



# The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Islam and Transnational Militancy

## BOTTOM LINES

- **Transnational War Volunteers.** Muslim foreign fighters volunteer to fight in conflicts beyond their home countries. Al-Qaida operatives, in contrast, engage in out-of-area terrorist attacks on Western civilians.
- **Recruitment Tool for al-Qaida.** In the short term, Muslim foreign fighters pose a limited threat to the West, but in the long term they fuel international terrorism. Not all foreign fighters become al-Qaida operatives, but most al-Qaida operatives start as foreign fighters.
- **A Particular Brand of Islamist Activism.** The foreign fighter movement is the sharp end of pan-Islamism, a subcurrent of Islamism that emphasizes intra-Muslim solidarity and thrives on symbols of Muslim suffering at the hands of non-Muslims.

By Thomas Hegghammer

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## THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PHENOMENON

A salient feature of armed conflict in the Muslim world since 1980 has been the involvement of so-called foreign fighters. These foreign fighters are unpaid combatants with no apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity with the Muslim side. Since 1980, between 10,000 and 30,000 such fighters have inserted themselves into conflicts from Bosnia in the west to the Philippines in the east.

Foreign fighters are notoriously understudied because they constitute an intermediary actor category lost between local insurgents, on the one hand, and international terrorists, on the other. In the literature on jihadism, Muslim foreign fighters have long been conflated with al-Qaida, even though most war volunteers never engaged in anti-Western terrorism, but waged guerrilla warfare in one conflict at a time.

Foreign fighters matter because they can affect the conflicts they join, as they did in post-2003 Iraq by promoting sectarian violence and indiscriminate tactics. Perhaps more important, foreign fighter mobilizations empower transnational terrorist groups such as al-Qaida, because war volunteering is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy. For example, when Muslims in the West radicalize, they usually do not plot attacks in their home countries right away, but travel to a war zone such as Iraq or Afghanistan first. A majority of al-Qaida operatives began their militant careers as war volunteers, and most transnational jihadi groups today are by-products of foreign fighter mobilizations. War volunteering is therefore key to understanding transnational Islamist militancy.

Today the presence of foreign fighters is taken almost for granted as a corollary of conflict in the Muslim world. Before 1980, however, conflicts in the Muslim world almost never attracted foreign fighters, despite the emergence of Islamism as an organized political phenomenon as early as the 1920s. Since 1980, on

the other hand, at least sixteen conflicts have seen the arrival of foreign fighters. Why did Muslims fight in each other's wars so much more frequently after 1980? Explanations emphasizing changes in the structure of conflicts, the profile of insurgents, the role of governments, new technologies, or the strength of the Islamist movement are all insufficient.

The foreign fighter phenomenon is linked to the emergence, in the 1970s, of a subcurrent of Islamism fixated on the "suffering of the Muslim nation" and the need for intra-Muslim solidarity. This pan-Islamist movement was spearheaded by marginalized elites employed in nonviolent international Islamic organizations in the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia. Seeking political relevance and increased budgets, these activists propagated an alarmist discourse emphasizing external threats to the Muslim nation. They established a global network of charities for the provision of inter-Muslim aid. The norms and networks created by the Hijazi pan-Islamists then enabled Arab activists in 1980s Afghanistan to recruit foreign fighters in the name of inter-Muslim solidarity. The "Arab Afghan" mobilization against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, in turn, produced a foreign fighter movement that still exists today, as a phenomenon partly distinct from al-Qaida.

This explanation informs debates about the very nature of transnational Islamist militancy, notably, the controversy about the relative importance of religion and politics in causing Islamist violence. At its most polarized, this debate opposes those who view al-Qaida as a cult of violence and those who see it as a response to Western policies in the Muslim world. Transnational militancy is obviously ideology driven, but the ideology in question—extreme pan-Islamism—arguably has more in common with state nationalism than with utopian religious constructions. Conversely, certain Western policies in the 1990s and 2000s have likely fueled transnational militancy, but only because an extreme sensitivity to such policies already existed. Besides, the actions of non-Western, non-Muslim armies—such as the Russians in Afghanistan and Chechnya, Israelis in Palestine, and Serbs in Bosnia—

have arguably done at least as much as U.S. foreign policy has to nourish the pan-Islamist victim narrative.

The distinction between foreign fighters and international terrorists shows that, although foreign fighters and al-Qaida hail from the same pan-Islamist mother movement, they do not have the same political preferences. Crucially, the two communities have often competed over resources, usually to the detriment of al-Qaida. It also reveals that foreign fighters consistently enjoy higher levels of popular support across the Muslim world, and thus recruit and fundraise more easily than terrorist groups.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

At least two important policy implications emerge from these findings. First, those seeking to prevent Muslim foreign fighter recruitment need to recognize that the recruitment message relies not primarily on complex theological arguments, but on simple, visceral appeals to people's sense of solidarity and altruism. Western governments should therefore worry less about ultraconservative Salafism than about the spread of the Muslim victim narrative in mainstream Muslim discourse and the availability of audiovisual jihadi propaganda on mainstream internet sites such as Youtube and Facebook.

Second, a long-term policy to stem foreign fighter recruitment must include strategies to undermine pan-Islamism, for example, by spreading awareness of factual errors in the pan-Islamist victim narrative and by promoting state nationalisms and other local forms of identification. In addition, Western policymakers should adjust their public diplomacy to the reality that the majority of Muslims view foreign fighters and international terrorists quite differently. The Western tendency to conflate the two has been a major source of communication problems between the West and the Muslim world since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. At the same time, both Western and Muslim governments must seek to prevent foreign fighter activism, because most al-Qaida operatives begin their careers as war volunteers.

## RELATED RESOURCES

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