

Why Foreign Fighters?

Historical Perspectives and Solutions

by David Malet

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Abstract: Insurgencies that recruit foreign nationals to join rebel groups in various civil wars around the globe are a source of growing concern to policymakers. Despite attention focused on recent Islamist groups, foreign fighters are a phenomenon that is neither new nor uniquely Islamic. In conflicts from the Spanish Civil War to the Afghanistan War, insurgencies consistently recruited foreigners by framing the local war as one that threatened a shared transnational identity group and necessitated a defensive mobilization. It is therefore possible to draw lessons about combating their flow through counter-recruitment from a wide array of historical cases.

Foreign fighters pose a challenge to counterinsurgency and peacekeeping efforts in a growing number of civil conflicts. The quantity of insurgent groups that have mobilized transnationally has been increasing in recent decades, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the total insurgencies being waged. 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.¹ However, what appears to be part of a new phenomenon tied to the growth of militant Islamists is, in fact, nothing new or peculiar to current circumstances. A wealth of available information from past cases suggests how the problem can be managed successfully.

While a good number of studies address how non-state armed groups are successful in recruiting combatants at the sub-national level in civil conflicts, researchers have largely overlooked transnational recruitment. A number of recent works have attempted to analyze the origins and motives of

¹ See David Malet, *The Foreign Fighter Project* (2007), available at <http://www.foreignfighter.com>; and David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (2009), available at http://www.proquest.com/products_umi/dissertations.

foreign fighters in the Iraq War,² but no one has conducted cross-case studies to determine whether the current recruitment mechanisms of transnational insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan are unique to those specific conflicts or are comparable to those for foreign fighters in other civil wars. This question is particularly pertinent as the international presence in Iraq winds down and security concerns turn to other areas of intrastate conflict that also feature foreign fighters, such as Yemen and Somalia.

Given the recent international attention to fundamentalist Islamist foreign fighters in these conflict states, it might initially seem easy to imagine what messages recruiters use, and who, how and where they target their appeals. The reality, however, is far more complicated. Consider Ahmed Elomar, the undefeated Australian Super Featherweight boxing champion who, in June 2007, was among several men of diverse nationalities arrested in Lebanon for ties to the Fatah al-Islam militant group. Elomar, whose uncle was one of several Lebanese-Australians arrested in 2005 for plotting an Islamist terror attack in Sydney, had departed two months earlier without informing his friends of his whereabouts. His trainer told reporters that Elomar was “a great bloke” and “he could have been at the wrong place at the wrong time, that is what I am desperately hoping.”³

How did Fatah al-Islam involve an Australian sports celebrity in the civil conflict in Lebanon? Although the group’s leadership might not acknowledge it, they likely employed the same strategy that a group called Haganah used in the late 1940s to recruit a Sephardic Jew of Iraqi descent who grew up in London’s Whitechapel slums. The young man’s father had abandoned him at an early age, and his mother had arranged for him to cover expenses by finding employment as a hairdresser. She also imparted her identification with anti-Fascist and Zionist political movements to the degree that “the passion that I felt about these issues” led him in 1948 to Palestine to fight for the creation of a Jewish state. After the establishment of Israel, Vidal Sassoon returned to London to resume his career, later using his financial success to found the International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.⁴

² See Alan B. Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Root of Terror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Institute of Peace, 2007); Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al Qaida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007). Cerwin Moore and Paul Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31.5 (2008), pp. 412-433 examine the fielding of foreign fighters in Chechnya.

³ Jamie Pandaram and Ed O’Laughlin, “Boxer among Australians Held,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 27, 2007. Although his father told the press that Elomar had been “brainwashed” by a radical cleric, he was released the following month for lack of evidence. In October 2009, his uncle and four co-defendants were convicted of plotting the largest terrorist attack in Australian history.

⁴ John Rennie, *London History: 100 Faces of the East End* (2006). United Kingdom, Lulu.com. Available at <http://www.eastlondonhistory.com/sassoon.htm>.

The same type of recruitment messaging had been used a decade earlier by the Communist International to recruit the son of a wealthy Paris stockbroker in yet another civil war, and he soon used the same method to become a recruiter himself. Despite a reported affliction with Tourette's Syndrome and a conviction for antiquities theft, André Malraux was a noted author when he organized a successful recruitment drive at the Paris Palais du Sport for 100 pilots to join him in flying combat missions for the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War.⁵ Despite being wounded twice in combat and having violated French neutrality laws, he returned to France to pen a popular novel about the war and later serve in both the French military and underground resistance movement.⁶

Malraux recruited transnational insurgents using the same strategy as a U.S. politician who had risen from a rural Huguenot family to be elected to multiple terms in Congress beginning in the 1820s. Despite the national success of his lecture circuit tour, he told voters during his final campaign that, if he lost, "You may all go to Hell, and I will go to Texas." He fulfilled this threat in January, 1836 leading a score of followers into the ranks of separatists in Mexico. Within two months Davy Crockett would be killed at the Alamo but, the following year, the town of Crockett was incorporated in the newly independent Republic of Texas, which would exist as a sovereign state for nearly a decade.⁷

The Communist nephew of Winston Churchill; the baron whose poetry had made him a leading figure in the Romantic movement; the decorated World War II veteran of the Queen's Own Rifles and heir to a chain of Canadian clothing stores; the scion of a Saudi construction and equity group who would become the icon for generations of insurgents. Each of these individuals, and tens of thousands of other foreigners fighting in modern civil wars were, if not in direct violation of the laws of their own country and the international community, at least acting against commonly accepted norms of military service under which individuals are presumed to owe allegiance to their own country and to fight on its behalf.

Foreign Fighter Recruitment Messaging

Records from across widely different historical cases indicate that insurgencies try to recruit foreign fighters by framing distant civil conflicts as threatening a transnational identity group with which the recruit is closely

⁵ John Carver Edwards, *Airmen without Portfolios: U.S. Mercenaries in Civil War Spain*, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Books, 1997).

⁶ Petri Liukkonen, *The Author's Calendar* (Finland: Kuusankosken kaupunginkirjasto, 2007). Available at <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/malraux.htm>.

⁷ Claude Elliot, "Georgia and the Texas Revolution," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* XXVIII (Dec. 1944), pp. 233-48.

affiliated. The nature of the relationship between the insurgents—shared ethnicity or some other tie such as religion—is irrelevant to the logic of transnational recruitment, in which recruiters consistently frame distant conflicts as threats. Recruitment messaging emphasizes the necessity of defensive action to preserve the existence of the community rather than the opportunities for individual gains. 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 U.S. 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.⁸

Recruitment efforts therefore typically follow this model:

- 1) Insurgencies, initially the weaker factions in civil conflicts, attempt to strengthen their forces by obtaining outside support, including manpower and specialists.
- 2) They target outside groups expected to identify with their cause because of some relation to the insurgents. Sometimes they have success obtaining aid from foreign governments; in other instances they find assistance from non-state groups who share ties of ethnicity, religion, or ideology.
- 3) Among these transnational groups, the most receptive audiences are individuals who are highly active in the institutions of that community and identify with it closely, but tend to be marginalized within their own polity as part of a minority group. These social bonds, therefore, provide both the means and rationale for participation.
- 4) Recruiters tell potential recruits that their common group is under existential threat and that their participation is necessary for their survival.

Data from across historical cases indicates that recruitment occurs via the social networks of the transnational communities, and potential recruits are generally closely connected to these identity subgroups rather than to their wider national society. Legal restrictions against recruitment historically have forced insurgent groups to target selectively rather than advertise to mass

⁸My gratitude to Bob Stoker for succinctly expressing this parallel when I described this project to him.

audiences. The use of social group networks for recruitment also permits recruiters to employ social pressures to join.

In some instances, an obvious tie of ethnicity or other immediate connection between domestic and foreign insurgents exists. In others, recruiters manipulate identities to make them salient, strategically using messaging to activate a sense of appropriate obligation or duty to the common group. When possible, recruiting organizations engage in displacement, broadening the definition of the involved group to a wider pool of potential recruits, thereby enlarging the scope of conflict.⁹ Indeed, recruiters engage in operations similar to Madison Avenue advertising executives: Identifying a target audience, creating emotive responses over matters that may have previously seemed of little import, and re-framing the message when initial approaches do not meet goals.

An example of this strategy was evident in Morocco, where Islamist groups recruiting foreign fighters maintained “watchers” at radical mosques and other places where people express anger about Iraq and Palestinians (rather than, notably, Moroccan affairs). The watchers discussed social justice and the duty to intervene on behalf of fellow Muslims with likely prospects, and then subjected them to background security 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 center abroad prior to entering the conflict.¹⁰ In a bit of irony that would probably be lost on the watchers, this procedure is nearly identical to the practices of Communist and Zionist recruiters decades before them.

Lessons of History

This defensive messaging has been a constant across highly disparate cases throughout modern international history. During the Greek War of Independence of the 1820s, Lord Byron and other Britons led a transnational effort to funnel arms and reinforcements to local insurgents based on appeals to liberate the suffering descendants of Classical Greece from Ottoman oppression. A decade later, in the midst of civil war in Mexico, Mexican Freemasons and Gulf business interests funded public recruitment drives in the United States with the stated intention of rolling back creeping military dictatorship in North America. Subsequent recruiting efforts by Texan colonists focused on the need to protect white women against the advances of the Mexican Army. Diaspora Jews were recruited to Palestine with the understanding that if they were unsuccessful in establishing the State of Israel, survivors of the Holocaust would perish and other

⁹ E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (Hinsdale, Ill.: Dryden Press, 1960).

¹⁰ Craig Whitlock, “Terrorist Networks Lure Young Moroccans to War in Far-Off Iraq” *Washington Post*, Feb. 20, 2007.

Jews would be unsafe in their own countries in the future. The Pan-Arab irregular volunteer force raised to counter them was under orders to “preserve the Arabism of Palestine” or risk destabilizing the Islamic world.¹¹

The Spanish Civil War

The 1936 Spanish fascist-supported military coup d'état led by General Francisco Franco against the unwieldy working class socialist-led parliamentary coalition of republicans, communists and anarchists presented an opportunity for both sides to issue appeals for defensive mobilization to broad transnational constituencies. Despite international non-intervention agreements and embargoes, Germany, Italy, and Portugal continued openly to aid the fascist Nationalist faction. And while Stalin was reluctant to engage Soviet forces or even support the Republicans overtly, public pressure from within the Comintern led to the decision to recruit sympathizers as a counter-force. Moscow gave local communist party branches abroad recruitment quotas, and instructed them to focus on trade unions and “democratic organizations.”¹² Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian who headed the Comintern at the time, told a U.S. correspondent in Moscow that the hope was to recruit Jewish nationalists, socialists and liberals under an anti-fascist umbrella.¹³

The International Brigades (IB), a term initially used during the Russian Civil War to describe Communist volunteers from abroad, was headquartered in Paris, where Joseph Broz (Tito) used local trade union offices to set up an underground railroad and false passport distribution center where recruits would be sent by organizers abroad before crossing the Pyrenees into Spain. After the outset of the conflict, the quotas provided to party branches were usually higher than could be met. Volunteers who were not party members were subjected to examinations by the Soviet secret police, *Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del* (NKVD), the forerunner of the KGB, and a doctor. During the course of the conflict, the IB produced an estimated 35,000-50,000 recruits, although probably no more than 18,000 were in Spain at any time.¹⁴

The economic upheavals of the 1930s had made class politics salient in the United States and produced a polarized subculture of radicals. The refusal of corporations to permit workers to organize labor unions, and the resultant clashes with private security and National Guard forces led many in the labor-worker movement to accept that violence would be necessary to achieve political change. Many citizens of the United States who joined the

¹¹ Haim Levenberg, Haim, *Military Preparations of the Arab Community of Palestine, 1945-1948* (Portland, Or.: Frank Cass, 1993), pp. 41, 43.

¹² Verle B. Johnston, *Legions of Babel: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1967), p. 37.

¹³ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus Books, 1969), p. 88.

¹⁴ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), pp. 439-41.

Communist Party during this period had neither a solid understanding of Marxist theory nor the desire to establish a fully communist state, but were interested in obtaining social justice for the poor and minorities. Meanwhile, fascist groups were already springing up in the United States. Intellectuals, liberals and minorities—and these categories overlapped considerably – had every reason to believe that they would be next if fascism continued to gain momentum. Radicals joined social justice and communist-affiliated groups that reinforced their ideological development, and made contacts that would ultimately serve as the recruitment chain for the pro-Republican Abraham Lincoln Brigade (ALB) during the Spanish Civil War.¹⁵

As Rosenstone put it, “joining the Communist Party did not produce the motivation to go; rather both actions were reflective of the same impulse.” Recruitment efforts therefore did not need to rely heavily upon indoctrination because those who had contact with Comintern-affiliated recruiters were already sympathetic to the aims of the organization. This resulted in so many initial volunteers in autumn 1936 that the U.S. organizing committee quickly shifted its focus from finding recruits to screening out political undesirables, with the goal of “excluding mere adventurers who lacked a political understanding of the anti-fascist struggle.”¹⁶ Much of the recruitment propaganda plays explicitly on the theme of sacrifice, and even *The Daily Worker*, distributed as the newspaper to volunteers as well as abroad, reported earnestly on casualties with pieces on how happy foreigners were to “die smiling” for the Republic.¹⁷

Contemporary letters from IB members and later recollections published in a variety of IB histories reveal that the recruiters were successful in communicating this frame. Radicalized by the Depression, Texas farmer Bob Reed “realized there was an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ in America, as well as everywhere else. So when I heard . . . that the ‘them’ and ‘us’ were at it with guns in Spain, in what I thought would be the beginning of the final showdown, I decided to go.”¹⁸ For some, the conflict was more personalized. Eugene Wolman wrote of his inability to retaliate against oppressive forces at home in the United States, including being struck by policemen. But, in Spain, “here finally the oppressed of the earth are united, here finally we have weapons, here finally we can fight back.”¹⁹

Don McLeod, echoing the sentiments of the pamphlet equating Spanish land reform to conditions faced by U.S. dustbowl farmers, explained

¹⁵ Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, pp. 50-55, 61, 68-73.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 119.

¹⁷ Harry Fisher, *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 166.

¹⁸ John Gerassi, *The Premature Anti-Fascists* (New York: Praeger Books, 1986), p. 42.

¹⁹ Quoted in Peter N. Carroll, Michael Nash, and Melvin Small, eds. (2006) *The Good Fight Continues: World War II Letters from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 17.

that “in the Depression, we poor people began to identify with other poor people in other parts of the world.”²⁰ Harry Fisher agreed that “in many ways we viewed the Spanish struggle as an extension of our fight against reaction at home . . . We were trade unionists.”²¹ Hy Katz neglected nationality altogether in his formulation of interest, explaining in a letter from Spain: “I took up arms against the persecutors of my people – the Jews – and my class – the Oppressed.”²² And Carl Geiser stated “I just felt it was my duty as an anti-fascist to go.”²³

ALB Veteran Harry Fisher recalled his induction:

[They took us] to a place on 2nd Avenue, where a group of doctors examined us and other people questioned us to see if we were really anti-Fascist. The committee was very somber and serious. They wanted us to know what we were getting ourselves into. One of them said something like “You know, comrades, this is not just another picket line. This is a matter of life and death.” . . . But I could not forget those newsreels of the Nazi storm troopers stomping and spitting on those poor helpless people. I also knew it could happen here. My anger was so strong, I knew I had to go. Fascism simply had to be stopped.²⁴

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Nationalists also managed to attract approximately 1,000-1,500 foreigners into the Spanish foreign legion and Carlist militias. As with other instances of successful transnational recruitment – and despite the fact that the Nationalists were on the offensive throughout most of the war – Franco still portrayed his rebellion as a defensive cause, using the same frame of obligation to protect a transnational identity under threat as did the Comintern.

Just as Abraham Lincoln Brigade recruits understood that Franco must be stopped because oceans would not halt Fascism, so too Irish Brigade recruits were implored in newspaper advertisements to defend the Catholic Church before International Communism could obliterate it. Most of these volunteers were from rural communities “where the Church was the main institution and religious affairs provided the glue of social existence.”²⁵ They heard priests speak of “vile outrages against nuns and made them see that intervention in Spain was a matter of putting down these outrages . . . these people had been whipped up to believe that an attack on churches and priests was imminent in Dublin city.”²⁶ En route to Spain, Irish volunteers stopped in

²⁰ Gerassi, *Premature Anti-Fascists*, p. 47.

²¹ Fisher, *Comrades*, p. 2.

²² Quoted in Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 31.

²³ Quoted in Gerassi, *Premature Anti-Fascists*, p. 49.

²⁴ Quoted in Fisher, *Comrades*, p. 16.

²⁵ Judith Keene, *Fighting for Franco: International Volunteers in Nationalist Spain During the Spanish Civil War* (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), pp. 106, 116-122.

²⁶ Peadar O'Donnell, *Salud: An Irishman in Spain* (London, England: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1937), Southworth Collection, pp., 245, 255.

Lisbon to hear sermons and visit local convents, where they heard themselves described as defenders of the faith.²⁷

Student fascist leaders in the ultra-nationalist Romanian “Iron Guards” went to Spain for the Church as well. Officials of the conservative regime told student leaders that they must join “a worldwide crusade to defend Christ against Satan and his Judeo-Masonic henchmen.”²⁸ A Spanish propaganda pamphlet presented biographies of two Romanian volunteers, with one testifying “Is it not a great spiritual benefit for the afterlife to fall in the defense of Christ? . . . We defend the power that is the source of our nation!”²⁹

The Afghanistan War

Defending religion against Communism was the principle argument a half century later in what became another civil war between secular modernizers and traditionalists. This time, the Soviet Union intervened directly to help a faltering client state and led transnational entrepreneurs to launch a recruiting effort that outlasted the conflict itself.

Probably the individual most responsible was Abdullah Azzam, a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence born in West Bank Transjordan in 1941 and recruited in the mid-1950s by a teacher to join the local branch of the Muslim Brothers. Although he served with the Jordanian fedayin irregulars during the Six Day War, Azzam grew disillusioned with the secular Palestine Liberation Organization and launched a career in academia, where he gave influential and widely distributed lectures outlining his philosophy of the need to retake control of Muslim lands. After the Soviet invasion, he relocated to Peshawar, capital of Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province on the Afghan border, to teach at its university and work in support of the mujahidin.³⁰

As the Afghan conflict escalated, Azzam grew frustrated that by 1984 only “ten or twenty men” had come from the outside to fight, and he called upon the Brothers to send mujahidin. When the leadership demurred, preferring to send weapons and humanitarian aid, Azzam publicly broke with the group. Although he would use his connections to Brothers to deliver recruitment sermons, he set out to attract his own volunteer force dedicated to his territorial view of Islam and the need to repel infidels from its historic lands.³¹ Thus, while some Arab states encouraged volunteers and paid for

²⁷ Robert Stradling, *History and Legend: Writing the International Brigade* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 10.

²⁸ Keene, *Fighting for Franco*, pp., 140, 215, 231.

²⁹ Los Legionarios Rumanos, Southwest Collection.

³⁰ Thomas Hegghammer quoted in Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds. (2008) *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008) pp. 82-98.

³¹ Hegghammer, quoted in Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda*, pp. 94, 95, 99.

the travel expenses of some mujahidin in an effort to rid themselves of dissidents, much recruitment occurred through existing Islamist institutions where Azzam had connections and could disseminate his messaging, and where potential recruits were predisposed to his view of the transnational ummah.

In *Join the Caravan*, Azzam describes Afghanistan as merely one front in a larger war against Muslims, in which fighting is necessary so “that unbelievers do not dominate.”³² In this frame, Muslims in many countries are living in subjugation, with “Muslim women being taken captive in every land,” and “they cannot repel attacks on their lives, honor, and properties.”

They no longer have the arrows to shoot; their quivers are empty. During this long period the Afghans hoped their Muslim brothers would come forth in their thousands, that their brothers in Islam would march to their aid, but until today the Muslims have not answered the call, as if they could not hear the mothers crying for their sons, the virgins screaming, the orphans sighing, and the elderly groaning. Many fine people felt it was enough to send their leftovers by way of assistance. The situation is more serious than that, however. Islam and Muslims in Afghanistan live in anguish and must face a grave peril . . .³³

However, the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan did not result in the demobilization of the mujahidin. “Some countries simply refused to let the fighters return. They became a stateless, vagrant mob of religious mercenaries.”³⁴ Compounding the difficulty for the recruits was the announcement by Pakistan in January 1993 that mujahidin offices were to be closed and foreigners without valid visas required to leave the country. With Azzam assassinated, the transnational foreign fighter movement needed to regroup and refocus its message of threat against the ummah. The leadership now looked for another conflict that could be easily framed as a one-dimensional war to protect the faithful from murderous infidels, and it soon located one in Bosnia.³⁵ Subsequently, Afghan alumni spread to other conflicts around the globe or engaged in terrorist activities, while still maintaining the frame of defensive mobilization.

Development of the Idea of the ‘Foreign Fighter’

Although transnational insurgencies have existed for centuries, the fact that political scientists have not perceived them as a singular phenomenon is evident from the lack of even a term in the discipline to describe the concept. This

³² Abdullah Azzam, *Join the Caravan* (1987), translation available at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/3302728/JOIN-THE-CARAVAN-ABDULLAH-AZZAM>, pp., 16, 22, 24, 25.

³³ Hegghammer quoted in Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda*, p. 124.

³⁴ Lawrence Wright, *Looming Tower* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 163-64.

³⁵ Evan F. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 27-28.

comes despite successive generations of transnational insurgents attempting to legitimize their activities by directly comparing their actions to those taken by other foreign rebels in other wars.³⁶ The term “foreign fighter” is used here because it is widely employed in popular media reports, primarily concerning jihadis, and generates greater recognition of the concept it describes than do alternative jargon-laden terms (e.g. transnational insurgent).

A Lexis-Nexis database search for the origin of the term in media use yields not answers, but interesting patterns. The first description of a foreign insurgent appeared in a headline published on March 21, 1988 by *The Times* of London covering a story about a victory by Afghan mujahidin “aided by Saudi, Egyptian and Pakistani fighters” against pro-Soviet government forces: “Khost Outpost Falls to Mujahidin Led by Foreign Fighters.” An article the following year in *The Independent* reported on South Africa’s 32 Battalion, which had formed around the nucleus of Angolan FNLA rebels in exile.

Subsequent mentions of rebel “foreign fighters” through 1992 all appeared in British newspaper articles concerning “the growing number of foreign fighters” with Croatian separatist forces against the Yugoslav central government. A 1991 report noted the rise of “Black Legions” that included more than 100 Europeans of various nationalities. The British adventure-seekers and Iberian former newspaper correspondents were reported to earn fifty-nine pounds a month, as compared to the former French Foreign Legionaries “who received serious money to train Croat forces.”³⁷

Comparisons to a prior transnational insurgency emerged the following year. One report claimed that “the Yugoslavian civil war has more foreign fighters involved than any conflict since the Spanish Civil War. Unlike the International Brigade . . . the English fighting in Yugoslavia are not there to preserve liberty . . .” but were “mercenaries” escaping dead-end lives to earn “100 pounds per month and an inspiration.”³⁸ Ted Skinner, a British volunteer, told a reporter before he was killed by Serb paramilitaries that the situation was analogous to German expansionism during the Spanish Civil War, arguing “If they get away with it in Bosnia, who’s to say they won’t in Kosovo?”³⁹

In 1993, *The New York Times* quoted an Indian security official as estimating that “the total figure [of foreign fighters in Kashmir] is about 400,” including 200 Afghans.⁴⁰ That same year, *The Toronto Star* covered the conflict

³⁶ i.e. International MACHAL volunteers in 1948 Israel compared themselves to the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, whose members had compared themselves to the English and French who fought in the Greek and American wars of independence respectively. Contemporary jihadis refer openly to mujahidin in 1980s Afghanistan, etc.

³⁷ Marcus Tanner, “Foreigners Rally to Croatian Flag.” *The Independent* Oct. 31, 1991.

³⁸ “Blood Brothers,” *The Evening Standard*, May 21, 1992.

³⁹ Adam LeBor, “Network of Hatred Traps Mercenaries,” *The Times*, Feb. 10, 1993.

⁴⁰ Sanjoy Hazarika, “Afghans Joining Rebels in Kashmir.” *New York Times* Aug. 24, 1993.

in Bosnia, noting that “military units on all sides of the barricades have eagerly recruited foreign fighters.”⁴¹

The concept had clearly come to represent the same type of actor regardless of particular conflict, location, or issue of contention, but there were only nine uses of the term in this context in media reports between 1988-1993. Although the appellation began to be employed by reporters covering Chechnya as well,⁴² and received more mentions due to U.S. insistence that mujahidin leave Bosnia as part of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, the term appeared only thirty-nine more times in the global media between the beginning of 1994 and September 10, 2001.

The first post 9/11 mention appears in the Lexis-Nexis database on September 15, 2001, noting the dilemma faced by Taliban officials contemplating turning over Osama bin Laden to the United States in risking the wrath of “thousands of foreign fighters indispensable in their war against the Northern Alliance.” By October 15, 2001 the term had appeared only five more times despite the preparations of the international community to confront al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan.

But by the end of the year, the term “foreign fighter” had appeared at least 313 times. What brought it into popular currency was the aftermath of the battle of Kunduz on November 27, 2001, in which, according to the Associated Press on November 27, 2001, “thousands of Afghan Taliban fighters who gave up were allowed safe passage out” while “under the terms of the Kunduz surrender, foreign fighters were to be imprisoned in the town’s jail pending an investigation of their links with bin Laden.” Therefore, while U.S. military operations had not created the identity and role of the foreign fighter, by publicly distinguishing transnational from local combatants they did reify the difference and create a context particular to current geopolitics. Following the end of hostilities at Kunduz, the term appeared 102 times in major world newspapers during 2002, all in references to foreign Muslim insurgents in locations from Kashmir to Georgia.

The invasion of Iraq was even more significant in entrenching this concept in the public consciousness than the routing of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. In the first two months of 2003, prior to the launch of the assault by Coalition forces on March 10, the term appeared seventeen times; by the end of the year it would have appeared another 660. It would appear more than one thousand times in each subsequent year. The explosion of coverage in major world newspapers both creates and reinforces awareness of the role of the foreign fighter as one to be assumed in any manner of insurgency, and the anecdotal evidence indicates that foreign fighters indeed regard themselves in a tradition of transnational insurgents.

⁴¹ Janusz Bugajski, “Yugoslav Wars a Godsend for Hired Guns,” *Toronto Star*, April 10, 1993.

⁴² Deutsche Presse-Agentur, “Russian Forces Approach Grozny in Heavy Fighting,” Dec., 20, 1994.

Why Are Most Contemporary Foreign Fighters Muslims?

Whether recruiters seek them on football fields or in chat rooms, the identity community used to motivate transnational insurgents in nearly all current cases is the Muslim ummah. Although some recent works have equated mujahidin with Spanish Civil War volunteers, these are single-sentence comparisons in the introductory sections of articles devoted to particular cases of jihadis.⁴³ The historical data presented in this project, however, indicates that the recruitment of foreign fighters – from locating potential recruits to framing the conflict – is essentially equivalent across cases, regardless of the issue of contention of the conflict. In modern history, transnational insurgencies stemmed from various ties of ethno-nationalism and ideology, but contemporary foreign fighters all share the same religious identity.

Nothing in the data suggests any intrinsic features of Islam or Muslim communities that should make this so. Rather, the cause appears to be partly the result of a period effect, the co-incidence of increasingly globalized communications and transportation technology with a particular identity community whose members have salient transnational identities. In the first half of the twentieth century, most foreign fighters were members of Communist groups. In the latter nineteenth century, the feared perpetrators of transnational violence were anarchists. In both instances, the militants and insurgents shared a key trait with mujahidin today: Transnational ideological affiliation was 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.

Omar Nasiri, a former jihadi, describes 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.”⁴⁴ Unprecedented waves of emigration by Muslims to the West deterritorialized the ummah, reinventing what it means to be Muslim and what constitute Muslim lands. Also, Wahhabism and other forms of strict Islam are now offered through the internet and a global network of madrassas, making national citizenship less consequential. These same institutions also challenge traditional cultural rituals as un-Islamic, leaving a transnational Islamic identity as the only alternative between the shunning, alien West and nearly equally closed former home societies. For this reason, much neo-fundamentalist violence, and an increasing number of foreign fighters, hail from Western countries rather than the Middle East. Neo-fundamentalism

⁴³ Cerwin Moore and Paul Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31.5 (2008), pp. 412-433; Mohammed Hafez, “Jihad after Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32.2 (2009), pp. 73-94.

⁴⁴ Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 2.

has flourished because it has already addressed (and rejected) westernization and provided a competing alternative – one that recruiters claim is threatened. Roy argues that once founding generations of Muslim immigrants are inevitably assimilated, transnational recruitment, funding, and website development will fade.⁴⁵

Clifford Geertz described the ideologization of religion as a response to a *lack* of faith because traditional structures that provide meaning and value are collapsing.⁴⁶ It is notable that Islamist foreign fighters, beginning with Abdullah Azzam, do not return to their homelands to fight for Muslims there. They do not hope to re-shape their lost societies of origin, rather they go to the peripheries of the ummah, to devastated conflict zones or desolate failed states where cultural and governmental institutions are weak and they stand a greater chance of building a theologically correct society when they have defeated the oppressor. “Radical militant jihadists fight at the frontier to protect a center where they have no place. They fight not to protect a territory but to recreate a community . . . Contemporary mujahidin are pessimistic because they know that there is no longer a fortress to protect, that the enemy is in the fortress.”⁴⁷

Managing the Transnational Future

There is another reason why the vast majority of foreign fighters today are Islamists: As noted, after the conclusion of the first round of civil war in Afghanistan, mujahidin were refused entry or persecuted by home governments that feared that they would continue their jihadist activities rather than settle down to normal daily lives. In other cases, despite breaking national and international laws, foreign fighters were generally granted amnesty for their actions. The fact that the vast majority of foreign fighters in Texas, Spain, and Israel did not maintain careers in insurgency or terrorism is one indication that the policy of Muslim countries toward Arab Afghans in the 1990s was misguided. Another lesson from history is the case of nineteenth century anarchists who were also exiled and traveled between different underground groups, becoming “connectors” that passed along best practices to violent activists in other countries.⁴⁸

Current approaches. As indicated by the debate over the closure of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, which housed a number of transnational insurgents that few states seemed willing to accept upon release, mitigating

⁴⁵ Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 2, 18, 120-25, 234, 324.

⁴⁶ I am following here Paul Overby, *Holy Blood: An Inside View of the Afghan War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Books, 1993), p. 190 in his summary of Geertz.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 289, 305, 313.

⁴⁸ Ersel Aydinli, “Before Jihadists there were Anarchists: A Failed Case of Transnational Violence,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31.10 (2008), p. 909.

levels of transnational violence is not a simple matter of amnesty. Even the jihadi rehabilitation programs attempted by Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and other states have yielded decidedly mixed results, both at home and abroad. For instance, three graduates of the Yemeni program were killed fighting in Somalia.⁴⁹

The United States has attempted to limit foreign fighter entry to Iraq by controlling key crossing points. In some areas this has included using bulldozers to build berms of sand to serve as physical barriers. Another strategy is targeting the Syrian smugglers who bring transnational recruits across the border. Unlike the Comintern in Spain and Haganah in pre-Israel Palestine, al Qaeda in Iraq and other insurgent groups have left foreign volunteers to provide their own transportation and have outsourced the final stage to experienced border-runners. There is some evidence of distrust between the two parties to the transaction: al Qaeda has asked foreign recruits to rate the service provided by the smugglers and report how much money they ultimately charged.⁵⁰ While this weak supply chain does present obvious counterinsurgency (COIN) possibilities for co-opting paid smugglers, the United States' record in interdicting drugs and illegal immigrants entering its own borders, and preventing recruits from leaving for past foreign wars, does not bode well for a policing approach to Afghanistan, Somalia, and other conflicts where conditions will be even less manageable.

Other states have taken different approaches to limiting the supply of foreign fighters with varying degrees of success. Russia has targeted key Arab Chechens for assassination to disrupt leadership and recruitment networks, with some reported success.⁵¹ Along with China and several Central Asian republics, Russia also formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001, in part to coordinate efforts directed against transnational insurgency and terrorism.⁵² The Netherlands has adopted a different tack, providing counseling and employment to dislocated Muslim immigrants so as to better integrate them into Dutch society and reduce the influence of militant groups that also offer social services.⁵³ The subsequent suicide bombing attack in Iraq by a Dutch-born woman who converted to Islam demonstrates that no approach will stop every determined insurgent.⁵⁴

Policy recommendations: Lessons of history. In the case of foreign fighters, the genie is out of the bottle: They fill a recognized political role,

⁴⁹ Gregory Johnsen and Christopher Boucek, "The Dilemma of the Yemeni Detainees at Guantanamo Bay." *CTC Sentinel*, 1.12 (Nov. 2008), pp. 1-4.

⁵⁰ Feller and Fishman, *Al Qaeda's Foreign Fighters*, pp. 25-27.

⁵¹ Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters," p. 427.

⁵² Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 202.

⁵³ Ministerie van BZK, Dec. 2002, pp. 14-15. Available at: <http://www.aivd.nl>.

⁵⁴ Sebastian Rotella, "European Women Join Ranks of Jihadis." *Los Angeles Times* Jan. 10, 2006.

according to the data they are relatively successful, their effective practices serve as models and are self-consciously replicated, and their numbers are on the increase. State and international laws have not prevented them, and norms of national citizenship grow weaker as the number and proportion of insurgencies that go transnational rise. Given that both historic and contemporary foreign fighters have been responsible for greater levels of violence and prolonging conflicts – whether for good or bad causes – states that engage in COIN operations have understandable motives for preventing the transnationalization of civil conflicts.

In tackling the problem of foreign fighters, the first lesson from the historical record is that insurgencies use the same type of messaging for all types of foreign fighters, regardless of whether they share the same ethnicity or some other affiliation, and regardless of the war's issue of contention. The shared identity communities – whether religious, ideological, or nationalist – through which recruits identify with distant insurgents provide the social structures that enable dissemination of recruitment messages and permit the mobilization of foreign fighters. Most recruits are already highly active members of these institutions, but are marginalized within their broader polities. 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.

This consistent pattern of foreign fighter recruitment messaging and mobilization across all types of cases carries useful implications for COIN planning. First, if insurgencies recruit foreign fighters 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 from mobilizing. On the contrary, doing so would support the frame of threat and might make high risk, high cost behavior seem even more necessary to forestall greater losses. Likewise, maintaining a high force profile in conflict zones as a deterrent against insurgents is also likely to provide fodder for recruitment propaganda. While there are valid strategic reasons for establishing forward military bases and force projection, and large numbers of personnel are necessary on the ground in successful COIN operations, efforts to use these practices to discourage foreign fighter interest in particular conflict zones is likely to fail.

A more effective approach would be to shift emphasis to preventing recruitment in the first place, and the historical data suggests two avenues for attempting to do so. The first possibility, and the second lesson of history for policymakers, concerns the enhancement of law enforcement efforts in disrupting the recruitment and mobilization process. Targeting particular identity groups for surveillance and infiltration invites charges of prejudice, whether they are Muslims today, or the Jewish Americans of the 1940s who were refused passports to limit the possibility that they would join the fight for Israel's independence.

Nonetheless, homeland security requirements and COIN efforts require identification of targets for intelligence-gathering. The data from the historical cases indicates relatively consistent demographic information that can be used to establish a profile of likely recruits that does not distinguish between the particulars of different identity groups and offers some anti-discrimination protection. Recruiters find foreign fighters among men who are in their early 20s and are first or second generation immigrants. Typically they come from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, and available information suggests broken homes feature prominently, perhaps indicating why membership in community groups is so salient to them. Older recruits are targeted because of their prior military experience; younger recruits are enthusiastic members of the organizations that tie them to the distant insurgents and through which they are contacted by recruiters. Most recruits do not see themselves as mercenaries; they genuinely believe that they are fighting in a defensive rather than an elective war.

Recruiters strategically employ frames and emotive imagery designed to stimulate outrage and fear. They 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. Usually this is not a difficult pitch to make because recruiters have selected potential targets from groups looking for alternatives to civic participation.

Therefore, the third policy implication that can be drawn from historical cases is that the ultimate solution to foreign fighter recruitment is to diminish the salience of the transnational groups through which recruitment is conducted. Identities are built through the structures of social transactions, which provide roles in relation to other members of the group. Roles generate expected norms of behavior that influence decision-making, including duty to the group. More contact through these social channels strengthens particular identities and connections with other members. 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.

Preventing recruitment would therefore be a question of reducing the centrality of transnational groups as social structures in the lives of the recruits and replacing them with institutions of citizenship. Rather than attempting to suppress any group, a misguided approach that would also surely backfire and generate recognition of threat, the alternative is to build the appeal of national civil and military institutions so as to facilitate greater identification with the state and fellow citizens. While some view nationalism as a threatening phenomenon, it presents an alternative to transnationalism, and it is not necessary to fight fire with fire. The United States military is held up as a benign and effective social leveler, muting divisions in ethnicity and class among members of the armed forces even after their service has concluded. COIN planners should consider efforts to build effective government agencies

and professionalize the militaries in targeted states that produce significant numbers of foreign fighters. This form of soft power cooperation might even be viewed as attractive by some otherwise potential recruits.

The future of foreign fighters. This study has presented the potential for increased levels of international violence posed by the growing propensity for insurgencies to recruit transnationally. It has also demonstrated that foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon, and that most recruits are neither mercenaries nor fanatics bent on domination. Rather than for greed, most mobilize in response to perceived threat. Recruits may have their own motives of adventure, vindication of the group, or simply lack of better alternative opportunity, but recruiters across highly varied conflicts in time and space consistently use the same frame of defensive mobilization.

Globalization and the success of past foreign fighter-driven rebel groups are increasing the probability that insurgencies will transnationalize their violence in an effort to tip the balance of forces enough to win their civil conflicts. These efforts are desperation ploys that are attempted when the insurgencies are not strong enough to win on their own and are unable to obtain the assistance of a friendly foreign state. Foreign fighters in these instances are responsible for higher levels of violence because they believe that it is necessary to act more aggressively in a losing struggle for survival and because they do not have their own assets and families to protect as do local insurgents. Rather than confronting them in the field or attempting to disrupt their mobilization, establishing alternate identities for them as citizens would be the most efficient means for preventing their participation.

Increasing numbers of foreign fighters are a cause for concern, not alarm. Indeed, a number of transnational volunteers fought what would widely be considered “the good fight” against even greater evils and their members are acclaimed as heroes. In either case, transnational insurgencies have been with us for a long time, and appear likely to be factors in civil conflicts for the foreseeable future. When examined as a broad phenomenon, the consistent logic behind recruitment is apparent and suggests counter-strategies. It is to the benefit of the recruits, the states they fight, and the civilians caught in between, to understand why they really fight and to use this information to identify the routes to peace.

