THE RİSE AND FALL OF THE FOREİGN FİGHTER PHENOMENON: STRATEGİC FUNCTİONS AND POST-CALİPHATE REALİTİES İN THE CASE OF ISIS

Iheb Achek*

Abstract

This article captures the developmental trajectory of ISIS foreign fighters from recruitment to post-caliphate detention. It first discusses the 2013–2015 rise phase, notably covering recruitment networks and the propaganda apparatus. It then discusses the 2014–2016 loud phase, where ISIS expanded territorial control and began to conduct international operations. The final phase, from 2016 to 2019, is characterized by clandestine activities and shifts in the organization's internal ideological structure, notably between its al-Hazmiyyah and al-Bin'aliyyah factions. This article walks through the collapse and dissolution (2015–2019) because of battlefield losses and international pressure, especially the international mass detention of foreign fighters in Kurdish prisons and Iraqi courts. This article highlights the ongoing threats of radicalized women and children detained in camps, such as al-Hol, and outlines attempts to revive ISIS networks in Africa. Through a combination of structural analysis and documented case studies, this study enhances our understanding of foreign fighters in the security, legal, and ideological domains, their evolving roles, and the challenges they pose.

Keywords: Foreign Fighters, ISIS, Caliphate, Jihad, Recruitment Networks, Post-Caliphate Detention.

Received: 25.11.2025 | **Accepted:** 08.06.2026 | **DOI:** 10.47932/ortetut.1830056

* Ph. D. Candidate, Sakarya University Middle East Institute

YABANCI SAVAŞÇI OLGUSUNUN YÜKSELİŞİ VE ÇÖKÜŞÜ: DEAŞ ÖRNEĞİNDE STRATEJİK İŞLEVLER VE HALİFELİK SONRASI GERÇEKLİKLER

Iheb Achek*

Özet

Bu makale, DEAŞ bünyesindeki yabancı savaşçıların devşirilme aşamasından halifelik sonrası tutukluluk süreçlerine kadar uzanan gelişimsel gidişatını ele almaktadır. Çalışma ilk olarak, özellikle devşirme ağlarını ve propaganda aygıtını içeren 2013–2015 yükseliş evresini tartışmaktadır. Ardından, DEAŞ'ın toprak kontrolünü genişlettiği ve uluslararası operasyonlar yürütmeye başladığı 2014–2016 yankı uyandıran dönemi incelemektedir. 2016'dan 2019'u kapsayan son evre ise gizli faaliyetler ve örgütün özellikle El-Hazmiyye ve El-Binaliyye hizipleri arasında gerçekleşen iç ideolojik yapısındaki değişimlerle karakterize edilmektedir. Makale; savaş alanındaki kayıplar ve uluslararası baskılar, bilhassa da yabancı savaşçıların Kürt hapishanelerinde ve Irak mahkemelerinde kitlesel olarak tutuklanması nedeniyle yaşanan çöküş ve dağılma (2015–2019) sürecini adım adım incelemektedir. Çalışma, el-Hol gibi kamplarda tutulan radikalleşmiş kadın ve çocukların oluşturduğu süregelen tehditleri vurgulamakta ve DEAŞ ağlarının Afrika'da yeniden canlandırılması girişimlerinin ana hatlarını çizmektedir. Yapısal analiz ve belgelenmiş vaka incelemelerinin bir kombinasyonu yoluyla bu çalışma; yabancı savaşçıların güvenlik, hukuki ve ideolojik alanlardaki gelişen rollerini ve ortaya koydukleri zorlukları anlamamızı derinleştirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı Savaşçılar, DEAŞ, Halifelik, Cihad, Devşirme Ağları, Halifelik Sonrası Tutukluluk.

Geliş Tarihi: 25.11.2025 | **Kabul Tarihi: 0**8.06.2026 | **DOI:** 10.47932/ortetut.1830056

* Doktora Adayı, Sakarya Üniversitesi Ortadoğu Enstitüsü

صعود وسقوط ظاهرة المقاتلين الأجانب: الوظائف الاستراتيجية وواقع ما بعد الخلافة في حالة داعش

إيهاب العاشق *

ملخص

يرصد هذا المقال المسار التطوري للمقاتلين الأجانب في تنظيم "داعش" من مرحلة التجنيد إلى الاحتجاز في مرحلة ما بعد الخلافة. ويناقش أولاً مرحلة الصعود (2013–2015)، لا سيما ما يتعلق بشبكات التجنيد وجهاز الدعاية. ثم يتناول المرحلة "الصاخبة" (2014–2016)، حيث وسّع التنظيم سيطرته الإقليمية وبدأ في تنفيذ عمليات دولية. أما المرحلة الأخيرة (2016–2019)، فتميزت بالأنشطة السرية والتحولات في البنية الأيديولوجية الداخلية للتنظيم، لا سيما بين تيارَي "الحازمية" و"البنعالية". ويستعرض المقال مراحل الانهيار والتفكك (2015–2019) نتيجة للخسائر الميدانية والضغوط الدولية، وخاصة الاحتجاز الجماعي الدولي للمقاتلين الأجانب في السجون الكردية والمحاكم العراقية. كما يسلط الضوء على التهديدات المستمرة التي يشكلها النساء والأطفال المتطرفون المحتجزون في المخيمات، مثل مخيم الهول، ويستعرض محاولات إحياء شبكات التنظيم في أفريقيا. ومن خلال الجمع بين التحليل البنيوي ودراسات الحالة الموثقة، تُعزز هذه الدراسة فهمنا للمقاتلين الأجانب في المجالات الأمنية والقانونية والأيديولوجية، وأدوارهم المتغيرة، والتحديات التي يفرضونها..

الكلمات المفتاحية: المقاتلون الأجانب، داعش، الخلافة، الجهاد، شبكات التجنيد، الاحتجاز في مرحلة ما بعد الخلافة.

تاريخ الاستلام: 25.11.2025 | **تاريخ القبول:** 08.06.2026 | **DOI:** 10.47932/ortetut.1830056

* جامعة سكاريا معهد الشرق الأوسط

Introduction

Both the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian revolution contributed to the revival of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (the Islamic State or ISIS) and its declaration of a caliphate in 2014. With the organization controlling vast areas in both Iraq and Syria, preeminent cities such as Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, and the oil-rich areas east of the Euphrates, it declared the establishment of a caliphate, appointed its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as a caliph of Muslims, and urged all Muslims to join this new state. The discourse surrounding the caliphate and the obligation to enter it, both from a religious–legal perspective and in consideration of the freedoms it affords for practicing Islamic religious rituals, which many countries prohibit, has attracted many foreigners from around the world.

The accompanying military propaganda, which created a utopian image of the new entity, attracted many foreigners worldwide. For example, Daniel Byman reports that when ISIS declared its caliphate in mid-2014, "thousands more foreign fighters… flocked to Syria and Iraq to join the fight" (Byman, 2015). The number of foreign fighters joining ISIS in late 2015 reached approximately 30,000 from 85 countries (Byman, 2015). These foreigners played very prominent and vital roles within the organization, whether in propaganda, on the battlefield, or even in the bureaucracy and administrative institutions of the Caliphate (Achek, 2024). The war in Syria has attracted not only foreigners to the ranks of jihadist organizations but also thousands of foreign fighters and militias, including hundreds of Europeans within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) ("Qasad Tatlub," 2025) and Shiite militias from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon ("Shiite Militias," 2015).

This study examines the phenomenon of foreign fighters in ISIS ranks during the Syrian revolution, focusing on whether this phenomenon constitutes a core strategy for building an army and projecting the caliphate, or instead results from international and regional dynamics. Does this mean that the organization's leaders planned and strategized to fight and serve the caliphate's institutions, or was it the result of international and regional policies that contributed to this phenomenon to some extent? To answer these questions, this article begins by defining the historical and terminological background of the foreign fighter phenomenon, the recruitment methods and roles played by foreigners within the organiza-

tion, the international and regional contexts that contributed to this phenomenon, and the collapse of the organization and the shift in foreign fighter strategy from the Middle East to other regions.

In this article, "caliphate" refers to ISIS's claim to religious and political authority, while "Islamic State" is treated as the organization's self-designation rather than a recognized state entity. The term "jihad" is used here in the specific ideological sense mobilized by ISIS to justify violence, migration, and recruitment. ISIS rose in a context shaped by state collapse in Iraq and Syria, sectarian polarization, weak border control (Pokalova, 2019), and highly effective propaganda and recruitment networks; its decline resulted from sustained military pressure, territorial losses, disruption of transnational mobility, and growing internal ideological fragmentation (Benmelech & Klor, 2020).

Conceptual and Historical Background

The phenomenon of foreign fighters neither originated in the Syrian revolution nor emerged as a direct result of ISIS. Rather, it represents a historically rooted phenomenon that ideologies with global or transnational reach have adopted. Many conflicts around the world have attracted foreign fighters under ideological labels such as leftist internationalism. The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) witnessed a significant influx of nearly 50,000 fighters from over 50 nationalities (Thomas, 2004).

As for the experience of jihadist groups, the Afghan-Soviet War of the 1980s was the actual and fundamental launching point. With the birth of Al-Qaeda during the Afghan War, the concept of global jihad spread to subsequent conflicts such as Chechnya (1994-2005). Foreign volunteers also fought in Bosnia (1992-1995) (Innes, 2006) and Chechnya within brigades composed of Arab, Chechen, and Central Asian fighters led by Khattab and Shamil Basayev (Kullberg, 2003). With the outbreak of the U.S.-Iraq war in 2003, a group was sent from Afghanistan to Iraq to establish a branch of Al-Qaeda in Iraq to fight the Americans. Al-Qaeda was founded in Mesopotamia, which became the core of ISIS. The leader of the organization was a foreign fighter, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who declared famously that "there is no real jihad in Iraq except with the presence of the muhajirin" (the "emigrants" or foreign fighters) (Achek, 2024).

Thousands from the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Europe joined Al-Qaeda in Iraq, reinforcing the idea of *hijra* (migration) as a religious duty. The concept of immigration and immigrants leaving their countries to defend Muslims was born and became established. Al-Qaeda in Iraq allied with other Iraqi jihadist groups to create the Islamic State of Iraq in 2008. This moment represented the alliance of the Salafi jihadist ideology of foreign fighters with the Ba'athist security doctrine of the Iraqi groups. This was evident in Baghdadi's speech when he declared the establishment of the caliphate, where he considered joining and migrating to the organization's lands a religious duty for every Muslim (Achek, 2024).

Through this deeply religious discourse and a sophisticated propaganda strategy that exploited the tools of globalization, the organization succeeded in globalizing jihad. Similar to previous experiences, the organization's appeal was not limited to individuals with Salafi jihadist learning. Instead, it was able to attract all groups, including entire families and even non-Muslims who, through the organization's propaganda, converted from atheism or Christianity to adopt the organization's extremist ideas.[1] The number of foreigners recruited into its ranks was unprecedented, estimated at nearly 40,000 from more than 80 countries. Russia, Tunisia, and Türkiye topped the list, while France ranked first among Western and European states with 1,700 fighters (L. Hassan, 2021).

Rise Phase: Strategic Recruitment and Utilization (2013–2015)

Recruitment Networks and Propaganda

The influx of foreign fighters into the organization's ranks was largely driven by the organization's recruitment strategy, which disseminated its propaganda through a range of mechanisms, most notably recruitment networks. These networks can be broadly categorized into two types: local and social networks, and digital and media networks.

The first pattern, local and social networks, is the traditional pattern,

1 In this study, many of cases that turned directly from atheism or Christianity to jihadist ideology with the Islamic State, the most famous of which is the French Vésoul network, which includes a group of young friends and girls in which more than 10 people from a bourgeois and Christian class turned directly to jihadists in the Islamic State. Achek, "Franco-European Fighters."

followed by most jihadist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and others. Within these networks, there is field activity by mosque preachers, callers, or associations in public squares, youth gatherings, social relationships, diaspora gatherings (gatherings of foreigners, such as those in Europe), and family networks. It can be divided into four types according to the context of their emergence.

First Generation, Afghan–Soviet War Networks (1980s): Networks established during the Afghan–Soviet War in the 1980s facilitated mobilization and recruitment operations. ISIS later exploited these traditional networks to support its recruitment and movement of fighters; the same networks continued to play a similar role during the 2003 Iraq War.[2] The first generation of such networks emerged during the Afghan–Soviet War (1980s) and continued to play a similar role in the 2003 Iraq War. These early networks primarily operated between major European cities and were dominated by North African groups, such as the Algerian,[3] Moroccan, and Tunisian[4] Combatant Groups (GCA) (Achek, 2024).

Open-Action Urban Networks: Sharia4 groups and the like. The second generation began with the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003, recruiting Al-Qaeda, including many returnees from the war in Iraq. The most important of these networks was the 19th Arrondissement Network Group in Paris, which later played a pivotal role in ISIS. The figures in this cell represent the most prominent French figures in the organization. One of the members of this group was considered the first European to be killed in Iraq in 2004, and his brother, Abu Bakr al-Hakim, later became the highest-ranking European fighter in ISIS (Achek, 2024).

The most famous of these groups, which have been active in many major European cities in mosques or public squares, such as Hamburg and Berlin in Germany "Millatu Ibrahim" and "Sharia4Germany," the Sharia4UK (Shariah4Britain) group in London, Britain, Sharia4Bel-

2 It is important to note that al-Qaeda-affiliated networks recruited fighters for the Syrian revolution, particularly from groups ideologically aligned with it, such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. However, most of their members joined ISIS when it entered the Syrian conflict.

3 It carried out bombings in France and recruited fighters during the Black Decade in Algeria.

4 For example, the Tunisian Combatant Group recruited two young Tunisians studying journalism in Belgium and carried out an assassination operation for al-Qaeda targeting Afghan leader Ahmad Shah Massoud in Afghanistan in 2001.

gium specifically in the Molenbeek,[5] a municipality in Brussels, Sharia4Germany and Sharia4Holland in Amsterdam and The Hague in the Netherlands, and Sharia4Denmark in Copenhagen (Foblets, 2020). Similar to the organizations active in many Arab Spring countries, such as Tunisia and Libya, which were called Ansar al-Sharia, despite being branches of al-Qaeda, they recruited large numbers of fighters to participate in the Syrian revolution, who, in turn, chose to join the ranks of ISIS upon their arrival in Syria.

Operational and Amniyat-Controlled Recruitment Networks: The second type is the networks that coordinated directly with the Islamic State organization through its "Amniyat"[6] apparatus, the External Operations Branch, and worked to recruit people to fight in Syria and Iraq and carry out terrorist operations in Europe. One of the most prominent of these networks is the Abu Wael network in Germany, which operated between Hamburg and Cologne and was responsible for the Berlin attack in 2016 (Heil, 2017).

In Belgium, the Al-Zerkani network is the most well-known of all ISIS recruitment networks owing to its members' involvement in the attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam. Founded in 2012, this network was led by Khaled Al-Zerkani, a Moroccan residing in Molenbeek, Brussels. One of the most prominent figures in this cell was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the perpetrator of the 2016 Paris attacks, and a well-known figure on ISIS's propaganda machine. Several interviews with him were published in the organization's magazine, Dabiq (Achek, 2024).

5 Molenbeek-Saint-Jean has sometimes been labelled "Molenbeekistan" in francophone media and public commentary, a stigmatizing nickname linked to the municipality's perceived association with Islamist radicalization networks and several terrorism-related cases. Members of this network carried out most of the ISIS attacks in Europe between 2015 and 2017. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, one of the most prominent foreign fighters who carried out the Paris attacks and was killed in France, was a member of this network.

6 Amniyat is the Islamic State's intelligence service. It was founded by former Iraqi officers in Saddam Hussein's intelligence service. It has two branches: one responsible for internal operations and counterespionage within the organization's areas of control. It is divided into two sections: one responsible for Syrian territory and one responsible for Iraqi territory. The other is the external operations branch, which is responsible for external operations and has four sections: the Europe and North Africa section, the Central Asia section, the Arab countries section, and the Americas section.

The 19th Arrondissement Network in Paris, although it predates ISIS, has been directly linked to it since 2012. It is no less critical than the Zerkani network, with many of its members being connected to similar attacks in Europe and North Africa. Fighters gained widespread notoriety. One of the most important members of this network was Abu Bakr al-Hakim, the highest-ranking European in the organization, the face of ISIS propaganda, and the mastermind of numerous operations in Europe and North Africa, most notably his assassination of Tunisian opposition leader Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013, just before he was due to travel to Syria. An entire issue of the Dabiq magazine was devoted to him, discussing his operations as part of the organization's propaganda strategy. The Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly, who carried out the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack, also belong to this network, and al-Hakim planned the operation (Heil, 2017).

Family and Village-Based Networks: The third type of network operates socially within families and in narrow circles, recruiting entire families or groups of friends to join the organization's ranks. These networks operate on a small scale, even in small villages or towns. An example is the Artigat network, named after the village of Artigat in Marseille, southern France. Its history dates back to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and it is considered one of the most well-known networks in France. It included prominent figures who became key players in the organization's propaganda machine, such as the Clain brothers, former rappers and singers of the organization's French anthems. One of them, Fabien Clain (Abu Anas, or the Voice of ISIS), was nicknamed the "Voice of ISIS" due to the audio messages he released after the Paris attacks (Achek, 2024).

Another member of this network was Sabri al-Sayed, who appeared in the organization's propaganda, alongside his French stepson, Rayan al-Faransi, who was shown killing one of the organization's prisoners in a video. The French Vésoul network, comprising a group of friends, girlfriends, and brothers, was linked to the Artigat network because one of its most prominent members, Romain Garnier, had been influenced by Sabri al-Sayed. This group, which consisted largely of Christians who converted directly to Islam and then joined ISIS, produced one of the organization's most visible propaganda figures. ISIS even released a film of more than twenty minutes entitled "The Story of Abu Salman al-Fransi," narrating his life story.

Employment and Role of Foreign Fighters in ISIS Institutions

The organization employed foreign fighters in all its agencies and institutions, utilizing the expertise these individuals had gained, whether they came from previous conflict zones with combat experience, such as Chechnya and Central Asia, or from Western countries in fields such as services, media, and others. A strict organizational structure characterizes the caliphate, and most researchers consider it a modern, sophisticated bureaucracy with medieval titles. A former Iraqi intelligence officer, Abdul Muhammad al-Ubaidi al-Dulaimi, also known as Haji Bakr, was the state architect, top military official, and second-in-command of al-Baghdadi's organization (Reuter, 2012).

In the public services sector, ISIS leveraged foreign expertise to upgrade basic infrastructure in areas under its control. Resident testimonies from Iraq and Syria consistently note improvements in electricity and telecommunications, including the rollout of solar power in previously underserved districts. A foreign specialist, reported by locals as a French engineer, oversaw telecommunications and power upgrades at the district level (Reuter, 2012).

Foreign personnel staffed border logistics and smuggling along the Turkish–Syrian frontier under a centralized chain of command led by Abu Muhammad al-Shamali. Internal documents recovered after ISIS's decline list multiple operatives responsible for moving recruits in both directions, into Syria for combat and back to Europe for operations, with aggregate figures in the hundreds across key gates such as Atimah, Jarablus, and Latakia, mirroring the pipelines later used by the Paris-Brussels networks.

Foreigners figured prominently in frontline combat and suicide operations, with prior military experience transferred into the ISIS force structure. Abu Omar al-Shishani, a former Georgian army sergeant, served as the organization's de facto war minister and symbol of the integration of foreign command (2013 onward) (Suc, 2018). Following his death, Gulmurod Khalimov, trained in Tajik elite units, assumed leadership and coordinated Tajik detachments noted for their battlefield aggressiveness. At the mid-command tier, former French soldier Abdelilah Himmich led the so-called "Tariq ibn Ziyad Brigade," exemplifying the blend of foreign cadres in specialized units (Gaüzere, 2025).

Foreign fighters also played the role of preachers and jurists in ISIS, as the organization sought to highlight this in propaganda, and the sermons of the shar'iyyun circulated widely. In the organization's early stages, Tunisian fighters emerged prominently among these shar'iyyun. Between early 2013 and late 2015, the organization utilized them to recruit new fighters from Tunisia, Morocco, Belgium, and France, as well as fighters from other Syrian factions, including Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.

This was particularly true because shar'iyyun in these groups included Tunisians, and a kind of jurisprudential debate ensued among them. Another goal was to employ them in the conflict between ISIS and the parent organization al-Qaeda. They excommunicated al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and then al-Baghdadi himself. They became a source of controversy within the organization, which prompted it to get rid of them and replace them with less extremist Saudis who were more knowledgeable about Islamic jurisprudence. This also helped convince supporters of the al-Hazmi movement to abandon their ideas after their numbers within the organization increased.[7]

The organization also had a women's fighting unit, the first of its kind in the history of Jihadist movements and groups. This group, known as the Al-Khanssa Brigade, is primarily composed of foreign women. The group's leader was a Tunisian woman who joined the Iraq War in 2003 (Gaüzere, 2025).

Many foreign female fighters were recruited from European countries. Female members of this battalion played essential roles, including work within the Hisbah apparatus and participation in suicide operations targeting Iraqi security personnel. Just as al-Baghdadi's state paid particular attention to women through the al-Khansaa Brigade as a means of reproducing the future generation of the caliphate, it also paid great attention to children, whom the organization dubbed "the Cubs of the Caliphate." They were incorporated into the propaganda machine through videos showing them studying in the organization's schools and receiving weapons training from an early age.

Finally, the most important and prominent role of foreign fighters re-

7 In the section on factors of downfall, we will discuss this issue in detail.

mains their role within ISIS's intelligence apparatus, "Amniyat," which played both internal and external roles, such as counterespionage within ISIS-controlled areas and planning external operations in numerous countries around the world targeted by ISIS. Many foreign figures played important roles and served as the backbone of this apparatus, both internally and externally. For example, both Jihadi John and Abaaoud played a key role in monitoring, training, and vetting newly arrived fighters (if they came from outside the networks with which they worked, as they were recruited by the networks and recommended by the leaders who sent them).

Jihadi John was responsible for the English-speaking fighters, while Abaaoud oversaw the French-speaking fighters and some African fighters. Similar to the investigation and training, they sat down with each fighter individually and asked them to propose strikes in their home countries. Al-Hakim, along with another Tunisian figure in the organization whose name has not been identified by sources or investigations, was deciding whether to carry out these operations (Suc, 2018).

As for the external operations apparatus, which was 100% foreign, directly linked to Haji Bakr, and headed by al-Hakim, its headquarters were in Raqqa. French investigations mention a restaurant in the organization's capital, Raqqa, where these individuals regularly meet. This apparatus attracted many lone wolves who carried out operations in many countries (Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco). Similarly, it dispatched its main elements to carry out operations in Paris and Brussels. It smuggled them through the channels mentioned earlier, originating in Syrian territory, passing through Türkiye, and arriving in Greece and Europe (Suc, 2018).

Fall: Collapse, Disbandment, and Detention (2015–2019)

The year 2015 marked the beginning of the organization's collapse, particularly after its loss in the city of Kobani/Ayn al-Arab, the launch of an international campaign against it, and the deaths of many of its prominent leaders. Al-Baghdadi's wife stated in a television interview that the death of Abu Sayyaf al-Tunisi ("Al-Baghdadi Panicked," 2024), The group's oil minister, who was in charge of finance and taxation and responsible for executions, marked the end of the organization and the beginning of al-Baghdadi's fears, which restricted his movement and that of his family.

Other international measures, such as military campaigns, have begun to restrict the organization's suppliers of fighters, and numerous border and legal measures have been taken to prevent further influx of fighters into Syria. However, a crucial aspect overlooked by many studies that played an indirect role in the collapse of al-Baghdadi's caliphate was the internal conflict among the organization's members, which shook its foundations. This conflict occurred between the al-Bin'aliyyah and al-Hazmiyyah factions in late 2014.

The Internal Crisis Conflict between al-Hazmiyyah and al-Bin'aliyyah

The al-Hazmiyyah movement and its clash with the al-Bin'aliyyah movement and with al-Baghdadi are considered to be among the most critical factors contributing to the disintegration of ISIS and the beginning of its internal collapse. The al-Hazmiyyah movement was named after Ahmad Omar al-Hazmi, a Saudi religious scholar and theorist. Al-Hazmi was known for his dubious stance on the issue of thought and developed a theory known as an endless chain of excommunication, the gist of which is that the ignorant have no excuse for declaring an infidel an unbeliever. Despite the ideological name of the al-Hazmiyyah movement and its followers within ISIS, al-Hazmi is not a member of the Islamic State and is not affiliated with the jihadist movement. He is not known to hold any political positions or opinions but is considered a neutral sheikh with the Saudi regime (Hamming, 2021). His lectures and sermons primarily focus on the theoretical aspects of Islamic doctrine. Al-Hazmi was arrested in a campaign targeting numerous preachers and sheikhs in Saudi Arabia. He was sentenced to 18 years in prison and was charged with multiple offenses, the most prominent of which was excommunication ("Sheikh Ahmed," 2022). As for al-Bin'aliyyah, it is named after Turki al-Bin'ali, one of ISIS's leading muftis and a Bahraini national. He studied under prominent Salafi-jihadist sheikhs, including Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, and became especially known for his refutations of al-Hazmiyyah and his ideological struggle against it within the organization's ranks.

The Loud Phase (2014-2016)

The spread of al-Hazmiyyah inside ISIS was driven above all by Tunisian fighters within the organization. Their connection to Ahmad Omar al-Hazmi dated back to 2011–2012, when al-Hazmi made four visits to Tunisia after the fall of the Ben Ali regime. During these visits, he trav-

eled between several cities, taught theology in many Tunisian mosques, and established the Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani Institute for Shari'a Sciences in Hay El Khadra, Tunisia.

In a country that had experienced the long-term marginalization of formal religious education, al-Hazmi's ideas found renewed popularity among young people seeking religious authority. Despite the broad rejection of these ideas within Salafi circles, particularly jihadist ones, al-Hazmi engaged in debates with sheikhs in Saudi Arabia, such as Sulayman al-Alwan. He also received responses from Tunisia, Egypt, and other jihadist milieus, all of which criticized and challenged his doctrinal position.

Abu Jaafar al-Hattab, a Tunisian member of the Sharia Committee of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, was one of al-Hazmi's students in Saudi Arabia and reportedly facilitated his visits to Tunisia. In an audio clip published by the al-Bayariq Foundation, affiliated with Ansar al-Sharia, he responds to a Salafi jihadist sheikh who criticized and excommunicated al-Hazmi (Mazouz, 2015).

Following the Tunisian authorities' crackdown on the Salafi movement and its leadership, most notably after the September 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy, Abu Jaafar, along with many Tunisians, joined the Islamic State in 2013 and became part of the initial nucleus of the caliphate project. After the declaration of the caliphate, Abu Jaafar al-Hattab assumed the position of Sharia judge within the organization and disseminated al-Hazmi's ideas among fighters and students. Al-Hazmiyyah adherents gained numerous followers within the Islamic State's Sharia, judicial, and military committees.

The nationalities most influenced by al-Hazmi's ideas were the Azerbaijanis, Russians, Saudis, and, indeed, the Maghrebis (Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco). The organization initially turned a blind eye to al-Hazmiyyah adherents despite the contempt within its ranks for their extreme tendencies. It merely organized debates between Abu Jaafar al-Hattab and his opponents. But as this phenomenon became more widespread and began to threaten the organization's leadership itself, al-Baghdadi and his advisers adopted a security approach, especially after a speech by Abu Omar al-Kuwaiti, one of the figures associated with al-Hazmiyyah, who declared that "Anyone who does not declare al-Zawahiri an infidel is an infidel, even if he is al-Baghdadi himself."

Al-Baghdadi tasked the Divan al-Amn (Security Bureau), whose members were known as the *amniyyin*, with handling the case of the Sharia scholars. This was the most influential apparatus within the caliphate's institutions and was directly linked to al-Baghdadi himself. Abu Jaafar al-Hattab, Abu Omar al-Kuwaiti, and Abu Musab al-Tunisi were arrested. Al-Kuwaiti was executed in late 2014, and the others in early 2015.

Following the organization's campaign against the al-Hazmiyyah adherents and the execution of their leaders, the al-Hazmiyyah adherents chose to operate secretly and penetrate deeper into the caliphate's institutions. Therefore, they toned down their rhetoric and worked to mobilize and strengthen themselves within the organization's institutions.

The way ISIS dealt with al-Hazmiyyah shows how the strategy ultimately backfired. The organization initially aligned with some of these ideas because they were useful in its conflict with al-Qaeda and its Syrian branch. Al-Hazmiyyah sermons were used to refute al-Qaeda, the al-Nusra Front, and other Syrian factions and to attract more defectors from those groups, especially since Tunisians constituted one of the largest foreign contingents in Syria. Yet as the influence of al-Hazmiyyah grew, and as criticism of figures such as al-Baghdadi spread within the organization, ISIS began to perceive the current situation as a direct threat. The problem was no longer merely doctrinal; it became a clash between the jihadist current and the Ba'thist-dominated security bloc that effectively controlled ISIS.

In this context, we can understand the clash between these mujahideen, who come from a religious Salafist background, and the Ba'athist leaders,[8] who come from a secular, security-oriented background. The clash between them stems from the differences in their goals and strategies. What makes this distinction even clearer is that the legal and jurisprudential responses to the al-Hazmiyyah did not originate from the organization's top leadership, but rather from individuals within its ranks, such as Turki al-Bin'ali and his Bin'aliyyah faction. Al-Bin'ali's views were not regarded as the organization's dominant or preferred position, and the

8 In the past, Zarqawi did not allow former Baathist officers from Saddam Hussein's era to hold sensitive positions within his organization, keeping them away from such roles. However, with the arrival of Omar al-Baghdadi in 2008 and the organization's shift toward an Iraqi identity, these officers became the most influential and powerful figures within it.

al-Hazmiyyah were, in some respects, closer to them. However, the conflict compelled this faction to assume greater jurisprudential authority and to articulate formal refutations of al-Hazmiyyah's doctrines.

The Secret Phase and the Attempt to Assassinate al-Baghdadi (2016–2019)

The organization appointed Turki al-Bin'ali as its general Sharia judge to spearhead the fight against al-Hazmiyyah, alongside a group of Saudi and Gulf shar'iyyun who shared the same general line. This tendency came to be known as al-Bin'aliyyah. The organization issued numerous statements and leaflets on the question of "excommunicating those who are excused." Although Turki al-Bin'ali dominated the organization's research and studies institution, he repeatedly warned of the continued presence of influential al-Hazmiyyah figures within several institutions of the caliphate.

Although the voice of al-Hazmiyyah within the organization appeared to decline, its strategy was to operate more quietly, seeking to infiltrate and dominate institutions while reducing open rhetoric that directly targeted the leadership with excommunication. Al-Hazmiyyah adherents sought to extend their influence over al-Baghdadi by gaining ground within several institutions, including the Security Office and the Sharia Council. However, the Delegated Authority, headed by the organization's spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who was openly hostile to al-Hazmiyyah, served as a barrier to their growing influence.

In mid-2016, following the killing of al-Adnani and the beginning of the battle for Mosul—which eventually fell in 2017—a figure associated with al-Hazmiyyah assumed leadership of the commission tasked with maintaining a balance between al-Hazmiyyah and al-Bin'aliyyah. This group then launched a campaign against the Bin'Ali sheikhs, interrogating them and removing them from their positions. After Bin'ali was killed in a coalition airstrike in 2017, an event in which al-Hazmiyyah adherents were said to have played a role, al-Baghdadi dissolved the commission and initiated a second campaign against al-Hazmiyyah adherents.

All these events coincided with the group's loss of Mosul and the onset of internal chaos within ISIS. Al-Hazmiyyah exploited this confusion to move into open confrontation with al-Baghdadi. As the campaign

against al-Hazmiyyah fighters intensified, one Tunisian fighter, Abu al-Baraa al-Tunisi, detonated himself when the organization attempted to arrest him on the airport road in Raqqa, killing three *amniyyin*. Yet the current was not internally homogeneous. Most of its adherents preferred to remain under the caliphate and al-Baghdadi's rule while directing criticism from within. In contrast, a smaller group regarded al-Baghdadi as illegitimate and sought to separate from him, form an independent body, and engage in confrontation with him.

The second group, which was declared unbelieving by al-Baghdadi, split from the organization, and dozens of its members fled its ranks. This is confirmed by a statement issued by the organization in 2016, calling on its fighters to kill anyone they found among them. The most prominent of these individuals was Abu Muadh al-Jazairi (Jaboori, 2017), who defected from ISIS and wrote an entire article proving al-Baghdadi's disbelief and illegitimacy as Caliph.

As ISIS declined, losing vast territories, and as al-Baghdadi disappeared amid repeated assassination attempts by the international coalition, al-Hazmiyyah took advantage of the situation and sought to stage a coup against him. In 2019, a group attempted to assassinate him with an explosive device as his convoy passed through the small town of Hajin in eastern Syria, near the Iraqi border. The organization accused Abu Muath al-Jazairi of being behind the attempt (Jaboori, 2017).

The war between al-Hazmiyyah and al-Bin'aliyyah was not confined to the ground; it also extended to social media, where conflicts, statements, and writings proliferated, sparking significant debate—particularly on Telegram. Moreover, al-Hazmiyyah's ideas did not remain limited to Syria and Iraq but spread to recruitment networks, especially in Europe (Hamming, 2021).

Since 2019, information about both al-Hazmiyyah and al-Bin'aliyyah has become scarce due to state measures restricting ISIS's online presence, especially on Telegram, which had been the primary source of information about them. Ultimately, neither current emerged victorious; instead, both sets of ideas continued to circulate among ISIS members. This internal conflict significantly weakened the organization both ideologically and organizationally and contributed to its eventual defeat.

International Action and Battlefield Collapse

The international campaign against ISIS intensified after 2014. The US-led coalition supported Kurdish SDF militias in Syria, while in 2016, Türkiye launched Operation Euphrates Shield with the Free Syrian Army to target ISIS and Kurdish forces alike. Simultaneously, the Iraqi Army, aided by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and coalition airpower, conducted large-scale offensives to retake major cities.

International and border legal procedures

In addition to military efforts, a global legal framework was established to disrupt the group's recruitment and financial networks. In September 2014, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2178, criminalizing the travel, training, and financing of foreign fighters and mandating that states share passenger data ("Résolution Numéro 2178," 2014). Tunisia, the top source of foreign fighters, implemented strict travel controls ("S17") (Youssef, 2018), restricting men under 35 from traveling to Türkiye, Libya, or Algeria without parental consent. By 2019, Tunisian authorities reported preventing about 17,000 citizens from reaching conflict zones ("Tunisia Prevented," 2019).

France,[9] another major contributor, amended its 2014 anti-terrorism law, creating six-month renewable travel bans for those suspected of planning jihad abroad ("Terrorisme: L'action," 2019) and introducing a Passenger Name Record (PNR) system to monitor air travel across Europe, and similar measures were also implemented in Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands (Boutin, 2015).

Türkiye, the main transit corridor into Syria, built border walls, expanded electronic surveillance, and blacklisted over 50,000 suspected militants. Parallel legal initiatives targeted ISIS's online propaganda, pressuring social-media platforms to remove recruitment content and curbing the group's global appeal. Collectively, these policies curtailed financial and human inflows, thereby weakening ISIS's transnational networks (Boutin, 2015). All of these measures have contributed to limiting the organization's power, both by reducing its funding for fighters

9 Like its legal actions, France has intensified its military activities since late 2014, both through its participation in the international coalition against ISIS in Syria and Libya, and its air campaign against groups operating in the Sahel and Sahara region of Africa.

and by altering its promotional content. This has had a direct impact on the organization, particularly after its image began to decline following numerous battlefield defeats.

Battlefield collapse

As international campaigns, both legal and military, intensified to prevent further influx of individuals towards him, the utopian image that al-Baghdadi had portrayed of his entity began to crumble. The myth of an invincible "caliphate" began to unravel with the battles of Mosul, Raqqa, and Baghouz. Mosul (2016 – 2017), ISIS's symbolic capital, fell after nine months of urban warfare led by coalition-backed Iraqi forces. The battle was overseen militarily by Gulmurod Khalimov, ISIS's Minister of War, who replaced Abu Omar al-Shishani. Foreign fighters, notably Tajiks, spearheaded suicide units (Inghimāsiyyīn Battalions) to delay the advance (Gaüzere, 2025). European participation was evident: British suicide bomber Ronald Fiedler died in Mosul (Gaüzere, 2025); hundreds of foreigners were captured, including German teenager Linda Wenzel, who married a Chechen fighter, and her son ("German Girl," 2017). In total, over 1,400 foreign women and children were detained in Iraq after these battles ("German Girl," 2017).

Raqqa, the administrative hub of ISIS, fell on 17 October 2017 after massive coalition bombardment that killed many senior foreign leaders. Fighters from Europe and North Africa led the last defenses before retreating to al-Bukamal or surrendering to the SDF ("German Girl," 2017). The Battle of Baghouz, from February to March 2019, was the organization's last stronghold and marked its announcement of its end and eventual fall.

The final stand at Baghouz (February-March 2019) marked the physical end of the "state." Thousands of militants and families gathered in the border village, forming the core of ISIS's last resistance. During the siege, Tunisian al-Hazmiyyah factions attempted a coup against al-Baghdadi, provoking internal clashes that hastened the collapse. When the enclave fell, thousands were killed or captured, while others escaped into the Syrian desert.

Post-Caliphate Detention Crisis

Mass Detention in Camps

Thousands of prisoners captured by the SDF, many of whom were handed over to the Iraqi army, were taken to camps and prisons. Prominent among these are the Aisin Issa camp, the Roj camp, and the al-Hol camp, which, before the battle for Baghouz, housed approximately 7,400 displaced persons. After the battle, the number of displaced people reached 70,000, most of whom were ISIS wives and children, with an estimated 50,000.

Numerous documentaries and press reports have recorded the plight of women in al-Hol camps, where foreign ISIS wives and their children are held captive. Most of their husbands were killed or captured during this campaign. These documentaries, filmed inside the al-Hol camp, illustrate the ethnic diversity of ISIS members, who come from different nationalities (European, American, Australian, North African, Russian, and Central Asian) (Sommerville, 2019).

The humanitarian situation in these camps is often described as catastrophic, with poor sanitation, inadequate healthcare services, and a lack of security. The camps also witness instances of violence, escape attempts, clandestine religious activities, and assassinations carried out by women through burning tents or stabbing. Despite repeated warnings from international aid organizations about the spread of disease and epidemics within the camp, as well as repeated statements by SDF leaders expressing fears that the situation could spiral out of control due to the group's lack of the necessary mechanisms to manage these massive numbers, the countries concerned refused to repatriate their citizens from these camps.

Most countries initially refused to repatriate their women and children. However, under pressure from international and humanitarian organizations and civil society in some countries, some began to find mechanisms to repatriate a small number of children without their mothers. This was a policy of Western European countries. Tens of thousands of detainees, fighters' wives, and children were transferred to Ain Issa, Roj, and al-Hol camps. Before Baghouz, al-Hol had approximately 7,400 residents; afterward, its population swelled to approximately 70,000, including around 50,000 children. Journalistic footage revealed

catastrophic humanitarian conditions, violence, clandestine preaching, and disease outbreaks ("At a Sprawling," 2019).

Despite UN warnings, most states refused repatriation. Western Europe accepted only limited returns, mostly unaccompanied minors, while MENA countries issued no repatriation statements. The United States repatriated all its citizens for domestic prosecution, arguing that trials at home were safer than leaving them in the camps.

Prisons and Executions

The SDF and the Iraqi Army captured thousands of ISIS fighters after their defeat in battle. The number of fighters in SDF prisons is estimated to be approximately 12,000, including 3,000 foreigners from more than 54 nationalities. The number of foreigners in the custody of Iraqi authorities is estimated to be approximately 1,000. The SDF's seven prisons are distributed across northeastern Syria, the most famous and most significant of which are the Ghuwair Prison in Hasakah and the Jirkin Prison in Qamishli. The SDF pointed to the seriousness of the situation inside prisons, both from a health perspective, where diseases and epidemics have spread among prisoners, and from an increase in extremism (B. Hassan, 2025).

The SDF, which lacks legal and judicial mechanisms, has not been formally charged or brought to trial. The international community calls for the establishment of a special international tribunal or the return of these fighters to their countries for trial. As previously mentioned, the U.S. responded by repatriating its citizens, prosecuting them, and imprisoning them. Middle Eastern countries are unwilling to allow them to return, and European countries have been quick to revoke their citizenship (B. Hassan, 2025).

What raises even more questions is how European countries handle the issue of their citizens detained in Syria and Iraq. Unlike the SDF, Iraq has taken a strict judicial approach and has issued death sentences for several of them. Many believe that Iraq has provided a way out for countries to refuse to repatriate their citizens ("Qui Sont," 2019).

An Iraqi court sentenced 14 French nationals to death in mid-2019. However, what is suspicious about this case is that the Iraqi army did

not capture these fighters but instead fell into the hands of the SDF after the Baghouz offensive, which in turn handed them over to the Iraqi army ("Les Forces," 2019). It's worth noting that these individuals include prominent figures in the French jihadist movement, and this handover represents the only case involving the extradition of foreigners between the SDF and Iraq ("Qui Sont," 2019).

The question here is: according to what legal or procedural criteria did the SDF hand over these elements to Iraq, and what was the French role in this process? It is no secret that there is a desire, both in France and the West, to rid themselves of their members. There is an agreement between the French and Iraqi sides to eliminate French elements who joined ISIS. The lack of transparency in trials and the application of the death penalty are standards that French courts do not meet.

This confirms what we mentioned in the first point regarding France, European countries, and even North African countries turning a blind eye to their citizens joining the war in Syria. This is a policy on the part of these countries to relieve themselves of the burden of these extremists by exporting the crisis to other regions. It is a way to get rid of them, either by killing them during battles or international bombing, or by capturing and executing them by local groups. This is something that these countries cannot implement in their own territory, where, in extreme cases, they would issue prison sentences against them. This explains why many countries have addressed the issue of foreign fighters from the outset.

Attempts to revive the organization

Following the death of al-Baghdadi on 27 October 2019, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi assumed leadership. During his tenure, the group's propaganda focused on the ideological and organizational imperative of liberating prisoners.

In January 2022, ISIS coordinated its largest post-caliphate assault: the Ghuwair Prison attack in Hasakah, run by the SDF. Internal inmates and external fighters communicated by phone to synchronize a riot with a car-bomb assault. The rebellion overran part of the facility and took SDF guards hostage, but U.S. air and ground intervention ended the siege (M. Hassan & al-Ahmed, 2022). Reports vary: SDF sources cited fewer than 100 escapees, whereas eyewitnesses claimed approximately 300

prisoners, including senior cadres, escaped. Although specific foreign involvement is undocumented, the presence of the spokesman-deputy "Abu Omar al-Muhajir," whose epithet means "the foreigner," suggests the continued prominence of non-Iraqi elements.

The movement to "revive the caliphate" within detention camps has been more sustained. In al-Hol camp, ISIS widows re-created a *hisbah* (morality police) network enforcing the group's rules and executing or burning women accused of apostasy, sometimes with their children. Children are indoctrinated and trained with weapons, turning al-Hol into a social incubator for ISIS's regeneration rather than a containment site (Soz, 2022).

Africa as a Secondary Arena

When ISIS proclaimed the caliphate in 2014, multiple militant groups worldwide pledged allegiance. After the fall of Mosul and Raqqa, numerous fighters, notably Tunisians, Moroccans, and French, relocated to Libya; the al-Battar al-Libi Battalion redeployed to Sirte (2017) (Achek, 2024). Following ISIS's defeat in Libya, remnants moved south toward the Sahel and Sahara. There, they merged into the Islamic State in the Sahel and Sahara Province, founded in 2017 by Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb commander. As ISIS lost its Middle Eastern footholds, Africa became the main operational sanctuary for both ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates. The recruitment of foreigners to African fronts was not simply a byproduct of Middle Eastern defeat. A propaganda film featuring Romain Garnier (Abu Salman al-Fransi) explicitly urged would-be volunteers blocked by travel bans to join ISIS branches in Africa, where mobility from Europe was more effortless. Since 2018, ISIS provinces in Africa have controlled vast swaths of territory, notably in Mali and Niger (Achek, 2022). The Puntland (Somalia) branch has grown more active and now benefits from the regional al-Karrar finance office, which has become its principal funding channel (Achek, 2025).

The organization's largest recent African operation occurred on 31 December 2024, when 12 fighters, nine foreigners, stormed a Puntland military barracks. Shortly afterward, police arrested six Moroccan nationals attempting to join ISIS, reviving questions about the group's cross-border recruitment and travel routes (Achek, 2025). Despite a

U.S.-backed Puntland counter-terrorism campaign, the influx of foreigners indicates persistent transnational coordination. Several ISIS media releases from Africa have highlighted the participation of Middle Eastern and foreign commanders in local leadership structures.

The renewed appeal of African branches stems from four interlinked factors:

1) Ease of travel and porous borders,
2) Relatively strong local bases and revenue streams,
3) Expansive ungoverned spaces across the Sahel,
4) Reduced surveillance compared to Syria and Iraq.

Consequently, Africa has evolved from a peripheral battlefield into the movement's new strategic hinterland, a future destination for surviving or aspiring foreign fighters loyal to ISIS's ideology.

Conclusion: The Experience and Legacy of Foreign Fighters in ISIS

Based on this analysis, the experience of foreign fighters in ISIS during the Syrian revolution is a new form of globalized jihadism. The group controlled the use of transnational networks and the internet as mobilization and recruitment tools of individuals from all over the world, successfully utilizing globalization as a factor of jihad.

In contrast to al-Qaeda's strict selectivity and doctrine gatekeeping, ISIS embraced an open-door policy, welcoming anyone willing to join its self-proclaimed caliphate. It welcomed people of all ages and both sexes, swerving from the typical pattern of armed groups enlisting only combat-capable individuals. Women and children were given institutionalized roles: the women were given the al-Khansaa Brigade, and the indoctrinated children the Cubs of the Caliphate (Ashbal al-Khilafah). Through such programs, ISIS endeavored to reproduce itself socially and inter-generationally, and not only militarily.

Foreigners served as administrators, technicians, and propagandists, as well as combatants. (Many of them brought professional skills and computer know-how gained in the countries they came from, further underpinning the group's media and bureaucratic apparatuses.) The Department of Intelligence (Amniyat) reflected this hybridization of

Baʿathist military strategy and universal jihadist reasoning in operations. Headed by former Iraqi intelligence personnel, it created what most scholars describe as the "deep state" of ISIS, in which members from abroad occupied top positions.

As the global campaign gained momentum after 2014, the Amniyat's foreign cadre dominated ISIS's external operations, taking the war to Europe in the guise of a deluge of staged terror attacks, from Paris to Brussels, designed to pressure the coalition and strike back against Syrian and Iraqi losses. These campaigns demonstrated that foreign fighters were not only a battlefield mobilization tool but also the vanguard of international terror projection. Ironically, the same foreign networks that built ISIS also accelerated its collapse. The internal doctrinal conflict between the al-Hazmiyyah and the Binʿ Aliyyah factions exposed the deep fractures between the movement's Salafi-jihadist core and its Baʿathist-securitarian leadership. The spread of al-Hazmiyyah ideas, rooted in Ahmad al-Hazmi's theory of perpetual takfir, radicalized many fighters and produced violent clashes within ISIS's own ranks. (The Tunisian Hazmi loyalist coup attempt at the Battle of Baghouz (2019) was the point of no return: the ideological opposition turning into organizational self-destruction.) ISIS might have contained this crisis had it followed al-Qaeda's earlier model of doctrinal arbitration. Bin Laden's strategy of dialogue and containment toward extremists within al-Qaeda contrasts sharply with al-Baghdadi's choice of repression. The decision to use the security apparatus against theological opponents reflected the legacy of Saddam Hussein's authoritarian system that had shaped ISIS's internal governance, a system of control without religious legitimacy.

The international element was at the heart of the rise of this new ideological extremism. Their own experiences overseas and exposure to different jihadist environments created a more absolutist worldview, which continues even after the group's territorial defeat. The imprisoned fighters and their families have perpetuated these ideologies: wives propagating doctrine in camps like al-Hawl, and children growing up in a culture of indoctrination and retaliation. The ideological survival of ISIS, therefore, continues as an "invisible camp-based caliphate."

While ISIS formally collapsed after Baghouz in 2019, its cells still exist in the Syrian Badia, the Anbar desert, and SDF prison networks. For-

eign detainees are both a political bargaining asset and a security drag. (Local governments lack legal and logistical capacity to try them but keep them as bargaining chips to secure continuous international legitimacy and support.) Western and Arab governments alike have largely had an externalization policy of security; they would rather leave their nationals confined abroad than pay the political and legal price of repatriation. (This policy is reiterated in broader Western practice that tacitly approved of foreign fighter exports in the first years of the Syrian war, a policy of "strategic outsourcing" of extremism that proved to be counterproductive.)

Now, the same countries rely on local militias to keep at bay the remnants of the caliphate, effectively making northeast Syria and northern Iraq permanent holding pens for the human waste of jihadism. As the Middle East front closed, Africa emerged as the new front of jihad. The displacement of large numbers of European and North African fighters into Libya, the Sahel, and Somalia, and their integration into ISIS affiliates such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and IS-Somalia, represents the third generational shift in the foreign-fighter phenomenon. In contrast to their forebears in Afghanistan (1980s) or the Middle East (2010s), these new forces act within flexible transnational spaces where borders are permeable and state authority tenuous. (Africa's huge ungoverned territories, local cleavages, and fragile governance frameworks now provide the ideal environment for global jihadist capital recycling.)

Foreign fighters' trajectories have therefore unfolded through three broad phases: ideological formation and mobilization in the Afghan and Iraqi theaters; institutionalization and state-building within ISIS in Syria and Iraq; and fragmentation and diffusion to Africa's hybrid insurgencies. Each stage builds upon the previous one, not only moving tactics and personnel, but also maintaining the global jihad's organizational memory. Syrian lessons, ISIS's inclusion of foreigners in all levels of administration and propaganda, continue to inform its African affiliates' operational templates today.

Lastly, the story of the foreign fighters within ISIS is more than a chronicle of the arrival and departure of a terror group; it is a story of how jihadism exported itself through the movement of believers, mercenaries, and ideologues. Their experience of Syria left a doctrinal legacy, a cyber founda-

tion, and a sociological phenomenon that have outlived the caliphate itself. As the jihad heartland shifts south, the same forces that remapped Raqqa and Mosul now threaten to do the same in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and beyond.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest that could affect the execution or publication process of the research.

Financial Support: No financial support was received from any institution or organization for this study.

Ethical Approval and Participant Consent: Scientific and ethical principles were adhered to during the preparation of this study, and all utilized works have been indicated in the reference list.

Use of Artificial Intelligence: Artificial intelligence was not utilized during the preparation process of this article.

Similarity Scan: This article has been scanned via İntihal.net software, and the obtained similarity rate complies with the journal's standards.

Bibliography

Achek, I. (2022). L'État Islamique et Al-Qaïda en Afrique : Un nouveau défi pour la sécurité régionale et mondiale. *Qiraat Africa*. https://qiraatafrican.com/fr/9185/securite-mondiale/

Achek, I. (2024). *Franco-European fighters in the ISIS organization* [Master's thesis, Altınbaş University].

Achek, I. (2025). Analyse de la dernière opération de l'État Islamique en Somalie. *Qiraat Africa*. https://qiraatafrican.com/fr/14076/analyse-de-la-derniere-operation-de-letat-islamique-en-somalie/

Al-Baghdadi panicked after the killing of Abu Sayyaf Al-Tunisi...and the organization's collapse was rapid. (2024, February 15). *Al Arabiya*. https://x.com/AlArabiya/status/1758203270718226456

At a sprawling tent camp in Syria, ISIS women impose a brutal rule. (2019, September 3). *The Washington Post*. https://web.archive.org/web/20190904004048/https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-a-sprawling-tent-camp-in-syria-isis-women-impose-a-brutal-rule/2019/09/03/3fcdfd14-c4ea-11e9-8bf7-cde2d9e09055_story.html

Benmelech, E., & Klor, E. F. (2020). What explains the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS? *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *32*(7), 1458–1481. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1482214

Boutin, B. (2015). *Administrative measures against foreign fighters: In search of limits and safeguards*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/import/publication/ICCT-Boutin-Administrative-Measures-December2016-1.pdf

Byman, D. L. (2015). *Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets*. Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/

Foblets, M. C. (2020). Islam under the rule of law in Europe: How consistent is the human rights test? *Religions*, *12*(10), Article 857. https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/10/857

Gaüzere, D. (2025). Gulmurod Khalimov et Shamsud-din Jabbar: De

l'armée au djihad. *Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement*. https://cf2r.org/actualite/gulmurod-khalimov-et-shamsud-din-jabbar-de-larmee-au-djihad/

German girl imprisoned for ISIS role has fleeting family reunion. (2017, December 15). *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/15/german-girl-linda-wenzel-imprisoned-for-isis-role-has-fleeting-family-reunion

Hamming, T. (2021). *Al-Hazimiyya: The ideological conflict destroying the Islamic State from within*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2022-12/Al-Hazimiyya-islamic-state-ideological-conflict.pdf

Hassan, B. (2025, January 4). ISIS prisoners held by the Kurds: What will happen to this issue after the new Syrian administration? *Al Hurra*. https://bit.ly/3ZmmmAe

Hassan, L. (2021). Repatriating ISIS foreign fighters is key to stemming radicalization. *FRONTLINE PBS*. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/repatriating-isis-foreign-fighters-key-to-stemming-radicalization-experts-say-but-many-countries-dont-want-citizens-back/

Hassan, M., & al-Ahmed, S. (2022). Details of the ISIS attack on the Al-Sina'a prison in Hasakah. *Middle East Institute (MEI)*. https://www.mei.edu/blog/tfasyl-hjwm-dash-ly-sjn-alsnat-fy-mdynt-alhskt-alswryt

Heil, G. (2017). The Berlin attack and the 'Abu Walaa' Islamic State recruitment network. *CTC Sentinel*, *10*(2). https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-berlin-attack-and-the-abu-walaa-islamic-state-recruitment-network/

Innes, M. A. (2006). *Bosnian security after Dayton: New perspectives*. Routledge.

Jaboori, R. (2017). Alleged coup attempt exposes Hazimite faction within Islamic State. *Terrorism Monitor*, *17*(5).

Kullberg, A. (2003, October 6). The background of Chechen independence movement V: The Dagestan provocation. *The Eurasian Politician*. https://users.jyu.fi/~aphamala/pe/2003/tsets-5.htm

Les forces arabo-kurdes de Syrie ont remis aux autorités irakiennes quatorze combattants de l'État Islamique de nationalité française. (2019, February 25). *Europe 1*. https://www.europe1.fr/international/syrie-les-kurdes-ont-remis-14-djihadistes-francais-a-bagdad-3863888

Mazouz, A. (2015, July 23). ean alsirae bayn 'alhazimiati' wa'albaneiliati' dakhil daeish? *Noon Post*. https://www.noonpost.com/18999/

Pokalova, E. (2019). Driving factors behind foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *42*(9), 798–818. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1427842

Qasad tatlub min muqatilin 'ajanib mughadarat suria. (2025, March 11). *Erem News*. https://bit.ly/3YQGoCK

Qui sont les onze Français condamnés à mort en Irak pour appartenance à l'État Islamique ? (2019, May 29). *Franceinfo*. https://www.franceinfo.fr/monde/proche-orient/offensive-jihadiste-en-irak/qui-sont-les-francais-condamnes-a-mort-en-irak-pour-appartenance-a-l-etat-islamique_3465601.html

Résolution numéro 2178. (2014, September 24). Nations Unies, Conseil de Sécurité. https://bit.ly/434hCS7

Reuter, C. (2012, April 18). Secret files reveal the structure of Islamic State. *Der Spiegel*. https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html

Sheikh Ahmed Bin Omar Al-Hazimi sentenced to 18 years in prison. (2022, January 24). *Thewina*. https://bit.ly/43f0idr

Shiite militias fighting in Syria. (2015). *Al Jazeera Net*. https://bit.ly/44FpECd

Sommerville, Q. (2019, April 12). Islamic State: The women and children no-one wants. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47867673

Soz, J. (2022, July 14). The crisis of female jihadists in Al-Hawl displacement camp. *Carnegie Endowment*. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2022/07/the-crisis-of-female-jihadists-in-al-hawl-displace-

ment-camp?lang=en

Suc, M. (2018). *Les espions de la terreur*. HarperCollins.

Terrorisme: L'action internationale de la France. (2019). *France Diplomatie*. https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/securite-desarmement-et-non-proliferation/terrorisme-l-action-internationale-de-la-france/

Thomas, H. (2004). *The Spanish Civil War*. Penguin Books.

Tunisia prevented 17,000 people from joining hotspots. (2019, February 18). *Nesma*. https://bit.ly/4mowthN

Youssef, A. (2018, March 6). tunis tahmi 'amnaha min al'iirhab bimane safar almashbuhin. *Al Araby*. https://bit.ly/4mC4vzs