played a role in the wave of terror that swept Cairo and other Egyptian cities."[72] These terrorist attacks included "attacks on prominent moderates and tourists, in addition to bank and train robberies, while sporadic attacks continued on the Copts."[73] These attacks led to an intensive crackdown on Islamists in Egypt. In 1992, over 800 members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) were arrested and tried.[74] While bin Laden was in Sudan, another Afghan foreign fighter, Ayman al Zawahiri of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad was also in Sudan until 1995. Al-Qaeda and EIJ coordinated some of their operations together.[75] These two organizations merged in 2001 and, currently, Zawahiri is the leader of Al-Qaeda. The ties that bound Zawahiri and bin Laden were rooted in the commonality of their experiences as foreign fighters in Afghanistan.

Abu Sayyaf, a militant Islamist group in the Philippines, was started by Abdurajik Abubakar Janjalani, who went to Afghanistan to fight in the Soviet-Afghan war. The group is known for bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings.[76] In 1994, Abu Sayyaf bombed a Philippines Airlines plane.[77] In 2000, the group kidnapped a group of foreign tourists. There are additional connections between the Soviet-Afghan war, Abu Sayyaf, and additional organizations. Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, brother-in-law to bin Laden, went to the Philippines to recruit fighters and develop revenue streams for the Soviet-Afghan war and other jihadi organizations.[78] Funding from the charities that Khalifa

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[71] Jonathan Schanzer, 2005, "Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups & the Next Generation of Terror," *The Washington Institute*, 34-35.

[72] Bruce Riedal, 2015, "Syria's Terror Blowback Threatens Europe and the United States." *The Daily Beast*.

[73] Jonathan Schanzer, 2005, "Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups & the Next Generation of Terror," *The Washington Institute*, 36.

[74] Marc Sageman, 2004, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 41.

[75] Katherine Zimmerman, 2013, "The al Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy," *AEI Critical Threats*, http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/-the-al-qaeda-network-a-new-framework-for-defining-the-enemy_133443407958.pdf, 17.

[76] "Who are the Abu Sayyaf?" *BBC News*, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/719623.stm.

[77] Michael S. James and John K Cooley, "The Abu Sayyaf-Al Qaeda Connection," *ABC News*, http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=79205&page=1.

[78] Zachary Abuza, 2003, "Funding Terrorism in Southeast Asia: the Financial Network of Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25(2): 175.

established was "used to funnel money to the Abu Sayyaf group."[79] These ties and the development of Abu Sayyaf and al-Qaeda are also rooted in the shared experience of the Soviet-Afghan conflict.

Many of the prominent terrorist organizations of the 1990s and 2000s were built by Arab Afghans after the Soviet-Afghan conflict ended. Leaders and key players were able to create a global network due to shared experiences and personal connects developed during their time in Afghanistan.

The path of foreign fighters can differ greatly post-conflict. This is clear by the above examples. A foreign fighter may return to their country of origin and return to normal activities, return to their country of origin and join a violent extremist group, continue fighting in another conflict abroad, or join a violent extremist organization abroad. Fighters that left Afghanistan exemplify all of these different paths.

Afghanistan is both an important and interesting case because it shows how these conflicts can be an incubator for future terrorists. In Afghanistan, where the foreign fighters played a small, negligible role in the actual conflict, the development and connections that occurred allowed for the creation of multiple terrorist organizations involved with dozens of attacks, forever changing the environment of global security. As Mendelson notes,

> "Arab jihadis had a minor impact on the war against the Soviets but Afghanistan's bleed out has exerted a remarkable impact on conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia, as well as on terrorism in the United States and Western Europe – more notably through the rise of a global jihadi movement."[80]

It was in Afghanistan that the connections necessary for Al-Qaeda were formed, ostensibly the largest terrorist security threat to global security from the mid-1990s until the rise of ISIS. The rise of Al-Qaeda and its subsequent affiliates, the rise of networked terrorism, and the inflammatory role of foreign fighters in conflicts such as the Algerian

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[79] Zachary Abuza, 2003, "Funding Terrorism in Southeast Asia: the Financial Network of Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25(2):176.
[80] Barak Mendelsohn, 2011, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 191.

Civil War, Bosnian War, and others reveals the impact and spillover effect of foreign fighters from the Soviet-Afghan war. As we move from a historical understanding of the past roles of foreign fighters and the effects of the Soviet-Afghan war to the current conflict in Syria and Iraq, it is possible to extrapolate the paths current the foreign fighters may take and the potential threats they may pose today.

CONTEXTUAL CHANGES IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

While gathering and dis-aggregating the data on foreign fighters is difficult and inexact, the ICSR currently estimates that there are over 20,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.[81] Of that number, approximately 11,000 foreign fighters originated from the Middle East, and 4,500 foreign fighters from the West.[82] This means that over 75% of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are non-Western; 50% of all foreign fighters are from the Middle East. There are foreign fighters from over 50 countries, with "Southeast Asia remain[ing] a blind spot"[83] due to insufficient data. The makeup of the fighters in Syria and Iraq does differ from Afghanistan. Not only are they more numerous but they are younger and there is greater diversity in country of origin and ethnicity in the Syria/Iraq theater.[84]

The role of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq differs greatly from the role of foreign fighters in Afghanistan because foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are actually being utilized as a fighting force supplying the warring organizations with fresh troops. The role and impact of foreign fighters does differ greatly from group to group, just as the fighters themselves vary in skill set. For some organizations, foreign fighters appear to be a valuable and utilized asset while other groups are not open to foreign fighters. For example, the Islamic State as a transnational, ideological movement is better equipped

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[81] Peter Neumann, 2015. "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s." *ICSR*.

[82] Peter Neumann, 2015. "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s." *ICSR*.

[83] Peter Neumann, 2015. "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s." *ICSR*.

[84] Jytte Klausen, 2014, "They're Coming: Measuring the Threat from Returning Jihadists," *Foreign Affairs*, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2014-10-01/theyre-coming.

incorporate western foreign fighters into its organization while groups such as the Free Syrian Army have a narrow domestic focus and little place for non-Arabic speaking, untrained individuals.[85] However, it is clear that foreign fighters today are a part of the fighting force and in combat. This active environment is creating more highly skilled foreign fighters than those that came out of the Afghanistan war. These fighters are gaining experience, knowledge, and skills while in Syria and Iraq in addition to gaining network connections and legitimacy as a jihadist. By understanding the impact by the foreign fighters coming out of the Soviet-Afghan war, with limited field experience, it is possible to assess potential paths for foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq. These current foreign fighters, who are gaining more experience than their 1980s counterparts, will most likely have a larger impact on global security and stability when they eventually leave this conflict due to having a higher skill level and a larger number of foreign fighters than the Arab Afghans.

Environmental Changes Impacting the Role of Foreign Fighters in the Syria/Iraq Conflict

As we look at the role of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, it is possible to use the Soviet-Afghan war a comparison point for the impact of Islamist foreign fighters after they leave a conflict. This is however, by no means an attempt to create a direct analogy but is an exploration of factors that have allowed for the rise and proliferation of Islamist foreign fighters. To accurately assess this threat, it is important to recognize the changes in environmental factors that have increased the threat foreign fighters coming from the Syria/Iraq conflict. These factors include technology, social acceptability, location and size of conflict, and language and culture. As Barrett noted, "advances in technology, communications, travel, and tactics (from a decade of fighting in the region) mean that even a very small percentage of returning foreign fighters could have a major impact on

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[85] Rachel Briggs Obe and Tanya Silverman, 2014, "Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 15.

their homelands."[86] The changes in these categories increases the threat posed by foreign fighters in the Syria-Iraq conflict.

Technological improvements since the 1980s have increased the scope and speed of organizational activities from recruitment to tactical messaging.[87] The rate of innovation and reductions in technological costs have allowed for the proliferation of networking tools such as computers, cellphones, and internet access. From 2005 to 2015, the rate of individuals using the internet worldwide rose from 15.8% to 43.4% and cell phone subscriptions went from 33.9% to 96.8% worldwide.[88] The internet is a prime example of a multipurpose tool that allows groups such as the Islamic State to securely share information from location to location. The Islamic State also has a vibrant recruitment unit that uses a variety of social media platforms to connect with potential recruits. As of January 2016, Facebook has 1.55 billion active users, the messaging platform Whatsapp has 900 million active users, and Twitter has 320 million active users.[89] The Islamic State's propaganda department uses these platforms, among others, to issue videos and messages in a multitude of languages to reach a wide audience.[90] The internet has allowed likeminded individuals to seek out and encourage each other to take an active role; the call to arms has been moved to the cyber sphere.

Technology allows for more and faster connections and interactions between recruits and recruiters. While traditional methods of spreading the call, such as television, radio, and social connections are still in use, "the target audience (young and emotionally engaged) does not get news or information about the war from traditional sources."[91] During the 1980s, foreign fighters were recruited slowly through social and religious

[86] Richard Barrett, 2014, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," *The Soufan Group*. 7.
[87] Thomas Hegghammer, 2011. "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad." *International Security* 35(3): 69.
[88] "Key ICT indicators for developed and developing countries and the world," 2015, *International Telecommunications Union,* http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx.
[89] "Leading social networks worldwide as of January 2016, ranked by number of active users (in millions," 2016, *Statista*, http://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/.
[90] Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, 20 Nov 2015, "Inside the Surreal World of the Islamic State's Propaganda Machine," *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-the-islamic-states-propaganda-machine/2015/11/20/051e997a-8ce6-11e5-acff-673ae92dddd2b_story.html.
[91] Richard Barrett, 2014, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," *The Soufan Group*. 8.

organizations; however, today they can recruit themselves by reaching out to Islamist jihadi organizations on social media. These technological changes have increased the recruitment rate, the number of individuals engaging in extreme Islamist activities, the reach of Islamist extremist groups, and the network of Islamist foreign fighters post-conflict.

When the Soviet-Afghan war began, the concept of transnational jihad as an individual duty was not common. As previously stated, it was introduced by Sheik Azzam in a fatwa. Barrett notes, "[w]hen people went to Afghanistan, even during the Taliban period, they had no developed understand of al-Qaeda's narrative, nor of the concept of global rather than local terrorism."[92] Since the 1980s, this concept has gained more traction. It is no longer a unique idea and while religious scholars still disagree on its place in Islam, fewer extreme religious scholars reject the practice outright. Transnational jihadism has gained social acceptance, and while this acceptance is not a majority held view, it is a strongly accepted part of extremist Islamist organizations. Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq "may go solely with the intention of fighting the regime, [but] they are more likely to be predisposed to accept the doctrine of Al-Qaeda and related groups."[93] The social acceptability of this phenomenon allows individuals to act on this belief and more readily be recruited.

Additionally the location of Syria and Iraq, which is more centrally located than Afghanistan, has made travel to the country easier. Syria is bordered by Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. The Istanbul Ataturk Airport, an international hub and common entry point for foreign fighters to the region, had an annual passenger traffic of 18.75 million in 2014.[94] The region's accessibility by land and the easy of travel to neighboring countries allows foreign fighters to enter the region more easily than they entered Afghanistan. Large and porous borders create easy access to the conflict. This has been bolstered by cheaper travel and the ease electronic funds transfers which allows

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[92] Richard Barrett, 2014, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," *The Soufan Group*. 21.
[93] Richard Barrett, 2014, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," *The Soufan Group*. 22.
[94] "Facts and Figures," Istanbul Ataturk Airport, http://www.ataturkairport.com/en-EN/abouttav/Pages/iaaterminal.aspx.

potential fighters to gain the money necessary to pay for their travel. This is considered one of the possible reasons for the enormous number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

In three years, the number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq has surpassed the total of number foreign fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The sheer size of the conflict is aided by the previous discussed technological advances. This does not mean that all of these foreign fighters will maintain violent activities post-Syria/Iraq but their "personal exposure to political violence that results in psychological distress affects political worldviews."[95] Thomas Hegghammer found that one-in-nine returnees engage in some form of violence after returning home meaning that of the 20,000 current foreign fighters in Syria/Iraq, approximately 2,222 present a threat to their place of origin.[96][97] This number does not include those that remain abroad moving from conflict to conflict.

Language, and its link to culture, is an interesting aspect in the case of Syria and Iraq. Its effect depends on the origins of the foreign fighter. For an Arab foreign fighter, being able to speak Arabic has allowed them to access a larger social network when transitioning from their country of origin to Syria and Iraq. While their dialect may differ from the dialect used in Syria and Iraq, their ability to speak the local language allows Arabic-speaking foreign fighters to integrate into more-seamlessly into the fighting forces. Arab foreign fighters during the Afghan-Soviet war lacked this basic ability to communicate and struggled to understand the Afghan culture. However in Syria and Iraq, Arab foreign fighters are able to communicate with less difficulty into the society their fighting in, settle and stay in this region, and have a better understanding of the culture in which they are now operating. As Mendelson notes: "more useful are foreign fighters originating from 'near abroad,' the immediate neighboring states,"[98] for the reason of integration. Some Arab foreign fighters may even have familial connections they can

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[95] Daphna Canetti-Nisim, Eran Halperin, Keren Sharvit, and Stevan E. Hobfoll, 2009, "A New Stress-based Model of Political Extremism: Personal Exposure to Terrorism, Psychological Distress, and Exclusionist Political Attitudes," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 (3), Sage Publications, Inc.: 363–89.

[96] Thomas Hegghammer, 2013, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review*.

[97] Currently, the only data available on percentage of foreign fighters likely to commit attacks post-conflict and is a well cited study. While many journalists and scholars discuss returnees in broad terms, Hegghammer is one of the few scholars who has completed a quantitative study on the foreign fighters.

[98] Barak Mendelsohn, 2011, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 196.

draw upon for support and assistance if necessary. On the other hand, there have been some reports of Western foreign fighters suffering abuse or receiving low skilled positions due to their lack of skills and social networks. For example:

> "As one former ISIS fighter put it: 'I saw many foreign recruits who were put on suicide squads not because they were 'great and God wanted it' as [ISIS] commanders praised them in front of us, but basically because they were useless for ISIS, they spoke no Arabic, they weren't good fighters and had not professional skills."[99]

Foreign fighters that cannot speak Arabic are not able to integrate as easily as Arab fighters due to cultural and linguist differences and "on average, the farther away a volunteer's country of origin, the less likely he is to be seen as an asset as a fighter."[100] They can face severe culture shock upon arrival. There are limited positions for non-Arabic speakers, as part of the propaganda media network, writing articles and reaching out in native languages such as English, French, German, and, most recently, Russia.[101] However, these propaganda positions require additional skills in media, filming, editing, etc. and are few and far between. Language can be both a divisive and a binding component. Members without a common language struggle to interact with each other however, when a common language is present it allows for group cohesion, social interactions, and increased networking. Foreign fighters are able to use language as a way to find like-minded individuals with whom they can create a future network.

The changes in these factors have increased the potency of the foreign fighter. They allow a foreign fighter to be able to reach more individuals, share their skill sets and knowledge, and increase their platform for a self-designed attack. The rate of communication is fast increasing recruitment abroad and at home while reducing governmental agencies time frame to find and eradicate threats posed by foreign fighters. Technology has reduced the need for a large network for funding and planning a terrorist

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[99] Jytte Klausen, 2014, "They're Coming: Measuring the Threat from Returning Jihadists." *Foreign Affairs*.
[100] Barak Mendelsohn, 2011, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 195.
[101] Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet. 2015. "Inside the Surreal World of the Islamic State's Propaganda Machine." *The Washington Post*.

attack and given rise to small, individually motivated networks. The rise of the individual agent is strongly linked to the rise in technology which makes foreign fighters, now seasoned veterans, coming out of Syria and Iraq a greater risk than those returning from Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The Beginning of the Effects

While the conflict in Syria and Iraq rages on, the effect of foreign fighters returning to their countries of origin can already be seen. Attacks claimed by the Islamic State have been perpetrated in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. As foreign fighters return to these regions, some continue to engage in violent extremism causing enormous problems for their home governments.

On November 13, 2015 multiple gunmen and bombers attacked the city of Paris in coordinated attack that left 130 people dead.[102] At least four perpetrators of this attack have been connected to Syria as foreign fighters. One of these men was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a 27 year old Belgian who is believed to have orchestrated the Paris attack and, according to a French Interior Minister Cazeneuve, "was involved in at least four of six terrorist plots foiled in France since the spring."[103] Abaaoud joined the Islamic State in 2013 and has been featured in propaganda videos as well as Dabiq, the Islamic State's English language magazine.[104] Chakib Akrouh, who died via a suicide vest during the police raid of a flat in Saint-Denis, north of Paris, is suspected of being the third operative at the bar and restaurant attacks which killed 39 people.[105] He travelled to Syria in 2013. Foued Mohamed-Aggad was one of three gunmen to attack the Bataclan concert venue; Aggad also travelled to Raqqa, Syria the capital of the Islamic State.[106] Bilal Hadfi, one

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[102] "Paris attacks: What happened on the night," 2015, *BBC News*, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34818994.

[103] Andrew Higgins and Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, 2015, "Paris Attacks Suspect Killed in Shootout Had Plotted Terror for 11 Months," *The New York Times*

[104] "Paris attacks: Who was Abdelhamid Abaaoud?" 2015, *BBC News*, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34835046.

[105] "Paris Attacks: Who were the attackers?" 2015, *BBC News*, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34832512.

[106] "Paris Attacks: Who was the third attacker Foued Mohamed-Aggad?" 2015, *BBC News*, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35055304.

of the attackers at the Stade de France also travelled to Syria to fight with the Islamic State.[107] The Paris attack was perpetrated by at least 11 attackers, four of which travelled to Syria. These returned foreign fighters were spread among the attack sites, with one at the Stade de France, one at the Batacan, and two at the bars and restaurants. They perpetrated the deadliest attack on Paris since World War II.

Southeast Asia has also seen a rise in attacks perpetrated by Islamic State supporters and returning fighters. In Malaysia, Murad Halimmuddin Hassan and his son, Abu Daud Murad Halimmuddin, were tried and sentenced for promoting terrorism on June 30, 2015.[108] Murad Halimmuddin reportedly travelled to Syria, fought for the Islamic State, and then "returned to Malaysia to act as a spiritual leader to others who wanted to perform jihad."[109] Ayob Kham Mydin Pitchay, a senior counter-terrorism official, has stated that 108 people have been arrested due to ties with the Islamic State and 63 Malaysian are known to have gone abroad to join the Islamic State.[110] Indonesian fighters returned from Syria are suspected of detonating a chlorine bomb in the ITC mall in Depok in February 2015.[111] While the number of foreign fighters from this region is small, estimated at 600-1000 Southeast Asians travelling to Syria and Iraq, the impact of the Islamic State can be seen in the slick propaganda and new tactics such as hostage taking, barricade style attacks, and beheading videos.[112] Dr. Rohan Gunaratna has stated that both the Philippines and Indonesia are strong candidates for a new Islamic State branch in Southeast Asia.[113] The Diplomat is reporting that "already, more Southeast

[107] "Paris Attacks: Who were the attackers?" 2015.

[108] "Father, son get jail in Malaysia terrorism case," 2015, *Channel News Asia*, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/father-son-get-jail-in/1950750.html.

[109] "Malaysian father and son jailed for planning ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks," 2015, The Jakarta Post, http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/07/01/malaysian-father-and-son-jailed-planning-isis-inspired-terrorist-acts.html.

[110] "Father, son get jail in Malaysia terrorism case," 2015, *Channel News Asia*.

[111] Kate Lamb, 2015, "Indonesian police blame jihadis returning from Syria for chlorine bomb," *The Guardian*, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/25/indonesian-police-blame-jihadis-returning-from-syria-for-chlorine-bomb.

[112] Zachary Abuza, 2016, "Beyond Bombings: The Islamic State in Southeast Asia," *The Diplomat*

[113] Prashanth Parameswaran, 2016, "Islamic State Eyes Asia Base in 2016 in Philippines, Indonesia: Expert," *The Diplomat*, http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/islamic-state-eyes-asia-base-in-2016-in-philippines-indonesia-expert/.

Asians have joined ISIL and the Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front than ever joined the anti-Soviet mujahideen."[114]

The Middle East is also facing issues with returning foreign fighters. A Moroccan jihadist group has been formed in Syria to both recruit jihadists and eventually establish a jihadist organization within Morocco. It's unlikely that this organization will stay in Syria once the conflict ends and "'just like Moroccans who returned from Afghanistan with experience, some might be tempted to set up their own groups once they go back to their country,' Saktivel said,"[115] and this is true of returned foreign fighters in any state or region.

Additionally, many U.S. allies have strict policies regarding Islamist extremists and returning foreign fighters. The Moroccan government's imprisonment rates have encouraged "Moroccan extremists to seek have elsewhere, such as Algeria and Syria."[116] Morocco has started to arrest foreign fighters who have returned to the country.[117] Concerns have been raised that both the Egyptian and Jordanian prison systems are more likely to become incubators for Islamist extremism and encourage extremist recruiting because of the treatment of prisoners within these institutions. One Egyptian prisoner, who was repeatedly tortured, reported witnessing Islamic State members recruiting prisoners by giving hope and purpose to other prisoners.[118] Shadi Hamid stated: "We know that imprisonment in such brutal circumstance often has a radicalizing effect."[119] Saudi Arabia, which once had mandatory rehabilitation programs for those who voluntarily left radical organizations, now mandates jail time for returnees.[120] This decree

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[114] Zachary Abuza, 2016, "Beyond Bombings: The Islamic State in Southeast Asia," *The Diplomat*

[115] Jules Cretois and Mohammed Boudarham, 2014, "Jihadists returning from Syria pose threat to Morocco," *Al-monitor*

[116] Vish Sakthivel, 2013, "Wathering Morocco's Syria Returnees," *The Washington Institute*, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/weathering-moroccos-syria-returnees.

[117] Jules Cretois and Mohammed Boudarham, 2014, "Jihadists returning from Syria pose threat to Morocco," *Al-monitor*, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/05/morocco-jihadists-fighting-syria-risks-return.html#.

[118] Murtaza Hussain, 2015, "ISIS Recruitment Thrives in Brutal Prisons Run by U.S.-Backed Egypt," *The Intercept*, https://theintercept.com/2015/11/24/isis-recruitment-thrives-in-brutal-prisons-run-by-u-s-backed-egypt/.

[119] Murtaza Hussain, 2015, "ISIS Recruitment Thrives in Brutal Prisons Run by U.S.-Backed Egypt," *The Intercept*

[120] Caryle Murphy, 2015, "Saudi Arabia tried to keep the Islamic State from recruiting its youth," *Globalpost*, http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/saudi-arabia/150302/saudi-arabia-islamic-state-recruiting.

aimed at reducing the number of Saudi citizens flowing to the Islamic State did little to reduce numbers; 355 Saudi citizens have left since the decree in 2014.[121] Likewise in Jordan, a new law passed has caused any returnee from Syria and Iraq to be jailed regardless of circumstance, creating a fear "that locking up retuned fighters together will turn angry young men into ticking time bombs."[122] One young man, Omar Khader, spent five months within the Islamic State before becoming disillusioned and returning home. After landing in Jordan, Khader was arrested, convicted by a military court for joining a terrorist organization, and sentenced to five years in prison.[123] This imprisonment policies meant to contain the problem of returned foreign fighters may be exacerbating the problem.

The above examples highlight two main points 1) that foreign fighters returning from Syria pose a threat to national, regional, and global security; and 2) counterterrorism policymakers can learn and utilize lessons from the paths of foreign fighters post-Soviet-Afghan war. Attacks and attempted attacks by returned fighters shows that some returnees will remain committed to their violent extremism while the stories of disillusioned youths and harsh prison systems reveals how governmental policies can encourage radicalization instead of disengagement.

CONCLUSION

Foreign fighters leaving the Syrian-Iraqi conflict will be a larger threat to global security than those that came out of the Soviet-Afghan war. Foreign fighters from the Soviet-Afghan war had a large impact on national, regional, and global security creating networks of violent Islamist extremism. However, those coming from the conflict in Syria and Iraq will be benefiting from changes in environmental factors that will increase their ability to carry out violent attacks. While a majority of foreign fighters do simply return home, the portion that will either be unable to or will chose to not return home will

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[121] Caryle Murphy, 2015, "Saudi Arabia tried to keep the Islamic State from recruiting its youth," *Globalpost*
[122] Michael Pizzi, 2015, "Foreign fighters come home to roost in Jordan," Al-Jazeera America, http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/6/5/jordans-foreign-fighters-come-home-to-roost.html.
[123] Michael Pizzi, 2015, "Foreign fighters come home to roost in Jordan," Al-Jazeera America

be better equipped to continue their fight. Western media has focused on the threat of Western foreign fighters returning home to commit acts of terror however a far larger portion of foreign fighters will be returning to states that lack the capacity and capability to monitor and respond to this threat. The West has a number or resources and tools it can use to monitor suspicious actors which many other states lack.

After the 2011 Arab Spring, there has been an increase in weak/failed states in the Middle East where the largest percentage of foreign fighters originate. As Barrett states, "national resources in most countries are insufficient to monitor more than a handful of returnees."[124] These states will be receiving more foreign fighters than the West and lack the resources and capabilities to properly vet these foreign fighters and assess their threat. This creates space for foreign fighters to develop violent extremist organizations. Much like Sudan and Afghanistan allowed Soviet-Afghan foreign fighters to develop into terrorist networks, the safe havens presented to Syria-Iraq foreign fighters will allow them the opportunity to do the same.

With the changes in the environmental factors above, the rise of individual agency, and the quantity of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, the problem of the foreign fighters leaving Syria and Iraq is going to be critical to US national and global security. Weak states that lacks the resources to reintegrate or monitor foreign fighters for further radicalization, counter extremist ideology, or halt potential attacks will be fertile ground for foreign fighters who want to continue their mission. "The Syrian war is likely to be an incubator for a new generation of terrorists."[125] Foreign fighters from Afghanistan completely altered the global security paradigm in the 1990s; foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq will do the same if the issue is not considered and addressed in a holistic manner.

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[124] Richard Barrett, 2014, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," *The Soufan Group*. 7.
[125] Richard Barrett, 2014, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," *The Soufan Group*. 22.

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