

# Broadened Perspective On Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters in Syrian Civil War

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## Abstract

The issue of foreign (terrorist) fighters is hardly a new phenomenon because the inclusion of foreigners into civil conflicts has been one of the substantial features of armed conflicts in the history. However, the current wave presents new challenges because it is larger, more global, and more diverse. This paper aims to elaborate the issue by firstly discussing the history of the phenomena and conceptual debates. Then, the paper elaborates profiles of foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria with a broader perspective than mainstream literature. In its analysis, this paper relies on the secondary and some primary sources. By doing so, this paper argues that although most of studies focus on religious foreign (terrorist) fighters, there are different kinds of foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria in different manifestations of the phenomena according to their radicalization sources like ethnic, separatist, ideological and religious.

**Keywords:** Foreign Fighter, Foreign Terrorist Fighter, Religious Radicalization, Right-wing extremism, Left-wing extremism, Syrian Civil War.

## Suriye İç Savaşı'ndaki Yabancı (Terörist) Savaşçılara Genişletilmiş Bakış Öz

Yabancı (terörist) savaşçılar, pek çok açıdan yeni bir mesele değildir, çünkü yabancıların sivil çatışmalara dâhil olması tarihteki silahlı çatışmaların önemli özelliklerinden birisidir. Sorun yeni olmamakla birlikte Suriye İç Savaşı ile ortaya çıkan yabancı (terörist) savaşçılar dalgası, hem olguyu anlama hem bununla başa çıkmada yeni zorluklar sunmaktadır çünkü bu sefer daha çok sayıda, daha küresel ve daha çeşitli bir yabancı (terörist) savaşçılar olgusuyla karşı karşıyayız. Mevcut makale öncelikle konunun tarihini ve kavramsal tartışmalarını kısaca tartışmakta ve sonrasında Suriye'deki mevcut yabancı (terörist) savaşçılar konusunu literatürdeki yaygın yaklaşımın aksine daha geniş bir perspektiften ele almaktadır. Bahse konu araştırmada temel olarak ikincil kaynaklar ile bazı birincil kaynaklar kullanılmaktadır. Netice itibarıyla bu makale, literatürde büyük çoğunlukla dini radikalleşme temelli yabancı (terörist) savaşçılara odaklanılmasına rağmen, konunun farklı tezahürlerinin olduğunu, bu anlamda Suriye İç Savaşı'nın etnik, ayrılıkçı, ideolojik ve dini olmak üzere farklı radikalleşme kaynaklarına göre yabancı (terörist) savaşçılar konusunda zengin bir vaka sunduğunu savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yabancı Savaşçı, Yabancı Terörist Savaşçı, Dini Radikalleşme, Sağ Aşırılık, Sol Aşırılık, Suriye İç Savaşı.

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## Introduction

The issue of foreign fighters in general or foreign terrorist fighters in specific is indeed hardly a new phenomenon in many respects. The involvement of foreigners into civil conflicts has been one of the substantial features of many conflicts in modern world history. One of the major turning point happened during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s in terms of foreign (terrorist) fighters' scale, motivations and goals as well as its implications. When these fighters turned back to their home countries, experienced militants in the Afghan war became the recruiters and trainers of future foreign (terrorist) fighters in other civil conflicts (Yıldız, 2016: 10).

Although the issue is not new like in Afghanistan in the 1980s, or in Bosnia and Chechnya in the 1990s, the current wave of foreign (terrorist) fighters with the deepening of the Syrian Civil War pose particular differences because it is larger in scale, more international, and more diverse in terms of profiles and experiences in the conflict zones (CTED, 2018: 1). Therefore, the current foreign (terrorist) fighters wave presents a more complex security challenges and has become a matter of international concern related to those who stay in conflict zones, the returnees and the relocators (OSCE, 2018: 11). As a concrete threat to humanitarian values, they frequently resort to atrocious acts such as suicide attacks, mass killings of civilians, recruitment of children for armed conflicts, and ethnic and religious cleansing. Having recognized the magnitude of the threat, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) confirms that foreign terrorist fighters have now "constituted one of the major threats to international peace and security" and asks all "member states to implement criminal justice measures to effectively prevent, deter and criminalize the travel of foreign terrorist fighters and their related activities" (UNSC, 2014b: 1 and 4).

Within this context, this study aims to elaborate the current foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria with a broadened perspective. First, the paper briefly deals with the history of the phenomena in general. Then, the paper discusses the definitions of two terms, namely 'foreign fighter' and 'foreign terrorist fighter' in order to clarify the concepts. Third, the paper elaborates the facts, profiles, figures about foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria with a broader perspective, different than the mainstream approach in the literature on the subject, to appropriately identify and counter the challenge they pose to international security. By doing so, this paper argues that there are plenty of foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria in different manifestations of the phenomena according to their radicalization source like ethnic, separatist, religious,

and ideological. In brief, the civil war in Syria involves various types of political violent extremism and it once again reminds that the phenomenon of foreign (terrorist) fighters is not unique to specific religion or civilization and therefore requires a broader perspective.

## A Brief History of Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters

Although the issue of foreign (terrorist) fighters is currently associated with Muslims fighting in various conflict zones, transnational militancy is indeed a much older and a global phenomenon. The practice of hiring foreign fighters or mercenaries was a very common tradition among many imperial and colonial powers until the establishment of national armies in the modern history. In this regard, the French Foreign Legion can be considered as one of the clearest example of this tradition. However, as David Malet states, there was no particular study on the subject until the last period due to the fact that they have not been considered as a specific type in the conflicts that needed distinct attention (2013: 215).

Not only the contemporary manifestation of this phenomenon but also the previous examples of foreign fighters have been beyond the realm of any country, civilization or religion. As Malet clearly demonstrates that the Spanish Civil War in 1930s showed how a civil war could attract myriads of foreign fighters through ideological motivations. The Spanish Civil War exposed the divisions in Europe and Catholic fighters volunteered to fight Communism with Franco while radical communist or socialist entities joined the International Brigades as a way to stop fascism (2013: 92-126). Palestinian Arab resistance against the British mandate and the foundation of the State of Israel in 1940s can also be considered as another clear example of the involvement of foreign fighters. During the First Arab-Israel War, around 5.000 foreign fighters took part on the Israeli side while approximately 6.000 Arabs from different countries fought on the other side (Malet, 2013: 127-157; Malet, 2016). During the Cold War years, individuals volunteered in various communist revolutions in Latin America, Europe, far-east Asia and others primarily due to their ideological motivations. Nationalist Serbs, on the other hand, fought in Croatia in the early 1990s while Muslim foreigners involved into the conflicts in Afghanistan and in Bosnia and Chechnya in the same period (Malet, 2016). In brief, foreign fighters appeared in approximately at least a quarter of the conflicts in the last two centuries and these previous cases presented certain patterns that could help to understand the problems of today and tomorrow (Malet, 2017).

Although the issue of foreign fighters is not something new in many respects and has implications on the current wave; the modern foreign fighters are also particularly different from the previous ones. In this regard, Yıldız argues that beginning with the Afghan War in 1980s, concept of foreign (terrorist) fighters has evolved dramatically. First, it was the first time in history that the scale of foreign fighters' involvement was unprecedented. Leaving aside the case of Syrian Civil War, it was the largest-scale recruitment of western foreign fighters to join the conflict in the name of religious aims (Yıldız, 2016: 10). Second, it was also a very important ideological shift in terms of motivations. While the main motivation had been leftist or rightist ideology to that time, the Afghan War brought a new type of motivation which has increased the use of violence in the name of holy goals from the perception of the fighters (Wiktorowicz, 2001: 22-24; Hegghammer, 2010/11: 71-73; Öztürk, 2019 :174-177). Regarding the motivation of Arab volunteers who became involved in the Afghan War, there is also another bulk of literature which focus on state-society relations and the transnational networks in the Middle East (Miodownik, Barak, Mor & Yair, 2014: 5). Third, the current wave of foreign (terrorist) fighters attracts more attention also because of its implications through the returnees and relocators especially after the case of terrorist organization Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Daesh, ISIL, ISIS). Although relatively few returnees involved in terrorist attacks in their countries, it is also a fact that even a small number of cases proved their potential to cause mass casualties when they wanted to do so. Contrary to the current foreign (terrorist) fighters, Malet argues, early foreign (terrorist) fighters did not have intention to return and to fight in their homeland. In other words, communists in the Spanish Civil War, or the ones joining 1948 war, or the ones like Abdullah Azzam in Afghanistan, did not come back to their home countries to fight there because they did not aim to re-shape these societies, but they went devastated territories where cultural and governmental institutions were weak in order to build a correct society from their perspectives (2010: 110).

The invasion of Iraq and the aftermath instability in the country created power vacuum in the region, which in the end became also another important turning point in understanding foreign (terrorist) fighters. This power vacuum triggered a struggle for power, or influence, at three level in the Middle East; namely local, regional and global. In the transformation of the concept of foreign (terrorist) fighters, Malet also drew the attention specifically to the deterioration of security situation during the postwar civil conflict in Iraq after 2003 (2013: 194-195). Soon after the invasion, the flow

of foreign (terrorist) fighters started from different parts of the world. Additionally, after the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011, all sides of the conflict welcomed foreign (terrorist) fighters. The scale of foreign (terrorist) fighters' involvement in the Syrian Civil War is historically unprecedented in numbers. While the opposition is bolstered by an influx of foreigners motivated to fight against the perceived brutality of the government; many Shias from the region joined the militia groups fighting on the side of the regime motivated to protect either 'the Resistance' or 'the Shia crescent'. In between, there has been an intense influx of foreigners into the terrorist organization Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) affiliated groups in Syria although the current focus in the literature on foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria ignores this reality.

Due to above discussions, the UNSC affirms that terrorism in all forms and manifestations constituted a major threat to humanity and within this framework foreign terrorist fighters require a particular attention because they increased the intensity, time and violence of conflicts (UNSC, 2014b: 1-2). The current wave of foreign (terrorist) fighters, eventually, is beyond the realm of any civilization, religion or nation and poses a very complex nature of threat to liberal values. Different motivations for radicalization in Syria do not necessarily dispel the fact that each and every group in Syria include foreign (terrorist) fighters. In other words, transnational militancy in the Syrian conflict is a rich case study; therefore, the current wave of foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria needs further elaboration, and before focusing on that it is more appropriate to clarify certain conceptual perceptions and definitional debates about the subject in the next section.

## Who is a Foreign (Terrorist) Fighter?

Who is a foreign fighter? Who is a foreign terrorist fighter? What makes a fighter foreign and/or terrorist? Are foreign fighter and foreign terrorist fighter different? These concepts are widely used in media and academia interchangeably without enough attention to the definitional discussions. In the literature the term foreign fighter was used firstly, yet it is not because of the nature of the phenomena but the evolution of the literature on terrorism itself. However, due to the fact that all foreign fighters cannot be assumed as terrorist; two terms, foreign terrorist fighters and foreign fighters, are started to be used in order to make a specific reference intentionally. In other words, those individuals who travel to another country for the purpose of terrorist activity and the others who travel to another country to be involved in a civil

conflict are separated. However, it must be noted that the boundaries for categorization are not very clear because foreign fighters may also be considered as terrorist when financial, political or ideological interests overlap significantly (UNODC, 2018: 2). The problem about the division is due to the vague definition of terrorism.

Since the definition of terrorism and terrorist activity is subject to discussions, and after all to political decisions, some researchers prefer to use the term foreign fighter instead of foreign terrorist fighters in order to leave the discussion on terrorism for other studies and to concentrate on the phenomena itself. Indeed, these questions are currently the subject of vivid discussions in many circles and these are endless debates. Within the framework of this paper since many states and international institutions have not been able to come to a consensus on the nature of terrorism, this paper prefers 'foreign (terrorist) fighter' in order to emphasize the vague nature of the division.

Malet describes foreign fighters as "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict." However, he also excludes those foreigners involving in a conflict under the command of any state or private company for citizenship or payment (2013: 9). Another prominent scholar brought a more detailed definition: "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" (Hegghammer, 2010/11: 57-58).

Hegghammer's definition brought clearer perspective while drawing the boundaries of the concept, yet it has also some points that need to be explained. Starting from the end, by stating 'unpaid' he excludes current mercenaries who fight for private gains in relation to a government or private entity. However, from the point of this study, making a demarcation line based on the issue of financial reward is subject to debate because terrorist organizations in Syria provide financial benefits to those who join their ranks from abroad. Second, the criteria about the existence of an affiliation to an official body is also questionable in practice. Although foreign fighters, or more specifically the ones called foreign terrorist fighters, have no acknowledged connection with official state institutions, it is also a very well-known fact that many armed groups in Syria receive training, funding and material aid from different governments. Hegghammer also argues that "most foreign fighters never engaged in out-of-area operations, but fought in one combat zone at the time" (2010/11: 58). Indeed, although this argument could be true at the time of writing, especially after the experience of Syrian Civil War,

one cannot ignore the changing course of the foreign fighters. In brief, these criteria also can limit the understanding of the concept and lead us to miss some significant dimensions of phenomenon.

The term ‘foreign terrorist fighter’, rather than foreign fighter, was first used in an official inter-governmental document by the UNSC in August 2014 (UNSC, 2014a). Then, the UNSC defines foreign terrorist fighters 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” (UNSC, 2014b: 2).

Any definition on foreign fighters in general or foreign terrorist fighters in specific makes people wonder why individuals risk their lives for a country that is not theirs (Schmid, 2015: 3). The conventional literature on violence and radicalization especially starting from 1970s concentrated on the push and pull factors in a social environment where radicalized individual has been living. In these researches, what is missing is a focus on how someone can be radicalized to the extent of joining a conflict in an another state. Indeed, the answer is very related to the transnational nature of the conflicts where transnational identities matter.

At this point, there is a need to question the definition of ‘foreign’. These foreign (terrorist) fighters may not be foreign after all. The usage of the term foreign is too state-centric (Jawaid, 2017: 102). Additionally, it is a very euro-centric understanding of concepts of state and citizenship. More clearly, one might have a very close ethnic/kinship relation to a certain country, while, at the same time, s/he does not hold citizenship status due to many reasons. Thus, the question is: what makes a person foreign to a specific country? Lack of citizenship? Lack of ethnic/kinship link? These discussions are important because as many argue in the literature, ethnic or kinship link may easily turn into a very powerful facilitator for individuals’ mobilizations. Therefore, the issue of foreignness on the discussions about the phenomenon should be evaluated tentatively, because the dichotomy of foreign and non-foreign only based on citizenship may not always be explanatory in real sense as ideological, ethnical or religious ties become more and more prevalent in our contemporary world where state boundaries do not necessarily bound anymore.

Especially within the context of motivations of foreign (terrorist) fighters, identity plays very central role. Barak Mendelsohn argues, the higher the number of common and shared identities, the higher the possibility for

individuals to join a particular conflict involving a certain community (2011: 192). Malet also emphasized that combatant groups in civil conflicts framed the conflict as a threat to a transnational identity in order to recruit foreigners (Malet, 2010: 99). In parallel to these, one estimate states that more than one third of Daesh members are foreign born (not Syrian or Iraqi) and about 70 percent of them are from the Middle East and North Africa (Mullins, 2014: 36). Additionally, some argue that those foreign (terrorist) fighters from Europe are generally family members of immigrants originating from Central Asia to Morocco (Schmid, 2015: 4-5; Öztürk, 2018: 307).

One last thing while defining the phenomenon is the definition of the term fighter. What makes a person fighter? Is it holding firearms in terrorist organizations? Is joining to a terrorist organization for logistic support a terrorist activity? How about being a medical person or a propaganda agent within a terrorist organization? The argument that foreign (terrorist) fighters can give just a contribution on the battlefield is a misperception and foreign (terrorist) fighters can play different roles in a specific conflict zone. Indeed, a considerable part of them covers supporting roles such as doctors, assistants, propaganda activists and recruiters for the ongoing conflicts (Conci, 2015: 13). From judicial and law enforcement perspective, these differences have to be addressed specifically.

## **Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters in Syrian Civil War: Facts, Figures and Profiles**

Syrian Civil War continues to convulse the region and the wider neighborhood. The conflict has spawned most violent groups in history, become ground zero for the Sunni-Shia struggle, and sparked clashes between NATO members and Russia (Barfi, 2016: 1). Many academic and official reports acknowledged that the recent conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Northern Africa attracted the highest numbers of foreign (terrorist) fighters in the history. According to RAN Manual, more than 42.000 foreign (terrorist) fighters from 120 countries joined terrorist organizations between 2011 and 2016, of which around 5.000 came from Europe (2017: 6). As of mid-June 2017, the Turkish authorities had recorded around 54.000 person from 146 countries whose State of residence noted that they may have intention to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq (Barrett, 2017: 16).

Numbers are subject to verification because governments are reluctant to share the real numbers and some foreign (terrorist) fighters are also not known by their governments. However, one thing is certain that a very high



number of foreigners poured to Syria especially from the Middle East, North Africa and Europe; and their possible return to their home countries created a great concern. Although the numbers are elusive, they are accurate in relative terms and the nature of the threat is still obvious based on available open sources. Apart from its size, the current wave of foreign (terrorist) fighters is also remarkable in terms of its global nature (Kraehenmann, 2014: 9). Foreign (terrorist) fighters in Daesh, Al-Qaida, People's Protection Units (Yekînêyên Parastina Gel, YPG), armed unit of Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) Syrian branch of terrorist group PKK, and Shia groups along with the regime are from at least 150 countries. Third, it is also demographically diverse. While previous foreign fighters consisted military age men, this wave includes women and children as family member or independent fighter (Holman & Moore, 2017).

In Syria, there are plenty of foreign (terrorist) fighters in different manifestations. The rise of Daesh has led the international community to focus mainly on Sunni radicalism, ignoring Shia, right wing or leftist transnational insurgency. Nevertheless, transnational militancy in Syria is a rich case study in different manifestations of this phenomenon. Those foreigners joining groups supporting Bashar al-Assad regime in the west or the terrorist groups in the north of the country remain largely uncounted in the literature (Levitt, 2015). One reason may be the belief that they are not considered as a threat to western societies; however, their traumatic experience and radicalization in conflict zones cannot be ignored because after all they are also experienced trained foreign (terrorist) fighters. In Syria, there are mainly four types of foreign (terrorist) fighters based on their radicalization grounds: Religiously motivated, ideologically motivated, right-wing extremism and ethnically motivated; and they joined mainly into three groups.

The largest group by far among foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria consists of those who are religiously motivated. Terrorist groups that have attracted the most are Daesh, Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham which were founded by members of al-Qaeda. They are more organized and have better financial capabilities than their counterparts (Barrett, 2014: 6). Indeed, one of the crucial threat posed by Daesh was the scale of foreign terrorist fighters. How many foreign terrorist fighters are involved in the conflicts both in Syria and Iraq? From which countries did they come? These questions are still difficult to answer with a clearness but the threat they pose against humanitarian values is concrete.

Second, foreign (terrorist) fighters in YPG is the category that is the most underemphasized. However, the flow of international recruits of both right and left wing ideologies to the PKK, operating under the name of YPG and Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ) in Syria is a very well-known fact in both media, academia and official circles (Koch, 2019: 3). Terrorist group has managed to get the support of leftist and communist parties and movements in Europe, and also recruited foreign volunteers to join the actual fight. Nora Martin argues that more than 400 non-Syrians joined the YPG/YPJ in Syria (Martin, 2019). United Nations also approves that "more than 400 FTFs from Europe, America and Australia, both male and female, have joined the Kurdish People's Protection Units" (UNODC, 2018: 32). The report also adds that "whatever their original intentions, their actions may amount to criminal offences" (UNODC, 2018: 32). Main motivation basis to join YPG/YPJ in Syria for Europeans are ethnic or left wing extremism; however, it is also argued that YPG has also re-enforced its units through foreigners from right-wing extremists (Koch, 2019: 1) When Christian communities were systematically targeted and persecuted by Daesh in northern Iraq and Syria, YPG attracted devoted Christians (Orton, 2017: 121-125; Martin, 2019). The increased number of YPG foreign (terrorist) fighters is because of the brutality of their opponents, namely Daesh, and therefore there is an emerging group of studies under the heading of 'anti-Daesh or anti-ISIS foreign fighters' (Tuck, Silverman & Smalley, 2016); nevertheless, another important factor is the glorification of YPG militancy in international media. The act of volunteering with YPG was not only perceived as harmless in international media but also framed as an act of bravery for different political reasons. YPG uses different recruitment methods for its cause in Syria but heavily relies on PKK network of militants in Europe and the Middle East to attract recruits in addition to its online capabilities (Hatahet, Cengiz & Rashid, 2019: 20).

The third category is composed of Shia foreign (terrorist) fighters along with regime forces. They are mainly from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan. Unlike foreigners joining into the opposition, in addition to Shia volunteers from various countries, this category is partially a product of Iran's regional foreign policy to support Damascus. In spite of Iranian campaign, they can still be considered as foreign (terrorist) fighters since many of them are not affiliated to any Iranian official security forces. Estimates of the size of the support vary, yet it is sizable and it has proved to be decisive in several regime victories (Tuck, Silverman & Smalley, 2016: 18-19). For instance, it is reported in 2015 by AFP that there are around 7.000 Shia Iraqi and Iranian foreign fighter in Damascus and its surroundings (2015). The main motivation

in this category are ideological-sectarian and economic concerns. In this manner, while the discourse of protecting Shia shrines is very powerful on Iraqi, Iranian and Lebanese Shias; it is said that Afghanis and Pakistanis are mainly motivated by economic rewards (Al Jazeera, 2015; Moslih, 2016).

Foreign (terrorist) fighters in different organizations in Syria are from different backgrounds. According to some reports, though the majority is young there are also people up to 60. Some are school dropouts and ordinary workers, but others are well-educated and professionals in different sectors. On the other hand, some have troubled pasts, but others may have a very prosperous life (UNODC, 2018: 19). Therefore, it is better to say that all-encompassing typologies and profiles about them fall short in explaining the whole issue. However, despite the fact that there are few consistent patterns and common profiles, this does not necessarily deny the fact that there are some common pathways for individuals joining terrorist groups which may be helpful for risk assessment studies both in academia and in security agencies (Stern & Berger, 2015a). Plenty of studies demonstrated that there is neither one single profile nor a common background. As John Horgan discusses the causes of individual radicalization in general; emotional vulnerability, dissatisfaction with the current reality, identification with victims, perception of violence as a useful tool, reward seeking and kinship or social ties to individuals involved in political violence can play important role to lead individuals to involve in foreign conflicts (2008: 84-85). Marc Sageman, on the other hand, focuses on the role of social networks as facilitator factor in the process of radicalization of an individual (2008: 47-48). In brief, there are several reasons for individuals to join a conflict abroad but the role of self-identification with the cause they are fighting for seems to be one of the most common factor among different profiles of foreign (terrorist) fighters.

The above discussion shifts the floor to the question of how foreign (terrorist) fighters are being recruited for the conflict in Syria. Indeed, there are several ways which are based on external or internal motivations of individuals. Community-based networks, religious leaders, ideological leaders, friends and relatives, non-violent radical groups, social groups affiliated with some terrorist organizations may play important role in motivating individuals in a path to violent extremism. While traditional approaches focus only on tangible ways, one should not underestimate the role of online radicalization especially after the case of Daesh and YPG. Online social networks, online game networks, chat applications and the internet can also encourage individuals for the same path. The recruitment of foreign (terrorist) fighters generally follows a regular path independent from the ideology, time and location and

generally it starts on the side of local insurgent groups since they commence conflicts as the weaker faction. Therefore, as the weaker faction, local insurgents aim to broaden the conflict so as to increase their leverage to gain the victory (Malet, 2010: 100). During the recruitment process, any kind of ties (religious, ethnic, ideological or personal) is highlighted in order to make the individual believe that s/he is also subject to same threat as the community with which they have the relationship is suffering from. Recruiters manipulate identities to activate a sense of obligation to go and fight for the cause (Malet, 2010: 100-101). In other words, when the question of 'What is wrong?' is transformed into questions of 'What should be done?' and 'What can I do?', recruitment occurs (Hegghammer, 2013: 8). It is also interesting to note that foreign (terrorist) fighters are on the average more radicalized ideologically and more intractable in their cause than the typical local fighters as many argue (Stern & Berger, 2015b: 77).

Last but not the least, another important aspect of the current wave of foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria other than previous cases is the role of women. For instance, around one in five from Europe in Daesh are female and this is higher among those travelling from other countries (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016: 51). There are various methods and approaches in terrorist groups in order to utilize females. Terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida and YPG use females as combatants, or even as suicide bombers. For instance, there is a specific unit in YPG which consists of just females namely YPJ. Daesh, on the other hand, did not consider women as fighters, rather their role is rearing children, looking after their husbands, indoctrinating her children. However, in time it is also reported that Daesh started to use women as radicalizers, propagandists and recruiters in addition to giving them firearms and policing trainings (UNODC, 2018: 23). Additionally, over time, Daesh also relaxed its rules about the role of the women in the conflict zones. In brief, women foreign (terrorist) fighters are also one of the substantial element in keeping the terrorist organizations running in today's world; therefore, their active role in terrorist activities is also very important. Besides that, according to UN reports, some states prosecuted even the wives of foreign terrorist fighters for terrorism on the basis of their day-to-day support (UNODC, 2018: 24).

As the current wave of foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria has demonstrated, the current threat is larger, more diverse and more global than any previous wave. There are foreign (terrorist) fighters in several manifestations like religiously, ideologically, ethnically or individually motivated in Syria in different groups such as Daesh, YPG, YPJ or any other groups. In other words, the issue of foreign (terrorist) fighters is not confined to any specific

religion, ideology or civilization as it can be traced backed in many groups involved in Syrian Civil War. Therefore, in order to deal with this challenge, states have to increase their own capacities and strengthen international cooperation with a broader perspective by recognizing terrorism equally in its all forms and manifestations.

## Conclusion

Although the issue of foreign fighters is not novel in the world history and the inclusion of foreigners into civil conflicts has been one of the substantial features of most of the armed conflicts in the history, the current wave especially after the Arab uprisings presented particular novel challenges to the traditional understanding of the phenomenon. It is larger in scale, global in geography and very diverse in its nature. They constitute a major threat to humanitarian and liberal values, since they frequently resort to atrocious acts such as suicide attacks, mass killings of civilians, recruitment of children for armed conflicts, and ethnic and religious cleansing. Having recognized the magnitude of the threat, many states and inter-governmental organizations started to implement active precautions to prevent the travel of foreign (terrorist) fighters. One main challenge in countering the threat lying ahead is the lack of international agreement on the definition of terrorism, and so that of the definition of what foreign fighter and what foreign terrorist fighter are.

Within this context, this study aimed to elaborate the issue of the current foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syrian Civil War with a broadened perspective by recognizing the threat equally in its all forms and manifestations. By doing so, the paper first dealt with the history of the phenomenon and then discussed the definitions of foreign (terrorist) fighters in order to evaluate conceptual discussions. In this manner, the paper deliberately chooses to use the term 'foreign (terrorist) fighter' in order to emphasize the vague nature of the division and the biased usage of these terms. Third, the paper elaborated the issue of foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syrian Civil War in details with a broader perspective, different than the mainstream approach in the literature which focuses majorly on the case of Daesh only. In conclusion, while the term is commonly associated with foreigners joining Daesh or other similar terrorist groups, this paper argues that there are plenty of foreign (terrorist) fighters in Syria in different manifestations of the phenomenon as they have been involved in conflicts based on diverse religious, ideological, ethnic and private motivations; and therefore they have to be dealt with indiscriminately in order to identify and counter the challenge appropriately.

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