

Foreign (Terrorist) Fighter Estimates: Conceptual and Data Issues

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This Policy Brief - a short version of a larger Research Paper to be released by ICCT in late 2015 - focuses on the phenomenon of foreign (terrorist) fighters (FTFs) as it relates to Syria and Iraq. It concentrates on recruits to jihad and the astonishing growth in numbers from less than 1,000 in 2011 to more than 3,500 in 2012, 8,500+ in 2013, 18,000+ in 2014 to more than 25,000 by fall 2015. By October 2015, nearly 30,000 militants from more than 100 countries had become foreign fighters with the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) in Syria and Iraq and other militant groups. This Policy Brief first discusses various definitions of FTFs by disaggregating the "foreign", "terrorist" and "fighters" elements of FTFs of the UN Security Council definition in resolution 2178 (2014). Subsequently, an attempt is made to bring some structure and order to the widely diverging estimates of the numbers of foreign fighters and their origins, with tables presenting the best available estimates for different sides of the conflict at different moments in time since 2011. UN estimates on foreign fighters are juxtaposed with estimates from other sources. The biggest uncertainty is the ratio of foreign fighters to IS own core manpower. It is likely that at least 40 percent of the fighters of IS are foreigners and many more if Iraqis in Syria are counted as such.

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1. Introduction

Foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon.¹ However, the present stream of foreign jihadist fighters to the Levant is unprecedented in recent times. Since the caliphate was declared by the so-called “Islamic State” (IS a.k.a. ISIL/ISIS, Daesh or Da’ash) in late June 2014, month after month between 850 and 1,250 new jihadist volunteers have been travelling to Syria and Iraq from abroad.² In the twelve months prior to September 2015, the number of foreign fighters nearly doubled to 28,000, according to the US Assistant Attorney General, John P. Carlin.³

Before the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, some 30,000 Muslim foreign fighters had already taken part in 18 different conflicts, ranging from Bosnia to Kashmir and the Philippines.⁴ Since 2011, more than 25,000 foreign recruits from 104 countries (including, for instance, Argentina, Honduras, Cote d’Ivoire, Cambodia and South Korea) have been drawn into the conflict in Syria and Iraq alone, notwithstanding the absence of ethnic or cultural links of many of the foreign fighters to Syria and the Arab world. Their numbers have grown from less than 1,000 in 2011 to more than 3,500 in 2012, more than 8,500 in 2013, more than 18,000 in 2014 to more than 25,000 by September 2015, reaching nearly 30,000 according to both US and UN estimates.⁵

In its short existence, IS claims to have won the adherence of jihadist groups of various sizes in more than ten countries where it claims to be establishing 36 provinces (*wilayat*).⁶ More than half of all countries - Muslim-majority countries and non-Muslim countries - today generate foreign fighters for jihad war zones.⁷ Western foreign fighters are said to account for nearly one fifth of all foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.⁸ The proclamation of

¹ David Malet, author of a monograph on foreign fighters in historical perspective, concludes: “Historically, we can document foreign fighters in close to 100 civil wars since the late 18th century. We don’t have precise data in even the biggest and best documented cases like the Spanish Civil War – which drew, in under three years, double the number that have recently gone to Syria and Iraq – but we can make a conservative estimate that there have been 100,000 foreign fighters worldwide over the past 250 years.” D. Malet, “What Does the Evidence Tell Us about the Impact of Foreign Fighters on Home-grown Radicalisation?”, *Radicalisation Research Briefing*, <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/malet-foreign-fighters-home-grown-radicalization/>; D. Malet, “Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 27, no.3 (2015), pp. 455 – 473. Malet puts the number of the International Brigades in the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) at between 30,000 and 60,000 (*Ibid.*, p. 463).

² R. Hall, “The U.S. Has Been Bombing the Islamic State for a Year. What Has Been Achieved?”, *Global Post*, <http://theweek.com/articles/571084/been-bombing-islamic-state-year-what-been-achieved>. US efforts to create an army of “moderates” have been unsuccessful. As Richard Hall writes “Most moderate rebel groups in Syria have been forced out by better-funded and more extremist factions as the war has dragged on. A \$ 500 million US program to train and equip Sunni Syrian rebels to fight IS has vetted a grand total of 60 fighters. Many of them have already been captured or killed” (*ibid.*).

³ National Security Division, “Assistant Attorney General John P. Carlin Delivers Remarks at the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law’s Event on More Effective Responses to the Foreign Terrorist Fighter Threat”, *Department of Justice*, 28 September 2015, http://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/assistant-attorney-general-john-p-carlin-delivers-remarks-international-institute-justice?utm_source=%20Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2ASituation%20Report.

⁴ J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ. Jihadist Foreign Fighters from A to Z. 200 Essential Facts You Need to Know about Jihadist Expeditionary Warfare in the Middle East* (Baku: Teknur, 2015), p. 69.

⁵ US Congress Homeland Security Committee, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel*. Washington, D.C., September 2015, pp. 11 - 12, <https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/TaskForceFinalReport.pdf>. Daniels et al, *Dealing with Muslim Radicalisation: An analysis of the strategies of Belgium, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom*. The Hague, CTC Theses, 13 January 2015, p. 17; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 254; E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, “Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts”, *New York Times*, 26 September 2015.

⁶ Anonymous, “The Mystery of ISIS”, *The New York Review of Books*, 13 August 2015; C. Lister, “A Long Way from Success: Assessing the War on the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p.3. Beyond Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State is said to have a foothold in Afghanistan, the Gaza stroke, the Golan Heights, Egypt (Sinai), India, Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Afghanistan, Algeria, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, The Philippines, Russia (North Caucasus), Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, the West Bank and Yemen. – For a list of groups pledging allegiance and/or support to IS, see: S. Unwin, *Overview – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*, 15 August 2015, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/overview-islamic-state-iraq-levant-isil-syria-isis-steve-unwin-msc?trk=hp-feed-article-title-publish>.

⁷ United Nations, (S/2015/358) *Analysis and Recommendations with Regard to the Global Threat from Foreign Terrorist Fighters (Report prepared by the 1267 Committee)*, 19 May 2015, p. 3, www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1508457_EN.pdg.

⁸ICRS data as quoted in S. Sharma, “Map: How the Flow of Foreign Fighters to Iraq and Syria Has Surged Since October”, *The Washington Post*, 27 January 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/01/27/map-how-the-flow-of-foreign-fighters-to-iraq-and-syria-has-surged-since-october/>.

the Caliphate on 29 June 2014 (or restoration, since the Caliphate had been annulled by Kemal Atatürk in 1924) by Ibrahim al-Qureishi (aka Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), has given a real boost to the inflow of foreign fighters. According to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon the increase over the first nine months following the proclamation was no less than 70 percent.⁹ Despite more than a year of mainly aerial attacks by ten states (almost 7,000 by September 2015, mainly by the United States, the United Kingdom but also by the Netherlands) out of a loose global coalition of some 60 anti-ISIS states and partner organisations¹⁰, and despite the reported loss of 10-15,000 IS fighters, the self-proclaimed rogue state is, according to American intelligence sources, not visibly weakened compared to a year ago.¹¹ It now controls to various extents part of northern Iraq and as much as half of Syria, ruling over some six million people. Credible estimates of IS' (para-)military fighters' size have been adjusted upwards several times and now reach, according to one estimate, 70,000.¹² While in the early phase of the conflict most foreign fighters joined the al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra front, it is now estimated that up to 80 percent of foreign fighters are part of ISIS after ISIS moved from Iraq into Syria in May 2013.¹³ Within IS, the share of foreign fighters has been estimated to be at least 40 percent.¹⁴

The attraction of IS for foreign fighters has not visibly diminished - despite its record of human rights violations, crimes against humanity, war crimes and attempted genocide of the Yazidis. The motto of IS is "remaining and expanding" (*baqiya wa tatamaddad*) and so far it has largely lived up to this: by June 2015 it controlled an area some 82,940 square kilometres¹⁵, inhabited originally by up to ten million people of which many have fled.

Foreign fighters volunteering to fight in someone else's war are nothing new but the amount of them attracted to Syria and Iraq is new, even compared to the numbers of foreign fighters who went to Afghanistan in the 1980s to oppose the Soviet intervention. The figures below are already dated as far as Syria and Iraq are concerned.¹⁶ Once the Caliphate was declared in mid-2014, the figures shot up: 6,000 new recruits were recorded in August 2014

[iraq-and-syria-has-surged-since-october/](#); C. McCauley, "Western Muslims Volunteering to Fight in Syria and Iraq: Why Do They Go, and What Should We Do?", *Freedom From Fear Magazine*, no. 11 (2015), <http://f3magazine.unicri.it/?p=1073>.

⁹ United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, *Secretary-General's Remarks to Security Council Meeting on Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts (Foreign Terrorist Fighters)*, New York, 2015, http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statements_full.asp?statID=2632#.Vi9WPmeFOig.

¹⁰ For a brief record of achievement, see: K.J. McInnes, "Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State", *Congressional Research Service Report 7-5700*, 4 August 2015, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44135.pdf>. Participants in the coalition include: Albania, the Arab League, Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, the European Union, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Oman, Panama, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Somalia, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States. (Ibid., p. 1). The lead states for addressing the FTF are the Netherlands and Turkey. The Netherlands is also the 3rd most active country in the air war against IS, fielding 250 personnel, 6 F-16 aircrafts plus two reserve aircrafts (Ibid., p. 4).

¹¹ "We have seen no meaningful degradation in their numbers", a US defence official noted, citing intelligence estimates that put the strength of IS at between 20,000 and 30,000, like in August 2014. Report by Sarah A. Carter, reporter at the American Media Institute: S.A. Carter, "Despite Bombing, Islamic State is no Weaker than a Year Ago", *USA Today*, 31 July 2015, www.todayonline.com/world/middle-east/despite-bombing-islamic-state-no-weaker-year-ago?singlepage=true.

¹² "The Propaganda War", *The Economist*, 15 August 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21660989-terrorists-vicious-message-surprisingly-hard-rebut-propaganda-war?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/ThePropagandaWar>.

¹³ G. Steinberg, *Kalifat des Schreckens: IS und die Bedrohung Durch den Islamitischen Terror* (München: Knaur, 2015), p.151.

¹⁴ According to Peter Neumann, Director of ISRC, as quoted in: F. Jansen, "Propaganda der Tat", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 6 October 2015, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/politische-literatur/terror-experte-neumann-zum-is-propaganda-der-tat/12415572.html>.

¹⁵ R. Hall, "The U.S. Has Been Bombing the Islamic State for a Year. What Has Been Achieved?", *Global Post*, <http://theweek.com/articles/571084/been-bombing-islamic-state-year-what-been-achieved>. However, lately IS has lost about 10 percent of the territory it controlled at one time. On the other hand, it conquered several new cities in Syria and continues to stage suicide bombings in Iraq's capital.

¹⁶ B. Peeters, *Choosing Battles: A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilizations (1980 – 2014)*, Utrecht: University Master Thesis, August 2014, p. 23, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl:8080/handle/1874/298875>.

alone, and in subsequent months an average of 1,000 foreigners joined IS month after month.¹⁷ Migration (*hijrah*) to the re-established caliphate was declared obligatory by the new Caliph and said to forgive all sins. According to IS “There is no life without jihad and there is no jihad without hijrah”.¹⁸

Conflict	Number of Foreign Fighters
Afghanistan (1978 – 1992)	5,000 - 10,000
Bosnia (1992- 1995)	1,000 - 3,000
Somalia (1993 – 2014)	250 - 450
Chechnya (1994 – 2009)	200 - 700
Afghanistan (2001-2014)	1,000 - 1,500
Iraq (2003-2014)	4,000 - 6,000
Syria (2011 – 2014)	10,000

Table 1: Number of Foreign Fighters in Various Conflicts in the Recent Past

Usually foreign fighters are a minority in a civil war. However, in the case of IS in Syria, they constitute 40 percent or more of all fighters – something which is unique.¹⁹ This figure, like many others, is disputable, depending in part on the definition of “foreign”.

2. Definitions of Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters

What is a “foreign fighter”? The term deserves a moment of reflection. David Malet, author of a monograph on foreign fighters, defines them as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict”.²⁰ Such a “dry” definition makes one wonder why would young men (and some women too) – most of whom have never held a gun in their hands - risk their lives for a country that is not theirs and of which they often do not even understand the language. After all, it is hard enough to die for one’s own country, let alone a foreign one. What makes them tick? Answers to this question are the subject of a longer ICCT Research Paper to be released later this month. Here the main focus is first on conceptual issues and then on the various estimates of foreign fighters, concentrating mainly on Sunni jihadist foreign fighters in Syria, leaving largely aside those who joined to lend their support to the Alawite regime in Damascus or to the Kurds in the north of Syria and Iraq.

To begin with, we have to realise that the cause these “foreign fighters purport to fight for might not be so “foreign” after all. If most foreign fighters are Muslims, does that make them “foreign” in a conflict that is about key Muslim concerns? Only if we take the Western concept of the state and of citizenship as reference framework, we create “foreigners”. While, according to one estimate, one third or more of its fighters are foreign born (that is, they are not Syrian or Iraqis)²¹ about 70 percent of them are Muslims from the Arab Middle East and North Africa’s Maghreb region. Another 20 percent of the foreign fighters are the sons and grandsons of immigrants to Europe originating

¹⁷ J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.119; E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, “Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts”, *New York Times*, 26 September 2015.

¹⁸ A. Waldeck, *The Ideology of ISIS: A Motivation for Europeans to Become Foreign Fighters?*, Tre Kroner Roskilde: Roskilde University Master Thesis, 2015, pp. 57 - 59.

¹⁹ C. McCauley, “Western Muslims Volunteering to Fight in Syria and Iraq: Why Do They Go, and What Should We Do?” (2015). The 40 percent estimate refers to 2013 when IS military formations were estimated to consist of only 4-5,000 fighters. At the level of leadership the number of foreigners in IS in Syria was double – 80 percent - most of them Iraqis, often led by officers from the Baath regime of Saddam Hussein – J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 118.

²⁰ D. Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts* (Oxford: University Press, 2013), p. 9.

²¹ CNN, “How Foreign Fighters are Swelling ISIS Ranks in Startling Numbers”, *Kiii-TV*, <http://www.kiiitv.com/story/26519130/how-foreign-fighters-are-swelling-isis-ranks-in-startling-numbers>.

from Muslim countries as far apart as Central Asia and Morocco.²² Against this backdrop, the definition for foreign fighters proposed by Jahangir Arasli, an Azerbaijani intelligence analyst, makes more sense than the one of David Malet cited earlier:

“A foreign Islamist fighter is a volunteer combatant actor with no apparent link to the area of the ongoing armed conflict yet bound to it by his sense of the perceived Muslim religious duty”.²³

The middle ground between Malet’s and Arasli’s definition can be found in the one of the Academy of International Law and Human Rights. This Geneva-based institution defines a foreign fighter as an

“individual who leaves his or her country of origin or habitual residence to join a non-state armed group in an armed conflict abroad and who is primarily motivated by ideology, religion and/or kinship”.²⁴

Thomas Hegghammer, a Norwegian scholar, in turn, defined the foreign fighter as

“an agent who (i) 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 organisation; and (4) is unpaid”.²⁵

EUROPOL, the Hague-based European police organisation, defines foreign fighters as

“individuals motivated by religion, who leave their country of origin in order to train, fights or perform extremist activities in war zones”.²⁶

From these definitions it would appear that foreign fighters are mainly religious fighters. Rather than navigating into the treacherous waters of religion, the UN Security Council chose to describe foreign fighters - or at least some of them - as “Foreign Terrorist Fighters” (FTF). In its resolution 2178 the Security Council defined them in September 2014 in a rather convoluted way as

“... nationals who travel or attempt to travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, and other individuals who travel or attempt to travel from their territories to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts, or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict”.²⁷

²² S. Mullins, “Foreign Fighters in Syria”, *per Concordiam*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2014), p.36,

http://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublishweb/MCDocs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordiam/pC_V5N3_en.pdf.

²³ J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 69.

²⁴ Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, *Academy Briefing No. 7: Foreign Fighters Under International Law* (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2014), p. 7, <http://www.geneva-academy.ch/docs/publications/Briefings%20and%20In%20breifs/Foreign%20Fighters%20Under%20International%20Law%20Briefing%20no7.pdf>.

²⁵ T. Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters”, *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2010/2011), pp. 57 - 58; S. Gates and S. Podder, “Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p. 107.

²⁶ V. Azinovic and M. Jusic, *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters’ Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: The Atlantic Initiative, 2015), p. 13.

²⁷ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2178 (2014): Adopted by the Security Council at its 7272nd meeting, on 24 September 2014*, S/RES/2178 (2014), www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2014/shtml.

Since the UN General Assembly never managed to arrive at a universally accepted legal definition of terrorism²⁸, there is ambiguity not only about the *foreign* element in FTF but also about the *terrorist* in foreign *terrorist* fighters.²⁹ Calling them “foreign non-state fighters” would create new problems since certain types of violence by non-state actors are legal in internationalised armed conflicts, as in resistance against foreign occupation.³⁰ Arguably, a distinction ought to be made between a ‘Foreign Fighter’ and a Foreign *Terrorist* Fighter’ but the Security Council chose not to do so.³¹

It should also be kept in mind that not all who go to Syria are *fighters*, as some of them are women with children who follow their husband or jihadist bride wannabes in search of a hero warrior husband. According to one estimate from February 2015, there were at least 550 Muslimas from the West living in territories controlled by IS).³² However, more realistic estimates put the number of girls and women at no less than 10 percent of foreigners, which would mean up to 2,500 females went, sometimes with husband and children, to Syria.³³ Apart from very rare participation in suicide operations and in acts of self-defence, women are not meant to fight but are meant to be subservient to men, serving the sexual needs of jihadists, get pregnant, produce “cubs of the Caliphate” and, more generally, act as “cheerleaders” of the Syrian jihad.³⁴ The stream of unaccompanied girls and young women to Syria is especially puzzling for nothing better awaits many of them than having to cover their whole bodies (including their eyes) in black, being largely confined to the house (they can only leave with a guardian) and serve the needs of often multiple males.

Another group that comes from abroad are those Syrians who had left Syria, for instance, as students, before 2012 and later returned to their home country to participate in the insurgency against the Assad regime – an uprising conducted by well over 100,000 Syrian men who fight in roughly 100 factions (including about a dozen linked to al-Qaeda).³⁵ Many of these Syrian returnees are not “terrorists” and most of them have not joined IS, which, according to Russian estimates, has 40,000 – 50,000 fighters in Syria.³⁶ In other words, question marks can be raised with

²⁸ The definition issue has been debated since 1972 in the Ad Hoc Committee on Terrorism of the General Assembly, to no avail. The definition utilised by the 15 member states of the Security Council in the 2004 resolution 1640 lacks the legitimacy, which one coming from the General Assembly with its 193 members would have. While it has no legal standing, the Security Council’s definition is more adequate than the draft definition currently discussed in the General Assembly’s Ad Hoc Committee on Terrorism. The Security Council used this description of terrorism in 2004: “... criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act, and all other acts which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature...”. - Security Council Resolution 1540, 28 September 2004; for a discussion of the UN struggle to find a legal definition, see: A.P. Schmid, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, pp. 50 - 60. New York and London: Routledge, 2011.

²⁹ The International Committee of the Red Cross noted: “...the term ‘terrorist act’ should be used, in the context of armed conflict, only in relation to the few acts specifically designated as such under the treaties of IHL. It should not be used to describe acts that are lawful or not prohibited by IHL. While there is clearly an overlap in terms of the prohibition of attacks against civilians and civilian objects under both IHL and domestic law, it is believed that, overall, there are more disadvantages than advantages to additionally designating such acts as ‘terrorist’ when committed in situations of armed conflict (whether under the relevant international legal framework or under domestic law). Thus, with the exception of the few specific acts of terrorism that may take place in armed conflict, it is submitted that the term ‘act of terrorism’ should be reserved for acts of violence committed outside of armed conflict”. International Committee of the Red Cross, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts Report*, Geneva, October 2011, EN 31C/11/5.1.2, p. 51.

³⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross, *International Humanitarian Law and Other Rules Relating to the Conduct of Hostilities: Collection of Treaties and Other Instruments*, Geneva, International Committee of the Red Cross, 1989. War Crimes are, of course, illegal in any type of conflict and since (some) acts of terrorism can be considered “peacetime equivalents of war crimes”, that also applies to terrorism.

³¹ One reason for the choice of FTF terminology might be the increasing use of private corporations and mercenaries by governments. See: S. McFate, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order* (Oxford: University Press, 2014).

³² K. Adam, “Report: Western Women Are Attracted to Islamic State for Complex Reasons”, *Washington Post*, 28 May 2015.

³³ In the case of Germany, for instance, there are an estimated 100 women among the 750 Germans who joined IS, a percentage of 13.3%. “13-jarige Duitser Wilde naar IS”, *Telegraaf*, 29 July 2015.

³⁴ J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 313.

³⁵ The “well over 100,000” figure is from C. Lister, “The West is Walking into the Abyss on Syria”, *Brookings*, 28 September 2015.

³⁶ According to the Russian Minister of Defence, Mid-October 2015.

regard to all three dimensions of the Security Council's conceptualisation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF - "foreign", "terrorist" "fighters". This issue is also related to the way this complex conflict is categorised.

Is it primarily a Sunni-Shiite armed conflict³⁷ comparable in some ways to the Catholic-Protestant conflict that cost some four million lives in Western Europe in the 17th century and lasted thirty years (1618-1648)? Or should we compare it with the Crusades that lasted two centuries (1095 – 1291), costing between one and three million lives?³⁸ Some analysts think that the current conflict in Syria and beyond is something new, fed strongly by a jihadist Islamist movement in Muslim-majority countries and in Western Muslim diasporas, brought together by the power of the Internet which had also helped to trigger the Arab Spring.³⁹ What makes the Syrian insurgency and its repression unique is the almost genocidal scale of destruction and displacement: half of the population – up to 12 out of 23 million - has been driven from their homes, over 4 million as external refugees and 7.6 million internally displaced (often several times), with 12,2 million in need of humanitarian assistance and a million injured and some 250,000 people - 111,000 of them civilians - having been killed while another 600,000 people are starving in siege situations and 80 percent of the population has been impoverished.⁴⁰ The intervention of Russian air- and rocket forces and of some Iranian ground forces since late September 2015 bodes ill for the people of Syria.

3. Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters – Estimates of Magnitudes of Foreign Fighters

An American congressional bi-partisan report, released in late September 2015 concluded that "There is currently no comprehensive global database of foreign fighter names. Instead, countries including the U.S. rely on a weak, patchwork system for swapping individual extremist identities".⁴¹ The information coming out of Syria is too often partisan information. News has become a weapon of psychological warfare. The civil war in Syria has a physical and a virtual reality and the two intersect and interact. Each side in the conflict tends to produce its own "facts" and counters, downplays or downright distorts information from other parties. This is also reflected when it comes to the number of foreign fighters. Estimates vary enormously, sometimes the lowest and highest estimates of foreign fighters (FFs) originating from one country differing by a factor as high as 25.⁴² The UN Monitoring Team (UN Res. 1267) has already reported in November 2014 that "accurate and reliable data" on FTF were impossible to obtain but estimated the number as between 15,000 and 20,000, with most of them travelling to join IS. Yet it admitted already then that the number of FTF could be as high as 30,000.⁴³

³⁷ The origins of the Shia-Sunni divide, originally linked to the question of rightful succession after the Prophet's death in 632, has poisoned intra-Muslim relations for more than 1,300 years, with both sides considering the other as heretics. D. Nicolle, *Historical Atlas of the Islamic World* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2003), p. 37.

³⁸ T.F. Madden, ed., *Crusade* (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2008), p.11 & p. 214. Some historians put the end of the crusades not at the date of the fall of Acra in 1291 but look at other crusades not only those focused on the recovery of the holy land. – Cf. C. Tyerman, *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), pp. 211 – 217.

³⁹ A background paper of the Partnership for Peace Consortium referred to this conflict in these terms: "In many respects, Syria is the first large-scale socially mediated war". – Partnership for Peace Consortium. Sunni Foreign Fighters in Syria: Background, Facilitating Factors and Selected Responses. Partnership for Peace Consortium, *Combating Terrorism Working Group Background Paper No.1.*, 21 May 2014, p.2., www.pfp-consortium.org.

⁴⁰ Figures from ReliefWeb, *Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O' Brien – Statement to the Security Council on Yemen, 28 July 2015*, <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-stephen-0> and Mercy Corps, *Quick Facts: What You Need to Know About the Syria Crisis*, 20 July 2015, <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/turkey-iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis> and from "Security Council: Syria 'largest humanitarian crisis in the world", *Al-Monitor*, 24 August 2015; Figure on civilian deaths from C. Lister. "The West is walking into the abyss on Syria". According to Lister, 95 percent of civilian deaths were caused by the Assad regime.

⁴¹ E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts", *New York Times*, 26 September 2015.

⁴² E.g. in the case of Italy in tables reproduced by S. Mullins, "Foreign Fighters in Syria", *per Concordiam*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2014), p.36, http://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/MCDocs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordiam/pC_V5N3_en.pdf (S. Mullins used ICRS high and low estimates).

⁴³ UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, *Action Against Threat of Foreign Terrorist Fighters Must Be Ramped Up, Security Council Urges in High-Level Meeting*, 29 May 2015, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11912.doc.htm>; the UN has published the second of three reports on 2 September 2015: United Nations Security Council, "Annex: Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) by

In the following an attempt will be made to bring some structure and order into this, presenting the various data we could find. These are often conflicting and confusing, for instance, when it comes to the ratio between foreign fighters and the non-foreign fighters in IS. Partly this has to do with the fact that the core of IS consists of Iraqi followers of the late Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006) and former Baathist officers of the regime of Saddam Hussein. Strictly speaking they are "foreign fighters" in Syria but not in Iraq.

The current Western focus on foreign fighters in Syria is somewhat blind on one eye, as those Shia and Alawite Muslims and Christians who have gone and continue to go to Syria to support the Bashar al-Assad regime in the west or the Kurdish separatists in the north of the country remain largely uncounted. Presumably this has to do with the fact that they are not deemed a danger to Western democracies when they return to their countries of origin. We therefore only have very rough and dated estimates on the foreign fighters on the Syrian's regime or Kurdish side (Table 2).⁴⁴

Origin of Foreign Fighters	Number of Foreign Fighters
Iranian	1-2,000 thousand from Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), mostly advisers, instructors, military specialists and "controllers"
Lebanese	5-8,000 Hezbollah fighters (of whom ca. 1,300 killed)
Iraqi	Some 2-3,000 (of whom the majority left; replaced by Afghani Shias of the "Fatemiyoun Brigade" of Hazaras)
Palestinians	Several hundreds (mainly from the Popular Front of Liberation of Palestine-General Command)
Russian*	Slavic Corps (private military company of 267 members)

Table 2: Foreign Fighters on the Side of the Assad Regime

*Ca. 2,000 Russian military advisors & aircraft crews (manning more than 50 military aircraft, incl. helicopters) and ground base protection troops arrived in late September 2015 in Latakia and launched attacks).⁴⁵

From the above it would appear that the number of foreign fighters who joined the Shia or anti-Assad side of the struggle is less than half of those who joined the Sunni side.⁴⁶ Most recently, Iran has reportedly also sent several hundred ground forces to Syria to strengthen Syrian government defences around Damascus since the Assad regime seems to be short of manpower due to battlefield losses and defections. By the end of August 2015, the land over which the Assad regime held control had shrunk to some 17 percent of Syria's total territory.⁴⁷

States Affected by Foreign Terrorist Fighters", in *Letter Dated 2 September May 2015 From the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1373 (2001) Concerning Counter-terrorism Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, 2 September 2015, S/2015/683.

⁴⁴ Rough estimates from an Israeli colleague, mid-July 2015; M. Levitt, "Waking up the Neighbours. How Regional Intervention is Transforming Hezbollah", *Foreign Affairs*, 23 July 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2015-07-23/waking-neighbors>; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, pp. 228 - 229; F. Tastekin, "Russia's Expanding Military Presence in Syria", *Al-Monitor*, 15 September 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/turkey-syria-russia-changing-rules-game-middle-east.html>.

⁴⁵ The 2,000 figure for Russia is from C. Lister. "The West is walking into the abyss on Syria"; On the other hand, the United States had, as of late September 2015, some 3,500 American advisers, trainers and other military personnel in Iraq: M.R. Gordon, "Russia Surprises U.S. With Accord on Battling ISIS", *New York Times*, 27 September 2015.

⁴⁶ A. Lund, "Who are the Foreign Fighters in Syria? An Interview with A. Y. Zelin", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53811>; Wikipedia, *Foreign Rebel Fighters in the Syrian Civil War*, 25 October 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_rebel_fighters_in_the_Syrian_Civil_War. Zelin arrived at an estimate of not more than 10,000 foreign fighters on the Shia side. On the other hand, the Azerbaijani security and defence analyst J. E. Arasli put their number at 30-40,000: J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.229.

⁴⁷ According to Agence France Press, as quoted by T. Beemsterboer, "De Toekomst Heeft er Sinds Tijden Niet zo Slecht Uitgezien voor Assad", *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 July 2015 (updated 8 June 2015); IHS Jane's 360 Intelligence Review: <http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country> as quoted in P. McLeary and A. Rawnsley, "Situation Report", *Foreign Policy*, 25 August

The Arab Spring inspired revolt against the repressive Assad regime turned into a sectarian civil war in Syria but also became a proxy war, with Iran and Russia involved on the side of the Syrian government and a number of other states, including Turkey,⁴⁸ Saudi Arabia and Qatar⁴⁹ being involved more or less directly on the other side. The Iranian involvement, indirectly through Hezbollah and directly through its Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with its elite expeditionary Quds Force, is somewhat better documented than the so far limited involvement of Russian armed forces which initiated aerial attacks in late September 2015 against mainly non-IS insurgents (similar to Turkey which also has other priorities in its aerial bombardments in Iraq). Russian citizens are involved on both sides: as highly valued “Chechen” foreign fighters (around 2,200 according to one recent Russian estimate) and, in more limited numbers as Speznaz special forces.⁵⁰ Ironically for what one could see as Machiavellian reasons, the government of President Putin actually appears to have encouraged indirectly militant Islamist of the Northern Caucasus to leave for Syria to get them out of the country.⁵¹

According to an estimate of the United Nations, there are more than 25,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries active, of which an estimated 22,000 are involved in the conflict zone between Syria and Iraq.⁵² The Syrian government, (whose armed forces of 325,000 men has been nearly halved since 2011 due to more than 80,000 casualties in its ranks as well as more than 70,000 desertions) has put that foreign fighters figure much higher than the UN (which generally tends to be on the cautious side while the Assad government tends to exaggerate). One report of a Syrian military research centre put the number already in September 2013 at 54,000 foreign combatants from 87 different countries.⁵³

Origin of Foreign Fighters	Number of Foreign Fighters
Saudis	12,000 (of whom 3,872 killed and 2,689 “disappeared”)
“Chechens”	14,000 (of whom 3,691 killed)
Lebanese	9,000 (of whom 2,904 killed)
84 other countries	19,000

Table 3: Syrian Military Estimates of Number of Foreign Fighters

2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/25/situation-report-f-22s-headed-for-europe-new-truce-between-the-koreas-syrians-say-they-were-sold-out-by-the-turks-special-ops-under-investigation-and-lots-more/>.

⁴⁸ *Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 July 2015, <http://www.hurriyetcailynews.com/>; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 362.

⁴⁹ B. Peeters, *Choosing Battles: A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilizations (1980-2014)*. Utrecht: University Master Thesis, August 2014, p. 99, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl:8080/handle/1874/298875>.

⁵⁰ Figure provided by top Russian official at conference in June 2015.

⁵¹ V. Dzutsev, “Investigative Report Suggests Russian Security Services Pushing North Caucasus Militants to Flee to Middle East”, *The Jamestown Foundation North Caucasus Weekly*, vol. 16, no. 16 (2015). The rationale behind it is, according to Dzutsev: “By allowing and promoting the emigration of Islamists, Russian authorities achieve several aims. They clear the volatile North Caucasus of Islamists and reduce violence in the country. The export of militants to the Middle East also serves Russian foreign policy goals, most principally to cause as much volatility in the Middle East as possible in order to drive up oil prices. (...) What appears to be a widespread practice in Russia, “agent agreements” signed between the Russian security services and Islamist recruits amounts to the Russian state recruiting militants for militant organisations in the Middle East”. See also <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/23/russia-s-playing-a-double-game-with-islamic-terror.html>.

⁵² United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Background Note: Special Meeting of the Counter-Terrorism Committee with Member States and Relevant International and Regional Organisations on “Stemming the Flow of Foreign Terrorist Fighters”*, Madrid, 27-28 July 2015, p. 1; T.S. Kaidanow, *Al-Qaida, the Islamic State, and the Future of the Global Jihad Movement*, Remarks at Brookings Institution, 16 September 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/rm/246983.htm>; H. El Said, “Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?”, in S. Zeiger and A. Aly, eds., *Countering Violent Extremism. Developing an Evidence-base for Policy and Practice*, p. 22. Abu Dhabi: Hedayah, 2015, p. 22, <http://www.hedayah.ae/pdf/cve-edited-volume.pdf>.

⁵³ M. Hashim, “Iraq and Syria: Who are the foreign fighter?”, *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, 3 September 2014, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29043331. The report was first published by the Tunisian daily *al-Chourouk*.

This grand of more than 50,000 foreign fighters probably also includes smaller contingents like the 50 – 60 mainly right-wing fighters from Sweden, Finland, Croatia, Serbia, Greece, Canada and United States. Many of them are siding mainly with Kurds in the north.⁵⁴

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), at least 8,000 IS members have been killed⁵⁵ while US estimates speak of 10 - 15,000 IS fatalities.⁵⁶ Casualty rates among un- and ill-trained Western foreign fighters are higher than among local Arabs as these volunteers tend to be used in the frontline as cannon-fodder and as kamikaze style suicide (car-) bombers.⁵⁷ Very few of the foreign (non-Iraqi) fighters have been allowed to rise in the hierarchy of IS to higher levels (an exception being the Chechen Abu Omar al Shishani, the second in command of IS operations in Syria).⁵⁸

The United Nations also collects data from its member states and UN estimates are, as indicated before, usually conservative estimates. Partly this has to do with the fact that some member states provide no data or provide them too late to be included in a report. According to the mandatory (that is under Chapter VII of UN Charter) Security Council resolution 2178 of 24 September 2014, member states are obliged to report to the UN progress in their efforts to stop foreign fighters. In its key passage, Security Council Resolution 2178 urges all member states to prevent and suppress recruiting, organising, transporting, and equipping FTFs as well as the financing of FTF travel and activities. It also requires all states to prevent the entry or transit of individuals believed to be traveling for terrorism-related purposes.⁵⁹

In order to monitor compliance the Security Council has asked UN member states to report on their efforts to stem the flow. So far, their reporting has been rather disappointing. The UN issued, in May 2015 the reported results for a first group of 21 states – out of a total of 67 states said to be most affected “by the acute and growing threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters”.⁶⁰ What is striking, is how little information some of the member states most involved could or would provide to the United Nations Security Council. Table 4 lists some of the officially reported numbers of foreign (terrorist) fighters who recently travelled to Iraq and/or the Syrian Arab Republic.⁶¹ For comparison, unofficial third party open source based estimates collected by J. E. Arasli have been added.⁶²

⁵⁴ J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.42.

⁵⁵ AFP, “ISIS Executes Over 3,000 in Syria in a Year-Long ‘Caliphate’”, *Al Arabia News*, 29 June-2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/06/28/ISIS-executes-over-3-000-in-Syria-in-year-long-caliphate-.html>.

⁵⁶ 10,000 according to US Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken, as noted in B. Johnson, “Deputy Sec State: Don’t Take Our Estimate of ISIS We’ve Taken Out So Literally”, *PJ Tatler*, 4 June 2015, <http://pjmedia.com/tatler/2015/06/04/deputy-secstate-dont-take-our-estimate-of-isis-weve-taken-out-so-literally/>; 15,000 according to R. Hall, “The U.S. Has Been Bombing the Islamic State for a Year. What Has Been Achieved?”, *Global Post*, <http://theweek.com/articles/571084/been-bombing-islamic-state-year-what-been-achieved>.

⁵⁷ To cite Scott Gates and Sukanya Podder, quoting General Ali al-Wazir from the Iraqi army: “We often see the foreign fighters in the first wave of attacks and then the Arab fighters will come in after an area is cleared”. They add: “Suicide bombers, who play a critical role in IS attacks appear to be dominated by foreign fighters. Given these tactic, foreign fighters probably suffer disproportionate casualties”. S. Gates and S. Podder, “Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State”, p.111. A. Waldeck notes on this point: “Fighters who arrive in Syria are obliged to attend a course before they are allowed to participate in the battle. They are isolated from the other members, their passports are taken away and they attend meetings in which they are brainwashed. A German returnee calls it “to be persuaded to ISIS” (...) In those meetings they can choose between being a martyr or fighter. Brainwashed and without the passport it is difficult to leave ISIS again, even if some fighters would like to do so”. A. Waldeck, *The Ideology of ISIS*, p. 66.

⁵⁸ T. H. Tonnessen, “Heirs of Zarqawi or Saddam? The relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p.54; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 42.

⁵⁹ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2178 (2014): Adopted by the Security Council at its 7272nd meeting, on 24 September 2014*, S/RES/2178 (2014), www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2014/shtml.

⁶⁰ United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 13 May 2015 From the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1373 (2001) Concerning Counter-terrorism Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2015/338, http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1514129_EN.pdf, p. 2.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶² Egypt, data for summer 2014: J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 56; Jordan, data for December 2013, p.161; Libya, data for 2012, p.173; Afghanistan data, August 2014, p. 17; Lebanon data , August 02014, p.171; Saudi Arabia, data for August 2014, p. 258. N.B.: In July 2015 the Saudi government provided 2,000 names to another international organisation. - Information from Case Officer of that organisation.

UN Member State	UN Member State Non-Estimate	Third Party Estimate
Egypt	"State does not possess accurate information"	1,000
Jordan	"State does not possess accurate information"	1,500 – 2,500
Libya	"State does not possess accurate information"	700 – 6,000
Afghanistan	"Insufficient information"	25
Lebanon	"Insufficient information"	900+
Saudi Arabia	"Insufficient information"	2,500 – 8,000

Table 4: United Nations Member States' Non-Estimates and Third Party Estimates

Those states that did report to the UN on their foreign fighters either reported zero foreign fighters (Pakistan, Qatar, Philippines) or numbers that were, in most cases, lower estimates than those of third party observers.⁶³ Again, the best available third party estimates brought together by J.E. Arasli and others are added for comparison.⁶⁴

UN Member State	Official Estimate Reported to UN	Third Party Estimate
Tunisia	3,00	7,000
Turkey	1,300	1,000+
Morocco	1,200	3,000
Maldives	200	20-100
Algeria	170	200-250
Malaysia	60	nearly 100
Indonesia	50	150-500+
Pakistan	0	330
Qatar	0	15
Philippines	0	ca. 100

Table 5: United Nations Estimates Compared to Third Party Estimates

According to a Europol assessment of January 2015, up to 5,000 Europeans have joined the jihad in Syria and Iraq.⁶⁵ That is a much higher number than the one for the United States where some 250 wannabe foreign fighters were successful in making it to Syria.⁶⁶ The 5,000 figure would put the number of European foreign fighters at nearly

⁶³ United Nations Security Council, "Annex: Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) by States Affected by Foreign Terrorist Fighters", in *Letter Dated 13 May 2015 From the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1373 (2001) Concerning Counter-terrorism Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, 14 May 2015, S/2015/338, p.10. The 3rd party estimates are those collected from open sources by J.E. Arasli, an internationally respected defence and security analyst and practitioner with a background in Soviet, and later, Azerbaijani national security (J. E. Arasli is, like the present author, a member of the Combating Terrorism Working Group at the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes).

⁶⁴ Tunisia, data for March 2015; J. E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 288; Turkey, data for mid-2014L Ibid., p.290 (however, this seems to be an underestimate as "more than 1,000". Turkish Kurds (Sic) were fighting with IS: "Turkey's Demirtas: 'Erdogan is Capable of Setting Country on Fire': Interview conducted by Hasnain Kazim", *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, 31 July 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/kurdish-leader-demirtas-calls-for-ceasefire-with-turkey-a-1046263.html>); for Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, data from R. Gunaratna, "2 Singaporeans Detained for Planning to Join ISIS", *Asia One*, 30 September 2015, <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/2-singaporeans-detained-planning-join-isis>; Moroccan data combine 1,000 from Morocco itself and 2,000 foreign fighters of Moroccan origin from Spain and other European countries; J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p. 194; Data for Maldives from July 2014: Ibid., p.178; the undated Algerian figure does not include 800 Algerians from Europe: Ibid., p.20; Malaysia, undated, ibid., p.178; Indonesia, undated data: Ibid., p.98 Pakistan, data undated: Ibid., p.214; Qatar data undated: Ibid., p.230; Philippines data undated: Ibid., p.217.

⁶⁵ P. Teffer, "Up to 5,000 Europeans Joined the Jihad, Europol Chief Says", *Euroobserver*, 16 January 2015. "Estimates vary from 3,000 – 5,000. The database of Europol contains about 2,500 names of suspects" (Ibid.) who have gone to Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones. The US government is said to have 15,000 listed: J. Queally, "US Adding Names to Foreign Fighter Watchlist 'Like a Ticking Odometer'", *Common Dreams*, 30 December 2015, www.commondreams.org/news/2014/12/30.

⁶⁶ US Congress Homeland Security Committee, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* (2015).

twenty percent of the total number of IS foreign fighters.⁶⁷ The trend is still upwards. In April 2015, a European Union official put the number at 6,000 European foreign fighters⁶⁸ while French Prime Minister Manuel Valls estimated that as many as 10,000 Europeans could be fighting in jihadi groups by the end of 2015.⁶⁹ The foreign fighters who joined IS and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq make up a significant part of the jihadist militants in Syria and Iraq but the estimated figures available diverge often significantly. In 2013, when IS in Syria was much smaller, consisting of only 4,000 – 5,000 fighters, 40 percent were said to be foreigners. By September 2014, two months after the proclamation of the Caliphate, the CIA estimate of the total number of IS fighters jumped to 20,000 – 31,500 fighters, with 15,000 of them believed to be foreigners, mostly Muslims from North Africa and the Near and Middle East (a year later US intelligence estimate doubled that figure to nearly 30,000 foreign recruits for IS)⁷⁰. At that time the Western foreign fighters were estimated to be a minority of perhaps 13 percent.⁷¹ However, all foreign fighters together constitute at least 40 percent of IS' total number of fighters.⁷²

Table 6 provides a breakdown of figures for selected European States, as well as Canada and the United States, mainly, but not exclusively, based on the open source monitoring of Jahangir E. Arasli. The figures are mainly from early 2015.⁷³

⁶⁷ For other figures, see: B.M. Jenkins, "When Jihadis Come Marching Home: The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq", *RAND*, 2014, pp. 1 & 5.

⁶⁸ P. Gonzales, "Vera Jourova: Près de 6.000 Européens Sont Partis Faire le Jihad", *Le Figaro*, 13 April 2015, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2015/04/12/01003-20150412ARTFIG00128-vera-jourova-pres-de-6000-europeens-sont-partis-faire-le-djihad.php>.

⁶⁹ RFI, "10,000 Europeans Could Be Fighting in Jihadi Groups by Year End, Valls", *RFI English*, 8 March 2015, <http://www.english.rfi.fr/france/20150308-10000-europeans-could-be-fighting-jihadi-groups-year-end-valls>. Quoted by Brian M. Jenkins (RAND) in presentation where author was present in July 2015.

⁷⁰ E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts" (2015).

⁷¹ J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, pp. 118 - 119.

⁷² According to Peter Neumann, Director of ISRC, as quoted in book review by F. Jansen, "Propaganda der Tat", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 6 October 2015, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/politische-literatur/terror-experte-neumann-zum-is-propaganda-der-tat/12415572.html>.

According to Rohan Gunaratna, FTF in Syria & Iraq constitute even half of IS's strength. R. Gunaratna, *Lecture at the 15th World Congress on Counter-Terrorism*, Herzliya: Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 9 September 2015 (lecture notes by A.P. Schmid).

⁷³ The estimates between brackets are from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR): P.R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighters Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s", *ICSR*, 26 January 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s>. See also "How Many People Have Gone to Syria to Fight?" *BBC*, 2 August 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33715636>. See also <http://www.intelcenter.com/reports-charts.html>. Some of the more recent figures are from Luisa Loveluck. "Islamic State: Where Do Its Fighters Come From", *The Telegraph* (UK), 8 June 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11660487/Islamic-State-one-year-on-Where-do-its-fighters-come-from.html>. A number of estimates are based on the author's conversations with officials from relevant countries. Other figures are from sources like, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina: V. Azinovic and M. Jusic, *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent* (2015), p.7; in the case of France, the figures are from "La commission d'enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes, Rapport fait au nom de la commission d'enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes," (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, June 2, 2015), as quoted in: T. Holman, "The French Jihadists 'Foreign Fighters' Legion in Syria and Iraq", *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, 24 July, 2015; for Belgium the figures are from P. Cruickshank, "A View From the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Alain Grignard, Brussels Federal Police", *CTC Sentinel*, 21 August 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/?p=35826>; for the United Kingdom, the figure is from B.M. Jenkins, "When Jihadis Come Marching Home. The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq" (2014), p. 19; Dutch estimates from August 2015 are from NCTV, as quoted in P. van den Dool, "Jihadisten Blijven Uitreizen naar Syrië en Irak – 'Voorname Dreiging voor Nederland'", *NRC-Handelsblad*, 1 September 2015, http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/09/01/jihadisten-blijven-naar-syrie-en-irak-reizen-voornamen-dreiging-voor-nederland/?utm_source=ema&utm_campaign=nieuwsbrief-20150901&utm_content=Binnenland&utm_term=artikel1; as well as A. Bunnik and T. de Zoete, "The Gloves Come Off: The Dutch Response to Jihadists in Syria and Iraq", *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 13, no. 19 (2015), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44383&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=26&cHash=95fa899b1ec0381f6; figure for Italy from R. Pinotti, Minister of Defence, as cited in Redazione ANSA, "Isis: Pinotti, 87 Foreign Fighters Passati dall'Italia", *ANSA*, 20 September 2015, http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2015/09/20/isis-pinotti-87-foreign-fighters-italiani_a50298c5-7de4-457a-87ad-1e86d9c7ef30.html; E. Schmitt and S. Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts" (2015); Chinese estimate from H. Saul, "Chinese Uighurs 'Join ISIS Overseas and Return to Take Part in Terror Plots', Officials Claim", *The Independent*, 11 March 2015; US Congress Homeland Security Committee, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* (2015), p.6; figure for Australia from United Nations Security Council, "Annex" (September, 2015), p. 27.

State	Number of Anti-Assad Foreign Fighters
Albania	100-200
Austria	233 (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 100-150)
Australia	255 (of whom 155 have returned)
Belgium	440 (of whom at least 100 have returned)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	217 (of whom 51 returned)
Canada	130-500 (of whom 80 returned to Canada)
China	up to 300
Denmark:	100 – 150 (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 100-150)
Finland	70-100 (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 50-70)
France	883 (of whom 271 returned) (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 1,200)
Germany	ca. 700 (ca. 1/3 returned) (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 500-600)
Italy	at least 87
Netherlands	210 (of whom 35 returned and at least 32 died)
Norway	60 (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 60)
Portugal	12 (incl. 2 women)
Russia	2,200 (from North Caucasus)
Serbia	several dozen
Sweden	300 (mainly Kurds) (ICSR, Jan. 2014: 150-180)
Spain	250
Switzerland	40
United Kingdom	700 (ca. 250 returned) (ICSR, Jan. 2015: 500-600)
United States	more than 250

Table 6: Anti-Assad Foreign Fighters from Western States, Russia and China

It would be interesting to compare these numbers with those of IS itself. The closest we can get to that, is via the London-based Palestinian journalist Abdel Bari Atwan who visited the Caliphate in late 2014. According to him, the foreign (namely non-Syrian and non-Iraqi fighters) fighters constitute at least 30,000 or almost a third of the more than 100,000 fighters of the Islamic State.⁷⁴ He offers these percentages (here also translated into numbers) of FFs:

Origin of Foreign Fighters	Percent of Foreign Fighters from Source
Libyan	21 percent (6,300 FFs)
Tunisian & Saudi	16 percent (4,800 FFs)
Jordanian	11 percent (3,300 FFs)
Turkish	6 percent (1,800 FFs)
Egypt	10 percent (3,000 FFs)
Lebanese	8 percent (2,400 FFs)
British	4.5 percent (1,350 FFs)
French Brigades*	6 percent (1,800 FFs)
Other	17.5 percent (5,250 FFs)

Table 7: Percentages of Foreign Fighters from Source who obtained data from IS

*Composed of French and Belgians of North African descent

⁷⁴ M. Ruthven, "Inside the Islamic State", *The New York Review*, 9 July 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/jul/09/inside-islamic-state/>.

In terms of regional origin, one survey produced in October 2014 came up with the following breakdown⁷⁵:

Regional Origin	Number of Foreign Fighters
Middle East	6,141
North Africa	5,660
Western Europe	2,770
Former Soviet Union	1,585
Asian Pacific	468
Western Balkans	442
South Asia	385
Sub-Saharan Africa	170
North America	42

Table 8: Regional Background of Foreign Fighters

In terms of country of origin, six out of ten countries producing most foreign fighters are Muslim-majority countries but there are also three West European countries among them.

Country of Origin	Number of Foreign Fighters
Tunisia	5,000
Saudi Arabia	2,275
Jordan	2,000
Russia	1,700
France	1,550
Turkey	1,400
Morocco	1,200
Lebanon	900
Germany	700
United Kingdom	700

Table 9: Top Ten Countries of Origin of Foreign Fighters*

* Estimates from late September 2015 by bi-partisan US Congressional Homeland Security Committee⁷⁶

Over time, the total share of foreign fighters in the Islamic State might decline, as IS has been aggressive in forcefully recruiting young men and even children⁷⁷ locally from the territories it controls (containing between six and eight million people). The rise of local fighters might also be the result of the fact that since the summer of 2015, Turkey has begun to get more determined about obstructing the passage of would-be foreign fighters crossing its border with Syria.

⁷⁵ Blog Across the Green Mountain, as cited in J.E. Arasli, *Archipelago SYRAQ*, p.213, since October 2014. Many of these estimates are on the low side. Central Asia (part of former Soviet Union), for instance, has fielded 3,000 foreign fighters – in addition of 2,400 originating from Russia, according to an estimate of the Soufan Group from September 2015: “TSG IntelBrief: Putin’s Syrian Gamble”, *The Soufan Group*, 22 September 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-putins-syrian-gamble/>; South East Asia has been the origin of more than 600 FFs, according to an estimate of R. Gunaratna, “2 Singaporeans Detained for Planning to Join ISIS” (2015), <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/2-singaporeans-detained-planning-join-isis>.

⁷⁶ US Congress Homeland Security Committee, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* (2011), p. 11.

⁷⁷According to research conducted by John Horgan and Mia Bloom. Small Arms – Children and Terrorism: C. Bartlau, “Der IS Züchtet die Nächste Generation Heran: Diese Kinder Werden zu Drohnen Gemacht”, *Web.de*, 21 July 2015, <http://web.de/magazine/politik/Kampf-Islamischer-Staat-IS/is-zuechtet-naechste-generation-heran-kinder-drohnen-30779166>.

The figures of FFs presented above in various tables vary greatly, depending when estimates were made and by whom they were made. Some put the number of foreign fighters almost as high as others put the total strength of IS – around 30,000 or 100 percent. On the other extreme, one BBC report implies that “as many as 20,000 foreign fighters” in the Middle East, constitute “around 10% of ISIS”.⁷⁸ That would put the number of ISIS fighters at 200,000 – double of the figure (“more than 100,000”) provided by Abdel Bari Atwan. A figure of 200,000 IS fighters was, however, also provided by a Kurdish leader in November 2014.⁷⁹ On the other hand, a figure of “more than 100,000” equals an estimate that was already made back in August 2014 by the Iraqi expert Hisham al-Hashimi.⁸⁰ The figure of 70,000 fighters for ISIS, cited earlier,⁸¹ is probably on the safe side but even that might be an exaggeration. If we are prepared to accept it, this would mean that the number of non-Iraqi foreign fighters would amount to about 40 percent of IS’ total (para-)military strength.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, a word of caution is in place: most estimates are of dubious reliability. They refer to different periods of time since 2011, some are cumulative, some are not, some estimates deduct casualties (killed and injured) suffered while others do not. Some appear to include Iraqis in Syria too while others exclude those. Some might also include Syrians living abroad who returned to their country of origin while others exclude such nationals. Some estimates even refer to foreign fighters in other jihadist theatres of war than Syria and Iraq while most do not. Some include and others exclude already returned foreign fighters. Some estimates include all foreign fighters in the conflict zone while others count only those fighting, disregarding those with Jabad al-Nusra or the Kurdish Peshmerga. Some estimates include not only foreign fighters but also those in support functions like jihadi brides.⁸² In other words: the situation remains complex and opaque despite the fact that the widespread use of social media has brought the reality and brutality of this war to our attention like no other war before. Only when the archives of IS (a very bureaucratic organisation) fall into the hands of its adversaries, are we likely to obtain more accurate figures.

Despite the shortcomings in the data situation, by looking at the problem of foreign (terrorist) fighters from several angles, this *Policy Brief* has, managed to establish provide greater clarity on some figures. We can be reasonably sure that:

- There are at least 25,000 foreign and perhaps as many as 30,000 insurgent fighters in Syria and Iraq with IS;
- The regime of Bashar al-Assad has less than half that number of foreign fighters on its side;
- The foreign fighters from Europe and other Western democracies number at least 5,000, with no clear signs that their part in the flow of foreign fighters has diminished;

⁷⁸ More Or Less, “Counting Foreign Fighters”, *BBC Radio 4*, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02yh0lx.

⁷⁹ P. Cockburn, “War With Isis: Islamic Militants Have Army of 200,000, Claims Senior Kurdish Leader”, *The Independent*, 16 November 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-islamic-militantshave-army-of-200000-claims-kurdish-leader-9863418.html>.

⁸⁰ R. Mohammed, “Islamic State Expands: Up to 100,000 People Have Joined, Experts Say”, *Mashable*, 26 August 2014, <http://mashable.com/2014/08/26/100000-people-join-islamic-state>; C. Lister, “A Long Way from Success: Assessing the War on the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015) p.11 - Such round figures (“100,000”, “200,000”) are always to be treated with extra caution).

⁸¹ “The Propaganda War”, *The Economist*, 15 August 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21660989-terrorists-vicious-message-surprisingly-hard-rebut-propaganda-war?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/ThePropagandaWar>.

⁸² This is also true in the new provinces IS claims to have set up other countries- like Libya (where IS claims 5,000 followers in Sirte and surroundings), Afghanistan or the Egyptian Sinai.

- 70 percent or more of the foreign fighters opposing the Assad regime are from Arab and other Muslim –majority countries;
- Foreign fighters constitute at least 40 percent of IS total number of fighters.

However, given the great disparities between some official (inter-) governmental estimates of the number of foreign fighters and other figures in the public domain, there is a clear need for better accounting mechanisms. These should be based also on greater conceptual clarity around the definitional elements “foreign”, “terrorist” and “fighters”.

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