

Dean C Alexander examines why so many foreign fighters are drawn to the conflict in Syria, and calls on governments to implement policies which prevent their citizens from fighting overseas

SYRIA'S SIREN

S yria is suffering a devastating civil war with cataclysmic effects in the region. There appears to be some recent momentum in favour of the Alawite-led Bashar Assad regime, although insurgents still control territory and remain potent adversaries. Lone wolves, cabals, sub-state groups and Syrian government forces have participated in the war, which has so far resulted in 150,000 deaths, more than 500,000 injured and millions displaced internally and outside Syria. In addition, many sovereign states – be they Iran and Russia (aiding Assad), or Western, Arab and Muslim countries (providing material support, from weapons to training and funds to variant insurgent groups) – have played undermining roles in the Syrian crisis.

During Spring 2014, tensions and conflict between two prominent Sunni jihadist insurgent groups – the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant and al Nusra Front – and other rebels, including Kurdish groups, have intensified. According to some analysts, these foreign fighters – comprised of hundreds of fighting brigades – have weakened overall insurgent efforts against the Assad regime through such infighting. In addition, the radical ideologies and goals of selected rebels have caused reticence by Western governments to support the demise of the Assad regime more fully, for fear of creating a Sunni jihadi base in Syria.

More specifically, Syria is increasingly viewed as a hotbed and training ground for trans-national (especially Sunni) jihadists. The multifaceted concerns about this emerging phenomenon are as follows. First, the prospect that Syria could come under full or partial control of these jihadi forces is troublesome. Second, there is concern that Syria might become a failed state, with ungovernable areas akin, in part, to areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Third, it is possible that Syria becomes a permanent terrorist training base for foreign fighters to learn their wares and return to their home countries where they would wreak havoc, whether in neighbouring states – Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and Israel (this has already been manifested) – or beyond, including the West. Fourth, it is conceivable that the degradation occurring in Syria further undermines stability in the Middle East and elsewhere.

What is transpiring in Syria is not unique. Foreign Sunni jihadi fighters joined Afghans in their quest to oust the Soviet Union following its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Afterwards, Afghanistan came under Taliban control and became a base of terrorism, complete with training camps and the headquarters of al-Qaeda central, from which they planned the 11 September 2001 attacks.

Subsequently, various other nations attracted trans-national Sunni jihadists to train and wage war against their perceiver oppressors. The Bosnian war in the early 1990s likewise attracted such foreign



Mujahideen. In 2001, following US and International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) efforts to depose the Taliban in Afghanistan and extricate al-Qaeda central, Afghanistan again became the land of destination for would-be Mujahideen. In 2003 Coalition forces, led by the US, dethroned Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, which simultaneously made Iraq a location of interest for foreign jihadi fighters, both Sunni and Shia, and state interveners such as Iran.

When Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt, and other countries experienced their versions of the Arab Spring, they, too, became sites of interest to international Sunni (and Shia) jihadi extremists, although to a far lesser degree than Syria. It is worth noting that in other nations not subject to the Arab Spring metamorphosis, such as Somalia and Mali, foreign jihadi fighters, including Westerners, transcended to these locales to fight government forces there.

According to US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper's January 2014 congressional testimony,

Faction fighters: rebels from the "Al-Mujahedin The Falcons of Islam" brigade prepare an attack on a government-controlled area of Aleppo

SONG



there are some 100,000 rebels fighting Assad's forces, of which about 25,000 are "extremists". Director Clapper further estimated that foreign Sunni jihadi fighters travelling to and participating on behalf of disparate Syrian insurgent forces originate from more than 50 countries, and number some 7,000 persons. These foreign fighters have come from across the globe (Canada, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Pakistan, Chechnya, Kosovo), although mostly from the Middle East and North Africa. The allure of fighting in Syria has even reached Australian shores.

By 2013, more than 1,200 European Muslims – mostly from Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Germany – were believed to have travelled to Syria, looking to fight on behalf of the rebels, mostly Sunni-linked. The number of Europeans participating in the Syrian conflict can be linked in part from the relative ease and low cost of reaching Syria through Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon. By 2014, some 500 British citizens were estimated to have travelled to Syria to fight in the civil war.

In 2013, British police arrested 24 people in relation to Syria-linked activities. During the initial months of 2014, 14 have been arrested on similar charges, suggesting either that law enforcement is increasingly adept at confronting this challenge, or there is increased interest by Britons to fight in Syria, or both.

In 2014, a noteworthy UK case includes two British women, Amal Elwahabi, 27, and Nawal Masaad, 26, charged with planning to make funds available to terrorism connected to the Syrian civil war. Masaad, who allegedly carried 20,000 Euros on her person, was arrested at London Heathrow airport as she tried to board a flight to Istanbul, Turkey, with Syria as her ultimate destination. Elwahabi and Masaad are believed to be the first British women arrested in relation to the Syrian conflict.

Analogously, it is estimated that more than 70 Americans have travelled (or attempted to travel) to Syria to participate in the conflict, primarily, again, to aid Sunni jihadi rebels. For example, former US army soldier Eric Harroun, 30, was arrested and charged in March 2013 with conspiring to use a rocket propelled grenade while fighting with the al Nusrah Front, often referred to as al-Qaeda in Iraq. More specifically, he was charged with conspiring to use a destructive device outside of the US. Harroun apparently entered Syria in January 2013, and later trained and fought with al Nusrah.

Similarly, in April 2013, 18-year-old high school student Abdella Ahmad Tounisi from Illinois was arrested as he attempted to board a flight from Chicago to Istanbul, on his way to ultimately travel from there to Gaziantep on the Turkish-Syrian border, and then to Syria. Tounisi, who interacted both online and offline with an undercover FBI employee, was charged with attempting to provide material support to al Nusrah Front, an alias for al-Qaeda in Iraq. A trial is expected in 2014.

In another case, three US naturalised citizens of Somali descent undertook suicide bombings in Somali on behalf of the Somali terror group al-Shabaab. The concern is that US-based individuals would fight in Syria, return to the United States, and participate in a terror attack on US soil.

While the majority of the Americans who travel to Syria are presumed to aspire to fight with one of the Sunni jihadist groups there, some Americans travel abroad to fight in support of Syrian government forces, including Hezbollah forces, or assist the Syrian regime while based in the US. An example of the latter is Mohamad Anas Haitham Soueid, 48, who in March 2012 was convicted of unlawfully acting as an agent of Syria by collecting videos and other information about individuals protesting the Syrian government. In July 2012, he was sentenced to 18 months in prison.

Under US federal law 8 US Code sec. 1481, an American-born or naturalised citizen may lose his citizenship if he: (3) enters or serves in a foreign army and that entity is engaged in hostilities against the US or the person serves as a commissioned or non-commissioned officer in that fighting force; or (7) engages in a conspiracy to destroy the US government

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Under attack: foreign fighters have flooded into Syria from around the world

or levy war against it. As such, US citizens who participate in fighting abroad or at home against the US are subject to losing their citizenship, among other sanctions.

Concurrently, some 6,500 foreign Shia fighters (mainly those affiliated with the Shia, Lebanese-based terror group Hezbollah; Iranian soldiers; and Iraqi volunteers) have fought to buttress the efforts of the Assad regime. In sum, Sunni and Shia foreign fighters have contributed to the aggravation of this sectarian conflict, although other elements of the population – Christians, Druze, and Kurds – further complicate prospects for reconciliation post-conflict, whenever that will occur.

Among the factors that will impact the likelihood of violent actions by foreign fighters upon return to their native (or other) countries are manifold. The first is why they chose to fight in Syria in the first place, whether for religious fervour, secular interests or to gain terrorist training, for example.

Second, what was their experience in Syria? Did they gain terrorist training? Did they engage in combat? What was their perception of the group(s) they served with, the group's effectiveness, and ideologies? Did they become more extremist in their viewpoints than before their trip to Syria?

Third, did they acquire a heightened animus towards their home country?

Also, did they view their experience in a positive manner or were they disheartened? Fourth, did they make helpful contacts as well as gain skills and resources that could be implemented in their home countries and elsewhere? In addition, will they continue their interest in supporting a respective side in the Syrian conflict by raising money or recruiting others for the cause?

Fifth, are law enforcement and intelligence agencies in their home countries aware of their travel abroad, and awaiting their return for questioning and/or arrest? Analogously, will family, friends or community members inform police about their participation as fighters in the Syrian conflict? Additionally, selected foreign fighters become disillusioned or were killed while fighting in Syria. Some foreign fighters may not necessarily seek violent jihad upon return to their home countries.

In addition to understanding the dispositions and goals of prospective foreign fighters, it behoves governments

to take steps to reduce the frequency and negative ramifications of fighters leaving far away lands for Syria. Among the paths that can be pursued are: outlawing travel to Syria except for limited reasons (eg media, humanitarian or religious activities) and require notice to government officials of travels to neighbouring countries; enacting (or enforcing existing) legislation to prohibit citizens to fight on behalf of a sovereign state or a sub-state group, including rebel organisations; expanding enforcement of attempts by individuals, groups, and organisations to provide material support to foreign terror and rebel groups; and increasing intelligence sharing domestically and internationally in this regard.

Also, governments can raise efforts on the information-driven and community policing fronts in order to gain tips about individuals who plan on participating in the Syrian conflict – whether through fighting, recruiting, raising money or acquiring weapons and supplies. In addition, governments can continue the use of sting operations online and offline to ferret out prospective terrorists.

In that vein, governments should increase training in relation to terrorist profiles, terrorist indicators, suspicious activities and suspicious financial transactions. Similarly, governments should accelerate inquiry into non-profit entities and charities that have a nexus with Syria as they may serve as terror funding fronts.

Support can also be provided to strengthen local communities in their struggle against radicalisation as well as undertake de-radicalisation activities among returning fighters and others who have embraced extremist tenets. Moreover, governments should expand counter-narratives against the alluring pitch of Syrian-themed recruiters.

In closing, these foreign fighters, coupled with the aid offered by sovereign states, are exacerbating the Syrian civil war. While an internally crafted solution to the bloodshed is unlikely in Syria, external sovereign state interference also complicates and prolongs the conflict. As such, it is likely that the Syrian civil war will continue for several more years, or some variant of the conflict for more than a decade (as we have witnessed prolonged insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan). Nevertheless, as highlighted, governments can adopt steps that undermine the prospective participation of their citizenry in the Syrian conflict.

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