What were the Major Motivating Factors for Foreign Fighters on Both Sides of the Islamic State Conflict?
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Abstract

This paper investigates the key motivations which caused thousands of Western foreign fighters to join both sides of the Islamic State conflict in Iraq and Syria. It examines a wide range of newspaper articles, films, documentaries, and academic papers, applying a thematic qualitative methodology, as well as Critical Discourse Analysis in order to investigate the question of motivation. It finds that foreign fighters in the Islamic State are overwhelmingly motivated by religious factors in their decision to join the war. Despite the obvious objections that might be raised about the horrendous conduct of the group prohibiting any genuine religious motivation, this is overcome by effective misinterpretation of Islamic texts by the Islamic State. There is no overarching motivator for the western opponents of IS, but rather a wide range of factors from simple thrill seeking to former western military personnel feeling as if they have to ‘finish the job’ their countries started in the Iraq war. Religion is almost never a key motivation for western anti-IS fighters, who view the conflict in secular terms.
Introduction

On 10th June 2014, a group of around 1,000 fighters from a group calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or simply, the Islamic State, IS) attacked the central Iraqi city of Mosul. Mosul was defended by as many as 30,000 American trained and equipped soldiers and policemen.\(^1\) On 29th June, the first day of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, an IS spokesman announced the restoration of the Caliphate and declared Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarra’iyy, more commonly known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to be the new Caliph.\(^2\) By September of that year, IS controlled vast swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria and looked to be the dominant force in the region, with an estimated asset portfolio of $2 billion. Al-Baghdadi, in a rare public sermon at the time, appealed to the global Muslim community, stating "Rush, O Muslims, to your state. Yes, it is your state...whoever is capable of performing hijrah [emigration] to the Islamic State then let him do so...there is no deed in this virtuous month or in any other month better than jihad in the path of Allah".\(^3\) Tens of thousands from around the world answered his call.

However, even as early as July 2014 it should have been apparent to anyone with even a passing interest in IS and the region that they were openly committing breaches of human rights of the most shocking kind. Foreign journalists and aid workers were actively targeted and executed on video; acts of genocide were perpetrated against the Yazidi people, Shi’a Muslims and those who refused to convert to the IS Salafist version of Sunni Islam. Public executions, sometimes of hundreds of people, became common place; the examples of torture, rape and murder of the most atrocious kind perpetrated by this group goes on endlessly.\(^4\) However, this was not hidden from the world, rather, the IS propaganda machine ensured that these deeds of the new state were widely known about in articles, videos and even videogames published online and picked up by news agencies and individuals around the world.\(^5\)

What interests me, and what will form the central focus of this study, is why people still chose to leave behind what were often comfortable, affluent lives in developed nations to risk

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\(^1\) Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (Regan Arts, 2015), p. xii


\(^3\) BBC News, *ISIS Leader calls on Muslims to 'build Islamic State'* , 1 July 2014, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28116846, accessed 08/05/2019


\(^5\) Jan Christoffer Andersen and Sveinung Sandberg, *Islamic State Propaganda: Between Social Movement Framing and Subcultural Provocation* in "Terrorism and Political Violence" (July, 2018)
everything for an organisation which was clearly committing some of the most heinous acts in living memory on a mass scale. Al-Baghdadi’s plea for new members and the justifications of many foreign IS members was based on a religious duty, to carry out these deeds and build a new state in the name of Islam. To me, and to many others, this notion goes directly against the teachings of Islam. I hope to understand more about the motivations of these people and ascertain whether religion really was the motivation or whether this is a convenient cover-all excuse for other reasons.

Likewise, I am fascinated by the foreigners who travelled to the region to work against IS. Often portrayed in a romantic manner similar to the foreigners in the International Brigades who fought Franco in the Spanish Civil War, they also often left behind a comfortable existence to fight in a region many of them had not even visited before. Some didn’t speak any of the local languages, had no military training and left well paid jobs in the West to be a soldier in the struggle against IS. As IS claim to see the conflict in religious terms, I will investigate if the same is true for their opponents in the Peshmerga and YPG groups who fought against them, or whether their motivations are more secular.

**Defining Religion in this Context**

The key thrust of this paper is to argue that while the foreigners fighting against IS were largely motivated by secular factors, the pro-IS foreigners were overwhelmingly motivated by religion, so it becomes necessary to explain what I mean by religion. Although countless scholars have offered various tomes of work dedicated to attempting to define what religion is or, just as importantly, is not, I am bound here to offer quite a general definition for my needs. Many have attempted to define religion as a worldview, a way of living one’s life to a code and doctrine and a way of attempting to explain the world around us, often accompanied with a supernatural factor such as belief in gods or miracles.⁶

In Western society, people are often confident that the above definition is an accurate description of religion and indeed it does a good job of covering Christianity, Islam and Judaism. However, many other ‘world religions’ do not even have a word for religion and have had a Western way of defining their religion thrust upon them, as with the British framing of Hinduism during the British Raj. Some, such as Rudolf Otto have insisted that it is in fact impossible to define religion at all and that is a sensation that must be experienced and

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never sufficiently expressed and therefore cannot be not studied.\textsuperscript{7} There is also an increasingly popular school of thought which would include movements such as Marxism and Nationalism as forms of religion, especially with the decline of ‘traditional’ religions in many regions.\textsuperscript{8} To avoid overcomplicating the matter, I will avoid including movements such as Socialism as a religion for this paper, as I believe it will open up the definition too much; otherwise left wing YPG groups could be said to be fighting for religious reasons, as could mercenary capitalists, Syrian nationalists or Kurdish feminists. I will instead focus on what might be termed the ‘traditional’ religions, such as Islam and Christianity, with a clear historical precedent and set of beliefs, behaviours and institutions with a principal belief in an all-powerful divine being who will reward their adherents in the afterlife for following what are perceived as their commands on Earth.

Clearly, the key religion in this conflict is that of Islam- it is within the hard-line interpretation of Sunni Salafist Islam that IS has based its raison d’être and claimed justification for their actions. A great number of IS’ opponents are Shia Muslims- fighting in many cases for their very survival, rather than religion- but this does not mean the anti-IS foreign fighters are necessarily Shia or motivated by a ‘traditional’ religion. I will not discount other religions such as Christianity, but believe that they will prove to be less of a motivator in this particular conflict.

\textbf{Method and Theoretical Framework}

The research question for this paper concentrates on the primary motivators for foreign fighters, with the expectation that religion will feature heavily for IS fighters, but not for anti-IS fighters. Therefore, the methodology used in this paper was qualitative in nature, out of necessity due to the types of sources used (newspaper articles, films, interviews) and due to the nature of the proposed question, where a quantitative approach may have oversimplified complex emotional responses crucial to understanding the wider conflict. The scope of the framework for this paper focuses on fighters who took an active part in the conflict from Western nations. These individuals need not be Muslim, of Arab descent or have had any personal involvement of the region previously. Originally, my plan was to approach foreign fighters on both sides of the conflict to see if they would participate in interviews or a questionnaire examining their motivations when they joined the conflict and how, if at all,

\textsuperscript{7} Russell T. McCutcheon, \textit{Studying Religion: An Introduction} (Routledge, 2007), p. 66

\textsuperscript{8} Smith and Burr, \textit{Understanding World Religions}, p. xxix
their opinions had changed over the course of time. Unfortunately, it became increasingly
clear that this approach was going to be extremely difficult as direct contact with IS foreign
fighters proved near impossible and anti-IS foreign fighters were extremely wary about being
interviewed or giving away their identities.

Addressing the Inherent Bias in Source Material

As well as some e-mail and social media contact with YPG (People’s Protection Units-
Yekîneye’n Parastina Gel) fighters, I have had to rely heavily on newspaper articles for
many of the interviews with the fighters on both sides. Critical Discourse Analysis became
key when examining newspaper articles and film, especially regarding analysing written
sources such as interviews and online blogs. Machin and Mayr have highlighted how the
press and other writers can change their language and selection of photographs depending on
their own bias or how they want their reader to view their subject.9 In such a controversial
war, where Islamic State fighters were often seen as wholly evil figures, this will need to be
something I am acutely aware of and try to assess appropriately.

One potential problem identified has been the very different ways Western media choose to
portray individuals from different sides of this conflict- with an inevitable hero/villain
framework. Using techniques discussed in How to do Critical Analysis, by Machin and Mayr,
I will use two media articles looking at fighters from opposing sides of the war to illustrate
this matter.

The first article is from The Independent and is about Harry Sarfo, a British citizen and
Muslim convert who fought for IS and has since been convicted in a Hamburg court for terror
offences. The article is specifically about recent revelations about his involvement in an
execution of civilians, despite previously stating that he never took part in killings.10 First, I
will examine the representation of Sarfo through photos, using the ‘mood systems’
photographical analysis described by Machin and Mayr.11 He is depicted holding the black
flag of Islamic State, in a camouflage top and carrying a pistol; his gaze is away from the

9 David Machin and Andrea Mayr, How to do Critical Discourse Analysis (Sage, 2012), pp. 2-14
11 Machin and Mayr, Discourse Analysis, pp. 70-2
viewer and turned down. This is an ‘offer image’ and the downward gaze suggests discomfort or negativity.

This is in contrast to a previous article on Sarfo by the same writer and newspaper, in which he is depicted as a repentant jihadi, urging young Muslims not to heed to call of IS; although they do use the same image in this earlier article, the emphasis is on other photos from his pre-IS Instagram page, where he is looking directly at the camera and smiling, his gaze demanding interaction and portraying him in a more positive light. With his deeper involvement in executions now plain, these more sympathetic images have disappeared, replaced by stills from IS propaganda videos which show blurred out dead bodies in Syrian streets and Sarfo in the background.

Examining the verbs used to frame Sarfo and his lawyer’s statements- ‘told The Independent’ and ‘said’- it is clear that Neutral Structuring Verbs are being used. The author does not need to use metapropositional or descriptive verbs in this instance; instead, the negative perception of Sarfo is implied merely by his association with the events, which are presented in a cold and stark manner: ‘Sarfo stands immobile by a wall for opening seconds of the fusillade, but he then pulls out a pistol and aims it at the men on the ground.’ This language and the choice of photographs used immediately, and unsurprisingly, paint Sarfo in a negative light, despite The Independent’s previously softer stance on a man who was seen as a repentant jihadi.

I will compare this to an article from The Guardian in which a man named only as Harry ‘a public school educated former Tory councillor’, is interviewed about this role fighting against IS for the Kurdish YPG groups. With regards to photographs used of Harry, there is only one which shows him in a camouflage shirt and carrying an assault rifle. This is a similar photo to the one of Sarfo, but Harry is smiling, and his gaze meets the viewer; Machin and Mayr explain that this type of open ‘offer image’ can be used to present an individual positively.

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13 Machin and Mayr, Discourse Analysis, p. 59
The whole tone of the article is different and appears to ask the question as to why someone so familiar to us would go to fight (white, British by birth, well educated), whereas the article on Sarfo seeks to distance him from British society (Ghanaian descendant, born in Germany, converted to Islam) and seems to imply that his desire to fight for IS should therefore be self-evident in his background. The use of quoting verbs is also slightly different and less neutral. Verbs such as ‘explained’ ‘told’ and ‘added’ are transcript verbs and give the speaker more of a sense of influence or control over the interview, which is lacking in the bland statements in the Sarfo piece.\(^\text{15}\)

Crucially, this pattern repeats itself again and again in Western media and should be fully taken into account when analysing reports and interviews of the fighters on both sides. There is often an expected agenda that portrays IS fighters as evil, with a troubled background and other factors that pushed them towards IS and for the anti-IS fighters to be seen as almost dashing and heroic, fighting selflessly for the underdog. Although there may be some truth in these stereotypes, it is largely a lazy and unhelpful way of bracketing people in a very complicated narrative.

This perception of IS being a wholly evil organisation and the Kurds and other groups who fought against IS being the heroes is a basic narrative used by Western media and some scholars to water down an exceptionally complex conflict with its origins in decades of warfare across the wider region. Not everyone who fought for IS did it with murder and genocide in mind, many thought they were probably on the ‘right’ side, especially towards the start of the conflict. Likewise, some Kurdish groups, such as the YPG have extreme left-wing views and elements of them have been known to threaten terrorist attacks in Turkey and in the EU to further their cause.\(^\text{16}\) I have found it important to try and look past the simplistic presentation of the conflict when analysing sources for this reason and approach each subject in a neutral manner.

Ethics

There are many ethical considerations I also needed to be aware of when conducting this research. The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity states that Reliability, Honesty, Respect and Accountability are the four principles of good research practices. While this gives an excellent foundation of how to conduct my research in an academically ethical

\(^{15}\) Machin and Mayr, *Discourse Analysis*, p. 59
manner, there are other potential ethical problems in this research. My own minor involvement in the conflict and ongoing career in the Royal Air Force is likely to influence my own judgement on research and will drastically shape how subjects react to me (possibly viewing me as friend or foe). In order to counter this, I intend to emphasise my role as student. I have not sought direct contact with IS fighters as this may prove problematic for me given my current occupation. However, in trying to contact Peshmerga and YPG fighters, I have emphasised my role and experiences working with the Kurds in Iraq in the hope that this will build a bridge with them and get them to open up to me a little. I have kept this in mind when analysing the information given to me and tried to stay as neutral as I can.

The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon

What are Foreign Fighters?

The concept of foreign fighters is certainly not unique to the Islamic State conflict or even the 20th and 21st centuries; powers have often been willing to hire foreign mercenaries to fight their battles for them and certain types of cause will always attract adventurers and drifters. Ozlem Kayhan Pusane states that the phenomenon has become more pronounced since the end of the Cold War due to the ‘end of the bipolar confrontation’ and the ‘growing pace of globalization in the past couple of decades’. The end of the Cold War saw the great ideological conflict of the 20th century, championed by two superpowers and their assorted allies, fall away and with it, the state centric actions which kept potential foreign fighters in their own countries fighting for a cause. The growth in communications, transport and technology has made it easier than ever for small groups with little or no initial influence to reach a global audience, buy and move weapons and appeal for funding. Such conditions have paved the way for the importance of the foreign fighter, who can be appealed to from anywhere in the world, travel quickly and be armed to terrifying effect easily and cheaply, often with little training required.

For local fighters in the Islamic State conflict, i.e. those from Iraq and Syria the motivations to fight tend to be immediate and pressing: repression, discrimination, torture, historical grievances, fear or simple necessity. For foreign fighters, usually not directly affected by the conflict and able to make less pressured and time sensitive decisions, the grand narrative at an

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ideological level is more important and more interesting and others even go to fight purely for financial gain. This group of ideologically driven warriors who volunteered for hardship and potentially death have attracted the most media attention, though their motives for doing so are often ignored or glossed over. However, it has been stated that foreign fighters coming from Western countries are among the most violent of the Islamic State’s troops and they have had a disproportionately high impact on how the world perceives IS and how the group interacts with the populations they ruled.\textsuperscript{18} The sheer impact that these fighters have had on both sides of the conflict alone makes them worth our attention.

Before I go further I must clarify that the vast majority of foreign fighters in the conflict on both sides came from Arabic countries, either due to geographical proximity, language and cultural similarities, the influence of similar ‘religious’ wars throughout the Middle East or familial or tribal ties. However, this study focuses on those not from that world. Instead, I am examining those from different backgrounds to the environment they chose to enter and organisations they chose to fight for. Their motivations, I feel, are often less apparent than their Arab foreign fighter counterparts and therefore worthier of examination. That is not to say that they have not played an important part in the war on both sides or that their motivations are not relevant, but this paper will predominantly deal with ‘Western’ fighters.

A 2018 study published by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation states that 41,490 international citizens from around 80 countries became affiliated with IS in Iraq and Syria. At its peak in late 2014, the group was attracting around 2,000 foreigners a month into its ranks.\textsuperscript{19} 75\% of this figure are men, while 13\% are women and 12\% are children. It is much more difficult to estimate the numbers of foreign fighters who travelled to the region to fight against IS. There are many different groups they could have joined from several countries so there is no central data collection; there tends to be less media interest in these fighters when compared to those who fought for IS and they are less likely to be profiled and followed by the intelligence services from their own countries. However, estimates for the

\textsuperscript{18} Hakan Mehmmetcik and Ali Murat Kursun, \textit{Making Sense of the Territorial Aspirations of ISIS: Autonomy, Representation and Influence} in Oktav et al., ‘Violent Non-state Actors,’ p. 65

\textsuperscript{19} Joana Cook and Gina Vale, \textit{From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State} (ICSR, King’s College London, 2018), pp. 3 - 7
numbers of foreign fighters choosing to fight against IS numbers in the thousands, across various groups and in both Iraq and Syria.\textsuperscript{20}

The Impact of Foreign Fighters

For both sides in the conflict, these individuals have often been used purely for propaganda purposes and kept away from front line duties. They are used to highlight the supposed international appeal of their cause and to encourage more foreign fighters to join them. For IS and their opponents, it makes perfect sense to recruit foreign fighters. They can offer military experience and training, medical skills, engineering skills, much needed manpower and a perception of worldwide appeal. Former FBI director James Coney stated, ‘Foreign fighters traveling to Syria or Iraq could… gain battlefield experience and increased exposure to violent extremist elements … they may use these skills and exposure to radical ideology to return to their countries of origin’. Training and indoctrinating foreign fighters who are then sent home to spread terror and the cause of IS highlights the further appeal to IS of recruiting them.\textsuperscript{21}

One such example of foreign fighters being utilised in just this manner is the Paris terror attacks of November 2015. Of the nine IS followers who carried out the attacks, seven were French and Belgian citizens returning from the Islamic State and using their nationalities to their advantage to move around freely and carry out their attacks.\textsuperscript{22} The subsequent investigation into the attacks unearthed a total of 30 men and women connected to that terrorist cell in Europe, of these 16 had been foreign fighters in IS. Paris was an extreme example of dozens of actual or planned attacks carried out by IS and their followers across Europe and other Western countries. While the focus of the IS leaders has always been on the ‘near’ fight in the Middle East, they have not completely given up on the idea of striking their ‘far’ enemies on their home countries. Examples such as these attacks are one of the key reasons for the preoccupation and morbid fascination in foreign fighters in IS and what they are motivated by. Perhaps if we can understand their motivations fully, it will be possible to have an impact on these factors and dissuade more people from following the same path.


IS has made heavy use of the internet and social media to spread its message and has been quick to capitalise on their foreign fighters’ language skills to aid their cause. Different individuals are used in different ways. They use figures such as the infamous Mohammed Emwazi (known as ‘Jihadi John’), the British citizen with a London accent who executed American journalist James Foley, among others, on camera to spread fear and terror. However, they often also tried a softer approach, such as filming Australian born doctor Tareq Kamleh caring for children in a paediatric ward in Raqqa and gently chiding his fellow Muslims who do not join the cause.

While the benefits of recruiting foreign fighters is clear for both sides, what is less clear is why these men and women decide to give up what are sometimes affluent, comfortable lives in developed countries to risk life and limb in a conflict that may not immediately appear to relate to them. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the motivations of fighters on both sides of the conflict, with a particular interest in whether religious beliefs are a key motivating factor.

**The Motivations of IS Foreign Fighters**

In this chapter I will examine the motivations given by various foreign fighters who took an active part in the IS conflict, having chosen to fight for the Islamic State. In the United Nations paper *Combatants on Foreign Soil*, the following motivations are given for foreign fighters/mercenaries for taking up arms in the conflict in Somalia, with examples drawn from other parts of Africa: ideological; religious; ethnic; insecurity; seeking to escape legal charges and economic rent seeking.\(^{23}\) With specific regards to religion, the paper states that although religion may be a genuine motivation for many, for some ‘it is a tactical tool to rally support’ for a certain group.\(^{24}\) This 2007 paper gives special mention to Islamic extremists in some conflicts as a minority of relatively fundamentalist Islamists, but this does not reflect the huge impact that foreign fighters have had in the IS campaign. Indeed, the number of foreign fighters in IS ‘far exceeded those recruited by any previous generation violent non-state actors’.\(^{25}\) The overwhelming majority of foreign IS fighters cite religion as their primary motivating factor. I hope to reveal in this paper if this is actually the case, or, as in Somalia, it is used as an excuse and other factors are in play.

\(^{23}\) *Combatants on Foreign Soil* from the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (June 2007), p. 7

\(^{24}\) *Combatants on Foreign Soil*, p. 24

\(^{25}\) Oktav et al., *Violent Non-state Actors*, p. 12
Brian Glyn Williams has written extensively about his interviews with foreign fighters from over 30 years of conflict in Afghanistan; although this predates the IS conflict, the Islamic State has its roots in Al Qaeda in Iraq, an offshoot of the original group in Afghanistan, a group in which many of those interviewed fought. He sums up the men he met as ‘adventurers, the brainwashed, genuine believers, escapist-dreamers, misfits, and many who seemed to regret their adventure that had landed them in a bleak prison’, but that they all felt that they were heirs to an ‘ancient tradition’ of jihadism in the region. Many of the Pakistani fighters he interviewed declared that their motivations for taking up arms was to establish a ‘pure Islamic caliphate’ in Afghanistan. They believed that the Islamic Emirate founded by the Taliban was the world’s only true Islamic state and were willing to die to see it resurrected. With the advent of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, a new region called for mujahedeen fighters. I will now turn to the Islamic State conflict and attempt to ascertain whether, as for the majority of mujahedeen in the Afghanistan conflicts, the motivation for these fighters was purely religious.

At the time of writing IS, has disintegrated in Iraq and Syria; it no longer exists as a state and no longer controls any major towns or cities. The fighting is not fully over and it seems almost certain that IS will continue their struggle by means of asymmetric insurgency warfare and terrorism, but the majority of their standing forces in the Levant have either fled, been captured or killed. From this increasingly desperate group of people, certain foreign fighters have emerged, either of their own volition by deserting IS, or by being captured as towns and cities were retaken.

Proclamations of Innocence

One of the consistent messages coming from these individuals is that they were not aware of what kind of organisation they would be joining- that they thought IS was purely overthrowing what they saw as corrupt governments in Iraq and Syria and defending the interests of the wider Muslim community; an organisation that did not commit atrocities. One such example is Lucas Glass, a German national who converted to Islam in 2010 after his mother had converted around ten years previously. He states that al-Baghdadi’s call for all Muslims to join him in the founding of an Islamic State in September 2014 struck a chord.

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with him as he did not feel he was accepted in German society and this gave him an opportunity to start his life afresh. He felt it was his duty to go. He married his German wife, and a month later they travelled to Turkey, where he paid a smuggler to take him across the border into Syria. Shortly after, he found himself enrolled at an ISIS religious school. In an interview with British newspaper *The Independent* he made the following statements, making it clear that his original reasons for joining IS were religious in nature: ‘You can compare it with a US soldier who wants to join the army. Why is he ready to join the US army, and go to Afghanistan or Iraq or Syria to sacrifice his life for the sake of democracy? We heard that they announced an Islamic State, this is what we came for’. 28

He continued, ‘At the beginning, when they announced their caliphate, thousands of Muslims came to Syria to support it. But now we know the reality of ISIS. They will not find any supporters anymore in the Muslim world. All these things ISIS did, and all these crimes, made Muslims all over the world hate ISIS. So, it will never be able to find any supporters anymore. I got cheated. All of us got cheated. All of these foreigners, thousands of Muslims who came to join ISIS got cheated.’ 29

He claims that he was not aware that IS was or would become a terrorist organisation or was carrying out atrocities when he went to join them in 2014, even though coverage of these atrocities was widespread at the time. He was assigned to the IS state police and says he left the organisation once he realised how out of control the situation was, but was prevented from leaving the country by IS’ secret police, who threatened him and his family.

‘The main work was manning checkpoints in the streets. I would stop cars and look out for cigarettes and drugs,’ he says. ‘I never pointed my gun at another human. Some of the propaganda videos of ISIS, burning people, drowning them. I got shocked when I saw these things. This is not allowed in Islam. These were things I don’t accept. After that, I decided to leave.’ From this interview, we are presented with a man who joined IS on religious grounds, thinking he was answering a call to build a new Islamic society and who was trapped in a nightmare after it became apparent how evil IS really was. Was this the case for most foreign

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fighters in IS; were they so fully unaware of the reality of the Islamic State’s war that only life under the regime made them realise how un-Islamic this group really was?

In a similar vein is Shabazz Suleman, a British citizen who ran away from a family holiday in Turkey in 2014; again, this is after the atrocities of IS were widely publicised. In an interview with British newspaper The Sun, he insists that he took no part in the fighting, although admits he was a soldier and was on the front line. He makes the claim that many IS fighters are not terrorists or a threat to their home countries, because the majority of them came with a cause to fight Assad's regime, not specifically to join IS. He claims he only joined the group because he bowed down to ‘peer pressure’ when he was surrounded by extremists in prison. Refuting the idea of being a terrorist, Suleman said he spent his time in IS territory ‘trying to evade ISIS checkpoints’. Even though he carried a Kalashnikov assault rifle and wore a military uniform, he goes on to state, ‘When you think of a terrorist, you think of someone with a mask, with a sword, beheading people and terrorising people… I was just hiding in Raqqa… playing Playstation or going around on bike rides.’ His father supports the image of youth led astray, claiming that Suleman was ‘brainwashed’ by extremists on Twitter whilst still in the UK.30

Suleman was 18 when he joined IS and he seems to play on his youth and the associated naivety or innocence associated with it by referencing video games, riding his bike and spending time with his friends- the normal activities of young men in many parts of the world. However, this self-portrayal does not match statements made on his Twitter account in 2015 (under the name of Abu Shamil Britani), in which he made jokes about the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks and posted photographs of beheaded and crucified men in Raqqa. He also previously told journalists that he had had the option to be deported from Syria and no longer linked to IS as part of a prisoner exchange with Turkey, but he refused, going back to the group.31 His latest interview protesting his innocence does not match up with his past actions.

In both examples, the men are now saying that they did not know what they were getting themselves into and that they tried to leave or did leave as soon as they realised the extent of IS’ crimes. However, Shiraz Maher, an expert on foreign fighters in the IS conflict and

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30 John Simpson, My jihadi son Shabazz Suleman was brainwashed in his bedroom, says father, The Times, 28 October 2017, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/my-jihadi-son-shabazz-suleman-was-brainwashed-in-his-bedroom-says-father-dh8j0rzvt, accessed 28/04/2019
director at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence at King’s College London, makes the following counterpoint: ‘It is simply not plausible to suggest that there was any doubt over ISIS’s true nature in 2014. Indeed, by the end of January in that year the group was drawing heavy criticism from even other rebel groups for its barbarity’.

Religiously Justified Violence?

So, we can assume that the majority of international fighters joining after mid 2014 did have a very good idea of the kind of crimes IS was committing, yet those joining IS still claim religion as a key motivating factor. I feel that it is now important to examine whether this idea of violence and religion is compatible. Debates on the justified use of violence or violence in the name of religion are centuries old and are still keenly studied by today’s increasingly litigation conscious militaries- I attended lectures on Just War Theory at the officer training college I went through in the Royal Air Force. Medieval knights, whose raison d’être revolved around violence, were concerned about the fates of their Christian souls. The advent of the Crusades gave a ‘legitimate’ outlet for this violence, as successive popes decreed that this was a defence of Christendom and therefore to fight the Muslims was God’s work. In this way, the medieval Christian mindset found room for both the peaceful teachings of Christ and the acts of barbarism which categorised much of the fighting in the Crusades. It is possible that the doctrine of IS has allowed a similar thought process and justification for their own fighters today.

The popular perception of Islam is that the religion itself encourages peaceful relations and it is only a few extremists who pervert the word of the prophet Mohammed for their own gain. One oft quoted passage from the Koran to support this is that if anyone kills a single man, it is as if he had killed the whole of mankind. However, further investigation of this particular verse (5.32) does state this is the case, unless the killing is committed ‘for a soul [i.e. to avenge a murder] or for corruption done in the land’. The following verse, 5.33, widens the possibility for violence in the name of Allah, ‘Indeed, the penalty for those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive upon Earth to cause corruption is none but that they be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet be cut off from opposite sides or that they be exiled from the land. That is for them a disgrace in this world; and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment’.
Following the Hanbali school’s interpretation of Islam, Salafist groups such as IS can use ambiguous verses such as this to defend the vast majority of their actions, especially as they see the USA, some of her allies and individuals such as Bashar al-Assad to be waging war on Islam, and therefore on Allah. They class this as a jihad al-daf (a defensive war), which is defined as a fard ‘ayn - the personal duty of every capable person. However, the Prophet Muhammed specifically prohibited the targeting in war of five categories of non-combatants, namely: women, children, the elderly, the clergy and the al-‘asif (any hired person). Classical Islamic law books expand this list to include: the blind, sick, insane, farmers, traders and craftsmen. This essentially leaves soldiers as the only legitimate target in a warfighting scenario, as the Law of Armed Conflict in NATO nations also specifies. Clearly, this has not been the modus operandi of IS.

Individuals in IS overlook this, either through ignorance or deliberate distortion and present themselves as fighting a defensive war to preserve their way of life, the key point of any ‘Just War’ theory. With this in mind, I see no bar for IS fighters, foreign or otherwise to being both highly religious and also able to carry out acts of violence on behalf of IS and, by extension in their own beliefs, on the behalf of Islam. Indeed, this interpretation of jihad is central to the doctrine of Sunni Salafist extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and IS. Al Qaeda were the first group to draw the distinction between a ‘near enemy’ (corrupt, autocratic governments in Muslim lands) and the ‘far enemy’ (non Muslim governments outside the region who had supported the near enemy). They also declared that jihad should be seen as a pre-emptive obligation, meaning they did not have to wait for a direct attack in order to ‘defend’ themselves.

This prevalent attitude is reinforced in the work of Frissen, Toguslu, Van Ostaeyen and d’Haenen, who have investigated the use of Koranic verses in the online propaganda magazine of IS, Daqib. They argue that the internet has brought about the rise of a so-called ‘Electronic Jihad’ in which groups such as IS use the Koran and other Islamic verse in a cherry picked and truncated manner in order to create and spread an extreme and inaccurate

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33 Al-Dawoody, Armed Jihad, p. 480
34 George Joffe, Global Jihad and Foreign Fighters in the Journal of Small Wars and Insurgencies, Volume 27 (Routledge, 2016), pp. 800 - 4
version of Islam. Unsurprisingly, the most frequently used Koranic verses in Daqib are Ayat 194 and 217 from Sura 2, which discuss a legal framework in which waging war and killing may be justified in defence against the modern ‘Crusaders’ of ‘the West’. Daqib also repeatedly insists that fighting is not only justifiable, but that fighting non-Muslims is in fact a religious obligation that all Muslims should embark upon. The analysis by Frissen et al. reveals that IS only chose the most provocative parts of the most extreme verses from core Islamic texts, leaving out parts which speak of making peace or of the mercy of Allah. Islamist scholars state that the historical context of these verses in the Koran should be taken into account, i.e. they referred to historical opponents who broke peace treaties with the Muslims and are not representative of the wider Islamic understanding of appropriate relations with non-Muslims, which generally encourage peaceful interaction.

Clearly, however, when propaganda such as Daqib is viewed in isolation, it would appear that the Islamic State is religiously justified in its warlike actions. This then, falsely, further reassures foreign fighters and potential foreign fighters that their cause is just and sanctioned by the Koran, Muhammed and Allah. In the short film ‘My Jihad’, Belgian journalist Rudi Vranckx interviews many Muslims in the community of Vilvoorde, which has had a large number of young Muslim men leave to fight for IS. The focus of the film is on Belgian Muslim convert Sulayman Van Ael, an Imam in the local community. He explains that one of the key problems facing Belgian Muslims (especially converts, such as himself), is that most of the Flemmish language books on Islam are connected to the extremist Salafist interpretation of Islam. In families who are not fully familiar with the religion (and are often baffled as to the reasons why their relation has converted), Muslims turned to the only literature available in the vernacular, which reinforced many of the type of messages pushed out by IS in Daqib and other publications and videos. Van Ael has set up schools and foundations to combat this and preaches a much more mainstream and peaceful form of Islam in Flemish, which he hopes will help reverse this trend. It is easy to see how disaffected Muslims who feel cut off from the society around them and could be swayed by these extremist writings if there is nobody else to correct them or debate with them.

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36 Frissen et al., *Capitalizing on the Koran*, p. 496
37 Frissen et al., *Capitalizing on the Koran*, p. 499
38 *My Jihad*. Online. Directed by Mark De Visscher, 2015
Clearly then, foreign fighters in IS were fully aware of the actions of IS before joining and were aware that it was likely they would be involved either indirectly or directly in these atrocities by joining and still felt that their religious motivation was acceptable and indeed correct. For many who were indoctrinated into the dogma of IS, their involvement in murder and oppression was a religious act in itself and would cause the wider Muslim community to view them favourably. Therefore, the fact that these individuals took part in acts widely seen as un-Islamic or non-religious does not discount their claims that their core motivation for joining the organisation was religious in nature.

Non-Violent Intent

Not all foreigners who travelled to the Levant to join IS did so with the intention of going as fighters, one example of a foreigner who joined IS not to fight (initially in any case) is Tareq Kamleh, a paediatrician from Australia who joined the group in 2015. In a video released in 2015, he gives an interview about his work and why he joined IS, stating ‘I saw this as part of my Jihad for Islam, to help the Muslim Umma, in the area that I could, which is the medical field’. In the video, he is interviewed in a clean and well-equipped paediatric ward, surrounded by new born babies; the message is clear - the Islamic State is flourishing and caring for its citizens. He goes on to further explain his motivations and admonishes other Muslims, ‘We are dealing with the countless numbers of burnt children that are coming in now from the continuous bombings that America is dropping on us. You are living in the countries that are sending us rockets. You are living in the countries that are killing Muslims in here and you are still paying taxes to them. You have no honour. You have no self-respect. You have no love for fellow Muslims.’

Again, Kamleh states that he joined IS for religious reasons, to help against what he sees as corrupt Western governments attacking Islam but using his medical skills rather than fighting. His case attracted a lot of media interest in his native Australia, especially as he is described as having had a ‘playboy’ lifestyle before joining IS. He seems to have been converted into a fundamentalist after a camping trip with some unknown companions in

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2013; his friends and colleagues have remarked on a total personality change following this and he embraced an extreme form of Islam, the religion of his parents. He later renounced his Australian citizenship, stating ‘The continuous bombing of civilian targets here by the coalition has done nothing but disappoint me of the country I once loved so much’. He seems to have become more radicalised the longer he spent with IS, rather than becoming disillusioned. In another video from 2017, he has gone from hospital scrubs and light stubble in a clean wardroom to having a long beard, looking thinner, wearing military fatigues and carrying an assault rifle in a dark subterranean passage. His language has also changed- he directly insults and threatens the leaders of the Western world, rather than attempting to appeal to them. Kamleh was killed in an air strike in Raqqa in June 2018, but he remained defiant to the end and consistently cited religious motivations for joining IS.

The effect of coalition bombing on the towns held by IS had a similar hardening effect on Jack Letts, a British Muslim convert. Motivated by a belief in living under Sharia law, he learned Arabic in Jordan before moving on to Kuwait and then eventually Iraq and Syria, ending up living on ‘the Oxford Street of Raqqa’ and marrying an Iraqi woman, who has since given birth to his son. He strenuously denies being an IS member, despite posting photographs of himself making the IS salute and living in regions controlled by IS. Letts admitted his experience in Raqqa at one point left him welcoming the 2015 Paris attacks after seeing children killed at first hand by coalition aircraft bombing raids. ‘To be honest at the time I thought it was a good thing,’ he told British ITV News, when asked about his reaction to the terror attacks that left 130 dead in the French capital.

Pro IS Female Foreign Fighters

It was not just men who answered the call of al-Baghdadi; as already noted above, 13% of foreigners joining IS were women, and most of these did not go to IS as fighters. Women

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such as Tooba Gondal, a French born British woman of Pakistani descent, who joined IS and was used to actively recruit more female members from the UK and other countries. Gondal used her Twitter account to share IS propaganda, celebrating executions and terrorist attacks and extolling others to join her, proclaiming, ‘Sisters come to the land of freedom! We have everything here for you’. 44 Hundreds of women heeded these appeals and again gave up comfortable lives to be so called ‘jihadi brides’ in IS. However, just as with the idea that all the male fighters left their countries because they were isolated loners who were brainwashed online, grouping all women in the category of ‘jihadi brides’ is equally over simplistic.

The motivations of the women who joined IS have been explored by Emily Winterbotham and Elizabeth Pearson, who have written a paper for RUSI in which they explore the gender dynamics of radicalisation. 45 They state that marriage or the appeal of marriage to IS fighters was a factor for many of these women, but that a myriad of other draws must be considered: adventure or thrill seeking, a feeling of isolation in their communities and a rejection of Western feminism and way of life, which may clash with some traditional Islamic values. IS told these women that they would be able to live as they wished, wear what they wanted to wear, with a strong possibility of real empowerment and status. IS idealised men as warriors and women as mothers who were to stay at home and help create a new Islamic Utopia. They would be given a home, financial support, and marry a high-status husband- a potentially appealing prospect for young women bored at home.

The reality for these women was bitterly different to what they were told to expect; they had to live with daily air strikes, food shortages, strict dress codes, not being able to enter public spaces without a man and strict punishments for even the most minor transgressions.

Winterbotham and Pearson argue that the narrative of foreigners going to join IS has painted men as actively wanting to join a violent terrorist organisation, whereas women have been painted as being naively duped into going by recruiters on social media. This is not the case; the women were as aware as the men of what might lie ahead of them.

In all of the above cases, and the vast majority of other examples I have examined, religious motivation is the primary stated reason for joining IS for foreign fighters and supporters.


However, there is a possibility that this is simply a catch-all excuse and indeed what followers of IS are expected to say— it has branded itself as a religious state, after all. It is essential to investigate other motivations.

Non-Religious Factors: Economic, Political, Social

Bhui, Everitt and Jones conducted a survey on depression, psychosocial adversity and limited social assets and their possible links to violent radicalisation as there is a generally perceived idea that those who join IS are likely to be from a deprived background or be poorly educated. They questioned 608 men and women of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin in East London and Bradford in the UK aged between 18 and 45 about their sympathies for violent protest and terrorism. They then asked a series of questions about how they felt about the society they lived in, such as their opinion on British troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, the level of their political involvement in society, whether they had been subjected to racial discrimination, their physical health and whether they had any depressive symptoms.

The results, presented in a series of comprehensive graphs and tables, found three distinct groups—those who were most sympathetic to terrorism, those who were least sympathetic and a larger control group of moderates. They found that depressive symptoms, such as hopelessness, suicidal thoughts and low self-esteem were most common in those who sympathised with terrorism the most and the same was true of those who suffered from social isolation. Their preconceived ideas about those with low social capital were challenged, however, as it was shown that they generally were the least sympathetic to terrorism.

This study is further supported by Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, who have collected data on thousands of foreign IS fighters from around the world. They note that although most foreign IS fighters come from the Middle East and Arab world, there is a significant number that come from the European Union countries, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other developed ‘Western’ nations. Their study provides a full analysis of the link between economic, political, and social conditions and the global phenomenon of IS foreign fighters. Their results demonstrate that, contrary to the recent

47 Bhui, Everitt & Jones, Violent Radicalisation, p.3
48 Bhui, Everitt & Jones, Violent Radicalisation, pp. 5-6
49 Bhui, Everitt & Jones, Violent Radicalisation, p.6
50 Benmelech and Klor, What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?, pp. 1-3
beliefs of many in the media, economists and policy makers, negative economic conditions of these individuals in their home countries is not a key factor in their motivation to join IS. They found quite the contrary- many of the foreign fighters originate from countries with ‘high levels of economic development, low income inequality and highly developed political institutions’. They found quite the contrary- many of the foreign fighters originate from countries with ‘high levels of economic development, low income inequality and highly developed political institutions’. Many of the fighters were also well educated, with undergraduate and post graduate degrees from their home countries.

They conclude that poverty is not a motivating factor, but there must be a reason for Western European countries accounting for a disproportionately high percentage of foreign ISIS fighters. They suggest that the ethnic and linguistic homogenous nature of these countries prevent easy assimilation of Muslims who emigrate to these countries, leading to a feeling of isolation and this leads to some of the conditions required to be radicalised.

Winterbotham and Pearson, when discussing non-religious motivations for foreign women joining IS give a number of possibilities for triggering extremism in Muslim communities in Western nations. They note that in older generations, there tends to be a fierce opposition to the ideas of Islamic extremism and a more relaxed attitude to issues such as Islamic interpretations of dress codes. They state that younger women in these communities often follow a stricter adherence to Islam and see this as a rejection of parental norms and challenging your family, a sort of teenage rebellion.

The same study also states that many of the young women joining IS are converts to Islam- as many as 25% of female IS members from France are converts. Thomas Sealy discusses the perceptions and treatment of British converts to Islam in the mainstream British media. Rather than being embraced as assign of Britain’s diversity and open-mindedness, it is depicted as an overwhelmingly negative phenomenon. Such is the association that Islam has with terrorism in British newspapers that the perception is that it is not compatible with British values and society, so converts tend to be ostracised by their own communities and not fully accepted by Muslim communities, who sometimes view them with a degree of suspicion or distain. Leon Moosavi agrees, stating ‘conversion to Islam is often undermined

52 Benmelech and Klor, *What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?*, p. 11
as a counter-intuitive anomaly that requires an ulterior motive instead’. In such conditions, it is easy to understand how someone feeling cut off from society can be talked into following an extremist group who offers them a sense of identity and purpose.

Another factor that should not be overlooked in radicalizing Muslims and inspiring thousands to take up arms with extremist groups is the impact that the American led Global War on Terror, which started in the wake of the September 11th attacks in New York in 2001, has had across the globe. Many questioned the motivations of and point of the US led attack on the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the hunt for Osama Bin Laden and even more questioned the legality, validity and sense of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. These wars have spilt over into neighbouring states such as Pakistan and Syria, where unmanned aerial vehicles and special forces are commonly used to strike targets by the US military and her allies. This has had an extremely regrettable impact in terms of civilian deaths. Between 2001 and 2016 in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistani regions, the estimated civilian death toll directly from fighting stood at an estimated 31,000 people. The Iraq Body Count Project has a conservative civilian death toll from fighting in Iraq from 2003 to 2019 between 183,348 and 205,908 people. Between March 2003 and March 2005, it claims that the US and her allies accounted for the largest share (37%) of the 24,865 recorded civilian deaths.

When confronted by these shocking statistics, it does not require a huge stretch of the imagination to understand that the unimaginable suffering that this would have inflicted on millions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and other states would have been enough to radicalise many and turn them against the US led military coalition and the men they sought to give control of these countries to. This ill feeling through the destruction wrought by war will certain account for many of the IS fighters local to Syria and Iraq, but is the same true of the foreign fighters?

Tareq Kamalah made it clear in the IS videos of which he was a star that one of the key reasons he became involved in the conflict was a result of seeing the civilians killed in missile strikes. He shows children who he claims have been hurt, and some later died as a consequence of, coalition air strikes. It is unsurprising that someone in his situation, who had

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to confront the human cost of the fighting on a daily basis could become more radicalised, rather than less so when he was in the Islamic State. Given the complex post-colonial British and French history of the Near East region, and of the British, Russian and American involvement in Afghanistan and the disastrous period of Partition in India and Pakistan overseen by the British, it must be expected that there is a certain resentment felt towards these nations and others besides across this region. Given this bigger picture, rather than just the select modern Western focused version of the Global War on Terror, foreign involvement in the region yet again is sure to inspire many from across the globe to see these countries as the aggressors and at fault, as opposed to the liberators and defenders as democracy they see themselves as. This is all fuel for the fire of extremism and means more local and foreign volunteers for radical groups such as IS.

A War on the Defensive?

In the short film *10 Days in the Islamic State*, Jürgen Todenhöfer, a German journalist is given unprecedented access to the Islamic State by Abu Qatada (formerly Christian Emde), a German born Muslim convert and spokesperson for ISIS. Qatada states that Germany is an active target for IS, giving a range of reasons from aggression from the Holy Roman Empire during the time of the Crusades to arming and training Kurdish fighters in the IS conflict. Again, Qatada explicitly states that it is Western aggression that has created the situation of the Islamic State.

Todenhöfer directly confronts Qatada about the barbarity of IS at one stage during an interview, asking him, ‘You, the Islamic State, have beheaded people, sometimes in spectacular fashion and you’ve filmed those beheadings, you have introduced slavery, you have enslaved Yazidis. Do you think beheading people and slavery are progress for humanity?’ Qatada replies, ‘I think there will never be a time in human history when these things don’t happen and that is part of our religion, to teach the unbelievers to fear us and we will keep on beheading people. It doesn’t matter if they are Shi’a whether they are Christians or Jews or whatever else. We will continue the practice and people should think about that. James Foley or whoever didn’t die because we started the fight, they died because their ignorant governments didn’t help them.’ In this one statement, Qatada makes several points clear about the beliefs of IS: they feel justified in their violent actions and believe that they are wholly Islamic and will in fact be pleasing to Allah; they don’t believe that they started

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the conflict, they believe they are on the defensive; they hold foreign governments wholly to account not only for the conflict, but for their own savage acts, as if they have no other choice but to behave in that manner.

Overwhelmingly then, the primary motivation for foreign fighters joining the Islamic State is religious in its nature. The vast majority of those who have given interviews or written online about their motivations from the start to the current moment of this ongoing conflict have made it clear that they believe they are carrying out the will of Allah in the defence of the wider Muslim community. Other factors are present, such as by joining IS, they often escape societies which have shunned them (deliberately or not) and found a sense of purpose or identity within IS that they could not find at home. However, these factors are almost always direct connected to religion, rather than a stand-alone reason. Additionally, these individuals, who risk life, limb and mental health for their cause are often happy to accept the most violent and barbaric of behaviour in connection with this ‘religious’ behaviour.

The Motivations of Anti-IS Foreign Fighters

While the religiously based ideals of the Islamic State have attracted thousands of foreign fighters, the enemies of IS on the battlefield have similarly had many foreigners volunteer to fight against the fledgling state. Some of these joined the Free Syrian Army units early in the conflict that began against Bashar Al Asad in Syria and ended up also fighting their corner against IS. The majority, however, joined the international units of the Kurdish Peshmerga and YPG (People’s Protection Units). 60 When IS started to grab land and Mosul fell, for a few weeks nobody opposed them throughout Iraq and they got as far as seizing parts of the suburbs of Baghdad- it looked as if the whole country would collapse. However, the fightback was spearheaded by the Kurds in the North of Iraq. Long persecuted by the Iraqi state under Saddam Hussein, the Kurds saw an opportunity to fight not simply to defend the status quo, but to finally ‘earn’ an independent country or fully autonomous region for themselves- they are currently the world’s largest ethnic group without a nation of their own. This story of a plucky underdog rising to defend their country and be the only force to stand in the way of IS appealed to many and directly led to some foreign fighters joining their ranks; it is these men and women I will examine at in this chapter to see if their motivations for fighting are similar to those of IS.

**Difficulties with Direct Contact**

I have made multiple attempts to contact current and former foreign fighters with the Peshmerga and YPG. I had hoped that my own military experiences working with the Kurds in Iraq might be a good way to get people to open up to me and answer a few basic questions about their motivations, but this has still proven very difficult. As with IS, the Peshmerga and YPG have capitalised on the use of social media to recruit members, although the Peshmerga sites are more open and tend not to be shut down by the platforms they run on. For example, there is a Facebook group called ‘YPG’ for the People’s Defence Units in Rojava and Northern Syria who, when contacted request that you follow a link to www.ypg-international.org, from where you are encouraged to e-mail them from an encrypted e-mail platform. I sent a message explaining my research, background and that I was hoping to investigate what their motivations for foreigners joining the group were, and whether there was any religious motivation. I have had only one short reply from someone going by the name of Herval Fazil, which stated ‘we are a revolutionary Force. Our Fighters come to defend a revolution or humanity, but not a religion’. This in itself is extremely revealing- the people I was trying to contact were generally confused by or put off by the religious focus of some of my early questions; the very fact that I was attempting to make an association with their cause and religious motivation was baffling to them. A further e-mail requesting more information on this subject was met with a flat refusal due to ‘security reasons’ and a suggestion to use pre-existing interviews.

During the course of this chapter, I will examine whether this attitude of a secular motivation is the most common among foreign fighters in the Kurdish units, as opposed to the strong religious motivations held by their opposite numbers in IS. In the absence of further direct contact with the fighters, I must again turn to previous interviews, journals and articles to ascertain whether this secular view, so different to the motivations of the IS fighters, is the most common motivation for the foreigners in the Peshmerga and YPG units.

**Who were the Opposition?**

Henry Tuck, Tanya Silverman and Candance Smalley have written a paper on Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria in Iraq, examining a group of over 300 of them to try and investigate their backgrounds and why they chose to fight; this provides some important
statistics for this paper. Only 3% of those joining anti-IS groups were female and almost exclusively took up combat roles in units such as the all-female Kurdish YPJ groups, in stark contrast to their opposite numbers in IS, who typically took on matriarchal or domestic roles. One of these women is Gill Rosenberg, originally from Canada and a former Israeli army pilot, she was convicted of a lucrative phone scam in her home country and stated that her desire to fight IS came from wanting to prevent genocide and to atone for her criminal past. This provides another example of motivation in a belief of some kind of karma, whereby their ‘good deeds’ of defending those who cannot do it themselves will wipe out past sins.

38% of anti-IS foreign fighters are US citizens, with the UK providing the next largest group at 14% and most in these groups are former military personnel. The US and UK spearheaded the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and this may explain why over 50% of the anti-IS fighters hail from these two nations. Caleb Stevens is one such American citizen who was attending the United States Military Academy when he was inspired to go and fight against IS, stating that once he saw what the YPG were doing he thought ‘here’s a cause that’s worth fighting for’. Stevens was part of a unit made up of other Westerners and he states that some of them were militant anarchists and some were there for reasons a diverse as holding feminist beliefs, but he does not expand on these examples. Stevens, as with many others who volunteered to fight against IS, was also encouraged to take action as he faces little or no persecution on his return to his home country, a fact that has attracted some who are simply in search of adventure.

The YPG and Peshmerga are not widely seen as terrorist organisations and there is generally no law against volunteering for these organisations. However, the YPG is the Syrian branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which is registered as a terrorist group by the majority of Western governments, including the USA. As the Kurdish militia groups have

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61 Tuck, Silverman, Smalley, *Shooting in the right direction*, p. ii
62 Tuck, Silverman, Smalley, *Shooting in the right direction*, p. ii
66 Orton, *Insight Turkey*, p. 157
generally been the strongest ‘local’ ally for the coalition in country, these differences have been strategically overlooked. So, although there may be higher level complications on a national scale (for example the PKK are also engaged in fighting Turkish forces, a NATO country who also make up a small part of the soldiers and aircrew in the anti-IS coalition), for individuals, there are usually no legal repercussions.

*Key Motivations*

As IS slaughtered the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar and besieged the town of Kobani in Syria in 2014, the flow of Western fighters into the YPG reached its zenith in reaction to these well documented atrocities. In a study analysing foreign fighters in the Kurdish militia groups, Kyle Orton tells us that most were ‘apolitical military veterans’ and breaks down these individuals into several categories, based on their motivations for fighting.  

The first of his categories is military veterans who felt that they could bring their skills to defend a helpless people in the face of the IS onslaught. Next were military veterans of the US led Iraq and Afghanistan wars, who felt duty bound to ‘finish the job’ their countries had started, and their comrades had died for. Interestingly, a further category of military veterans comprised those who had missed the war fighting phases of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and felt as if they had not achieved enough or lived up to the example of their near peers in these wars. There are also those military veterans who felt uncomfortable returning to normal ‘civilian’ life at home and saw their entry into this conflict as a return to a life that they preferred rather than being at home in peace time.

Aside from the purely military groups listed above, there are also those seeking money or fame through association with the war, who often capitalise on their experiences (sometimes falsely) by writing blogs or making films of their time in the conflict. Then there are the ‘drifters and lunatics’, some who were suffering from mental health problems and did not understand the full gravity of their situation and others who were there to thrive off the violence without restriction or boundaries. Finally, there are the adventurers, who simply seek a thrill and a test of themselves, although this motive may often be hidden behind stated moral or ideological reasons. None of these groups is mutually exclusive and nothing prohibits an individual being motivated by several of these factors simultaneously.

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67 Orton, *Insight Turkey*, pp. 162 - 3
This situation, where anyone can go and fight a war for as long as they want for a cause that most will view as being just, (even if they don’t agree with the methods used), and then return to their former lives without fear of legal persecution may in itself be a very strong motivator. One of the motivations for foreign fighters can be a simple love of adventure or a need to test oneself in the extreme environment of warfare. For those with this inclination and perhaps with a romantic idea of what a ‘just’ war might look like, then joining the underdog side of the Kurds who are fighting against the despotic organisation of IS might just be the best way to achieve these goals. For those who claim this as a romantic adventure, it would be wise to not always take their stated motivations at face value; being effectively a mercenary in a foreign conflict may diminish the allure of their adventure and so it seems likely they would adopt another motivation, such as a desire to help the Yazidis or Kurds, rather than a very callous looking wish to fight simply for pleasure or test themselves physically and mentally.

_Fighting for Profit?_

Two of these potential adventurers are former British soldiers, Jamie Read and James Hughes, who volunteered to fight for the Kurds and in an interview with Sky News said that they were treated ‘like royalty’ by their hosts.68 They do not specify which group they were attached to, but they were in Northern Iraq, so it is more likely to be Peshmerga, rather than the Syrian YPG units. They were posted to a small group of Western volunteers, some of who had no military experience but were ‘driven by the desire to smash the Islamic State’. Read stated, ‘We couldn’t justify sitting back here in the UK watching IS pretty much do what they wanted; a lot of innocent people getting killed out there for no reason at all’. They go on to say that the videos IS made of beheading non-combatants was the final straw for them and led to them feeling that they had to take action. Unlike foreign fighters in IS, they were told that if they wished to leave, they could do so at any time- they were not kept in place through fear, but through a desire to help the Kurds. Read and Hughes make it clear that their motivations for fighting were from a sense that they could make a difference to the conflict with their military background and therefore should make a difference, rather than be bystanders from a distance.

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However, their claims have been undermined by other witnesses stating that they were nowhere near the front lines, took part in no fighting and were only filming in an attempt to get famous and sell their footage for financial gain.\(^{69}\) Herein lies one of the key differences between the foreign fighters on both sides of the conflict; although the IS fighter may return to a select few countries to be hailed as a hero, they will be shunned or prosecuted in most. Those who fight against IS return to a hero’s welcome and the appreciative fascination of the media and general public. This opens up a wider range of motivations for those fighting IS, including financial gain and fame, which will not usually be the case (in a positive sense) for IS fighters. Many foreign fighters, who did see combat action in the conflict have published memoirs of their actions, calling into question whether this was their intention all along.

One potential example of this is Mike Peshmerganor, a former Norwegian soldier (\textit{a nom de guerre}) who wrote \textit{Blood Makes the Grass Grow: a Norwegian Volunteer’s War Against the Islamic State}. In this he states his motivations for joining the conflict was the frustration of seeing the chaos IS was creating and not understanding why his government was not deploying the military to combat the threat. He wrote, ‘I couldn’t think of a single better reason for the government to send troops abroad than to stop an ongoing genocide. And what about all the foreign fighters from Europe who fought for ISIS? Didn’t we have a responsibility to stop our own citizens from actively perpetrating war crimes and other atrocities in Iraq? Who will prevent them from returning home and carrying out terrorist attacks here, in our own cities? I realized it was futile to wait for Norway to engage directly in the fight against ISIS. I had to do it on my own.’\(^{70}\)

Peshmerganor is one of the most well-known anti-IS foreign fighters thanks to his strong online presence, especially on the social media platform Instagram. At the time of writing, he has over 178,000 followers on Instagram, who have been able to follow his actions against IS in graphic detail since March 2015.\(^ {71}\) He is certainly no battle-dodger there for publicity as many of his personal videos are from deadly combat with IS fighters, which begs the question of why he has chosen to publish his involvement so heavily. As he keeps his identity secret throughout, we should be able to rule out fame as a key motivator. It seems that his account is

\(^{69}\) Simon Murphy, \textit{Jihadi hunters... or fantasists? They said they risked their lives to battle ISIS in Syria. So why do witnesses insist these UK fighters were miles from action... and only in it for money?}, Daily Mail, 27 December 2014, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2888715/Jihadi-hunters-fantasists-said-risked-lives-battle-ISIS-Syria-witnesses-insist-UK-fighters-miles-action-money.html, accessed 04/05/2019

\(^{70}\) Mike Peshmerganor, \textit{Blood Makes the Grass Grow: A Norwegian Volunteer’s War Against the Islamic State} (Independently Published, 2018), p. 3

\(^{71}\) Peshmerganor, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/peshmerganor/?hl=en, accessed 22/05/2019
mainly used to spread awareness of the Peshmerga groups and Kurdish cause, rather than from any personal gain. So, not all those who utilise social media are doing so for financial reasons, as it appears Read and Hughes may have been.

Military Veterans

Patrick Maxwell is a former US Marine who fought in Iraq in 2006, leaving the service in 2011. In 2014, he returned to Iraq to fight IS, stating that he couldn’t stay away having seen the country he fought so hard to try and improve fall into the hands of IS. Matthew Van Dyke, who fought with Libyan rebels against Muammar Gadaffi and then set up ‘Sons of Liberty International’, a group training Americans who wanted to fight IS, has met many of veterans like Maxwell. He states that these veterans ‘once did something that they view as significant with the US military, now they’ve come back [to their home country] and they’re doing a job that they consider to be menial labour or something that they’re not happy with. They want a sense or feeling of belonging or importance again.’ He goes on to say that the connection between the US military’s enemy in Iraq, Al Qaeda, and IS has not gone unnoticed, ‘They see it as the undoing of years of their own [work] for the US military in Iraq. You spent years [fighting], saw comrades die, and perhaps suffered injuries... And then you see, in a matter of a month or so, the sweep of ISIS through Iraq. It really must get to these people.’ In this we can see one of the motivations mentioned by Orton earlier of former military men seeking a lost sense of belonging and a duty to finish the work started by their countries in the Iraq War of 2003-2011. This extension of the former foreign policy for the US and other nations is in itself a motivator for many fighters; individuals such as Peshmerganor feel disappointed by the lack of action by their governments in the face of an organisation committing crimes against humanity openly and frequently.

Non-Military Personnel

Jac Holmes became a well-known British fighter for the YPG groups in Syria, conducting many interviews with foreign media across a span of several years. He had joined the YPG in 2015 and was killed attempting to defuse a suicide bomb belt in Raqqa in April 2018. In an

74 Tuck, Silverman, Smalley, Shooting in the right direction, p. iii
interview with the BBC, he stated ‘I think the fight against Daesh is everyone’s war. It’s the world’s war, there’s Daesh all over Europe, especially in England and we need to stop them here and in Iraq, or they’re going to spread’. So, Holmes saw it as his duty to fight not only to help the people in Syria and Iraq, but in order to help protect Europe and the UK from a terrorist threat- he views his actions as defensive, despite travelling thousands of miles to fight in a foreign country. Perhaps ironically this is, as we have already seen, the same reasoning many IS fighters used to justify their actions- they thought they were defending Islam from sustained attacks by the West and Arab dictators.

Religious Motivations

So far, all those examined have professed secular reasons for joining the fight against IS, but are there any who see religion as their main motivator? Tuck, Silverman and Smalley state that there is a small minority who do. Some are Muslims who display a ‘passionate support for a community that transcends national parallels’, the Islamic concept of the ‘ummah’, the world-wide Muslim community, the concept of which is exploited by IS propaganda relentlessly. However, anti-IS fighters who cite the protection of the ummah as their motivation are protecting the communities attacked by IS, who in turn claim to be protecting the wider ummah by aggressive expansionism. Muslims are not the only anti-IS fighters who are drawn to the conflict on religious grounds; one American Christian and military veterans, Brett, explained to ABC News that the quote from Jesus of ‘What you do unto the least of them, you do unto me’ inspired him to take up arms with Dwekh Nawsha and protect Christian communities in Iraq and Syria.

However, as noted at the start of this chapter, most Peshmerga and YPG fighters would find the association with their own reasons for fighting and religion to be confusing. They fight for other ideals, be they Kurdish nationalism, socialism, anti-fascism or feminism, but religion motivation seems to be the exception rather than the rule, in contrast to IS fighters. While the motivations of IS fighters was almost always linked to religion in some manner, there is no clear overarching motivator for those fighting against IS. The list of motivating factors from Orton above corresponds closely with other suggestions made by Thomas et al.

and Ezrow and generally indicate a much more varied and secular range of influences for foreign fighters in these groups.\textsuperscript{77,78}

**Conclusion**

Throughout the course of the paper I have highlighted the importance of foreign fighters in the Islamic State conflict in order to illustrate the impact they have had in this war. I believe that the model IS and their enemies have utilised to entice foreign fighters to their causes will be used in near future asymmetric conflicts all over the world. In order to unlock the full potential of this recruiting, these groups will need to understand what motivated foreigners to take up arms for a cause far from home.

IS have clearly demonstrated that in a world many regard as increasingly secular, the appeal and power of religious righteousness, even when used to support heinous acts, is still an incredibly powerful too. As demonstrated in all cases examined above, the one unifying theme in the motivations of foreign fighters in the Islamic State is without doubt religion. For a group that has insisted that it was the new caliphate and the only true Islamic country in the world, this is perhaps unsurprising, but this war has unlocked a more extreme form of this blind following of Salafist Sunni Islam than any other conflict.

Conversely it is clear that within groups such the YPG or Peshmerga, individuals are only motivated by religion as an exception and not the rule. At first, the wide variety of reasons given in examples above may lead us to believe that there is no overarching motivator such as religion for IS foreign fighters. Foreigners who chose to fight IS did so for a wide variety of mostly secular reasons, but generally in reaction to the barbarity displayed by IS in their conquest of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; this initial disgust at the concept and actions of the Islamic State is the unifying motivator which brought such a diverse group of men and women together.

In the introduction it was suggested that by examining the motivations of IS foreign fighters, a path may be found to stemming the flow of young men and women from their families in Western countries to terrorist groups. This study has demonstrated that religion is the key motivator for these individuals, so the solution must surely also lie in religion. Much more must be done to combat the doctrine of IS and groups like them to illustrate that Islam is a

\textsuperscript{77} T.S. Thomas, S.D. Kiser, W.D. Casebeer *Warlords rising: Confronting violent non-state actors* (Lexington, 2005), p. 122

\textsuperscript{78} N. Ezrow, *Global politics and violent non-state actors* (Sage, 2017), p. 55
peaceful religion and any other interpretation of the Koran or other Islamic texts is harmful within the wider Muslim community.

Clearly, other factors are at play here as well, not least American and other Western nations’ foreign policy, but I think the costly and disastrous Middle Eastern wars of the past couple of decades are finally influencing a less ‘hands on’ international approach to the region which should encourage some stability. However, these nations cannot morally fully abandon places such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, they now also have a responsibility to ensure their rejuvenation of countries following the devastation wrought by war; this can come through soft diplomacy as well as military strength. There is also the issue of Muslim integration in is largely homogenous Western countries. More needs to be done to encourage understanding and the full incorporation of these families into the societies they live in as well as those societies taking an active and positive interest in their Muslim communities. While national foreign policy is not something many can do to change in the short term, combatting extremist versions of Islam by the spread of more moderate knowledge, especially to the youth and to converts, as well as helping Muslim communities integrate into better into the Western countries that they are already resident of are things that can and should be influenced at a grassroots level.

Alternative Interpretations

As discussed, the popular perception of the motivations for foreign fighters joining IS is that they are isolated in their societies at home and by joining IS they find a sense of belonging and purpose which was not available to them previously. However, if it only through lacking a sense of camaraderie that is the key factor in this instance, there is nothing preventing these individuals preaching at a local mosque, or joining a football team or the armed forces- all avenues that people of all walks of life can find a sense of community. I still maintain that the drive to join IS is religious in it’s base nature- what sets IS apart is that they were declaring a new Caliphate specifically to appeal to Muslims all over the world- religion is the key factor. Economic and political factors certainly provide a secondary motivator, but religious fanaticism is the catalyst.
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