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## Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies

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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

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Before that, De Roy van Zuijdewijn has worked on various research projects on the foreign fighter phenomenon, studying historical cases, policies and threat perceptions. She is a member of the Steering Committee of the European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues (EENeT) and teaches in several courses for students and professionals. She co-developed the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) "[Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Comparing Theory & Practice](#)" on Coursera with Prof. dr. Edwin Bakker, attracting over 150.000 participants.

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Professor Malet has been researching foreign fighters since 2005 and is the author of *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford University Press) and co-editor of *Transnational Actors in War and Peace: Militants, Activists, and Corporations in World Politics* (Georgetown University Press). His book *Biotechnology and International Security* (Rowman and Littlefield) was inspired by his experience working in the office targeted in the 2001 anthrax attacks.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The literature on foreign fighters devotes considerable attention to the questions of why individuals join armed groups outside of their nation-states and their propensity for engaging in political violence after they return to their home countries. But what happens to those who do not return but go on to join new groups, or even new wars?

This paper examines career foreign fighters<sup>1</sup> who have traversed from one insurgency to another. We present an original dataset of over 50 individuals who served as foreign fighters in multiple insurgencies. More than half of those who could be identified as having served with more than one armed group achieved leadership positions, which is historically atypical for foreign fighters. Some become top leadership while a significant percentage also facilitate terror attacks.

The Syrian conflict has produced a policy debate about whether it is more dangerous to allow foreign fighters to return or to leave them unaccounted. This study provides the first evidence that foreign fighters who survive their first tours accumulate resources, develop skills, and transfer their abilities to new violent actors. Our findings indicate that career foreign fighters pose a greater and broader security threat than returning, one-off foreign fighters.

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign fighters have been a preeminent international security challenge of the twenty-first century. They have been a facet of civil wars throughout modern history. The presence of tens of thousands of foreign fighters in current conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere raised concerns that some will return to home countries to perpetrate domestic terrorism or radicalize the next generation of extremists. These provisions created international disputes about how to address prisoners and returnees. But the binary debate over whether foreign fighters are more of a threat if they return or if they stay misses an important factor: those who continue on to become career foreign fighters.

While research on foreign fighters has focused on cycles of recruitment, fighting, and returning, there have been foreign fighters throughout history who have instead gone from one conflict to another. Some of these individuals have crossed ideological boundaries, fighting for groups aligned with mutually exclusive communist, ethnic, and jihadist ideologies.<sup>2</sup> To illustrate, one individual who served in multiple conflicts around the African Great Lakes clearly established himself as a career foreign fighter, reporting he had served in seven different groups and adhered to the ideologies of all of them, including nationalist

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1 The authors use the term “foreign fighter” in this report. The term “foreign terrorist fighter” (FTF) can also be used to denote the individuals described herein.

2 David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 171, 227-231. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199939459.001.0001>.

parties from different countries.<sup>3</sup> While some professional adventurers or mercenaries might serve with several armed groups or with the same organization in multiple theaters of conflict, typically professional mercenaries do not become career foreign fighters because insurgencies do not pay as well or reliably.<sup>4</sup>

This study examines individual jihadists who served as foreign fighters in multiple groups, building “careers” across multiple conflicts, with evidence that many enjoy career progression from foot soldiers to top leadership. It presents data on more than 50 career foreign fighters and case studies of three who served in multiple conflicts and became influential in the jihadist movement globally. Prior analysis of foreign fighters has not focused specifically on career foreign fighters. Our analysis, however, indicates that career foreign fighters can have a significant impact far beyond just the conflicts in which they choose to fight. Given the breadth of their reach, greater understanding of the motivations, lived experiences, and lasting impact of career foreign fighters is needed to develop more effective counterinsurgency (COIN) and countering violent extremism (CVE) programs and policies.

To assess the impact of career foreign fighters, it is necessary to delineate the individuals examined. We adopt the definition of foreign fighters as non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts.<sup>5</sup> We therefore measure the careers of individuals who fought with non-state insurgent groups during civil wars. We do not examine participation in multiple domestic extremist groups or the spatial movement of the members of terrorist networks.

## FOREIGN FIGHTERS & FOREIGN CONFLICTS: EXAMINING CURRENT KNOWLEDGE

### Becoming a Foreign Fighter: Pathways & Motivations

To understand the career development of foreign fighters in conflict zones, we must first understand who leaves to become a foreign fighter. This question of the who, why, and how has inspired many scholars, mostly to conduct case studies.<sup>6</sup> Consensus seems to exist around the how question: in the majority of

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3 United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, “Combatants on Foreign Soil: An Assessment of their Current Status and of Measures to Facilitate their Disarmament, Repatriation, and Inclusion in National Demobilisation and Reintegration Programmes,” *UNOSAA Issue Paper* (2007): 19.

4 Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 9.

5 Ibid.

6 Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol, “Who Are They and Why Do They Go: The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (2014): 100-10; Daniel H. Heinke and Jan Raudszus, “German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 1 (2015): 18-21; Jytte Klausen, “Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no.1 (2015): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948>; Adrian Shtuni, “Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria,” *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 4 (2015): 11-14; Marco Nilsson, “Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local Jihad: Interview Evidence from Swedish Jihadists,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, vol.5 (2015): 343-58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1005459>; Edwin Bakker and Roel De Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, vol. 5 (2016): 837-57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1209806>; Francesco Marone, “Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq,” *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews*

cases, social networks and facilitators are the key factors in explaining mobilization.<sup>7</sup> Foreign fighters mostly travel in (small) groups of friends and relatives and are often part of social networks with other (prospective) foreign fighters. Less consensus exists around the questions of who joins and why. When it comes to ideological motivations, we know that foreign fighters travel to fight in defense of a transnational community perceived to be under existential threat.<sup>8</sup> In terms of personal motivations, a wide variety of reasons—including those that are more worldly or material in nature—play a role in explaining who joins the fight and who does not. Consequently, establishing a universal profile for foreign fighters, as for terrorists, is probably futile.<sup>9</sup>

Further complicating the matter is that foreign fighters come from widely different contexts and backgrounds. Most current research is devoted to understanding Western foreign fighters, particularly the thousands of Europeans who have joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq since 2012. While descriptions of European foreign fighters might be useful in explaining the characteristics of fighters from a particular European country, these findings cannot be extrapolated to other geographical regions. Questions regarding who the thousands of foreign fighters originating from countries in North Africa and the Middle East or former Soviet Republics are or why they joined the fight elicit answers distinct from those of their European counterparts. Plenty of examples, outlined below, underscore the variety in foreign fighter backgrounds and motivations.

For instance, Vera Mironova interviewed foreign fighters for her book *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non-State Armed Groups* (2019). Chechen fighters in Syria told her that “Syria is a good training ground, but we are keeping our eye on the situation in Chechnya, and as soon as Kadirov [Head of the Chechen Republic] or Putin die, we will go back.”<sup>10</sup> For those fighters, some of whom already had previous fighting experience, going to Syria was a strategic, long-term decision in preparation for a more important battle. Unlike their Chechen counterparts, however, fighters from Central Asian Republics seemed to join as a result of social and economic grievances. According to Mironova, many Central Asian Republic fighters first worked in Russia, where they suffered from dire socio-economic conditions and felt discriminated against and marginalized.<sup>11</sup> Studies on the various foreign fighters emanating from European countries again illustrate a different picture. Many European fighters had links to “nonviolent

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*Journal of International Relations* 7, vol. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1205>; Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, “The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Case Study of the Netherlands,” in *Not Only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Kacper Rekawek (NATO IOS Press, 2017), 1-11.

7 Based on Marc Sageman’s “bunch of guys” observation, see Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Timothy Holman, “‘Gonna Get Myself Connected’: The Role of Facilitation in Foreign Fighter Mobilizations,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, vol. 2 (2016): 2-23; Sean C. Reynolds and Mohammed M. Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no.4 (2019): 661-86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1272456>.

8 Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 4.

9 Holman, “‘Gonna Get Myself Connected,’” 3.

10 Vera Mironova, *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non-State Armed Groups*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 112, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190939755.001.0001>.

11 Mironova, *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists*, 111.

but extreme organizations or preachers before they embraced violence.”<sup>12</sup> On a country level, Dutch fighters, for instance, were mostly under the age of 25, with middle and low education levels, originating from low or lower middle-class socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>13</sup>

Over the past years, more attention has been paid to the so-called crime-terror-nexus—the assumed overlap between terrorist and criminal networks in Europe. Recent studies have pointed at the high proportion of European jihadists who already had careers in crime prior to becoming foreign fighters,<sup>14</sup> which has implications for the skills they possess. Foreign fighters with criminal pasts can use their criminal skills for terrorist purposes and might already be more familiar with violence.<sup>15</sup> A criminal past could also affect the motives for becoming a foreign fighter. For example, seeking redemption for past criminal sins might be one of the core motives of these criminals-turned-terrorists.<sup>16</sup>

## Contributing to the Conflict: Varied Skillsets & Experiences

While the backgrounds and experience levels of foreign fighters may vary, many studies argue that foreign fighters only rarely bring extensive skillsets and experience to the conflict. For instance, Arab fighters that joined local Afghan fighters to combat the Soviet Union in the 1980s were described as rich Gulf kids without any fighting experience, often traveling to the conflict for only a few weeks during their summer holidays.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the military contribution of foreign fighters to the Afghan conflict has been called “not particularly significant, their number miniscule in comparison to the local conflict.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the first wave of foreign fighters who arrived in Bosnia in the early 1990s mostly lacked real fighting experience.<sup>19</sup>

However, in some cases, studies have shown that foreign fighters have brought significant skills and knowledge to their adopted conflicts. While, as noted above, the first wave of foreign fighters who joined the Bosnian war were relatively unskilled, the second wave, comprised of many commanders from the conflict in Afghanistan, brought useful experience to the Bosnian fight.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, of Chechen fighters who traveled to Syria, few could be considered “first-timers.”<sup>21</sup> Rather, the Chechens fighting in Syria

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12 Daniel Byman, *Road Warriors* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2019), 218.

13 Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol, “Who Are They and Why Do They Go,” 107.

14 Rekawek et al, *European Jihad: future of the Past? From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Final Report* (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2019), 5.

15 Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 6 (2016): 26.

16 Basra and Neumann, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorists Futures,” 26.

17 Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: IB Tauris & Co LTD, 2004), 76.

18 Barak Mendelsohn, “Foreign Fighters- Recent Trends,” *Orbis* (Spring 2011): 90, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2011.01.002>.

19 Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker, *Returning Western Foreign Fighters: The Case of Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Somalia* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2014), <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-De-Roy-van-Zuijdewijn-Bakker-Returning-Western-Foreign-Fighters-June-2014.pdf>.

20 Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, “Fearing the Western Muslim Foreign Fighter: The Connection Between Fighting the Defensive Jihad and Terrorist Activity in the West” (MA diss., University of Utrecht, 2014), 58.

21 Neil Hauer, “Chechen and North Caucasian Militants in Syria,” *The Atlantic Council* (2018).



were comprised mostly of experienced (foreign) fighters, some of whom had ascended into leadership positions and brought useful skillsets and experience with them.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, individuals with fighting expertise can prove useful for the groups they join. Such expertise could also explain why certain individuals rise within the ranks of those groups. First-time foreign fighters following similar trajectories can also become experienced fighters with useful skills and knowledge.<sup>23</sup> In addition to previous experience, the ability of individuals to learn, grow, and adapt to changing circumstances in conflict zones might be equally, if not more, important to understand which fighters will assume positions of leadership. As summarized by Mendelsohn, a fighter's "rise is a function not only of personal charisma or reputation (...), but mostly of knowledge accumulated through experience, often via activity in a number of locations or prolonged service in one arena."<sup>24</sup>

## Interacting with Local Dynamics: A Resource or a Liability?

Whereas many scholars have studied the motivations of foreign fighters and the potential threat they may pose upon return, far less attention has been paid to the impact of foreign fighters on the conflicts they join.<sup>25</sup> Kristin Bakke authored one of the few in-depth studies focused on fighters' impact in local contexts. In her study, Bakke notes that the conflict in Syria had raised many questions and worries about the influence of foreign fighters, "[y]et despite these policy concerns, little scholarship has explored the ways in which transnational insurgents, once they arrive, influence domestic struggles."<sup>26</sup> As Bakke explains, the influx of foreign fighters into a conflict can have different outcomes: it "might boost a domestic insurgent movement's strength by bringing along fighters, weapons, know-how, and financial resources," as is often assumed, but "they can also jeopardize a domestic movement's strength."<sup>27</sup> The latter can be explained by tensions between the local population and foreign fighters, which could lead to less support for the insurgent organization or even internal divisions or splintering. Bakke mentions the example of the Chechen resistance movement from which factions split off around 1999 as a result of disagreement on the question to what extent they were fighting a nationalist or global Islamist bat-

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22 Ibid.

23 See also the discussion on non-jihadist fighters in: Arkadiusz Legieć, "The Risks of Foreign Fighters in the Ukraine-Russia Conflict," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 150 (2019), 2.

24 Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters-Recent Trends," 195.

25 The literature on motivations has been discussed in the previous section. For literature on the threat posed by returnees, see for instance: Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 1–15; Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, "The Foreign Fighters' Threat: What History Can(not) Tell Us," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 5 (2014); Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq* (Brookings, 2014); Daniel Byman, "The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 8 (2015): 581-602; Phil Gurski, *Western Foreign Fighters: The Threat to Homeland and International Security* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Alastair Reed, Johanna Pohl, Marjolein Jegerings, *The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2017); David Malet and Rachel Hayes, "Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat?," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018): 1-19.

26 Kristin Bakke, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 150, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00156](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00156).

27 Bakke, "Help Wanted?" 185.

tle.<sup>28</sup> More recent examples include the split-off of the Syrian-focused al-Nusra Front from Al Qaeda in Iraq and tensions within al-Shabaab leading to splinter groups.<sup>29</sup> Clint Watts argues that splintering is no exception: “When defeats outnumber victories and objectives appear unattainable, fractures routinely form between local and foreign fighters. Locals with a post-conflict stake in the region rapidly break with foreign volunteers who lack local alternatives”.<sup>30</sup> These examples indicate that the effect of foreign fighters on domestic movements is not always positive and outright negative when it leads to in-fighting between factions.

Another potential consequence of the influx of foreign fighters is the internationalization of the conflict, drawing in other parties that support or fight them or use their presence “as an excuse to escalate a pre-existing conflict with local or regional adversaries.”<sup>31</sup> This has also been shown in the context of foreign fighters in Chechnya and Syria: they “have had a catastrophic impact on international and domestic perceptions of the opposition” and affected the power balance as groups preferred to support the known government rather than an unstable and unreliable jihadist fighting force.<sup>32</sup> In cases like these, the presence of foreign fighters can often have negative effects. There are also indications pointing to a more hybrid logic when it comes to the debate about foreign fighters as resource or nuisance. Their usefulness as a resource is dependent on the extent of their commitment or alignment to the cause.<sup>33</sup>

The effects foreign fighters have on local conflicts are not always unidirectional or easy to measure. A study by Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty on the influence of foreign fighters in Chechnya warns against simplified explanations. For instance, it cannot be claimed that the use of suicide attacks during the Second Chechen War (1999-2009) was a direct result of the influx of foreign fighters.<sup>34</sup> Rather, they state that this was “symptomatic of the changing nature of the indigenous resistance and the society of which it is a product.”<sup>35</sup> They also show how external factors greatly affected the relative strength of the foreign fighter movement in Chechnya.<sup>36</sup> Other studies have found that the presence of foreign fighters makes insurgencies more likely to use violence against civilians, and markedly more when they do not share close ethnic or kinship ties with the local populations, which jihadists typically lack because their networks are organized based on religion.<sup>37</sup>

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28 Bakke, “Help Wanted?” 177.

29 Ben Rich and Dara Conduit, “The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 2 (2014): 121; Clint Watts, “Deciphering Competition Between al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State,” *CTC Sentinel* (July 2016): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.979605>.

30 Watts, “Deciphering Competition Between al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State,” 2.

31 Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdwijn, “Terrorism and Beyond: Exploring the Fallout of the European Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Syria and Iraq,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 6 (2016): 83.

32 Ben Rich and Dara Conduit, “The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 2 (2014): 125.

33 Tiffany S. Chu and Alex Braithwaite, “The Impact of Foreign Fighters on Civil Conflict Outcomes,” *Research and Politics* 1 (2017): 6.

34 Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, no. 5 (2008): 425, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610080199334>.

35 *Ibid*, 425.

36 *Ibid*, 427.

37 Pauline Moore, “When Do Ties Bind? Foreign Fighters, Social Embeddedness, and Violence against Civilians,” *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 2 (2019): 12-14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318804594>.

Mendelsohn critically commented on the relevance of Western foreign fighters in (pre-2010) conflicts, stating that they “are not only insignificant for the fighting effort; they may even become a liability. Instead of a force multiplier on the front, many need the equivalent of babysitting.”<sup>38</sup> There are many indications that this has been different in the case of the thousands of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq over the past years. They have shown to be an important asset or resource for the Islamic State, which has actively recruited many Western foreign fighters.<sup>39</sup>

## REMAINING KNOWLEDGE GAPS: AREAS FOR FURTHER EXAMINATION

The “mixed record”<sup>40</sup> of the impact of foreign fighters both between and within conflicts underlines the importance of recognizing the significance of local context and dynamics over time, as well as the pathways of individual foreign fighters once they have joined the conflict. As outlined above, existing studies have shed some much-needed light on the effects that foreign fighters as a group might have on the conflict. Still, little is known about these individual trajectories. One issue in need of further examination is the role of foreign fighters in terrorist organizations and the future use of their experience and skills.

This question is therefore not merely relevant for the debate on returning foreign fighters. Fighters might use their experience in different conflicts or different organizations. Recent literature indicates that many leaders of jihadist organizations had previous transnational fighting experience.<sup>41</sup> Little is known about the trajectories of such veteran fighters and their career paths. Getting a better understanding of how such veteran fighters might use their previous experience to climb the ranks and apply their skills and experience in different conflicts is, therefore, much needed.

Further expanding the knowledge base on career foreign fighters is not only relevant for the academic debate, it also has policy implications. For instance, further information on career foreign fighters could help clarify the potential implications posed by veteran foreign fighters joining new battle zones as well as how their migration to new conflicts could affect local conflict cycles. In addition, further study of career foreign fighters can also expand evidence-based insights to inform what is now a highly-politicized debate in Western countries—whether to repatriate and assist in the return of foreign fighters to their home countries. Expanding the knowledge base could help assess the implications of foreign fighters staying abroad and potentially joining other or future conflicts.

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38 Mendelsohn, “Foreign Fighters- Recent Trends,” 195.

39 Colin Clarke, *After the Caliphate* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 54.

40 Inspired by the title of Bakke’s article.

41 Daan Weggemans and Lennart van Leeuwen, “Characteristics of Jihadist Terrorist Leaders: A Quantitative Approach,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 4 (2018): 63.

# Switching Groups: Foreign Fighter Migration Between Violent Extremist Groups

An unexamined niche of career foreign fighters are militants who move between allied fighting groups. While there have been studies of individuals who defect during war time or who join rival insurgent or extremist groups due to fragmentation, there has been relatively little research to date on individuals who switch from one allied group to another that is fighting on the same side. Typically, motivations for switching between groups that are otherwise fighting on the same side are ascribed to differences in the groups' material or social incentives.<sup>42</sup>

Explaining how foreign fighters choose which group to join, Vera Mironova posits that “those leading groups will most likely portray themselves as ideological.”<sup>43</sup> The most ideological and committed groups, therefore, could be considered the most successful in attracting foreign fighters. As in any organization, Mironova notes that qualified leadership is the most important factor in “developing successful human resources policies” contributing to positive fighter experiences in a group and to the group’s attractiveness to potential recruits.<sup>44</sup>

Paul Staniland further argues that rebel leaders can either build upon deeply integrated “vertical” ties to local communities or must rely on more dispersed “horizontal” ties to ideological networks elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> Those who have neither must compensate with a small, dedicated “vanguard,” or a tightly structured, small cadre of leaders, and hope to build strength quickly.<sup>46</sup> While some insurgents in history have attempted the vanguard strategy—Che Guevara was perhaps the most prominent—jihadist foreign fighters have always benefitted from transnational ties. Jihadist foreign fighters do not usually arrive in new theaters of conflict without references and resources.<sup>47</sup>

There is also competition for recruits and resources between, on the one hand, established foreign fighter groups that have arrived from prior conflicts to a new location and, on the other hand, local groups that already exist in that location. In some instances when career foreign fighter groups have supplanted local insurgent groups, they have been perceived by local populations to be more effective and reliable.<sup>48</sup>

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42 Julie Chernov Hwang, “Understanding the Changing Landscape of Islamist Extremism in Indonesia,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Toronto, ON (2019): 2-4; Stathis Kalyvas, “Ethnic Defection in Civil Wars,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 8 (2008); Victor Asal, Mitchell Brown, and Angela Dalton, “Why Split? Organizational Splits among Ethnopolitical Organizations in the Middle East,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no.1 (2012): 94-117; Ethan Bueno De Mesquita, “Terrorist Factions,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 4 (2008): 399-418.

43 Mironova, *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadist*, 46.

44 *Ibid.*, 15.

45 Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

46 *Ibid.*, 26-31.

47 Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 195.

48 Jasper Schwampe, “Muslim Foreign Fighters in Armed Conflicts” (PhD Dissertation, Aarhus Universitet, 2018), 54, 62-64.

Insurgencies that have foreign fighters appear to last longer than those that do not—the former’s odds of long-term survival are nearly double that of the latter.<sup>49</sup> While the first generations of transnational jihadists built networks in training camps, newer foreign fighters and supporters are linked by a commitment to maintain the global jihadist movement. They may fight in the company of nationally based insurgencies, but they are not personally connected to the local conflict dynamics and will travel to seek opportunities to supplant the governance of weak states.<sup>50</sup>

## Armed Group Careers & Leadership: Personnel Management & Career Progression

There has been less research to date on the fate of individual foreign fighters. The historical record indicates high casualty rates among foreign fighters, who are often used as cannon fodder by local rebel commanders or are extremely ideological and volunteer for suicide missions.<sup>51</sup> Those who survive and remain ideologically committed are likely to be formidable insurgents. Mendelsohn notes that high casualty rates among foreign fighters produce a kind of Darwinian selection, so that “only a relatively small group of experienced operatives ends up assuming leading positions in one of the active jihadist fronts.”<sup>52</sup>

Studies of armed groups reference the importance of mid-level commanders in maintaining cohesion over rank and file members, but they offer few guideposts for navigating the group hierarchies or distinguishing different levels of leadership. Similarly, while research has focused on leadership in terrorist and rebel organizations, it is difficult to find definitions of leadership and standards for differentiating top from middle leaders or lower-ranking officers. While some studies of leadership and personnel management in armed groups discuss career progression within organizations in terms of individuals rising through ranks—from muscle to brains—it is rare to find any coding system to define this career progression.<sup>53</sup> This gap means that it is difficult to measure how individuals rise within armed groups and how armed groups prioritize and reward skills and success in promoting members into leadership roles.

Outside of terrorism studies, business management literature also rarely ever defines middle management. For example, “middle management is the intermediate leadership level of a hierarchical organiza-

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49 Tricia Bacon and Daniel Milton, “Crashing the Party? The Impact of Foreign Fighters on Terrorist Group Behavior,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, (2019): 3, 21.

50 Clarke, *After the Caliphate*, xi, 2, 6. Also see Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Umma*, 2004: 313, for the argument that “neofundamentalist” jihadists seek out failed states and conflict zones to try to establish governance because they do not believe they enjoy enough support to supplant institutions in functional societies.

51 Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 197-198, 208-209.

52 Mendelsohn, *Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends*, 195.

53 Michael D. Mumford et al., “Development of Leadership Skills: Experience and Timing,” *Psychology Faculty Publications* (Omaha: University of Nebraska, 2000), 64; Brian J. Phillips, “How Does Leadership Decapitation Affect Violence? The Case of Drug Trafficking Organizations in Mexico,” *Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2 (2015); Judith Verweijen and Claude Iguma Wakenge, “Understanding Armed Group Proliferation in the Eastern Congo,” *Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper* (2015).

tion, being subordinate to the senior management but above the lowest levels of operational staff.”<sup>54</sup> In the absence of more stringent definitions to apply to the study of armed group management and ranking structures, it is difficult to understand how individual members progress through the ranks and their lines of authority. Most do not appear to have adopted a full series of gradation in rank akin to rankings of regular military personnel. For example, Themner describes mid-level commanders of non-state armed groups as “the category of military personnel that was previously situated between the rank-and-file combatants and the highest military leadership, and who personally led their subordinates in battle.”<sup>55</sup>

Several studies of decapitation strategies in terrorism literature note the gaps that would emerge without effective leadership. Who fills leadership roles, how they get there, what authority they actually wield, and their impact on organizational growth and sustainability, however, is less clear. Jordan asserts that charismatic individuals are typically “more directly responsible for planning and recruitment.”<sup>56</sup> Without providing examples of formal tiers of rank, Abrahms and Potter contend that senior leadership is generally composed of the “oldest” members of the group, while foot soldiers or low-level operatives are typically among the “newest.”<sup>57</sup> Shapiro, however, further argues that low-level operatives can be more difficult to manage. Not only do they lack ideological indoctrination, their lack of experience coupled with their desire to rise through the ranks can result in less cautious behavior and more aggressive, performative acts.<sup>58</sup> This lack of alignment between top leadership and low-level operatives produces what he terms “the terrorist’s dilemma.”<sup>59</sup>

With regard to career foreign fighters, the literature is even less clear. If the same holds true for career foreign fighters, we can expect that the longer their careers and the higher they rise, the less directly involved in violence and more responsible for planning or directing attacks they become. However, the extent to which they are able to reach these roles and exert control over or establish coherence within the groups they join remains somewhat of a mystery.

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54 Lumen (Accessed October 8, 2019) *Boundless Management*. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-management/chapter/management-levels-and-types/>.

55 Anders Themner, “Intermediaries of Peace or Agents of War: The Role of Ex-midlevel Commanders in Big Man Networks,” in *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks*, ed. Mats Utas (London: Zed Books, 2012), 220.

56 Jenna Jordan, “When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009): 726, 728, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410903369068>.

57 Max Abrahms and Philip B.K. Potter, “Explaining Terrorism: Leadership Deficits and Militant Group Tactics,” *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818314000411>.

58 Ibid.

59 Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400848645>.



# METHODOLOGY: IDENTIFYING CAREER FOREIGN FIGHTERS & DETERMINING RANKS

This study is limited to Sunni jihadists instead of all foreign fighters for two reasons. First, doing so created an easily identifiable population instead of trying to identify anyone in history who served as a foreign fighter in different groups. Second, jihadists are prevalent across major modern conflicts both as a collective group and individuals. Sunni jihadists are often described as belonging to waves or generations defined by foreign fighter mobilizations: the 1980s Afghanistan war, the 1990s Al Qaeda-coordinated globalized insurgencies and training camps, the 2000s Iraq War, and the 2010s Syrian conflict.<sup>60</sup> Each of those waves of foreign fighters networked with other members of their generation and facilitated their travel between conflicts, so it is particularly worthwhile to look for patterns over the decades within the jihadist movement.

We collected data between September 2018 and July 2019 through publicly available open source records. Because the data concerned Sunni jihadist foreign fighters, the population data extends to the formation of this cohort with the 1979 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. With a scope of forty years, the number of potential jihadist career foreign fighters is unknown. An estimate of the total number of jihadist foreign fighters is also unknown and subject to much disagreement, although it is likely to be in the tens of thousands.

Although it would be reasonable to expect to identify numerous foreign fighters, despite a thorough search of jihadist propaganda primary sources, media reports, and academic research, we were only able to positively identify a few dozen. Complicating research was scarce access to contemporaneous sources before the internet and social media. Such sources may have described early activities of the most senior career foreign fighters before they rose through the ranks, potentially differing from hagiographic official accounts extolling their leadership. At the same time, more famous figures—such as group leaders—are more likely to have generated records of their activities than others. This suggests there may be many individuals for whom there is no record of their career foreign fighting and that individuals who ascended the ranks may be over-represented.

Therefore, we acknowledge that the population of career foreign fighters described in this study is a small sample—it cannot be determined how representative it is. However, we expect that career foreign fighters would be a minority of jihadist foreign fighters, and that the dozens identified are a reflective sample size. For example, Cragin argues that “the relative size of Al Qaeda in its formative years tends to be over-emphasized,” and that there were likely only dozens of members among the Arab Afghans.<sup>61</sup> If this is correct, then the approximately thirty career foreign fighters whom we identified as participating in that phase of the conflict is a reasonable sample.

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<sup>60</sup> See Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*; Peter R. Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and Threats to the West* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2016); Thomas F. Lynch III, *Sunni and Shi'a Terrorism: Differences that Matter* (Washington, DC: Brookings Report, 2008).

<sup>61</sup> Cragin, 1065.

Additionally, we note that many individuals in the dataset went by a number of names, aliases, or *noms de guerre* (*kunyas*), meaning that records of the same individual operating under different names had to be reconciled. At the same time, the same *kunyas* may be adopted by multiple individuals, so coding also required disaggregation through cross referencing.

## What Makes a “Career” in Foreign Fighting?

This study introduces the category of “career foreign fighters”: individuals who served as foreign fighters in more than one insurgent group. We employ the term career in accordance with the Oxford English Dictionary: “an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person’s life and with opportunities for progress.”<sup>62</sup> There is no test of longevity in our definition of career, and we do not always have clear records of how long individuals were foreign fighters in particular locations.

### A NOTE ON FIGHTER ROLES

We do not distinguish which roles individuals performed for the insurgent groups. While the presence of individuals with ostensibly non-combatant roles in ISIS has produced some debates about whether non-combatants should be classified as foreign fighters, we contend that it is appropriate to do so because individuals who join regular armies are classified as military personnel regardless of whether they perform combat duties. Additionally, it is difficult to obtain accurate records of the activities of any foreign fighters, who are engaged in illegal activities under national and international laws.

### A NOTE ON DOMESTIC VERSUS INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

While we record whether career foreign fighters engaged in domestic extremist groups before or after foreign fighting, we do not count extremist membership as part of their careers, only serial foreign fighting. Presumably most foreign fighters were active to one degree or another in domestic networks. Information about their militant activity pre-foreign fighting is important for developing profiles of who becomes foreign fighters. However, it does not reflect the choices by jihadists to remain foreign fighters instead of returning home, decisions to switch from one conflict to another, or from one group to another, and whether this accumulation of battlefield experience changes their role in jihadist insurgencies beyond their states of origin. Further research in that regard is needed.

### A NOTE ON CAREER FOREIGN FIGHTER CAREER “SUCCESS”

We presume that foreign fighters want and have the opportunity for progression to leadership positions in jihadist groups, but we do not classify them as having had a successful career if they rise to senior leadership. Nor do we say that they did not have a career in foreign fighting if they did not become senior leaders. As in any vocation, some people can remain in the operational side of organizations for their entire career without becoming management.

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<sup>62</sup> “Career,” *Lexico*, powered by the Oxford English Dictionary, accessed January 28, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/career>.



In keeping with the literature on senior and middle management in armed groups, we identified ranks, or leadership levels, to indicate whether tenure in a career as a foreign fighter leads to progression in insurgent organizations. We delineated ranks of executive, midlevel, and operational roles (Table 1). Executives are the top individuals leading an organization or regional affiliate. Midlevel are all others who command other fighters, including military, terrorist operations and religious authority. Operational are the bottom level of foot soldiers. Executive is used instead of senior, and operational instead of junior, to avoid equating the length of time spent as a foreign fighter with the level of responsibility within the insurgent organizations. Our findings demonstrate that some individuals do remain at the operational level despite participating in multiple insurgencies, while others begin their foreign fighter careers in positions of authority.

**Table 1:** Career Foreign Fighter Ranks

<b>Executive</b>	Executives are the top individuals leading an organization or regional affiliate.
<b>Mid-level</b>	Midlevel are all others who command other fighters, including military, terrorist operations and religious authority.
<b>Operational</b>	Operational are the bottom level of foot soldiers.

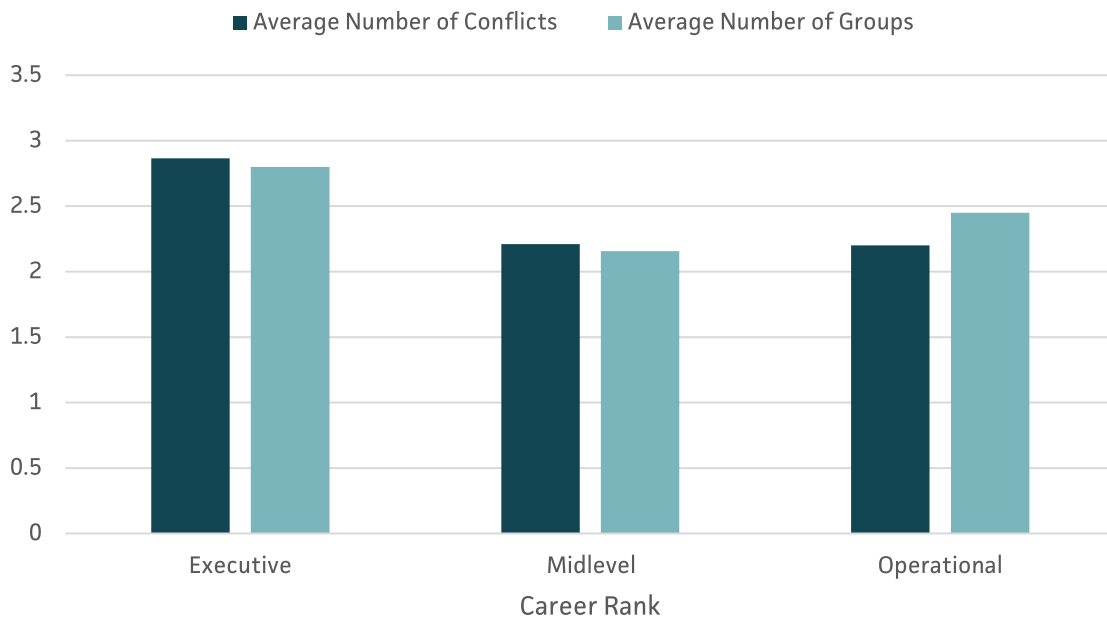
## FINDINGS

We identified 54 jihadist foreign fighters in multiple groups between 1980 and the present day. Most of them served in multiple civil wars but some were foreign fighters in different groups in the same theater of conflict. All career foreign fighters served with at least two insurgent groups. The largest number of groups we recorded for one career foreign fighter was six.<sup>63</sup>

Overall, the 54 career foreign fighters we examined participated in an average of 2.4 conflicts and served with an average of 2.4 different groups (with a median of 3 conflicts and 2 different groups). There was little difference in number of conflicts between ranks of career foreign fighters, with executives averaging 2.8 conflicts and groups, compared to 2.2 for both midlevel and operational career foreign fighters (Figure 1).

<sup>63</sup> Samir Saleh Abdullah (Ibn al-Khattab) served in at least six groups in five different conflicts.

**Figure 1: Career Foreign Fighters by Groups and Conflicts**



## Conflicts & Career Fighters: Launching Pads & Magnets

The conflicts in which career foreign fighters appeared indicate interesting trends (see Figure 2 for a list of conflicts appearing in the dataset). Many of the jihadists who have fought in multiple insurgencies and made names (*kunyas*) for themselves were active for the longest lengths of time. Therefore, career foreign fighters were most active in early jihadist wars in Afghanistan and Bosnia. The conflict in Syria, which has the most foreign fighters, has not yet generated many fighters who have traveled on to fight in another conflict. Career foreign fighters in the Syria data represent individuals who have switched among groups fighting within that conflict.

Disaggregating data on the first time serving and subsequent jihadist conflicts in foreign fighter careers shows that some conflicts have launched far more foreign fighters into careers than others. Afghanistan was the first foreign jihad for half of the career foreign fighters in our data set. In contrast, other destinations for career foreign fighters, such as Russia and the Philippines, appear to almost exclusively have career jihadists in their second or later journeys. Some conflicts, therefore, appear to bleed out more foreign fighters to other conflicts, while others attract experienced jihadists, but fail to launch the careers of newer, or more novice foreign fighters (Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Conflicts in the Dataset with Career Foreign Fighter Participation**



**Figure 3: Most Frequent Conflicts with Career Foreign Fighters**

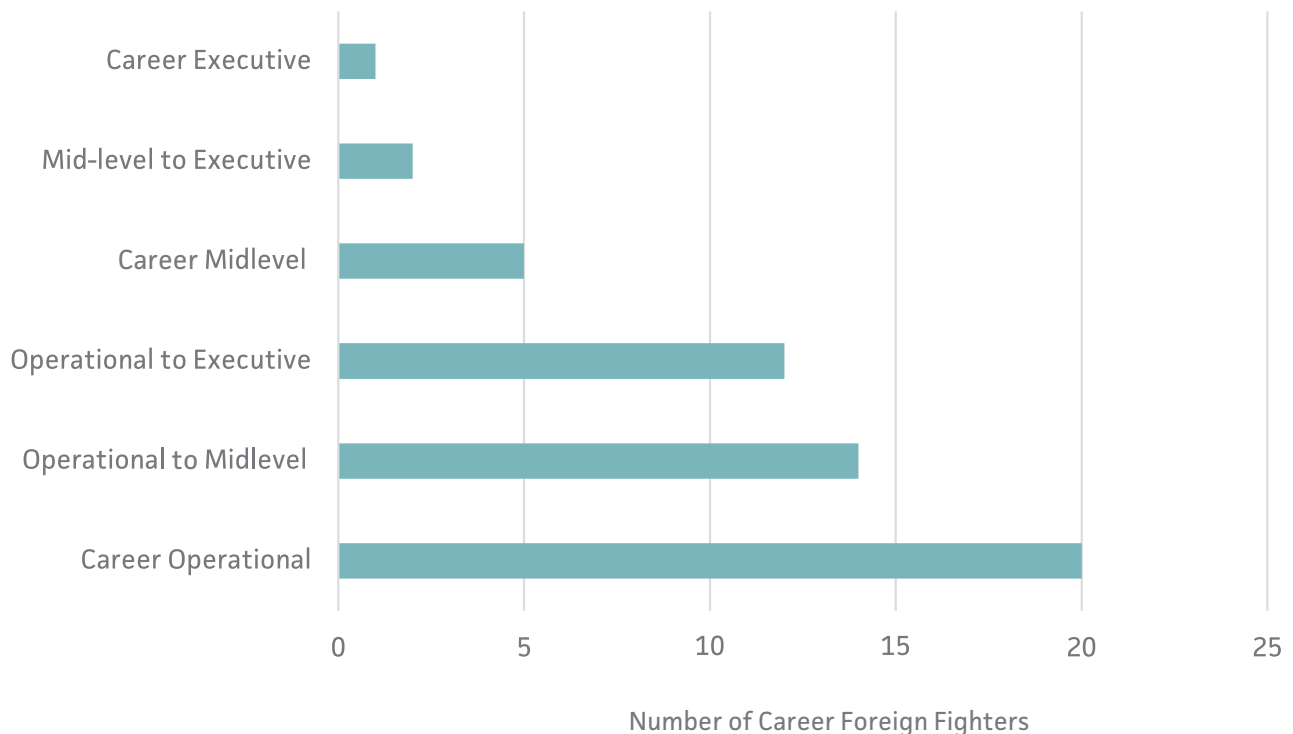


# Playing the Field: Advancing Careers by Switching Groups

In terms of individual progression, many career foreign fighters climb in the ranks as they serve across multiple groups. Most executive leadership began as operational rank and file militants. The majority of operational level foreign fighters ascend in rank over the course of their careers across different groups. A small minority of executive and midlevel leadership began their careers in command positions, but those cases were exceptions based mostly on the individual's hereditary connection to other jihadist leaders.

In Figure 4 we see that most foreign fighters (46 of the 54 we identified) start at the bottom of their organizations, in the third tier of conducting operations. Of these, more than half ascended to midlevel (14) or to executive (12) leadership. In all, just over half of all career foreign fighters fought with more than one group and advanced to higher leadership positions as they moved.

**Figure 4:** Foreign Fighter Career Progression



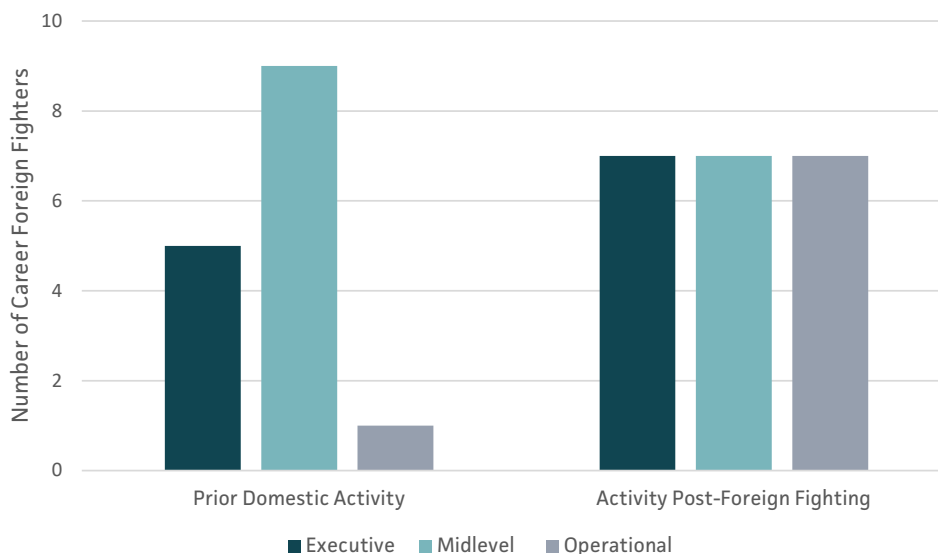
Presumably, operatives who gain experience are bigger security threats to society, and those who ascend to midlevel and executive leadership do so because their comrades recognize their effectiveness. Considering that foreign fighters are usually treated as cannon fodder by local insurgent commanders and invariably conflict with local fighters, the ability to thrive as a foreign fighter and ascend in new organizations indicates particularly effective militancy.<sup>64</sup>

64 Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 201.

## Experience Matters: Previous Domestic Engagement

An examination of the careers of jihadists beyond foreign fighting yields interesting results (Figure 5). The biggest difference between top, middle, and bottom level career foreign fighters is in their domestic militant activities prior to becoming foreign fighters. While few at the operational level had prior experience as domestic militants, about one-third of executives and more than half of midlevel commanders did.

**Figure 5:** Activity Before and After Fighting



This study does not capture how pre-foreign fighting experience affected the careers of the jihadists, but these results raise an intriguing question: did experience with domestic militancy lead to command positions abroad for foreign fighters? The typical assumption is that individuals become foreign fighters to gain battlefield experience that they can then use at home as returnees. However, our findings in Figure 4 indicate that the expertise may flow in the other direction: individuals may earn positions of command in foreign insurgencies because they already had training or experience at home. It may be that the most dangerous domestic militants are traveling to become the most dangerous foreign fighters, not the other way around. Further research on this possibility is needed.

## Returning Career Foreign Fighters: Assessing the threat

Whether career foreign fighters become greater threats by virtue of growing expertise and influence is part of evaluating the potential threat of returnees and whether they should be repatriated or prevented from coming back to countries of origin. Presumably career foreign fighters are the most committed to their cause regardless of whether they become more dangerous with more experience. Only a few, mostly from the fractious Syrian conflict, switched between rival groups in the same theater of conflict.

The data indicates that just over one-third of career foreign fighters become returnees who engage in terrorist plots in their home countries. While from a limited sample, this finding indicates that career foreign

fighters are more likely to pose security threats than average jihadist foreign fighters, of whom eleven to less than one percent are liable to engage in plots as returnees.<sup>65</sup> Career foreign fighter returnees have been arrested for domestic activity in Western, Eurasian, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian countries, indicating that national responses are not the determining factor in whether they remain engaged.

In our sample, there were 15 career foreign fighters with prior militant experience, and 21 who became returnee terrorists. 14 of the 21 career foreign fighter returnees had ascended to leadership roles, but there was little overlap between those who had been domestic militants before foreign fighting and those who continued after returning. Just six fighters were active before and after being foreign fighters; three were executive leadership and three were midlevel. Thus, it appears that career fighters with prior domestic experience make contributions to foreign fighter insurgencies, but career foreign fighters who become returnee terrorists are a different group who had little prior experience to begin with. While some domestic terrorists may seek to become foreign fighters to gain experience to use in their home countries—the data indicates that almost no career foreign fighters follow this trajectory.

## THE IMPACT OF CAREER EXECUTIVES: THREE CASE STUDIES

In efforts to fill a gap in existing literature on leadership positions, authority, and impact in terrorism studies, this section compares three different career foreign fighters who rose through the ranks to become executive leaders of insurgent groups in foreign countries. While each had prior ties to the Saudi jihadist movement that facilitated their becoming foreign fighters in Afghanistan, each subsequently established themselves in leadership roles in multiple different locations by trading on their foreign fighting expertise. However, their influences took on different forms, demonstrating the multiple ways career foreign fighters have shaped the global jihadist movement.

### Samir bin Salih bin ‘Addullah al-Suwaylim

*Khattab’s competitive advantage established throughout his career as a foreign fighter allowed him to ascend the ranks and hold more influence with each subsequent armed group.*



**Afghanistan**



**Azerbaijan**



**Bosnia &  
Herzegovina**



**Tajikistan**



**Russia/  
Caucasus**

65 Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 1–15; Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, “The Foreign Fighters’ Threat: What History Can(not) Tell Us,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 5 (2014): 64; Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, “Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000615..>

## OVERVIEW

Samir bin Salih bin `Addullah al-Suwaylim (known by the kunya Ibn al-Khattab or Emir Khattab), has been described by the Combating Terrorism Center as “an international jihadist par excellence.”<sup>66</sup> Originally born in Saudi Arabia, Khattab fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan from 1988-1994. He subsequently joined jihadists in Bosnia and Azerbaijan and in the civil war in Tajikistan in 1994-1995. He ultimately traveled to Russia, operating in Dagestan briefly before ending up in Chechnya between 1995-2002, where he eventually died in a covert Russian assassination plot.<sup>67</sup>

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

Khattab left his native Saudi Arabia at the age 18 to fight in Afghanistan with Maktab al-Khidmat lil Mujahidin, the Services Bureau for Mujahidin established by Abdullah Azzam for foreign fighters. Khattab evidently already had ties to transnational networks because he carried letters of recommendation signed by a member of the Saudi led chapter of Maktab al-Khidmat lil Mujahidin and by the head of the Saudi Red Crescent organization in Pakistan.<sup>68</sup>

## CAREER TRAJECTORY

Khattab ultimately operated as a career foreign fighter for fourteen years. He ascended as executive leader of the International Islamic Peacekeeping Brigade, a foreign fighter group operating in the Caucasus. In his memoir, *Memories of Amir Khattab*, Khattab described the knowledge and experiences he acquired in each conflict. In Afghanistan, he notes that there were numerous problems between the Afghans and the ansar (foreign fighters), with each group blaming the other for their mishaps. “I remember after every operation there would be problems and they would look for a scapegoat and put the problems on someone’s back. Really there was no studying and order in the case of entering [combat].”<sup>69</sup>

According to Khattab, many of these issues stemmed from the foreign fighters being a burden on the local population. They would enter a conflict with the intentions of helping locals but would end up requesting assistance from them. This became a common theme: “there is no difference in the battles of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, or elsewhere” he lamented, “fighting is fighting brothers, the Ansar brothers who should come to support and help the people became a burden, they come to the field and ask for help from the people who need help?! [sic]”<sup>70</sup>

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66 Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, “Khattab: Jihadist Bios project,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, West Point, March 1 2015, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/khattab-jihadi-bios-project/>, 2.

67 Ibid.

68 Al-`Ubaydi, “Khattab.”

69 Samir Saleh al-Suwailem (n.d.), “Memories of Amir Khattab: The Experience of the Arab Ansar in Chechnya, Afghanistan & Tajikistan,” Translated by *Ansar al-Mujahideen English Forum*, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://archive.org/details/TheMemoriesOfAmirKhattabTheExperienceOfTheArabAnsarInChechnya>: 4-8.

70 Ibid.

By the time Khattab reached Tajikistan he was regarded highly enough based on prior exploits that he could offer organizational advice to local commanders to help avoid conflicts with the foreign fighter contingent. As Khattab recalled, “to avoid all kinds of problems we prepared ourselves for Tajikistan.” He advised Abdulloh Nuri, leader of the Tajik rebels, in accordance with Abdullah Azzam’s philosophy, that the foreign fighters were there to offer aid and support, but they were not “masters in the field of military operations and jihad.”<sup>71</sup> However, despite any reduced frictions with foreign volunteers, the local forces were not successful in Tajikistan, and Khattab moved on to Russia itself.

## CAREER CULMINATION

Dagestani jihadists criticized Khattab for his intentions to fight with the Chechens, whom they regarded as simultaneously communists, Sufis, and polytheists. Nevertheless, Khattab maintained that he would be effective in training individual militants, instructing them in both insurgent tactics and the Salafi creed: “Our creed is not just words, its [sic] words and action.”<sup>72</sup> Allowing actions to speak louder than words would change the contours of the Chechen war, introducing jihadist ideology and tactics honed on prior battlefields and transforming a nationalist struggle for sovereignty into a front in a global religious war.<sup>73</sup>

Reportedly, Khattab positioned himself as the “leader of the Arab Ansar in Chechnya,” using “his own resources and funds”<sup>74</sup> to found the International Islamic Brigade (IIB),<sup>75</sup> which, according to some reports, had up to 300 Afghan-Arab career foreign fighters.<sup>76</sup> He spent years influencing the political and military culture of the rebels through his experience and transnational ties as a career foreign fighter.<sup>77</sup> As executive leader, he put his own stamp on recruitment, basing his efforts on the successful training program he had been part of in Afghanistan. In 1995,<sup>78</sup> Khattab, along with Abu Fatqh a fellow jihadist, founded the Kavkaz training camp near Serzhen-Yurt, a Chechen village in the Shali region.<sup>79</sup> It provided military training to 1,000-2,000 recruits who attended the camp for 45 days to six months.<sup>80</sup> A growth in foreign trainees in the camp coincided with increasingly fundamentalist religious underpinnings of the training.<sup>81</sup>

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71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Zeyno Baran, S. Frederick Starr, Svante E. Cornell, “Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Studies Program* (2006) accessed June 12, 2019, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30281/14\\_Islam\\_Radicalism\\_Central\\_Asia.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30281/14_Islam_Radicalism_Central_Asia.pdf).

74 Al-`Ubaydi, “Khattab,” 2.

75 George Garner, “Chechnya and Kashmir: The Jihadist Evolution of Nationalism to Jihad and Beyond,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 25, no. 3 (2013): 419-34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.664202>; Zeyno Baran, S. Frederick Starr, Svante E. Cornell, “Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU.” *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Studies Program* (2006), accessed on July 1, 2019, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30281/14\\_Islam\\_Radicalism\\_Central\\_Asia.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30281/14_Islam_Radicalism_Central_Asia.pdf).

76 Sebastian Smith, *Allah’s Mountains: Politics and Warfare in the Caucasus* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1998), 152-53.

77 Al-`Ubaydi, “Khattab.”

78 Elena Pokalova, *Chechnya’s Terrorist Network: The Evolution of Terrorism in Russia’s North Caucasus* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2015).

79 Ekaterina Sokirianskaya. “State and Violence in Chechnya (1997-1999),” In *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, eds. Anne Le Huérou, Aude Merlin, Amandine Regamey, Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), 93-118, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315798318-6>.

80 Ibid.

81 Elena Pokalova, “Islamic Radicalization in Russia’s North Caucasus: Lessons from Russia’s Handling of Religious Revival,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 21, no. 2 (2019): 146-69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2017.1367587>.



## BROADER IMPACT

Under Khattab’s leadership, the Chechens’ instructors became primarily foreigners, Arabic-speakers working with Dagestani translators. “Thus, thanks to Khattab, thousands of young people gained access to a rather sophisticated and advanced ideological and military training in international Jihad,”<sup>82</sup> which did not necessarily affect the first Chechen War, but influenced the development of the insurgent movement in the country thereafter.<sup>83</sup> The transformation in the Chechen insurgency occurred because of the growth of the jihadist movement there, and Khattab was able to foster it because of his prior experience, reputation, and connections to the global jihad movement. But it was not simply ideology or connections that were the basis of Khattab’s leadership; he had those same attributes when he first became a foreign fighter. Khattab’s competitive advantage established throughout his career as a foreign fighter allowed him to ascend the ranks and hold more influence with each subsequent armed group.

## Abdul Aziz al-Muqrin

*Effective career foreign fighters can transmit their expertise beyond the groups they lead and influence the entire transnational network.*



Afghanistan



Algeria



Bosnia &  
Herzegovina



Somalia



Yemen

## OVERVIEW

Abdul Aziz al-Muqrin (kunya Abu Hajir al-Najdi and Abu Hazim) was a Saudi national who spent close to half of his life rising through the ranks of global jihad. Sixteen of these years were spent linked to al-Qaeda in some capacity.<sup>84</sup> After participating in multiple conflicts including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Algeria, Somalia, and Yemen, he eventually became the emir of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP),<sup>85</sup> returning to his home-country to help orchestrate high-profile attacks within the Saudi Kingdom.

Al-Muqrin was responsible for the bombing of a Riyadh housing complex that killed seventeen people in 2003.<sup>86</sup> In 2004, in an audio message on behalf of his group, he claimed responsibility for the 25-hour assault on the al-Khobar compound that killed twenty-two people and injured twenty-five.<sup>87</sup> Also in 2004,

82 Ibid., 107.

83 Pokalova, Chechnya’s Terrorist Network.

84 Norman Cigar, “Overview and Analysis,” in *Al-Qa’ida’s Doctrine for Insurgency: ‘Abd Al-‘Aziz Al-Muqrin’s A Practical Course for Guerrilla War* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc. 2009), 8.

85 Lawrence Joffe, “Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin: Al-Qaida mastermind behind Saudi Killings,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2004/jun/21/guardianobituaries.alqaida>.

86 “Profile: Abdul Aziz al-Muqrin,” *BBC News*, June 19, 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3821237.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3821237.stm).

87 “Gunmen ‘Killed 22’ in Saudi City,” *BBC News*, May 30, 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3762423.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3762423.stm).

under al-Muqrin’s leadership, his group kidnapped and killed Paul Johnson, a Lockheed Martin employee stationed in Saudi Arabia, with images and a video of Johnson’s brutal beheading posted on the internet.<sup>88</sup> Reportedly, his efforts to dispose of Johnson led to al-Muqrin’s killing,<sup>89</sup> evidence that operational roles always carry the highest risks, even for leadership.

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

Before his short tenure as the leader of AQAP in Saudi Arabia, al-Muqrin began his career in Afghanistan in 1990, leaving school at the age of seventeen to join the jihad<sup>90</sup> against his parents’ wishes.<sup>91</sup> He learned the use of weaponry in the al-Faruq training camp and eventually became an instructor for Arab recruits, gaining the nickname “Mr. Nasty” due to his tough treatment of pupils.<sup>92</sup> Afghanistan is where al-Muqrin is claimed to have made connections with Osama bin Laden, which embedded him in the transnational jihadist network.<sup>93</sup>

## CAREER TRAJECTORY

After a short period back home in Saudi Arabia, al-Muqrin traveled to Algeria, smuggling arms from Spain to Morocco, later joining Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) until most of the members of his cell were arrested.<sup>94</sup> Throughout his years in jihad, Saudi Arabia functioned as a transitioning point for al-Muqrin’s travels between conflicts zones. After leaving Algeria, he traveled between Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan before moving on to Bosnia where he instructed militants in a training camp and supported the local Muslim community in combat.<sup>95</sup> From Bosnia, via Saudi Arabia and Yemen, al-Muqrin went to Somalia where he fought against Ethiopian troops in Ogaden.<sup>96</sup> He was later captured and spent over two years in an Ethiopian prison before being extradited to Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, he faced four more years in prison but was released after two for displaying good conduct and memorizing the Quran.<sup>97</sup>

## CAREER CULMINATION

A former militant and acquaintance of al-Muqrin described him as a reckless young man, who lacked religious expertise and was not interested in learning.<sup>98</sup> However, accounts describe him as developing more extreme views and devotion to militant jihad after his years of imprisonment.<sup>99</sup> Much of this devotion

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88 Joffe, “Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin.”

89 “Al Qaeda Militants Kill American Hostage,” *CNN*, June 19, 2004, <http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/06/18/saudi.kidnap/>; “Militants Behead US Hostage,” *BBC News*, June 18, 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3820495.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3820495.stm).

90 Joffe, “Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin”; “Al Muqrin: Al-Qaeda’s Angel of Death,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, June 20, 2005, <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/features/al-muqrin-al-qaedas-angel-of-death>.

91 Ibid.

92 “Al Muqrin: Al-Qaeda’s Angel of Death.”

93 Joffe “Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin.”

94 Cigar, “Overview and Analysis,” 7.

95 Joffe, “Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin”; Cigar, “Overview and Analysis.”

96 Cigar, “Overview and Analysis.”

97 “Al Muqrin: Al-Qaeda’s Angel of Death”; Cigar, “Overview and Analysis.”

98 “Al Muqrin: Al-Qaeda’s Angel of Death.”

99 Cigar, “Overview and Analysis.”

stemmed from changes he saw in local society, anger over the U.S. presence in the Arabian Peninsula, and what he perceived as aggression towards the Muslim community in the US.<sup>100</sup>

Upon release from Saudi prison in 2001, later that year al-Muqrin traveled back to Afghanistan and fought against American forces in the aftermath of 9/11, until he finally returned to Saudi Arabia in 2002, later becoming the leader of the local branch of AQAP.<sup>101</sup>

## BROADER IMPACT

In addition to his leadership roles as a career foreign fighter, al-Muqrin is best known for his contribution to tactical strategy as the author of *Guerrilla War*, a text promulgating the operational and doctrinal philosophies of AQAP.<sup>102</sup> Apart from its tactical instructions and Maoist theory, *Guerrilla War* provides insight on the use of the environment and local populations to conduct a successful insurgency. This includes being adaptable to local situations, developing trust among the people, while actively shaping local conditions to launch an effective insurgency.<sup>103</sup>

Al-Muqrin also addresses lessons learned from previous conflicts he participated in, along with experiences from other prominent jihadists, including Khattab. He observes that “factors that help promote a protracted war include avoiding some targets that the mujahidin could strike, because were they to attack them, they would lose the majority of their cadres and organizational structure,” which is what “happened in Tajikistan” under the “mujahidin led by Khattab.”<sup>104</sup> As a theoretician, Al-Muqrin applied his experience from the previous theaters of conflict, along with lessons learned from fellow foreign fighter jihadists, to create a manual for successful insurgencies in the future. Al-Muqrin’s case illustrates that effective career foreign fighters can transmit their expertise beyond the groups they lead and influence the entire transnational network.

## Abu ‘Abdel al-Aziz Barbaros

*Al-Aziz demonstrated the impact of recognized career foreign fighters across transnational networks.*



**Afghanistan**



**Bosnia &  
Herzegovina**



**India/  
Kashmir**



**Philippines**

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Cigar, “Overview and Analysis”; “Al Muqrin: Al-Qaeda’s Angel of Death”; and Joffe, “Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin.”

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Norman Cigar, “Abu Hajir ‘Abd Al-‘Aziz Al-Muqrin, A Practical Course for Guerrilla War,” in *Al-Qa’ida’s Doctrine for Insurgency: ‘Abd Al-‘Aziz Al-Muqrin’s A Practical Course for Guerrilla War* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc. 2009), 97-107..

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 93.

## OVERVIEW

Abu ‘Abdel al-Aziz (kunya Emir Barbaros, Barbarossa, and Abdel Rahman al-Dosari), was born in the Indian subcontinent, but was also a Saudi national who began his career with the mujahidin in Afghanistan.<sup>105</sup> Before becoming a foreign fighter, he worked for Saudi Airlines and conducted Islamic lectures around the Gulf, employing rhetoric that did not shy away from confronting the Saudi government that he viewed as corrupt.<sup>106</sup>

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

Al-Aziz reported that he decided to travel to Afghanistan around 1984 to answer the call of Abdullah Azzam.<sup>107</sup> As a foreign fighter, he acquired the nickname “Hown” due to his skills with Russian manufactured “Hound” artillery rockets. He also developed ties with other Afghan-Arabs fighting with connected groups in the region.<sup>108</sup> While he never outwardly discussed his connection with al Qaeda, it is believed that al-Aziz was linked directly to group members including Osama bin Laden.<sup>109</sup> Al-Aziz recalled his time in Afghanistan as “a great experience.” He maintained that those participating in the conflict had a strong “desire that Allah would keep them engaged in Jihad until their death and that Allah would give them their death in the battlefield of Jihad.”<sup>110</sup>

## CAREER TRAJECTORY

Apart from Afghanistan, al-Aziz participated in conflicts in Kashmir, the Philippines, and traveled to strategize with militants around Africa,<sup>111</sup> but little is recorded about his activities. He traveled to Bosnia after the mujahidin conquest of Kabul in April 1992, becoming one of the initial Afghan-Arabs to participate in the Bosnian conflict.<sup>112</sup> In part because of al-Aziz’s reports, Bosnia was deemed a “legitimate holy war” and became a first destination for the Afghan-Arabs to begin their careers in foreign fighting.<sup>113</sup> Efforts to recruit, fund, and support the conflict in Bosnia began, and al-Aziz was named the first emir (commander-in-chief) of the Afghan-Arabs in the Bosnia.<sup>114</sup>

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105 New debate on the nom de guerre Abdel Rahman al-Dosari, associated with al-Aziz has surfaced. While a number of sources connect the name with al-Aziz, in *The Universal Enemy* (2020), Darryl Li argues that al-Dosari is a different person. While this argument may be valid, we have decided to note this discrepancy, keeping the name within our research, since it has no effect on our overall findings or the biographical information we present on al-Aziz.

106 Evan Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2004).

107 See: “The Bosnian Jihad: An interview with Abu Abdel Aziz Barbaros,” *Deutsches Asienforschungszentrum*, accessed on July 1, 2019, Retrieved from <http://www.dafz.org/news/the-bosnian-jihad-an-interview-with-abu-abdel-aziz-barbaros/>.

108 Ibid.

109 Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe*.

110 Ahmed Waseem, “The Jihad in Bosnia,” *Al-Daawah* (Islamabad, January 1993).

111 “The Bosnian Jihad” and “Help from The Holy Warriors,” *Newsweek*, October 4, 1992, <https://www.newsweek.com/help-holy-warriors-199918>.

112 Maria Galperin Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson, and Zack Fellman (n.d.) “Case Studies in History: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya,” *Foreign Fighters in History*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, accessed on July 12, 2019, <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history/case-studies.html>.

113 Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe*, 18.

114 Ibid.

## CAREER CULMINATION

Initially, Bosnian locals seemed to welcome al-Aziz and his foreign fighter contingent. Newsweek reported that “when mujahedin commander Aziz drives through Mehurici in his new black four-wheel-drive Nissan, the town turns out for him, children wave, old people turn and smile, and other villagers approach with invitations to weddings and parties.”<sup>115</sup> However, this enthusiasm soon evaporated when foreign fighter groups failed to acknowledge truces between the Bosnian Army and Croatian militias, attacked UN and NATO peacekeepers, called for “total jihad,” and began spreading Wahhabism, which at the time was a foreign doctrine in the region.<sup>116</sup>

Adding a jihadist angle to the separatist wars in the Balkans, al-Aziz was clear about his belief that the jihad should expand from Afghanistan to Bosnia. His argument that “it is then our (religious) duty to defend our Muslim brethren wherever they are, as long as they are persecuted” reflected similar beliefs to Abdullah Azzam’s defense of the *Ummah* (Muslim community worldwide).<sup>117</sup>

## BROADER IMPACT

While he proselytized to civilians part-time, al-Aziz stated that his main purpose was to “bring men” to the conflict,<sup>118</sup> which included training fighters in a camp in Mehurici, near central Bosnia.<sup>119</sup> Al-Aziz contributed to the expansion of training camps internationally and to the establishment of training programs for Lashkar-e-Taiba in Kunar in 1993.<sup>120</sup> He also engaged in outreach and fundraising in the United States at Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA) conferences.<sup>121</sup> As such, al-Aziz demonstrated the impact of recognized career foreign fighters across transnational networks.

## Discussion: The Rise & Influence of Career Executives

The experiences of Khattab, al-Muqrin, and al-Aziz illustrate the influence that career foreign fighters have beyond their roles in the conflicts they initially travel to join. Khattab and al-Aziz leveraged transnational networks to transform local insurgencies into branches of the global jihadist movement. Both incorporated best practices from prior conflicts into the doctrines of the subsequent groups they led. Additionally, al-Aziz worked to transmit organizational learning to other insurgencies, while al-Muqrin

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115 “Help from The Holy Warriors.”

116 Brian Glyn Williams (2007) *Allah’s foot soldiers: An assessment of the role of foreign fighters and al-Qa’ida in the Chechen insurgency*, in Moshe Gammer (ed.) *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder* (London: Routledge, 2007), 159.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

119 Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe*.

120 Thomas Hegghammer, “Violent Islamism in Saudi Arabia, 1979-2006: The Power and Perils of Pan-Islamic Nationalism”; Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris, ECOLE DOCTORALE DE SCIENCES PO Programme Doctoral Monde Musulman Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Doctorat de Sciences Politiques (2007), 642, accessed on July 18, 2019, <https://hegghammer.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/hegghammer-thesis-violent-islamism-in-saudi-arabia.pdf>.

121 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *Salafism in America: History, Evolution, Radicalization* (Washington, DC: George Washington University’s Program on Extremism, 2018), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Salafism%20in%20America.pdf>; Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe*.

developed a written doctrine to disseminate to other groups. While all became prominent executive leaders of foreign fighter groups, they each rose to top leadership in different conflict zones, advancing their career by promoting best practices from previous foreign fighting experience and using different means and channels, including personal connections, financial resources, proselytizing, and building names for themselves in global jihadists networks.

## CONCLUSION: NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE SUCCESS

Outlined in this report, the available data indicates that career foreign fighters have had an outsized impact on the global militant jihadist movement. Despite lacking local ties, they build on transnational networks of ideological and material support, which they add to the resources of the groups they join. They also benefit from prior experiences, both practical knowledge and reputational effects. Many use this legitimacy to prove themselves valuable to their new groups and earn higher levels of command.

### What's in a Career?

Career foreign fighters defy the conventional picture of foreign fighters as inexperienced dilettantes who are of no use to the rebel groups they join except as cannon fodder. Many of these individuals, particularly those at midlevel leadership, arrive with prior active membership in domestic militant groups. Future studies should attempt to evaluate whether foreign fighter recruits bring in more skills from domestic terrorist groups than returnees bring back to domestic groups.

### Impact Beyond the Battlefield

Furthermore, career foreign fighters pass on valuable insights and best practices to subsequent groups they join. It has been noted that groups such as al Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State learn from past mistakes—the risk of losing popular support by failing to provide services to civilians, for one.<sup>122</sup> However, this assumes that the group, primarily, is responsible for organizational learning. Organizations are not sentient, they do not set their own agendas but, rather, are comprised of individuals and leaders who make choices on their behalf. The evidence presented here suggests that key individuals, including career foreign fighters, rise to leadership because of their past experience. Those individuals then use that experience to identify shortcomings and develop institutions and doctrines to ameliorate them. Consequently, career foreign fighters have played a vital role in transmitting learning across jihadist organizations, and, therefore, in the evolution of those organizations as well.

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122 Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015), 62.

## Domestic Versus International Career Tracks

Our findings indicate that career foreign fighter trajectories may vary based on the conflict. The jihadist diaspora that emerged from the Afghanistan war produced career foreign fighters who flocked to different battlefields. Similarly, some of the large number of foreign fighters who joined the Syrian civil war have already become career foreign fighters. Unlike Afghanistan, however, Syrian foreign fighter careers have not been built on jumping between different foreign conflicts, but a result of having switched allegiances between competing groups within Syria itself. Time will tell whether Syrian career foreign fighters export their knowledge and skills elsewhere.

## Leadership & Evolution

Based on past trends, new career foreign fighters will rise in the ranks of subsequent insurgent groups and many will become the top leaders of their own organizations. Our sample of a few dozen career foreign fighters does not permit us to conclude that most foreign fighters who do not return home advance to organizing plots and leading groups. But it does appear that many of those who move on instead of returning home are able to parlay their resumes into foreign fighter careers. We also identified evidence that once in leadership positions, career jihadist foreign fighters communicate and cooperate with insurgent groups in other conflicts to try to help them evolve.

## Returning Career Foreign Fighters

While a significant proportion have returned to become domestic terrorists, career foreign fighters create bigger security challenges by fortifying insurgencies elsewhere and successfully shaping the jihadist movement internationally. The likelihood that future career foreign fighters will make similar contributions to insurgencies and terrorist networks worldwide factors into the debate about the need to repatriate and prosecute foreign fighters. Career foreign fighters have significant local impacts on civil wars they join during subsequent travels, but their highly developed transnational networks ensure their influence worldwide.



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