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Biker Gang Chic and ‘Reverse Jihad’: The “Other” Foreign Fighters

By Shashi Jayakumar

Synopsis

Some individuals (mainly from Europe and the United States) have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight the IS (Islamic State) and other jihadist forces. What motivates them? What are the possible scenarios of more such foreign fighters taking up arms against IS?

Commentary

RECENT MEDIA reports on the journey by three members of the Dutch biker gang “No Surrender” to support Kurdish fighters against Islamic State (IS) point to an under-explored phenomenon – foreign fighters taking up arms against IS. Understanding this development may throw some light on how the conflict in Syria and Iraq might unfold.

The members of the Dutch biker gang are reportedly former members of the military. What precisely motivated them other than sympathy for the Kurds, is unknown. There are some suggestions that the biker gang’s involvement had been purely to support the distribution of aid - until IS’ recent gains and atrocities against minorities such as the Yezedis and Christians made them take up arms. “You can’t stay sitting on your couch,” said one of the gang when interviewed by the media.

Kurdish solidarity, Syriac Christians and Americans

A small number of individuals from the Kurdish diaspora in Europe are known to have returned to support their brethren, fighting with the YPG (the Kurdish People’s Protection Units in Syria) or the peshmerga in Iraq. Many more are involved through fundraising in Europe. Kurdish activists in Europe and Britain say that IS’ successes have caused more Kurds to make the journey to fight as it threatens the existence of the Kurdish people. It also puts at risk their dream of an autonomous Kurdish entity spanning the Kurdish areas in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey.

Syrian and Iraqi Christians have also begun to mobilise as regions formerly untouched by the conflict are now falling under the shadow of IS. Their situation – outmanned and largely outgunned - has not gone unheeded by members of the Syriac Christian diaspora. A Swiss of Syrian Christian origin, Johan Cosar, has been fighting for the Syriac Military Council (known as the MFS), a Christian militia group active in the mainly Kurdish region of Northeast Syria.

Cosar, a former soldier in the Swiss army, has imparted some of his military training to MFS fighters, and appears himself to have taken part in fighting against IS in joint MFS operations with the YPG. Reports suggest that there are several others like Cosar. A key motivating factor appears to be empathy for co-religionists. Another Swiss national active in Iraq, interviewed by the media, commented: "Someone has to take action to prevent the disappearance of Christians."

Three Americans, all with some military experience, are known to be fighting with the YPG in Syria. They appear to see themselves as responding to the call of moral duty. As Jordan Matson, the most prominent of the Americans with the YPG, states in an interview: "I can't just stand by (while men women and children are killed)." There is also some suggestion of rootlessness or psychological displacement. The Americans in question appear not to be deeply rooted in the US and may be searching for some sort of cause.

Implications and possibilities

None of the groups fighting IS or other jihadist elements in Syria or Iraq have issued a general call to arms for foreign fighters to come to their aid. Spokesmen for the Kurdish regional government in Iraq and peshmerga officials have indicated that what is needed are arms, not manpower. It is unlikely that the Kurdish forces in Iraq or Syria would issue such a call to foreign fighters in the near term, given that this would likely antagonise Western powers which are providing aid to them.

The network to bring such fighters in, however, is clearly in place. The Americans fighting with the YPG appear to have first got in touch with YPG elements on social media, while there are scattered indications of a similar underground railroad that assisted Europeans of Syriac Christian origin in making the journey to Iraq and Syria. Also in place is a rudimentary "cheerleading" element. One of the Americans fighting with the YPG (Jordan Matson) has taken up the role of answering questions from others (including, by his own account, hundreds of individuals from the West) considering going to join the anti-IS fight.

Some commentators have made comparisons with the "International Brigades" of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) – individuals largely drawn from various parts of the western world who fought against fascist forces. These comparisons are for the time being fanciful. There are, however, intriguing signs that some individuals without any direct religious or ethnic affiliation to the groups under threat by IS may consider joining the fight. Recent media reports suggest that citizens of Greece and Turkey (including individuals of non-Kurdish origin) have joined the YPG, motivated by the threat that IS poses to greater humanity.

But the most interesting of the "lone wolves" within this class is an unnamed individual (not thought to be of Kurdish or Muslim origin) from Britain's elite Royal Marine Commandos; in October 2014 he was stopped by the authorities before he could execute his plan to fly to Turkey and link up with the peshmerga fighting IS.

Threat of larger inter-religious conflict?

If IS gains ground in a manner which imminently threatens genocide of Kurdish and Christian populations in Iraq and Syria, increasing numbers from the West may consider it their duty to fight for their ethnic brethren or co-religionists. Already, some websites with a fundamentalist Christian orientation have started to talk of a crusade or "reverse jihad" against IS. The related, longer-term possibility is that the clash against IS may acquire overtones of a larger inter-religious conflict.

There is also the question of the fate that awaits these anti-IS foreign fighters (should they survive) if and when they attempt to return to their home countries. US officials have stated that it is illegal for an American to fight for Syrian militia. But various EU states appear – for the time being at least – to be prepared to look the other way. The Dutch authorities have for example suggested that there is nothing to prevent Dutch Kurds from joining the anti-IS fight, and that such individuals do not face persecution on their return to the Netherlands.

Technically, however, it is still illegal to join the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK, which remains a proscribed terrorist organisation, and which has close links to the YPG. Unless the authorities make

clear their stance on their citizens joining the anti-IS conflict, unofficial “boots on the ground” may arrive in greater numbers, whether governments like it or not.

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