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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Land of the 'Boutique Jihad': The Foreign Fighters in Syria**

By Ahmed Salah Hashim

### **Synopsis**

*The number of foreign fighters in the Syrian civil war has reached an alarming level. They contributed significantly to the rebel side and have now begun to worry the authorities of their home countries. Who are the foreign fighters and why do they go to Syria?*

### **Commentary**

AS THE Syrian civil war rages on for a third year it has morphed into a wider jihad by Islamist militants, both home-grown and foreign imports. Syria has become the 'favourite' battleground of the so-called jihadists from a wide-range of countries, including Arab-Muslim countries as well as western states. The patchy performance of the original rebels - opened the way for the Islamist militants to take over the fight against government forces.

This year witnessed the tide turn in favour of the beleaguered Damascus regime of Bashar Al-Assad which dealt the rebels a severe mauling. Unsurprisingly, many foreign fighters have been 'martyred' in Syria. Who are they and why do they go to Syria?

### **Land of the 'Boutique Jihad'**

One reason for the rise of the jihadists is that Syria is the land of the 'boutique jihad.' In contrast to the remote and austere battlefields in Afghanistan, Somalia, Mali and northern Nigeria, it is more readily accessible, through Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. It is an advanced society in the heart of the Middle East, and travelling to Syria does not engender suspicion because would-be jihadists can enter Syria indirectly through Turkey.

Turkey does not require visas for citizens of European Union countries or for citizens of many Arab countries. There are many flights into Turkey from Europe and the Arab world and tickets are extremely cheap as it is a popular tourist destination. Jihadists from Arab countries go by air to Turkey or Lebanon and then make their way to Syria with the help of intermediaries. Those from countries bordering Syria have only to cross the largely unguarded borders.

The once sleepy town of Atmeh on the Syrian side of the border with Turkey is now an economically vibrant transit town for jihadists, providing them with almost all their needs.

## Where the foreign jihadists come from

The jihadists are overwhelmingly young Sunni Muslim males from lower middle or working class background, socio-economically marginalised either due to lack of education or employment opportunities or cultural identity in western societies. In the case of those from Arab-Muslim countries, the marginalisation is more profoundly socio-economic due to widespread poverty and economic stagnation and also severe political repression by authoritarian governments in the Middle East.

The total number of jihadists from Western countries is arguable, ranging from 600 to 1,000. Western intelligence agencies are worried by the security implications of trained jihadists returning home. According to the French authorities some 300 French citizens and residents are fighting in Syria, some of them white. France now sees the home-grown jihadists as the greatest internal security threat, with a senior French counter-terrorism judge stating that “the actual terrorism will begin just as soon as the Assad regime is defeated.”

The German internal security organisation has claimed that 80-100 Germans are in Syria and that 20 jihadists with German passports or residence permits have returned to Germany. Britain is another country which has exported a large number of jihadists to Syria; and around 100 are said to have traveled to Syria and some have re-entered Britain. Initial complacency has been replaced by genuine concern that they may be ticking time bombs.

The smaller European countries are not exempt. The Dutch intelligence service estimates that roughly 100 Dutch citizens are in Syria Belgian authorities have claimed that 70 members of the outlawed Islamist group Sharia-4Belgium are fighting in Syria, most of them immigrants from impoverished neighborhoods. The Swedish intelligence service stated that roughly 30 Swedish jihadists have served in Syria, 18 of whom are immigrants from the Middle East or first generation Swedish citizens.

The foreign jihadists from Muslim and Middle Eastern countries include 700 fighters from Jordan, making it the leading ‘exporter’ of jihadists to Syria. The Jordanians come from the austere and economically-deprived cities of eastern Jordan. Non-Arab Turkey has provided the jihad with around 50-100 militants, notably in and around Aleppo.

Palestinians have entered the fray in considerable numbers from refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria itself where there are UN-mandated Palestinian camps. Though the refugees in Syria have traditionally been quite secular in their orientation, bored and alienated young male residents of the camps have either joined the government side out of a sense of loyalty or the jihadist rebels as result of proselytising by Islamist clerics in the camps.

## How they are recruited

More recently, more than half the Palestinian camps fell into the hands of jihadist fighters who imposed Islamist mores and inculcated a more religious fervour among the inhabitants. The Chechens, a Muslim but non-Arab people without an independent homeland, but with combat experience, have also played a significant role in the Syrian jihad. From neighbouring Iraq, when the insurgency broke out in Syria, Iraq-based insurgents - many of them Syrians - returned to their home country. They were joined by a contingent of hardened Iraqi jihadists who had fought the Americans in places like Fallujah.

A number of Lebanese Sunnis have joined the jihad after being radicalised by the growth of militant ideology within a significant Sunni population, particularly in the northern part of the country. Salafist clerics in Tripoli have played a key role in exhorting Sunnis to go fight the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Asad. There have also been fighters from Libya and a relatively small influx of foreign jihadists from the Maghreb lands: Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

The would-be jihadists are recruited from the mosques in their local neighbourhoods, community clubs, or by word of mouth among kinship networks. The recruiters are adept in their proselytising skills which they have honed over several years of jihad. They state and repeat a simple message endlessly: Islam is in danger from the ‘infidel’ West, from local tyrannical and apostate rulers, and from abhorrent deviations from the Islamic religion, namely Shi’ism and the Nusairis or Alawites.

Once in Syria the jihadists are provided with six weeks to two and half months of training in explosives and handling small arms and rocket-propelled grenades and then integrated into the fighting units. Many, especially those from Western Europe, arrive with considerable enthusiasm but no military experience or training. Some of the Westerners were sent back because they were “too weak to participate in the fighting.”

The Syrian war is entering its third year in March 2014. The ultimate disposition of all the foreign fighters of the

Syrian conflict is likely to make the 'Arab Afghan' problem, following the end of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, look like a picnic in comparison.

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