

FOREIGN FIGHTERS

A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

COLONEL BERND HORN



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FOREWORD

It is my pleasure to introduce the fifteenth monograph in the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) Professional Development Centre (PDC) series. These popular publications remain an important forum in expanding the growing body of literature on Special Operations Forces (SOF) in general and Canadian Special Operations Forces (CANSOF) in particular. Through this vehicle personnel within the Command, as well as those external to it, can continue to learn more about SOF, especially its saliency and strategic utility to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), the Government of Canada, and the nation as a whole.

This latest monograph, *Foreign Fighters: A Clear and Present Danger* is noteworthy as the topic has become one of great domestic and international concern. Foreign fighters emanating from all over the world, including Canada, represent a hidden threat. Although not a new phenomenon, many of the “new” breed of foreign fighters, that is those who leave their country to fight in conflicts in other states, are radicalized and have joined extremist organizations that have taken up jihad, often against the West. These fighters are trained and often further radicalized by extremist organizations, wage combat on their behalf and gain deadly experience. The menace lies in the fact that leaders of extremist groups often send Western fighters to carry the fight back to their homes. Savvy to Western culture, possessing passports from mainstream Western countries, many foreign fighters can easily cross borders without scrutiny. Moreover, foreign fighters can return home on their own, recruit others, inspire or participate in group plots or “lone wolf” attacks. Additionally, research has shown that one-in-nine foreign fighters have been involved in domestic attacks or attempted attacks in their home country or another Western state.

Even those that do not return home pose a threat to international security. Research has shown that foreign fighters tend to increase the level of indiscriminate violence and they have a tendency to propagate the conflict. This phenomenon in turn increases the likelihood of the conflict becoming a major conflagration that spills over to the larger region or international arena.

As such, *Foreign Fighters: A Clear and Present Danger* lays out the issue of foreign fighters in great detail, with a specific focus on the Canadian nexus. The issue is one that law enforcement, intelligence agencies and SOF must all be aware of as it cuts across both the domestic and international domain, as well as its terrorism nexus. In the end, as always, I hope you find this publication informative and of value to your operational role. In addition, it is intended to spark discussion, reflection and debate. Please do not hesitate to contact the PDC should you have comments or topics that you would like to see addressed as part of the CANSOFCOM monograph series.

Dr. Emily Spencer
Series Editor and Director of Education & Research
CANSOFCOM PDC

FOREIGN FIGHTERS: A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

The savage beheading of American journalist James Foley on 19 August 2014, by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) extremists proved to be a catalyst for Western outrage and action. The fact that the brutal execution was carried out by a British ex-patriot who converted to Islam and joined the extremist jihadist organization was equally concerning. Notably, the executioner represented but one of thousands of foreign fighters that had rallied to wage global jihad.

Although not a new phenomenon, the current wave of foreign fighters is of great trepidation to governments. Globalization combined with the ability of terrorist organizations to use the internet and social media to attract, seduce and subsequently radicalize individuals to join “the cause” and wage jihad, or to support any other extremist action, exponentially increases the threat and effects of terrorism. Simply put, foreign fighters who are recruited to terrorist organizations expand the international reach of transnational insurgencies, as well as religious and ideological conflicts.

Perhaps most concerning is that thanks to globalization and the reach of the internet and social media, foreign fighters, the causes and terrorist organizations they often support, and the savage actions undertaken in their name, transcend borders. Of great alarm is the fact that foreign fighters tend to perpetuate the conflict they have joined. Indeed, they are reported to be responsible for higher levels of violence, largely because they have no personal equity or families to protect in the same way that local insurgents do.

For Western governments, foreign fighters also represent a hidden threat. Once they return home, or are ordered home by their respective organizations to carry on the fight, foreign fighters represent a cohort that is more experienced, more lethal and more dangerous and sophisticated than many of their domestic counterparts. They now represent a substantive menace, either as a group or as individuals acting in a “Lone Wolf” capacity.

Canada is not immune. Government sources concede there are in excess of 130 known Canadian cases of individuals who have left the country to participate in training and/or actual operations with terrorist organizations. In addition, there are 80 known Canadian former foreign fighters who have returned home and are currently residing in Canada. The Government’s apprehension is that these foreign fighters exacerbate the potential for, and the effectiveness of, homegrown terrorism. The threat is even more ominous since identifying and tracking individuals leaving the country for nefarious purposes is not always easily accomplished as those radicalized who are spurred to action do not fall under a single identifiable profile. As they travel with Canadian or other mainstream Western national passports, they can easily flow across international borders without being subject to the restrictions and visa requirements that are placed on many non-Western citizens.

In the end, foreign fighters represent a growing threat that has implications for global stability as well as for domestic security. The solutions are far from simple and require a comprehensive global and domestic approach. As the barbarity and savageness of the Islamic State terrorist organization has shown, turning a blind eye to the cancer of foreign fighters and the organizations they support is an approach fraught with peril. Foreign fighters, notably not all rallying to jihad or Islamic organizations, represent a hidden peril that feeds transnational insurgencies, as well as a skulking national threat and, as such, they cannot be ignored.

What is a Foreign Fighter?

It is first important to delineate what exactly constitutes a foreign fighter. Dr. David Malet, an internationally recognized expert on the subject from the University of Melbourne, characterizes foreign fighters as simply “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict.”¹ Similarly, Barak Mendelsohn, a senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, describes them as “Volunteers [who] leave their homes and intervene in a clash taking place in a foreign location.”²

Professor Thomas Hegghammer from the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment takes a more complex approach. He classifies them as, “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.”³ His more detailed definition is structured to exclude mercenaries, returning diaspora members, or exiled rebels, who, as he describes, “have a pre-existing stake in the conflict.” In addition, he distinguishes foreign fighters from international terrorists, who specialize in out-of-area violence against non-combatants.⁴ In sum, all share the same basic tenant – foreign fighters are individuals who leave their home country to participate in conflict in another state.

The desire to travel to foreign lands to fight for a “righteous cause,” or simply adventure and thrills is not a new phenomenon. Yet, the current wave of foreign fighters has triggered concern, new legislation and increased law enforcement initiatives worldwide. The question becomes why is there now so much fear?

The answer is easy to understand and most governments, analysts and scholars share a similar view. Quite simply, foreign fighters are seen as a significant threat because:

1. They perpetuate the conflict in which they are participating;
2. They act as inspiration to other vulnerable individuals;
3. They create a “Blowback effect” – i.e. they return home, or travel to a third country and commit violent acts, often in the name of jihad;⁵ and
4. They are more lethal, dangerous and sophisticated than their domestic counterparts.⁶

These issues highlight valid concerns. Conflicts worldwide have shown that foreign fighters are responsible for higher levels of indiscriminate violence. Analysts and scholars assert this rise is due to their belief that they must fight more aggressively because they perceive that they are in a losing struggle for the very survival of their cause. In addition, they can be increasingly brutal, savage and indiscriminate because they have no equity or families to protect in the same manner that local insurgents do.⁷ Furthermore, their “apparent” religious zealotry often promotes sectarian violence.⁸ Indeed, Dr. Malet observed that “Transnational recruits are responsible for higher levels of violence than are local insurgents and insurgencies that manage to recruit foreign fighters are disproportionately successful as compared to other rebel groups.”⁹

Recent events in Iraq and Syria underline these points. The series of beheadings conducted by IS were executed by a British foreign fighter. Videos depicting the mass murder of Syrian soldiers taken prisoner by IS, the reports of ultimatums to convert to Islam or face death by those who fell under IS control, as well as the litany of stories of captured Kurdish and Yazidis villages and the subsequent killing, rape and kidnapping of men, women and children, as well as the accounts of brutal imprisonment by hostages that were later ransomed, all speak to the savagery of the IS terrorist organization. Undeniably, IS has been profoundly successful in

its military campaigns to defeat rival forces and capture territory. It has also proven to be immensely capable of attracting a large proportion of foreign fighter recruits. In fact, 40 per cent of those in the Islamic State organization are foreign fighters.¹⁰ Equally disturbing, many analysts believe that up to 80 per cent of the foreign fighters travelling to fight in Syria and Iraq aspire to join the IS organization.¹¹

The advantage of foreign fighters to a group is notable. After all, they often bring a heightened skill set. For example, foreigners who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan have used tactics, techniques, and procedures that demonstrate greater skill, and often greater lethality (e.g. deployment of improvised explosive devices (IEDs)) than those used by local insurgents. General Stanley McChrystal, a former theatre commander in both Iraq and Afghanistan assessed, “foreign fighters provide materiel, expertise, and ideological commitment.”¹² These benefits were clearly evident in Iraq. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi demonstrated how materiel assistance, expertise, and ideological commitment could elevate the lethality and effectiveness of an insurgency as he almost accomplished pushing Iraq to the verge of civil war in 2006 by employing a strategy of pitting Sunni and Shi’a Arabs, and Kurds all against one another.¹³

In fact, according to Clint Watts, a former Army officer and special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI):

Left unchecked, the Second Foreign Fighter Glut will produce the next generation of terrorist organizations and attacks much as the First Foreign Fighter Glut fueled [Al-Qaeda].¹⁴ While they might not be as numerous as those that participated in the 1980s jihad, which was in many cases sanctioned by regional governments, they have learned skills that far outweigh those of the original jihadis. Their understanding and employment of urban

tactics, weaponry and advanced technology make them far more lethal than their predecessors. In Iraq, for instance, while such fighters have accounted for less than 5 percent of insurgents they were estimated at producing over 90 percent of high lethality attacks.¹⁵

The concern with foreign fighters also revolves around their experience and ideological commitment. Many volunteer to fight for what they see as a “righteous cause.” Although radicalized through the internet, social media or local mentors, they are often indoctrinated to a deeper jihadist ideology as a result of their training and combat experience. As Professor Hegghammer explained, “more importantly they empower transnational terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, because volunteering for war is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy.”¹⁶ As an example, the London 7/7 bombers originally travelled to Afghanistan to fight. However, after having attended a training camp in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) for a week, their Al-Qaeda (AQ) instructors directed them to take the fight to England with catastrophic results for British citizens.¹⁷

The concern with their training and experience, and the implication for source nations has not gone unnoticed. European Union (EU) Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmström warned:

Europeans who travel abroad to train and to fight in combat zones, become more radicalised in the process. Some of these young men have joined groups with terrorist agendas, they have been trained and hardened in war, and could pose a threat to our security upon their return from a conflict zone. In the longer term they could act as catalysts for terrorism.¹⁸

The spectre of individual foreign fighters returning home, further radicalized, potentially traumatized by their combat experience,

and committed to conducting attacks in their home country, or other Western countries, make them formidable threats. Furthermore, they have learned new skills and have a knowledge and understanding of their own native culture and landscape. One group of scholars recognized, “With sophisticated tradecraft and the potential to train others, this group is all the more dangerous.”¹⁹

The danger posed by these fighters is beyond theoretical. A research report noted that between 1990 and 2010, one-in-nine returned foreign fighters were involved in domestic plots. The study revealed that “these plots tended to be more effective and lethal, thanks both to the skills learned and the indoctrinated zeal provided at radical training camps.”²⁰ Currently in the United Kingdom (UK), “more than half of MI5’s [national Security Service] anti-terror investigations involve Britons who have traveled to Syria.”²¹ Clearly, foreign fighters represent a clear and present danger.

Historical Background

Although the issue of foreign fighters has become a lightning rod for governmental action due to the excesses of terrorist organizations overseas, particularly the Islamic State, the problem of individuals travelling overseas to fight in the wars of others is not a new phenomenon. For example, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) attracted thousands of foreign fighters who wanted to support either the Republican Government or the rebels, known as Nationalists, who in turn were also supported by Fascist Germany and Italy. As many as 60,000 foreign fighters, hailing from more than 55 countries, including 1,600 Canadians, fought in the conflict.²²

Individual motives may have differed but importantly they resonate to the current state of affairs. For many it was their duty as non-fascists to go – to fight for the survival of the Republic against

a dictatorship. It was a belief that General Francisco Franco, “must be stopped because oceans would not stop Fascism.” In fact, *The Daily Worker* reported on casualties with articles “on how happy foreigners were to ‘die smiling’ for the republic.”²³

Religion also played a role. For example, a pro-Nationalist Irish Brigade was raised “to defend the Catholic Church before International Communism could obliterate it.” The majority of the recruits originated from rural communities where the Roman Catholic was the key social institution that both provided spiritual guidance but also acted as the glue to the societal fabric. Priests would regularly speak “of vile outrages against nuns and made them [recruits] see that intervention in Spain was a matter of putting down these outrages.” The Irish volunteers were sent to Lisbon en-route to the front “to hear sermons and visit local convents where they heard themselves described as defenders of the faith.” A Nationalist Spanish propaganda pamphlet went so far as to present “biographies of two Italian volunteers with one testifying ‘Is it not a great spiritual benefit for the afterlife to fall in the defence of Christ? We defend the power that is the source of our nation!’”²⁴

The Second World War also drew foreign fighters to both the Allies and Axis powers. Moreover, in the postwar period, the 1948 Israeli War of independence drew Jewish volunteers from four continents. Closer to home, Canadian volunteers, numbering from 5,000 to 30,000, signed up to fight in the US Army during the Vietnam War from approximately 1965-1975.²⁵

Arguably, the greatest perceived involvement of foreign fighters in a contemporary conflict occurred during the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Analysts and scholars estimate between 5,000-20,000 foreign fighters participated in the war.²⁶ Of interest, the “first wave” of foreign fighters began as a trickle. In 1984, Abdullah Azzam, a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, was deeply disappointed that a paltry 10 to 20

volunteers from external countries had come to fight against the Soviet occupation. As a result, he began to deliver recruitment sermons that positioned the struggle in “a territorial view of Islam and the need to repel infidels from its historic lands.” He described Afghanistan “as merely one front in a larger war against Muslims in which fighting is necessary so ‘that unbelievers do not dominate.’”²⁷ Subsequent waves of foreign fighters proved more substantial.

Since 1980, between 10,000 and 30,000 foreign fighters have participated in conflicts from Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Philippines.²⁸ In the Former Yugoslavia, reports of “Black Legions,” which consisted of Croatian separatist forces fighting the Yugoslav central government also included more than 100 Europeans. Foreign fighters were present on all sides. In fact, in October 1995, a suicide bomber destroyed the police headquarters in Croatian port town of Rijeka in retaliation for the arrest of Abu Talal, one of al-Gama al-Islamiyya’s leaders by Croatian authorities. The perpetrator was John Fawzan and he carried a Canadian passport. His attack represented the first successful suicide operation in Europe.²⁹

Notably, the inclusion of foreign fighters in the conflict in the Former Yugoslavia was not seen as a positive development. As noted earlier, they escalated the indiscriminate violence and helped perpetuate the war. A Bosnian colonel elaborated:

It was a mistake to let the Mujahideen in here. No one asked them to come. They commit most of the atrocities and work against the interests of the Muslim people. They have been killing, looting and stealing. They are not under the control of the Bosnian Army and they must go.³⁰

Indeed, Professor Mendelsohn argued that the foreign fighter presence in Bosnia may have actually hindered their cause. “The

Arab contingency in Bosnia,” he explained, “committed excesses that turned a highly effective military force into a political liability.” He went so far to assert, “The adverse consequences of such excesses became even more apparent a decade later, as the actions of foreign jihadis in Iraq created a backlash from the Sunni populations (especially from the Sunni tribes) and gave impetus to the establishment of the Awakening Councils.”³¹

Nonetheless, the trend of foreign fighters has continued. Since 2001, experts estimate that as many as 20,000 outside insurgents, mostly jihadists, have deployed into war zones from Afghanistan to the Middle East, as well as North Africa to join local rebel groups, Al-Qaeda or its affiliates or other Islamist organizations. They have calculated that over the past two centuries, more than 70 insurgencies have successfully gone transnational and that there have been foreign fighters in at least one in five modern civil wars.³² As an example, during the 2003 American invasion and post-conflict insurgency, 4,000 to 5,000 foreign fighters were drawn to the conflict.³³ Currently in Syria, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assesses that 15,000 foreign fighters are present.³⁴ In addition, thousands of foreign fighters, “constituting what the United Nations has termed an ‘insurgent diaspora,’ are spread across the African Great Lakes region, some tied to the Lord’s Resistance Army,” and others to Rwandan rebel groups.³⁵

Recruitment

Experts have identified that “most foreign fighters were not remotely touched by events in the countries to which they traveled.” Moreover, they also ascertained that “public goods offered by local insurgents would not benefit foreigners.” Finally, in many cases there was also no likelihood of pay, loot or power.³⁶ So, the question becomes how do terrorist organizations attract, recruit and convince individuals to die for their cause?

Not surprisingly media acts as a catalyst. Graphic, if not often sensationalized coverage of conflict, particularly emphasizing suffering, carnage and apparent excessive force by the targeted enemy engages human emotion and appeals to an individual's sense of obligation to assist in the same manner that recruiters attempt to harness emotional appeal in their propaganda. In this vein, globalization has made the recruiter's function arguably simple. The internet and social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, have created the ability to send messages and graphic images worldwide in mere seconds. In fact, "viral" is now an internationally understood term that describes videos that have captured a large global audience in a relatively short span of time.³⁷

Not surprisingly, the internet and social media play a significant role in the recruitment of foreign fighters by extremist groups. In fact, law enforcement agencies in Canada, the US and Europe have reported that many of the foreigner fighters in Syria have been inspired by online media they have seen from extremist organizations and jihadists. Consequently, through the medium of chat rooms, e-mails and text messages the groups arrange for the recruitment and travel to Syria to train and fight for the cause.³⁸

For example, the IS has been immensely successful in targeting and attracting Western recruits with social-media campaigns. They have produced slick, engaging videos and English-language publications. A number of videos have been produced "starring" Canadian foreign fighters who had joined the jihadist extremist organization. Specifically, on 4 July 2014, IS released a high-quality English-language video called "Al-Ghuraba: The Chosen Few," which focused on a Canadian fighter, Abu Muslim al-Kanadi (Abu Muslim the Canadian, originally Andre Poulin from Timmins, Ontario) who was killed in August 2013, during the final assault on a Syrian air base. In the video, Poulin is portrayed as a heroic warrior and a pious Muslim, "a brother with excellent character:

truthfulness, dedication, selflessness and steadfastness.” Poulin is also presented as having been an every-day Canadian. He actually states:

Before Islam I was like any other regular Canadian. I watched hockey. I went to the cottage in the summer-time. I loved to fish...It’s not like I was some social out-cast. Or some anarchist. Or somebody who just wanted to destroy the world and kill everybody...Life in Canada was good. But at the end of the day, it’s still Dar al Kufr [Land of Disbelief].³⁹

In the video Poulin asserts that he left the “Land of Disbelievers” for the honourable and obligatory duty of fighting holy war in the name of Islam. He proclaims that in doing so he became “one of the few,” turning himself from an average Muslim living in a society at war with Islam to a holy warrior fighting to establish a state built on Islamist tenets.

Featuring a Canadian was a conscious choice for the IS: they were looking to consolidate their territorial gains in Syria and Iraq to establish their Caliphate, and they required more fighters, engineers, professionals and money. Poulin, an English speaking representative who emanated from a country “respected both for its friendliness and its high standard of living,” clearly held a powerful underlying message. Namely, if “Poulin could leave his comfortable life for his religious calling, then other Muslims from Western countries could too. Better to die in the service of Islam, so the argument goes, than to live under the rule of a secular and anti-Muslim government.”⁴⁰

Another manner the new technologies are leveraged to attract recruits is through “disseminators,” who are “unaffiliated but broadly sympathetic individuals who can sometimes appear to offer moral and intellectual support to jihadist opposition groups.”⁴¹

Disseminators rely heavily on the use of Twitter and are “driven by a strong sense of Muslim identity and the fact that they believe there is a lot of anti-Muslim propaganda being promulgated.”⁴²

As powerful as the new information technologies are, not all foreign fighters are recruited through the internet or social media. One study revealed that many volunteers were actually recruited by returning foreign fighters or local religious leaders.⁴³ Scholars consider foreign fighters essential to mobilization of volunteers as they can provide a first-hand narrative that can glorify the act of volunteering and fighting, as well as guidance on how to travel, routes to use and contacts to seek out on arrival. “During the 1990s,” Professor Mendelsohn described, “former foreign fighters were crucial elements in the recruitment of the next generation of foreign fighters, serving as contacts for attracting disaffected youth, seeking purpose and excited by the recruiters’ stories of glory and comradeship.” He noted that “such recruiters were able to gain large numbers [of volunteers].”⁴⁴

Not surprisingly, there appears to be a very local nature to radicalization (defined as the process by which individuals acquire the motivation to use violence⁴⁵) and recruitment. Common “breeding” grounds include:

1. Religious sites;
2. Certain neighbourhoods;
3. Cafés;
4. Student associations (which serve as “radicalization incubators” where anti-West messages and jihadist calls to action are common); and
5. Prisons (which are fertile ground for extremist thinking and both trigger and reinforce the radicalization process.

This venue is not hard to understand as recruits are surrounded by a large population of disaffected young men; inmates whose feeling of frustration and alienation is hardened and easily transformed into a desire for revenge).⁴⁶

The use of social group networks for recruitment is a logical choice. It allows recruiters to use social pressure to get individuals to join. Analysts and scholars have determined that recruiters engage in displacement, broadening the definition of the involved group (i.e. that target group that is perceived to be victimized or under threat of survival) to a wider pool of potential recruits, thereby enlarging the scope of conflict. Recruiters aim to “identify a target audience, create emotive responses over matters that may have previously seemed of little import and reframe the message when initial approaches do not meet goals.” Dr. Malet uses an excellent example from Morocco. He explains:

Islamist groups recruiting foreign fighters maintained “watchers” at radical mosques and other places where people express anger about Iraq and Palestinians...The watchers discussed social justice and duty to intervene on behalf of fellow Muslims with the likely prospects, and then subjected them to background checks and psychological assessments. Those who passed were assigned a handler who smuggled them out of the country on false passports to a training and indoctrination centre abroad prior to entering the conflict.⁴⁷

Whether through internet, social media, religious mentor, returning foreign fighter, or other mediums, extremist organizations require a compelling message and/or “hook” to recruit volunteers for their cause. Interestingly, the pitch is seldom based on deep theological or philosophical arguments. Rather, it is normally focused on appealing to an individual’s selflessness and sense of

community. Professor Hegghammer asserted that “those seeking to prevent foreign fighter recruitment need to recognize that the recruitment message relies not primarily on complex theological arguments, but on simple, instinctive appeals to people’s sense of solidarity and altruism.” As a result, some scholars suggest “Western governments should therefore worry less about the spread of ultra-conservative Salafism than about populist anti-Western reporting by the television network al-Jazeera and the rapid spread of audiovisual propaganda on the internet.”⁴⁸

In essence, recruiters consistently frame distant conflicts as threats that are, or should be, of importance to the targeted recruits. As such, rather than try to recruit on the basis of opportunities for personal reward or gain, they emphasize in their messaging the requirement to take strong defensive action to save and preserve the survival, if not existence, of a specific “community.” Therefore, the recruiting message is often in the form of “the Muslim nation (*umma*) faces an existential external threat [and] the conflict for which volunteers are sought is but the latest and direst in a series of occupations of Muslim territory and massacres of Muslims.” As various scholars underline, the rationale then becomes very clear, namely that all able-bodied Muslim men must join the fight because Islamic law requires it. The message is pervasive and very convincing. After all, it emphasizes the concept of a unified Muslim nation. Importantly, the message also consistently refers to the victims as “our brothers/sisters/mothers/children in the sense they are all blood relations.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, the appeal to arms also raises the obligation of Islamic law, specifically the religious duty of all Muslims to fight for the *umma*.⁵⁰

Interestingly, scholars have observed that insurgencies use the same type of messaging, namely defensive mobilization, to attract foreign fighters regardless of whether they share the same ethnicity or some other affiliation and regardless of the war’s root

cause(s) or issues of dispute. Not surprisingly, recruiters strategically employ emotive imagery and narratives that are designed to stimulate outrage and fear. What scholars note is important is the shared “identity communities,” whether religious, ideological or nationalistic. It is through these shared communities that volunteers identify with distant struggles and insurgents. It is also the mechanism, namely the provision of social structures, by which the dissemination of recruitment messages and the mobilization of foreign fighters are enabled.⁵¹

Importantly, most foreign fighter recruits are normally already active members of these community/religious institutions, but are generally marginalized within their broader society. As a result, scholars emphasize that “these shared transnational identities, and the duties that come with roles as members of the community, are therefore highly salient to the recruits, more so than ties of national citizenship.” Simply put, foreign fighter recruits “tend to be active in sub-cultures and are willing to fight for them because they identify more closely with other members abroad than they do with fellow citizens of the state in which they reside.”⁵²

In summation, Dr. Malet encapsulated the methodology of messaging. He explained:

Insurgent groups, from the Texan Army in 1836 to Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria today, use despair rather than optimism to recruit members. Generally, they tell recruits that they are losing a war of survival and that they face an existential threat. It might not seem like the most persuasive pitch, particularly for fighters who, if they join, must violate a number of laws and take up arms in an unfamiliar territory. But it works. Such groups can convince a recruit that he or she is part of an endangered community and is obliged to defend it. The strategy works best with foreign

recruits who share the movement's ideology, ethnicity, or religion but who, unlike local fighters, do not have immediate communities and families in the line of fire.

But recruiters can also add volunteers who are only loosely affiliated with, or are merely sympathetic to, a certain group. Such fighters are often persuadable because of their weak affiliations with their own country and national identity, especially in the case of unassimilated immigrants or the politically repressed or economically marginalized. Many transnational insurgencies have typically preferred to bring these more pliable foreign foot soldiers on whenever possible, rather than risk their own regular members on the battlefield. This strategy appears to work well in ideological conflicts, but it is more difficult for ethnic rebel groups to sustain. In fact, even the most successful ethno-nationalist insurgencies have tended not to use foreign fighters. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey were successful at raising foreign financial support, but they apparently did not aim for more than that. They imported guns, not sons, perhaps because they could never make a credible claim that their struggle represented enough of an existential threat to rouse members of their far-flung diaspora to come and join them.⁵³

So, who exactly are those willing recruits to fight and die for the apparent cause(s) of others? A well-researched 2007 New York Police Department (NYPD) report on radicalization concluded, "the transformation of a Western-based individual to a terrorist is not triggered by oppression, suffering, revenge or desperation. Rather, it is a phenomenon that occurs because the individual is looking for an identity and a cause and unfortunately, often finds them in extremist Islam. There is no useful profile to assist law

enforcement or intelligence to predict who will follow this trajectory of radicalization. The radicalization process is accelerating in terms of how long it takes and the individuals are continuing to get younger.”⁵⁴

Despite this finding, the NYPD, as well as MI5, the British Security Service, both observed that most individuals “had some vulnerability in their background and [that] made them receptive to extremist ideology and that it was always influenced by others.”⁵⁵ Numerous other studies have shown foreign fighters tended to be impressionable, young males who were students or unemployed, lacking purpose and looking for an identity. French authorities categorize volunteers from France as disaffected, aimless and lacking a sense of identity or belonging. Scholars tend to agree that these characteristics appear to be common across most nationalities and fit with the high number of converts, presumably people who are seeking a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. Alienation from mainstream society also played a central role. The typical age for recruits averaged from 18 to 29 years old, with some as young as 15 to 17 years old. As noted by the NYPD research, the trend since the mid-2000s is of recruits to extremism becoming younger.⁵⁶

Dr. Malet also underlined that “transnational ideological affiliation provides a highly salient identity because immigration and modernization had destroyed other communal ties and produced isolated, embattled individuals ripe for recruitment by movements that spoke to their particular fears.” He underscored his notion with a quote from a former jihadi who described his old colleagues as “Men who had no home. Men reviled in the West because they were not white and Christian and reviled at home because they no longer dressed and spoke like Muslims.”⁵⁷

The Importance of Syria and the Foreign Fighter Nexus

The current Western focus on foreign fighters is deeply tied to the events in Syria, which has been embroiled in a brutal, savage civil war for well over three years. Caught up in the “Arab Spring,” which was a result of the rupture of a decades old status quo that maintained an oppressive relationship between oil rich states and their large swaths of poor, disenfranchised people within their population, led to popular uprisings in Syria with nationwide protests against President Bashar al-Assad’s government in March 2011.⁵⁸ Similar to other authoritarian Arab regimes, Assad used his security forces to crackdown violently on the unrest. However, the conflict gradually grew from popular protests to a full-fledged rebellion. In 2012, the UN declared that the conflict was “overtly sectarian in nature” between mostly government forces, militias and other Shia groups fighting largely against Sunni-dominated rebel groups. By July 2014, rebels controlled a third of Syria’s territory and most of its oil and gas production.

The severity of the humanitarian disaster in Syria has been outlined by the UN and many international organizations. At time of writing the death toll was estimated at between 160,000-190,000 people. In addition, more than 6.5 million Syrians have been displaced; more than three million Syrians have fled to countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey and become refugees; and millions more have been left in poor living conditions with shortages of food and drinking water.⁵⁹

The conflict, which was allowed to fester and grow by the international community, has had extremely negative consequences for everyone. Not surprisingly, the now large ungoverned space in Syria that is no longer under government control allowed extremists to fill the vacuum and, quite simply, thrive. After all, the extremist organizations have had time and space, as well as freedom

of manoeuvre to create the infrastructure and amass the resources they require to prosper. Counter-terrorist experts have observed that militant networks need the ability to effectively carry out a number of functions to flourish and operate, namely, leadership, safe havens, intelligence, communications, movements, weapons, personnel, ideology and finances.⁶⁰ The captured territory that opposition groups seized from the Syrian government, not to mention the corollary infrastructure, equipment and population that can be mobilized, taxed or victimized, offers them everything they require. It is no wonder then that counter-terrorist experts consider Syria, particularly because of the large number of foreign fighters attracted to the conflict, as the incubator of a new wave of terrorists.

This connection is not hard to understand. For example, in January 2014, the Director of National Intelligence in the US estimated that there were in excess of 7,000 foreign fighters in Syria from approximately 50 countries.⁶¹ By the summer of 2014, most sources placed the number of foreign fighters in excess of 12,000 individuals from at least 81 countries, including approximately 2,500 from Western countries, from mainly the European Union, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as several hundred from Russia.⁶² The growth continued. The CIA assessed in September 2014 that 15,000 Foreign Fighters were currently in Syria.⁶³ The increase in numbers in such a short period of time is both worrisome and remarkable.

Ominously, the great majority of foreign fighters join extremist groups. Importantly, they choose these groups because they are seen as the better resourced, more motivated and more disciplined force. Indeed, the mainstream rebel forces are often seen as ineffective fighters and unwilling to cooperate with each other to defeat the larger enemy. As a result, the opposition to the Syrian Army is a multiplicity of small groups operating locally and joining

alliances as a way to maintain their influence rather than building an effective force capable of defeating the Assad government. In addition, extremist groups are also better able to absorb foreigners many of whom do not speak Arabic and generally have no military training. Moreover, their recruitment message or narrative of fighting to protect a global Muslim community from aggression, although in this circumstance in the local setting of Syria, is more attractive, if not inclusive, compared to that of the Free Syrian Army groups that emphasize the local struggle for freedom.⁶⁴

The IS, a Sunni jihadist organization that was originally called the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) depending on which version of the Arabic translation is used,⁶⁵ is a perfect case study of a jihadist extremist group that has directly benefited and literally exploded as a result of the situation in Syria and the influx of foreign fighters. In fact, as noted previously, foreign fighters make up 40 per cent of IS fighting strength. As such, IS becomes a perfect example of the negative impact foreign fighters can have in exacerbating conflict and indiscriminate violence.

IS was officially created in April 2013. However, it is an offshoot of the former Sunni insurgent organization Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which was formed in 2003. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, joined the Iraqi insurgency as a result of the US invasion in 2003.⁶⁶ Captured by the Americans in 2005, he had risen to a middle-level leadership position within the AQI. In 2007, following the death of its founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI renamed itself the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Upon release in 2009, al-Baghdadi took control of the terrorist organization's operations in Iraq, however, the organization suffered a number of setbacks.

The civil war in Syria in 2011, however, gave al-Baghdadi and his extremist organization a powerful opportunity. IS gained strength,

followers and support from external countries because of its opposition to President Assad. It also gained media coverage, as well as revenue from sponsors and captured oil refineries. In 2013, Baghdadi split from AQ due to a disagreement with AQ's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, over the integration of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) an extremist Sunni militia that was also fighting the Assad government in Syria. Contrary to Zawahiri's orders, Baghdadi assimilated the group and created ISIS, later renamed simply IS as mentioned earlier. In the process, he also assumed control over a substantial piece of territory spanning the northern parts of Iraq and Syria. The split became irrevocable in February 2014, when the AQ leadership formally disowned IS. The differences spanned a number of issues, primary of which were the application of Islamic authority and imposition of Islamic law, as well as the use of excessive wanton violence.⁶⁷

The IS very quickly proved its effectiveness. Its battle cry, "Repent or Die," struck fear in all those that found themselves in their path. Bankrolled by a myriad of Sunni sponsor states in the Gulf, as well as the looting of banks in territory it captured, the ransoming of hostages and the selling of oil on the black market, IS has been able to fund its continuing growth and operations.⁶⁸ In addition, Baghdadi's reputation as a battlefield commander and spiritual leader, compounded by IS's operational success and combined with a well-oiled strategic communications campaign that uses videos, glossy publications and disseminators across the globe, has ensured IS's ability to secure large numbers of foreign fighters. Its total strength is estimated at 30,000 to 50,000 fighters.⁶⁹

By March 2013, IS captured the Syrian city of Raqqa. In January 2014, they seized Fallujah in Anbar province, in Iraq. Their offensive in Iraq was relentless, capturing Mosul and Tikrit in mid-July with the assistance of anti-government factions and Sunni tribal support. The assault caused the exodus of over half a million

residents and created shock waves worldwide. The capture of the second largest city in Iraq prompted many experts to warn that IS represented a threat to the entire region. Moreover, IS also began an aggressive campaign of bombing and assassinations in Baghdad itself. The IS success and territorial gains led al-Baghdadi to proclaim the creation of the Caliphate on 29 June 2014 in Mosul, which simply put, was a declaration by IS that al-Baghdadi was now the spiritual leader of all Islam, a claim that has been largely dismissed by the Muslim and Western world.

The success of IS cannot be denied. Many have called it a terrorist organization with its own state and army. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Brett McGurk noted that "ISIL's overall strategy of consolidating and expanding its caliphate 'fundamentally relies upon military superiority to wrest control of land and cities from modern states.'"⁷⁰ Their ability was enhanced by American state-of-the-art military equipment abandoned by fleeing Iraqi Security Force (ISF) soldiers.

IS's continuing offensive was also relentless. In early August 2014, IS forces took control of the northern Yazidi town of Sinjar and threatened Baghdad itself. In Sinjar, women and children were abducted and Yazidi men and boys were slaughtered. Approximately 200,000 civilians fled, with thousands becoming trapped in the Sinjar Mountain range prompting a humanitarian disaster.⁷¹ Western nations quickly reacted to provide food, water and medical supplies, as well as military equipment to the ISF and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. The US also renewed military action in Iraq in response to the IS advance. US President Barack Obama explained the air strikes were designed to break the siege of Sinjar mountain to prevent genocide, as well as to protect American personnel and assets in Erbil.⁷² By 20 September 2014, IS thrusts in the northern Kobani area of Syria, which borders on Turkey, forced another 60,000 Syrian Kurds to flee across the Turkish border.

As of September 2014, analysts estimated that approximately eight million people were under IS control and that the terror organization possesses anywhere from 40,000 square kilometres (km) to 90,000 square km (i.e. the size of Belgium and Jordan respectively) of Syria and Iraq.⁷³ Some experts insist that “the taking of Fallujah, Mosul and now Tikrit has done a great deal to burnish ISIS’s reputation” and as a result, “Al-Baghdadi and his group have become a magnet for a lot of jihadists around the world because he’s been able to prove himself on the battlefield, whereas Zawahiri [AQ] has for many years done nothing more than issue videotapes.”⁷⁴

The ruthless, savage and extremely violent nature of IS, fuelled by the high number of foreign fighters, has created a fearsome reputation. They have publicly embraced, through videos, photos and publications, their brutal character highlighting their actions of kidnap, torture, bombing and murder. The beheading of the journalist James Foley marked the first time IS had killed an American citizen since the Syrian conflict erupted in March 2011. Ironically, many experts believe the gruesome video is fuelling the popularity of the extremist organization.⁷⁵ In fact, Gilles de Kerchove, the EU’s counter-terrorism coordinator confirmed “the increase in foreign fighters leaving Europe to be trained in Syria or to reinforce IS has recently risen sharply.” He revealed the number of “European passports” being trained by IS jumped by 50 per cent.⁷⁶ IS beheaded a second American, fellow journalist Steven Sotloff, on 2 September 2014 and a British humanitarian worker, David Haines, on 13 September 2014.

Significantly, the executions were carried out by who intelligence sources believe to be a British citizen. Equally disturbing are reports by hostages who were ransomed from IS that during their imprisonment they were guarded, abused and tortured by foreign fighters from Western nations, including Canada.

Not surprisingly, response to IS began to galvanize quickly once it began its sweep across the region unleashing its unrestrained violence and savagery. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif urged his counterparts in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to demonstrate “Islamic unity, joint measures, and coordination in confronting terrorism and supporting the government and nation of Iraq against the growing wave of terrorist attacks.”⁷⁷ In fact, the Iranian Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani issued an edict of jihad directed at anyone who can take up arms and is able to volunteer in combating IS.⁷⁸

The West, partly in response to the genocide and war crimes occurring in Iraq and Syria, but arguably animated by the brutal beheadings of Western citizens and the total disregard and contempt by the IS for Western norms and standards of civilized conduct, also finally awoke to the threat and began to mobilize action to stop the IS sweep through the region and to clamp down on foreign fighters. President Obama vowed the US would not forget the “terrible crime against these two fine young men,” and warned, “Our reach is long, and justice will be served.”⁷⁹ Similarly, British Prime Minister David Cameron revealed to NBC Nightly News anchor Brian Williams that he was certain that IS was plotting attacks in Europe. “These people want to kill us,” Cameron announced, “They’ve got us in their sights and we have to put together this coalition ... to make sure that we ultimately destroy this evil organization.” He explained, “It has oil, it has money, it has territory, it has weapons. And there’s no doubt in my mind it has already undertaken and is planning further plots in Europe and elsewhere, specifically in Belgium, in Brussels.” Cameron extolled, “There are other plots they have been attempting including in my own country in order to kill and maim innocent people. And the same applies to the United States of America.”⁸⁰

Closer to home, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird asserted that dealing with organizations such as IS would be “the great struggle of our generation” and he cautioned that the battle “is not something that will start or end in northern Iraq.”⁸¹ To many experts, Al-Baghdadi and his IS extremist organization represents a far greater threat to the region and the Western world than Osama bin Laden ever did. “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is now something bin Laden could only dream of being,” Mr. Rooz Bahjat, a senior member of Kurdish Intelligence warned. He continued, “The sleep of reason produces monsters. It’s the lack of resolve in the West that is the most important thing. Reason has been sleeping and now we have lots of monsters.”⁸²

In response to the Western reaction and subsequent airstrikes, as well as the continuing effort by the US to create a global coalition against IS, the latent fears of Western countries was realized, at least verbally. On 21 September 2014, IS, a threat that was largely regionally based in Syria and Iraq, fulfilled speculation and expanded to a more global menace. IS issued a threat against Western countries including Canada, the US and European nations. In a 42-minute audio recording distributed on social media, Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani, an IS spokesman, called on Muslims everywhere to kill anyone whose country takes part in an attack on IS. He stated:

Oh, believer, do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be. You must strike the soldiers, patrons and troops of the tyrants. Strike their police, security and intelligence members. If you can kill a disbelieving American or European — especially the spiteful and filthy French — or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that joined a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be.⁸³

Adnani also voiced the paradox that the West and its anti-IS coalition face. "If you fight it [Islamic State]," he goaded, "it becomes stronger and tougher. If you leave it alone, it grows and expands."⁸⁴ However, Western governments made the decision – IS and the problem of foreign fighters would be tackled. IS "represents a threat not just to the Middle East, but the world," said Jason MacDonald, a spokesman for the Prime Minister's Office. "We will," he asserted, "continue to work with allies to push back against this threat,"⁸⁵

On 24 September 2014, President Obama warned the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) in New York that IS was a "network of death that must be destroyed." He attempted to rally the world, particularly Muslim countries to join the American fight against IS extremists. With the backdrop of escalated airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, Obama tried to convince others of the necessity to counter the extremism and sectarian conflict, which permits terrorism to flourish. "No God condones this terror," he asserted, and "No grievance justifies these actions." He proclaimed, "There can be no reasoning – no negotiation – with this brand of evil." Obama argued, "The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force," He promised, "So the United States of America will work with a broad coalition to dismantle this network of death." The Americans have announced that more than 40 countries have joined a coalition to fight the extremists, including five Arab countries that took part in the first round of airstrikes in Syria.⁸⁶

Canada also agreed to participate. After all, the Minister of National Defence (MND) Robert Nicholson labelled the Islamic State, "a real and growing threat to civilization itself."⁸⁷ He was not alone in his beliefs. "I do not believe," proclaimed Prime Minister Stephen Harper, "that we can watch a terrorist caliphate, essentially what has become a quasi-state, establish a regime of mayhem over

an entire region.”⁸⁸ The public supported his position. Despite the normal reluctance of Canadians to endorse military intervention, two-thirds of Canadians support the objectives of the anti-IS coalition mission and the use of military resources to prosecute it.⁸⁹

And so, Syria has become a magnet for foreign fighters with an estimated 3,000 individuals from Europe having traveled to the region. Canadian authorities report that between 130 and 145 Canadians are believed to be abroad in some role, with over 30 actually in Syria.⁹⁰

This finding is worrisome because the foreign fighters who have gone to Syria will have been exposed to an environment of sustained radicalization and violence. Moreover, they will be trained and experienced in advancements in technology and communications, tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) that have evolved and that have been developed over a decade of fighting in the region. Even if only a small percentage, the one-in-nine as mentioned earlier, decide to return home or to another Western nation to continue the fight, their impact could be profound. This connection has not been lost on the experts. They caution, with the large numbers of returning foreign fighters, national resources to monitor more than a few of the returnees, that is if you can even identify them, will be extremely difficult. Matthew G. Olsen, director of US National Counterterrorism Center stated, “The concern going forward from a threat perspective is there are individuals traveling to Syria, becoming further radicalized, becoming trained and then returning as part of really a global jihadist movement to Western Europe and potentially to the United States.”⁹¹ Former FBI Director Robert Mueller “warned that an increasing flow of US citizens heading to Syria and elsewhere to wage jihad against regional powers could end up in a new generation of homegrown terrorists.”⁹²

Furthermore, the threat has become arguably even more pressing. As noted earlier, the beheading of the American reporter James Foley galvanized international anger at the IS extremists and fuelled fears about the flow of foreign fighters joining their ranks. But governments from the Middle East to Europe and even Washington appear uncertain about how to stop them. By the end of August 2014, Interpol, the international police agency, called on the international community to support a globally coordinated push to stem the tide of international fighters joining IS, which had swallowed up territory across Iraq and Syria.⁹³

The rhetoric, threats and international attention has had a dramatic impact. An NBC poll indicated that as a result of the IS success in Iraq and Syria and the spate of beheadings of Western hostages, “nearly half of Americans now believe their country is less safe today than before the 9/11 attacks.” Notably, that number is almost double that from a similar poll taken a year earlier.⁹⁴

As such, the war in Syria has become a beacon for those who wish to become foreign fighters and wage global jihad. It has also allowed the explosive growth of one of the most savage and intolerant extremist groups to flourish and proclaim its own state, the Islamic Caliphate. In addition, it has allowed the IS to spread terror not only in Syria and Iraq, but its tentacles of chaos and violence have now threatened to engulf the larger Middle East and Western world. Importantly, Canada is one of those countries specifically targeted by name.

Foreign Fighters – The Canadian Nexus

The issue of foreign fighters, and the IS extremist organization, which many of them support and that has now directly threatened Canada, poses a clear and present danger to the nation. University of Waterloo professor Lorne Dawson, co-director of

the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society, asserts that the foreign fighter issue is the “Most serious threat Canada has faced.” He explained, individuals return who are trained and experienced. He added, they may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and lash out at society.⁹⁵ The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) estimated at the end of 2013 that up to 100 Canadians may have been involved in the conflict in Syria.⁹⁶ Significantly, by February 2014, the director of the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS), Michel Coulombe, testified in front of the Senate National Security and Defence Committee that 130 Canadians had gone overseas to fight in Yemen, Somalia and North Africa, a number which also included 30 individuals who are fighting, or have fought, in Syria. By October 2014, CSIS affirmed that number may be as high as 145.⁹⁷

Importantly, security agencies readily admit that it is highly probable, in fact likely, that there are even more Canadians who are travelling overseas to engage in terrorist activity of whom they are not even aware. “The phenomenon of Canadians participating in extremist activities abroad,” voiced Tahera Mufti, a CSIS spokeswoman, “is a serious one.”⁹⁸ Her statement is not surprising. Within the last few years alone, Canadian terrorists have been implicated in attacks in Algeria, Bulgaria and Somalia, as well as Syria and Iraq.⁹⁹ Specifically, Hassan El Hajj Hassan is wanted by Bulgarian authorities in connection with a bomb attack, on behalf of Hizballah, on a bus that killed six people and injured 35 in July 2012. In addition, two Canadian extremists participated in the January 2013 terrorist attack on the Algerian gas plant near In Amenas, Algeria; a Canadian was involved in the April 2013 attack on the Supreme Court of Somalia, which killed more than 35 people and injured dozens more¹⁰⁰ and a Calgarian, Salman Ashrafi, conducted a suicide bomb attack in an IS operation in Iraq in November 2013 that killed 46 people.¹⁰¹

Disconcerting for Canadian authorities is the diversity of locations from which Canadian foreign fighters have originated. In the 1990s, Canadians involved in terrorism abroad, or supporting terrorist or insurgent groups across the Middle East and Afghanistan were predominantly tied to the Montreal region and focused on conflicts in North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco), Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan. From the late 1990s and through the post-9/11 period, the hotbed of foreign fighter sourcing was found in the Greater Toronto Area with more diverse links into North Africa, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and recently Syria. However, this documented evolution in source locations of foreign fighter recruitment (i.e. from Montreal (pre-9/11) to the Greater Toronto Area (post-9/11)) has now apparently spread across Canada to Edmonton, Calgary and Winnipeg, as well as smaller metropolitan areas such as London, Timmins, Pembroke and Maskinongé.¹⁰²

The result is that Canadians are now well-known jihadi fighters in Syria. Although numbers vary, Government estimates and others who track jihadi fighters put the figure at a range of anywhere from a few dozen to as many as 100 Canadians fighting in Syria and Iraq at the current moment. Experts indicate this propensity of Canadians fighting abroad should cause alarm since the number of Americans fighting there, despite their country's disproportionately larger population compared to Canada, is much smaller. Therefore, it appears that Canadians are overrepresented as a foreign fighter element. "When you look at it in context, it is certainly disproportionate," confirmed John Amble, who researches regional militant Islamic groups.¹⁰³

So what? Should the nation be concerned if some of its people decide to venture overseas and fight for the cause of others? The issue becomes the "blow back" effect. If even one-in-nine foreign fighters decide to, or are ordered to, return to the West and continue the fight, the issue becomes one of national security. In April

2014, the IS released a video showing foreign fighters pledging allegiance to the cause of IS. With a background of loud “intense” music accompanied by masked, chanting, heavily armed fighters clad in black, the video depicted a number of foreign fighters apparently destroying their passports. Of interest, one fighter, believed to be a Canadian, is featured destroying his passport. He then addresses the camera and proclaims, “This is a message to Canada and all the American tyrants: We are coming and we will destroy you, with permission from Allah the almighty.” He then rips up his passport and throws it into a burning fire.¹⁰⁴ Now, having done that it may be difficult to return to their home countries to wage jihad without applying for new passports and explaining the loss of their original, however, the point is clear. For some, if not many of the foreign fighters, the inhibition to strike out against their “home” or other western countries, is non-existent. At the time of writing, the Government was aware of about 80 individuals who had returned to Canada after extremist travel abroad.¹⁰⁵

The Homegrown Nexus

Predictably, for Western governments, including the Canadian Government, foreign fighters represent a hidden threat, due to a concept that has often been labelled the “blow-back effect.” Simply put, once foreign fighters return home, or are ordered home by their respective organizations to continue the fight, they represent a cohort that is more experienced, more lethal and more dangerous and sophisticated than their domestic counterparts. They now represent a substantive menace, either as a group or as individuals acting in a “Lone Wolf” capacity. The danger they pose is not merely theoretical. As mentioned earlier, a research study revealed that between 1990 and 2010, one-in-nine returned foreign fighters were involved in domestic terrorist plots. The study concluded that “these plots tended to be more effective and lethal, thanks both to the skills learned and the indoctrinated zeal provided at radical training camps.”¹⁰⁶

Richard Fadden, a former director of CSIS, testified to a Senate Committee that the shift to the more difficult to detect “sole-actor” or “lone wolf” style attacks is a pressing problem for Western counter-terrorist agencies. He conceded that “this makes things very complicated for us [CSIS].” He elaborated that the lone wolf approach tends to attract individuals driven by ideology as well as serious personal problems, a combination that makes them more unpredictable.¹⁰⁷ He explained that the larger group activities or plots allowed security agencies more margin for success. After all, for the plotters to achieve their objective of launching an attack, they had a requirement to plan and communicate. This requirement provided scope and some possibility of intercepting communications. The fact that there were more players and more moving parts also meant that there was greater likelihood of someone making an error. However, when it is only a single conspirator, when there is only one person not talking to anyone, then as Fadden conceded, “you have to be really lucky.”¹⁰⁸

Similarly, former National Security Agency Director Lieutenant General Michael Hayden also underlined the concern about the “new” recruits extremist organizations were training and unleashing back on the Western countries. He described:

These Western recruits were reputed to speak multiple languages. They were technologically savvy. They understood Western culture and knew how to blend in. Some of the recruits were of Pakistani descent and were part of the huge diaspora that now lived in Britain. But others were Caucasian. Al Qaeda was bringing more and more people into the tribal region, people who wouldn’t draw undue attention if they were next to you at the passport line at Dulles Airport.¹⁰⁹

The problem was also succinctly described by Dennis Blair, a former director of national intelligence. He acknowledged:

We have a good capability to detect and disrupt these sorts of multipurpose [terrorist] teams that take months to plan, rehearse, fund, provide the logistics support for an attack. But we are not as capable as we should be of carrying out the much more difficult task of detecting these self-radicalized citizens of the United States, Europe, other countries like Nigeria, who are given a very simple mission – with an advanced bomb to carry it out – or who plan their own attacks, inspired by Al-Qaeda’s message but not directed by Al-Qaeda.¹¹⁰

In essence, “lone wolf” terrorism is the term coined to describe individuals who commit, or are prepared to commit, violent terrorist acts on their own, external to, although perhaps loosely affiliated with a recognized terrorist group, in support of a particular ideology or movement.¹¹¹ Not surprisingly, the difficulty of identifying these individuals, as discussed earlier, has made “lone wolf” terrorism an increasingly evolving trend in terror tactics. The lethal effects were clearly shown in 1995, when Timothy McVeigh killed over 150 people and injured in excess of 500 hundred more in his lone wolf attack on a Federal building in Oklahoma City, as well as in August 2011, when Anders Breivik murdered 77 individuals in a bombing and shooting spree in Norway. It is not surprising then that a 2009 United States Department of Homeland Security Assessment concluded that lone wolf terrorists “are the most dangerous domestic terrorism threat in the United States...because of their low profile and autonomy.”¹¹² According to University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) lone wolf terrorism expert Jeffery D. Simon:

What makes lone wolves so dangerous is their ability to think outside the box. Since they operate by themselves, there is no group pressure or decision-making process that might stifle creativity. Lone wolves are free to act upon any scenario they can dream up. This freedom has

resulted in some of the most imaginative terrorist attacks in history. For example, lone wolves were responsible for the first vehicle bombing (1920), major midair plane bombing (1955), hijacking (1961), and product tampering (1982), as well as the anthrax letter attacks in the United States (2001).¹¹³

The prospect of foreign fighters returning home or to other Western countries undetected using their Western passports and then carrying out lone wolf attacks has panicked many, including senior politicians. “This [foreign fighter/IS threat] is a turning point in the war on terror,” South Carolina Senator Lindsay Graham remarked on Fox News. He demanded the US President deploy thousands of ground troops to Iraq, “before we all get killed back here at home.” He was not alone. “They intend to kill us,” warned House Speaker John Boehner, “And if we don’t destroy them first, we’re going to pay the price.”¹¹⁴

Their concerns, although on the surface they appear a tad overdramatic, are not merely theoretical or philosophical. They are in fact very real as they have been borne out. Some recent examples make the point. For example, the 7 July 2005 (7/7) suicide bombings in London, England were homegrown attacks. Two of the four 7/7 bombers, all of whom were British Muslims, had trained in the FATA region of Pakistan and rather than fight in Afghanistan as they had originally intended, they were sent back to London by their AQ handlers to conduct a series of coordinated suicide attacks in central London that targeted the public transport system during the morning rush hour. They used organic peroxide-based explosive devices that were packed in rucksacks. Three of the bombs were detonated in London Underground subway trains. The fourth bomb was detonated on a double-decker bus in Tavistock Square. The four bombers killed themselves and 52 civilians, and in excess of 700 others were injured.

British authorities also thwarted a plot that was described as a “Mumbai-style” armed assault in late February 2014. In June of the same year French authorities arrested a French national who returned from Syria and conducted an attack in Belgium in May, which killed three people at a Jewish museum. French police also thwarted a nail bomb attack near Cannes. And in Kosovo, arrests in November 2013 apparently disrupted a terrorist cell planning the purchase of weapons for future operations.¹¹⁵

Australia has also felt the specter of foreign fighters and home-grown activities. David Irvine, the director general of Australia’s spy agency, revealed that 15 Australians fighting with militant groups were believed to have been killed in Iraq and Syria. He indicated that dozens of Australian foreign fighters have already returned home and he conceded that “a good number of these” remained a concern to the authorities. He also revealed that a 100 or more people in Australia were “actively supporting” militant groups by recruiting new fighters, grooming suicide-bombing candidates, and providing funds and equipment.¹¹⁶

Not surprisingly then, on 18 September 2014, Australian police carried out anti-terrorism raids in Sydney sparked by intelligence reports that Islamist extremists were planning random killings in Australia. The Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, announced that a senior Australian Islamic State militant had called for “demonstration killings,” reportedly including a public beheading. As a result, raids by approximately 800 heavily armed officers were conducted leading to 15 arrests. A 22-year-old Australian, Omarjan Azari, is currently accused of conspiring with Mohammad Ali Baryalei, who is believed to be the most senior Australian member of IS, as well as several others between May and September, to abduct members of the public and behead them on film. Authorities confirmed that “Direct exhortations were coming from an Australian who is apparently quite senior in

[IS] to networks of support back in Australia to conduct demonstration killings here in this country.” Prosecutor Michael Allnutt stated:

Mr. Azari had planned to commit “extremely serious” offences that involved “an usual level of fanaticism” and were “clearly designed to shock, horrify and terrify” the public. The plot involved the “random selection of persons to rather gruesomely execute”, and those involved had an “irrational determination” to carry it out even though they knew they were under surveillance.¹¹⁷

The United States has also been impacted by the peril of home-grown attacks. Since 9/11 there have been in excess of 40 terrorist plots in the US involving American citizens or permanent residents.¹¹⁸ Some examples prove the severity of the threat. Najibullah Zazi, a 24-year-old coffee cart vendor in Manhattan, who later became a shuttle bus driver at Denver international airport, flew to Peshawar in 2008 with two high school friends eager to join the fight in Afghanistan. While in Pakistan, three senior AQ leaders persuaded them that they could optimize their assistance to the jihadist cause by returning to New York and conducting a terrorist attack. As such, Zazi plotted to explode a suicide bomb in the New York subway system in a coordinated “Martyrdom” attack with two others in September 2009.¹¹⁹

In addition, on 5 November 2009, Major Nidal Hasan, a serving member in the US military went on a shooting spree killing 13 in Fort Hood. Also, Faisal Shahzad, a financial analyst at Elizabeth Arden, travelled to a Taliban training camp in the FATA where he learned to make bombs. As was the case with others, Taliban leaders requested Shahzad to return to the US to conduct a terrorist attack. As a result, he planted a car bomb in Times Square, New York, on 1 May 2010. Fortunately, the bomb failed to go off and

two alert street vendors noticed smoke coming from a car and upon investigation spotted the bomb and alerted the New York Police Department.¹²⁰

Some American homegrown attack examples, however, do not stem from foreign fighters but rather are the product of radicalized individuals who lashed out such as the case of the 19-year-old Somali-born US citizen who tried to detonate what he thought was a car bomb at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon on 26 November 2010. Ten thousand people had gathered for the ceremony and had the FBI not thwarted the plot, many would have been killed or injured. Also are the cases of: a Baltimore construction worker who plotted to blow up a military recruiting station in Maryland; a 34-year-old naturalized American born in Pakistan who was charged with plotting to bomb the Washington Metro; and finally the case of Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnayev, two brothers who lived in the Boston area for several years and used two homemade pressure cooker bombs, which they placed at the finishing line of the Boston marathon on 15 April 2013, killing three people and injuring more than 200. The subsequent manhunt paralyzed Boston and ended in a gunfight that killed Tamerlan and led to the capture of Dzhokhar.¹²¹

Canada has not been immune to the homegrown threat. In 2006, Canadian homegrown terrorists, who were labeled the “Toronto 18” by police, wanted to prod the Canadian government into rethinking its involvement in Afghanistan. They plotted to target the Toronto area with a view to destabilizing the economy through attacks on the Toronto Stock Exchange by way of three truck bombs set off over three consecutive days, which they hoped would paralyze Canadians with fear and keep them at home. They believed that the attacks would be bigger than the London 7/7 subway bombings. In addition, they also planned to attack CSIS Headquarters in Toronto and an unspecified military base off of

Highway 401 between Ottawa and Toronto. CSIS and law enforcement discovered the plot through an informant who assisted them in making the case. As such, police found plans and materials at the homes of the plotters. A test of the terrorist plans demonstrated “the blast effect from the bomb was equivalent to 768 kilograms of TNT, and would have caused catastrophic damage to a multi-story glass and steel frame building 35 metres from the bomb site, as well as killing or causing serious injuries to people in the path of the blast waves and force.”¹²² All members of the group were arrested prior to enacting the plan, however, only four were actually charged with the bomb plot itself as the others were not fully implicated in what the four were planning. As such, the other 14 were charged with a variety of terrorist charges. Although the plot was not activated, all was in place with the exception of the last component, the delivery of three tonnes of highly combustible ammonium nitrate fertilizer, which was unknowingly to the conspirators, being handled by a Muslim businessman turned informant who was working with CSIS and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).¹²³ Upon delivery of the explosive fertilizer the police swooped in and arrested the extremists. Fortunately the plan never came to fruition. The judge hearing the case concluded that the plot “would have resulted in the most horrific crime Canada has ever seen.”¹²⁴

More recently, in April 2013, “Project Smooth Arrests,” resulted in the apprehension of two Canadians who conspired to attack a VIA Rail passenger train travelling between New York and Toronto. Chiheb Esseghaier and Raed Jaser were arrested and charged. Months later, in July 2013, John Nuttall and Amanda Korody were charged with conspiring to use improvised explosives built using pressure cookers to bomb the British Columbia legislature Building during Canada Day festivities.¹²⁵

The homegrown threat is exacerbated by the insidious reach of social media and the internet. Organizations such as IS, which employ thousands of foreign fighters that can be unleashed on the West, also employ savvy cyber skills that allow them to penetrate countries from afar. Michel Juneau-Katsuya, a former Canadian intelligence officer who now heads an Ottawa cybersecurity company observed, “They [IS] have been capable (of recruiting) young people without speaking directly to them face to face.” He noted, “If they’ve been capable through the media – through the Internet – to reach them, I wouldn’t be surprised that they convince some of these people that instead of travelling to the Middle East, to stay here and simply attack us here.”¹²⁶

The threat has prompted Prime Minister Stephen Harper to assert with regard to “knife and gun” attacks in the US and Canada, “These threats are very, very real.”¹²⁷ In fact, RCMP Commissioner Bob Paulson affirmed, “We have 63 active national security investigations on 90 individuals who are related to the travelling group, people who intend to go [to countries such as Iraq and Syria] or people who have returned.”¹²⁸

In fact, the Prime Minister’s warning was only too real. On 20 October 2014, Martin Rouleau, a 25-year-old radicalized Muslim convert, ran over two military personnel with his car as they walked across a parking lot, killing Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent and seriously injuring another. The RCMP had identified Rouleau as a “high-risk” traveller; he was arrested at the airport in July as he was leaving for Turkey and his passport was seized. Then, on 22 October 2014, another radicalized Muslim convert, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, struck in the nation’s capital. He first shot to death Corporal Nathan Cirillo, who was standing guard at the National War Memorial. Subsequently, Zehaf-Bibeau left the scene and quickly moved to Parliament Hill where he entered the House of Commons, penetrating deep inside until he reached the party Caucus rooms, which were in session. However, before he could

do anymore damage, he was gunned down by Kevin Vickers, the sergeant-at-arms, and unidentified RCMP personnel. The attack put Ottawa on lock-down and prompted the Canadian Armed Forces to institute higher security measures since its members had become the target of radicalized individuals.

And so, the homegrown threat becomes even greater, whether through the medium of social media and the internet or with the possibility of foreign fighters returning with their new found skills, experience and potentially fanaticism turning to attacks in their homelands. Both represent an enhanced hidden threat that is not easily detected or necessarily thwarted.

Solving the Foreign fighter Issue

With the clear and present danger that foreign fighters, the organizations they support and the homegrown plots that they may inspire, support or initiate, represent, the over-riding question then becomes, how does one stop them? Predictably, the Canadian Government has taken numerous steps toward tackling the problem and its associated issues. For instance, the RCMP leads a High Risk Travel Case Management Group, which involves a number of other government departments (OGDs) and law enforcement agencies. The group examines cases of extremist travellers and works to find the best tailored response to the most pressing cases through a continuum of actions.

The Government also works with international organizations, such as the UN, NATO, G-7, the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum and Interpol, as well as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to counter terrorism. In addition, the Government has also taken action through the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada (FINTRAC), releasing more than 200 financial intelligence disclosures to authorities relating to terrorist financing.

Moreover, in 2012, then-Public Safety Minister Vic Towe unveiled Canada's first comprehensive counter-terrorism (CT) strategy, which includes response plans in the event of a major attack and strategies for de-radicalizing homegrown terrorists. Known as *Building Resistance Against Terrorism*, the strategy encompasses a four-step methodology that includes preventing, detecting, denying, and responding to possible threats.¹²⁹ As part of the Government's strategy they also implemented Bill S-7, the *Combating Terrorism Act*, which came into force in July 2013. This legislation created four new offences intended to prevent and deter persons from leaving Canada for certain terrorism-related purposes. Specifically, an individual commits an offence by leaving or attempting to leave Canada for the purpose of:

1. Knowingly participating in or contributing to any activity of a terrorist group for the purpose of enhancing the ability of any terrorist group to commit a terrorist activity. This categorization includes providing training, receiving training, or recruiting a person to receive training;
2. Knowingly facilitating a terrorist activity;
3. Committing an indictable offence on behalf of, at the direction of or in association with a terrorist group;
4. Committing an indictable offence that constitutes a terrorist activity.

The offences described in the first bullet carry a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment. The remaining offences carry a maximum penalty of 14 years.¹³⁰

Other foreign governments (e.g. Australia, UK, US) have similarly made it a criminal offence to leave the country to engage in terrorist activities or fight in foreign conflicts. In addition, the UN Security Council, at a meeting chaired by President Obama, unanimously

passed a resolution on 23 September 2014, specifically designed to plug the flow of foreign fighters to militant organizations such as IS. In fact, the Security Council voted 15 to 0 to compel countries to make it a crime for their citizens to travel abroad to fight with militants or recruit other people to do it.¹³¹

Although the efforts are laudable, there is one major problem. Experts point out that repression, criminalization and prosecution can be counterproductive as these measures increase the “victimization” narrative. The EU commission established the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which clearly cautioned:

Only repression ...will not solve the problem. Prevention, signalling and providing programs to help (potential) foreign fighters to leave the path of violent extremism are necessary as well. These actions are often organized on a local level. For instance, first line practitioners such as teachers and youth workers, can be trained to recognize and refer those who are being influenced to go on jihad. Also, families can be partners in both detecting potential fighters and convincing them to deploy their engagement in a non-violent way. Finally, exit-programs that have proven to be effective can be tailored to the target group, for instance by employing formers or practitioners as acceptable intermediaries or coaches.¹³²

The reality is that many of those who become foreign fighters and join extremist groups do so because they feel alienated or disassociated with their society and/or are looking for a meaning/cause to guide their existence. For many, Islam and the call to defend the “*umma*” filled that void. As the RAN notes, further sanctions and threats simply reinforce the narrative of Western victimization of Muslims. Unfortunately, to date the West offers no clear anti-jihadist message to the many who are drawn to the call to defend Islam. One study identified a wide range of motivations, including

“the horrific images of the conflict, stories about atrocities committed by Governmental forces, and the perceived lack of support from Western and Arab countries.” As one analyst noted, “Such motivations not only speak to fellow Muslims, but also to secular-minded people who wish to defend the ‘widow and the orphan.’” He concluded, “There is no effective message to deter them from joining the ranks of or falling prey to the most brutal and radicalized groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL) or Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).”¹³³

As such, cooperation between various intelligence and security agencies, as well as local law enforcement and community groups, will have to become closer. This relationship building entails also working with organizations and agencies that may have little to no experience dealing with security issues.¹³⁴ In essence, the foreign fighter phenomenon underscores the blurring of boundaries in contemporary national security issues. Moreover, in a borderless world, it has become evident that all forms of international issues have resonance and implications domestically. In the end, it would seem that there are very few challenges “over there” that do not have a nexus with “over here.” Therefore, authorities and agencies at every level, i.e. municipal, provincial and federal, both governmental and non-governmental, must be involved and work cooperatively. As Senior Research Analyst at the NATO Council of Canada, Alexander Corbeil, concluded:

The solutions to these issues are varied, but all include the input and collaboration between Canada’s Muslim community and their leaders, private industry and government institutions beyond the narrow law enforcement focuses of CSIS and the RCMP. Those at risk of joining these groups or being influenced to carry out plots at home must be convinced of their place in Canadian society and the error of those who have already gone to fight overseas. In short, a new narrative must be created

using a comprehensive approach, one which competes with the flashy propaganda machine of the IS and other terrorist groups.¹³⁵

As such, Professor Hegghammer argues part of any long-term policy to combat foreign fighter recruitment “must include strategies to undermine pan-Islamism, by spreading awareness of factual errors in the pan-Islamist victim narrative and by promoting state nationalisms and other local forms of identification.”¹³⁶ In addition, rather than attempt to suppress the appeal of other groups or causes, a concerted effort must be made to emphasize the importance and inclusion of national civil and military institutions. The concept is to generate greater identification with the state and the individual’s own society.

Conclusion

Foreign fighters and the organizations and causes they support represent a very real domestic and international threat. The ability of foreign fighters to travel, often relatively undetected due to their Western passports and cultural acuity, make them a potentially hidden menace. Trained, experienced and possibly more radicalized and/or traumatized by their experiences, they possess the potential to carry out terrorist attacks, either in groups or as a “lone wolf” attack at home or in other Western nations. Studies have shown that one-in-nine foreign fighters will participate in a terrorist assault at home or in a Western nation. Moreover, the same studies have shown that foreign fighters are more lethal, skilled and successful than their domestic counterparts.

In the end, concerted action must be taken to deter, detect, track, disrupt and stop those who would do us harm. Notably, intelligence operations, law enforcement and increased legislation are but one line of operation. Equal effort must be placed into preventing radicalization at home. In addition, effort must also

be placed into disrupting and destroying extremist organizations and their leadership which contribute to instability in the world. As President Obama explained, “Resolutions alone will not be enough. Promises on paper can’t keep us safe ...Lofty rhetoric and good intentions will not stop a single terrorist attack. The words spoken here today must be matched and translated into action. Into deeds.”¹³⁷

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NOTES

1 David S. Malet, "Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts," PhD Dissertation, George Washington University, 2009, 9.

2 Barak Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," *Orbis*, Spring 2011, 193. Mendelsohn clarifies that a distinction must be drawn between a foreign fighter in a local conflict that is not his own country's war and "a foreign trained fighter, a local who goes to another area, receives training only, and comes back to carry out attacks elsewhere, normally in his own country."

3 Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters. Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010/11), 57-58.

4 *Ibid.*, 57-58.

5 As most left to fight Jihad, which identifies the West as an enemy, they therefore return home and are potentially motivated to continue the struggle.

6 J. Skidmore, "Foreign Fighter Involvement in Syria," International Institute for Counterterrorism, 2014, 9; and Center for Security Studies (CSS), "Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Responses in Eleven Countries," CSS Study, Zurich, March 2014, 4.

7 David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions," *Orbis*, Winter 2010, 114. Dr. Malet noted, "It's no accident that most suicide missions in Afghanistan and Iraq were carried out by foreign fighters rather than local militants. Fighting for what is often an abstract ideal, without having to worry about direct retaliation against their families, the foreign fighters need not show mercy. Some insurgent groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, have taken advantage of this dynamic by using foreigners to target civilians when the local combatants will not. David

Malet, "In Depth: Foreign Fighters Playbook," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 April 2014. <<http://www.group3.com/News-Analysis/in-depth-foreign-fighters-playbook.html>>, accessed 28 July 2014.

8 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 53.

9 Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?" 97.

10 Skidmore, 33. The Islamic State (IS) is a Sunni Jihadist organization that was originally called the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) depending on which version of translation is used. The confusion revolves around the interpretation of the word "Levant," which in Arabic is *al-sham*, which can mean the Levant, Syria or even Damascus in some circumstances. The name was changed to IS in 2013.

11 Ben Winsor, "Where They Came From," *Business Insider*, 27 August 2014, <<http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-is-recruiting-westerners-countries-2014-8#ixzz3Bdt8hVYI>>, accessed 29 August 2014.

12 Cited in Michael P. Noonan, "Disrupting the Foreign Fighter Flow," Foreign Policy Research Institute <<http://www.fpri.org/articles/2009/10/disrupting-foreign-fighter-flow>>, accessed 28 July 2014.

13 Ibid.

14 "First Glut" of foreign fighters refers to the Mujahedeen that fought in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation 1979-1989. Many chose not to return to their homelands and many were barred from returning.

15 Cited in Noonan.

16 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 53.

17 Skidmore, 15. 7/7 refers to the suicide bombings by four British Islamic men on 7 July 2005. They conducted a series of coordinated suicide attacks in central London that targeted the public transport

system during the morning rush hour. The organic peroxide-based explosive devices were packed in rucksacks. Three of the bombs were detonated in London Underground subway trains. The fourth bomb was detonated on a double-decker bus in Tavistock Square. In total the four bombers and 52 civilians were killed, and over 700 were injured.

18 Center for Security Studies (CSS), “Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Responses in Eleven Countries,” CSS Study, Zurich, March 2014, 4. Her concerns were not without merit. Foreign fighters trained in Al-Qaeda training centres have “featured prominently in more than half of the major terrorist plots against the West between 2004 and 2011.” For example, two of 7/7 London Bombers had trained in the FATA region of Pakistan; the 2009 Christmas Day/Underwear Bomber, Farouk Abdulmuttalab, had received hands-on training in Yemen; the attackers who plotted against the Barcelona metro system in 2008 and Najibullah Zazi who planned to attack the New York subway system in 2009, all trained in Pakistan. Furthermore, former foreign fighters tend to be more sophisticated and more lethal than non-veterans. Pascale Siegel, “Why Should We Be Worried?” <<http://www.trackingterrorism.org/article/foreign-fighters-syria-why-we-should-be-worried/why-we-should-be-worried>>, accessed 28 July 2014.

19 Sharon L. Cardash, Frank J. Cilluffo and Jean-Luc Marret, “Foreign Fighters in Syria: Still Doing Battle, Still a Multidimensional Danger,” *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, note No. 24/13, August 2013, 2.

20 Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review*, February 2013, 10; and Alexander Corbeil, “Why Canada must address its foreign-fighter problem,” *The Globe and Mail*, 16 July 2014, <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/why-canada-must-address-its-foreign-fighter-problem/article19631289/>>, accessed 24 July 2014.

21 Quoted in Jez Littlewood, “Foreign Fighters: what to read to grasp the key issues,” <<http://npsia.wordpress.com/2014/07/03/foreign-fighters-what-to-read-to-grasp-the-key-issues/>>, accessed 28 July 2014.

22 Abdullah Hamidaddin, "From International Brigades to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," 31 January 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/01/31/From-International-Brigades-to-the-Islamic-State-of-Iraq-and-Syria.html>, accessed 28 July 2014. As always numbers vary. Dr. Malet puts the number of Foreign Fighters at 35,000-50,000 recruits, normally with no more than 18,000 in Spain at any given time. He also highlighted how Joseph Broz (Tito) used local trade union offices in Paris to set up an underground railroad and false passport distribution centre where recruits for the Communist supported International Brigade, fighting on behalf of the Republican Government, would be sent by organizers abroad before sending them to Spain. Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?" 102.

23 Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?" 103.

24 Ibid., 105.

25 The wide variance underscores the difficulty of identifying foreign fighter numbers as they are not easily tracked.

26 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 60.

27 Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?" 105. Malet explains that with defeat of the Soviets some countries simply refused to let the foreign fighters return and many became a stateless, vagrant mob of religious mercenaries.

28 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 53.

29 Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, "Fearing the Western Muslim Foreign Fighter. The connection between Fighting Defensive Jihad and Terrorist Activity in the West," MA Thesis, University of Utrecht, 2014, 59.

30 Ibid., 59.

31 Mendelsohn, 196.

32 Dr. Malet observed, "Among the 331 civil conflicts occurring between 1815 and 2005, at least 67 of them featured the presence of foreign fighters." Noonan.

- 33 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 60.
- 34 CNN Live, 12 September 2014.
- 35 David Malet, "In Depth: Foreign Fighters Playbook," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 April 2014. <<http://www.grouph3.com/News-Analysis/in-depth-foreign-fighters-playbook.html>>, accessed 28 July 2014.
- 36 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 63.
- 37 One definition of viral is five million views, in a 3 to 7 day period. However, the reality is often much greater. The Kony 2012 video by Invisible Children, Inc, had over 34,000,000 views on the first day it was uploaded on the internet on 5 March 2012. In another example of the pervasive impact of the internet, the Gangnam Style video, as of June 2014, has been watched over two billion times on YouTube.
- 38 Michael S. Schmidt, "Canadian Killed in Syria Lives On as Pitchman for Jihadis," *New York Times*, 15 July 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/16/world/middleeast/isis-uses-andre-poulin-a-canadian-convert-to-islam-in-recruitment-video.html?_r=0>, accessed 28 July 2014. One group of scholars believe, "In the minds of the foreign fighter, social media is no longer virtual: it has become an essential facet of what happens on the ground." Joseph A. Carter and Peter R. Neumann, *Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks*, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, 2014, 1.
- 39 Corbeil; and Colin Freeze, "Canadian killed in Syria shown in new propaganda video," *The Globe and Mail*, 11 July 2014, <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/canadian-killed-in-syria-shown-in-new-propaganda-video/article19578172/>>, accessed 24 July 2014.
- 40 Corbeil; and Freeze.
- 41 Carter and Neumann, *Greenbirds*, 7.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 18.

43 Skidmore, 8. For example, an American foreign fighter who drove a truck packed with explosives into a government building in Syria in May 2014, had just returned to the Middle East after several months in his Florida hometown, where US officials say he tried to recruit some of his friends for Syria's violent revolution. Cynthia McFadden, Pete Williams and Robert Windrem, "Suicide Bomber From Florida Tried to Recruit Hometown Friends," NBCNews.com, <<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/suicide-bomber-florida-tried-recruit-hometown-friends-n169881>>, accessed 26 August 2014.

44 Mendelsohn, 198.

45 Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" 2.

46 Skidmore, 14.

47 Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?" 101. Malet points out that ironically, historically, it is the same process as used by communist and Zionist recruiters decades prior.

48 Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 90. See also Kevin E. Klein, *From Assassins to Al-Qaeda: Understanding and Responding to Religious Terrorism* (Kingston: CANSOFCOM PDC, 2013).

49 See Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 73; and Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?" 100.

50 Dr. Malet explains, "Recruitment occurs when local insurgents, who always begin conflicts as the weaker faction because they do not control the instruments of the state, attempt to broaden the scope of conflict so as to increase their resources and maximize chances for victory. However, due precisely to a lack of resources typically they must motivate outsiders to join them for reasons other than material gain. Recruiters, therefore, frame victory in the conflict as necessary to the interests of outsiders with whom they share connections and who might be credibly convinced by these claims. Ironically, as US forces engaged with transnational insurgents in Iraq to 'fight them over there

so we don't have to fight them at home,' their opponents offered precisely the same argument." Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?" 100.

51 Former FBI agent Clint Watts asserts that the foreign fighter pipeline has three phases: (1) source country/flashpoint, (2) safe havens and the transit network, and (3) target locations. Others suggest that a fourth phase, outflow destinations, is important as well.

52 Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?" 112. Dr. Malet observed that the recruiters, "offer appeals to defend transnational communities because they believe that they can make obligations to these groups more salient to the recruits than their duties as citizens, which in most countries includes a proscription against foreign military service." He further argued, "If insurgencies recruit FF by persuading them that they face a potentially existential threat as a member of a particular group then threatening them still further with punitive measures or force is unlikely to deter them because it would support the frame of the threat and might make high risk, high cost behaviour seem even more necessary to forestall greater losses. Better method enhanced law enforcement efforts in disrupting recruitment and mobilization process."

53 Malet, "In Depth: Foreign Fighters Playbook."

54 Cited in Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, *Counter Strike. The Untold Story of America's Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda* (New York: Times Book, 2011), 213. See also Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win. The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2006), 16-24. In Pape's specific study of suicide terrorism, he concluded, "Few suicide attackers are social misfits, criminally insane, or professional losers. Most fit a nearly opposite profile: typically they are psychologically normal, have better than average economic prospects for their communities, and are deeply integrated into social networks and emotionally attached to their national communities."

55 Skidmore, 18.

56 See Richard Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," *The Soufan Group*, June 2014, 16; and Skidmore, 18. A majority of fighters list their

profession as student, arguably making the case for universities having become a critical recruiting field for extremist organizations. Barrett, 28.

57 Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?" 109.

58 The term "Arab Spring" was coined from the Prague Spring, which was a short period of political liberalization and reform in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War, when the country was under Soviet domination. The brief era of reform began on 5 January 1968, and ended on 21 August 1968, when Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops invaded and halted the reforms. The Arab Spring began on 17 December 2010, when Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian vegetable seller set himself ablaze in the town of Sidi Bouzid, in Tunisia. His cart was confiscated by a policewoman, who also slapped him and spat in his face. The indignity and injustice apparently was too much for him to bear and Bouazizi burnt himself to death in an act of self-immolation in protest. The incident quickly fueled long-simmering frustrations over poverty and the gulf between, if not the greed of, the political elite and the general population, which subsequently spilled over into protests, which were, not surprisingly, brutally quashed by state security forces. However, the iron hand of the government was not enough to quell the unrest. And so, with Bouazizi's death, the Arab Spring was born. Protests also erupted in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Syria and Yemen. In Tunisia, by 14 January 2011, the situation was so untenable that the President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, fled the country. He was not the only despot to fall. Approximately a month later, on 11 February 2011, Egypt's President, Hosni Mubarak, was also forced to succumb to the pressure of the popular protests in his country and after a brutal attempt to put down the uprising was forced from office after nearly 30 years in power.

59 See Canada, *2014 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada* (Ottawa: Public Safety Canada, 2014), 17; and CBC New, "Syria's civil war: key facts, important players," 3 April 2014, <<http://www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/syria-dashboard/>>, accessed 22 September 2014.

60 Schmitt and Shanker, 54.

61 Barrett, 10.

62 See Barret, 10; Skidmore, 5; and Carter and Neumann, *Greenbirds*, 8. One report broke down the “country of origin” for foreign fighters based on their sample. Australians, Canadians and Americans together accounted for 5.3 per cent, while fighters from the United Kingdom (United Kingdom: 17.9 per cent) made up the highest number of foreign fighters, with France at 11.6 per cent, Germany at 11.1 per cent, Sweden at 10 per cent; and Belgium at 8.9 per cent. CTV News Staff, 18 April 2014, <<http://www.ctvnews.ca/sci-tech/canadian-funded-study-explores-how-foreign-fighters-in-syria-use-social-media-1.1782481>>, accessed 24 July 2014.

63 CNN Live, 12 September 2014.

64 Barrett, 10.

65 The confusion revolves around the interpretation of the word “Levant,” which in Arabic is *al-sham*, which can mean the Levant, Syria or even Damascus in some circumstances.

66 Baghdadi’s real name is Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri al-Samarri.

67 AQ had learned from its Iraq experience. The use of excessive violence by the AQI under its founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, specifically the assaults on mosques, suicide bombing causing mass casualties and the assassination of tribal leaders led to the “Awakening” and the creation of the “Sons of Iraq” who worked with the Americans to rid the region of AQI.

68 Iraqi officials state that ISIS has accumulated a war chest of approximately \$2 billion dollars. Dr. Paul De B Taillon, “Shock and Awe: The Rise of the Islamic State & Implications for the Middle East,” Briefing Note 50, Mackenzie Institute, 3. See also Michael Stephens, “Islamic State: Where does jihadist group get its support?” 1 September 2014, *BBC News*, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29004253>>, accessed 5 September 2014; Andre Mayer, “Iraqi jihadist group reportedly

advancing on Baghdad,” CBC News, 13 June 2014, <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iraqi-attacks-isis-victories-the-beginning-of-an-earthquake-1.2673307>>, accessed 2 September 2014; and Mark Gollom, “ISIS by the numbers: How big, strong and rich the militant organization may be,” CBC News, 26 August 2014, <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/isis-by-the-numbers-how-big-strong-and-rich-the-militant-organization-may-be-1.2746332>>, accessed 2 September 2014.

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70 Michael Knights, “ISIL’s Political-Military Power in Iraq,” Combating Terrorism Center, 27 August 2014, <<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/isils-political-military-power-in-iraq>>, accessed 6 September 2014. The operational success of IS is due to a very deliberate, focused and complex political/military campaign that carefully strengthened and shaped the operating environment. The wholesale destruction of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in June 2014 was the result of IS’s preparatory operations. As Dr. Knights noted in his analysis that IS began:

targeting pro-government Arabs in a powerful multi-year campaign of assassinations that culminated in al-Baghdadi’s ‘Soldiers Harvest’ campaign against on-duty and off-duty security force members from July 29, 2013, to June 2014. In addition to demolitions of soldiers’ homes, the first six months of “Soldiers Harvest” witnessed a sharp 150% increase in the number of sophisticated close quarters assassinations of troops manning checkpoints and effective under-vehicle improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on key leaders.

Although the campaign was executed across Iraq, it was particularly focused on Mosul and Ninawa Province, including escalating efforts to cut off Mosul’s highway communications with Baghdad. By June 2014, according to McGurk, “by day [Mosul] would appear normal, but at night, ISIL controlled the streets.” When ISIL’s offensive began in Mosul on June 6, 2014, the ISF were brittle and comparatively easy to crumble during three days of escalating skirmishes within the city.

Alongside weakening the opposition, al-Baghdadi also used the years preceding this summer's successes to build the current ISIL force. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the Syrian civil war provided ISIL secure bases and a reinvigorated pipeline of suicide bombers. As analysts have noted, ISIL has developed a highly-motivated cadre of quality light infantry forces since 2012, drawing on the combat experiences of urban and mobile warfare in Syria, as well as from the prior combat experiences of foreign jihadists who served in the Balkans and Chechnya. These lessons have been institutionalized and refined in training camps in Syria and, since the first half of 2013, also in Iraq.

Trained fighters were increasingly shifted from Syria to Iraq from "early 2013" according to McGurk, and new camps were set up on the Iraqi side of the border complete with local anti-aircraft defenses that proved effective at deterring attacks from unarmored Iraqi helicopters. ISIL attacked Mosul on June 6, 2014, with the main strike force deployed from Syria in a motorized infantry column that included "hundreds" of armed utility vehicles. In all these cases, ISIL reinforcements from Syria joined up with local cells within Iraqi provinces that had already kept up a drumbeat of operations year after year... During the "Breaking the Walls" campaign (July 2012-July 2013), the then-ISI demonstrated and repeatedly exercised its re-centralized command and control system in 20 multi-city synchronized car bombing waves, a sequence of attacks that continued until the end of 2013... Surprise, mobility and shock are the principal characteristics of ISIL offensive operations in Iraq. The group often achieves tactical surprise, whether against the federal ISF or Kurdish forces. This is attained through rapid approach marches that utilize Iraq's dense, high-quality road network and often culminate in night or dawn attacks. The relative compactness of Iraq, where good roads allow large swathes of the country to be traversed in a single day, gives an aggressive force strong ability to concentrate forces at a given point of attack. Mobility and deception allow ISIL forces to achieve local superiority in numbers despite their smaller strength in comparison to state armed forces, with aggressive platoon-sized or company-sized raiding columns defeating and dislodging successive ISF or Kurdish positions. Probes and feints appear to be common elements in ISIL offensives,

often apparently intended to test opposition, bypass solid defenses, and draw away enemy forces from the main target. ISIL columns have the mobility to rapidly exploit any thinning of enemy forces, as occurred recently when ISIL struck Jalula on August 10, 2014, a town that Kurdish special forces had previously left to meet an ISIL thrust elsewhere at Makhmour. Lacking intelligence analysis skills, wide area surveillance capabilities, or local night vision aids, federal ISF and Kurdish forces are generally not aware of massing ISIL forces until it is too late. Ibid.

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In the first phase, called “Preradicalization,” the study notes that most homegrown terrorists have normal jobs and lead ordinary lives. The second phase, “self-identification,” occurs when individuals are influenced by external or internal events and begin to explore the jihadist stream of Islam on their own, often using the internet. The third phase, “indoctrination,” transpires when an individual completely subscribes to the extremist ideology and is willing to commit violence to support the cause. The study noted that this stage is often facilitated by someone with religious influence, such as an imam or other respected figure with religious credibility, who sanction violence as religious duty. Finally, “jihadization” is attained when individuals accept it as their duty to commit violence in the name of Islam and plot to execute a terrorist act. *Ibid.*, 213.

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112 U.S. Government. “Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment,” Office of Intelligence and Analysis, IA-0257-09 (Washington: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, April 2009), 7. The autonomy of lone wolves is a key threat point. Individuals such as Theodore Kaczynski, more widely known as the “Unabomber,” remained undetected for 17 years because he was able to work in isolation and take the necessary time he felt he needed.

113 “What Makes Lone-Wolf Terrorists so Dangerous?” Jeffery D. Simon, UCLA Newsroom, 18 April 2013, <<http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/what-makes-lone-wolfe-terrorists-245316>>, accessed 3 October 2014.

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118 Schmitt and Shanker, 112.

119 Cited in *ibid.*, 217. On his way to the target he became spooked by surveillance by US agents and he was warned by an Imam that Federal authorities had been asking question about him. As a result, Zazi dumped his explosives and flew back home to Colorado. He was arrested several days later with the other plotters.

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