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# The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria

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## ABSTRACT

The ongoing war in Syria reflects the interesting phenomenon of foreigners flocking to the troubled region to join the combat. While foreign Jihadists joining the fighting ranks of terror organizations such as the Islamic State or Al Qaeda have attracted considerable reporting and research, the flip side of this phenomenon has gone largely unnoticed—that of the foreign anti-ISIS fighters. Although these fighters share a common enemy, adversary on the battlefield, they hold disparate personal ideologies and motives. This article will examine manifestations of foreign anti-ISIS fighters affiliated with both the far right and far left ideologies, in order to contribute to the understanding of this unfamiliar aspect of the war in Syria and its scope, as well as the potential consequences and potential threats it embodies.

## KEYWORDS

Anti-Fascism; counter-Jihad; foreign fighters; Salafi-Jihadism; right-wing extremism; left-wing extremism; Syria

## Introduction

*Considering increasing extreme right/left polarisation and violence, having more battle hardened militiamen/women around is surely a security concern.*

— Alexander Ritzmann, co-chair of the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network<sup>1</sup>

During the liberation of Raqqa, the Syrian city that had served as the capital of the Islamic State (ISIS), some media outlets published photos of Polish fighters who came to Syria to fight ISIS as part of a Kurdish militia.<sup>2</sup> One photo, purportedly taken in Raqqa, shows a male fighter holding the Polish national flag in one hand, and a burning ISIS flag in the other.<sup>3</sup> This and other images highlight the largely overlooked phenomenon of foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria to fight ISIS, a group of fighters that is not easy to define. However, it seems that some of these anti-ISIS foreign fighters are motivated by western-oriented right-wing and left-wing political extremism; and their involvement and role in this conflict is yet to be fully revealed.

Syria is certainly not the only arena that attracted foreign fighters in recent years. Another arena is Ukraine, where since early 2014 Russia-backed separatists have been fighting the Kiev government. Actually, in Ukraine, the two warring factions attracted both right- and left-wing extremists.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the war in Ukraine is directly linked to the war in Syria. I will later elaborate on this issue. “Foreign war volunteers,” noted Nir Arielli, “are a recurring phenomenon in modern warfare.”<sup>5</sup> He referred to these fighters as

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“volunteers” because they traveled of their own volition and initiative to war zones in other countries to participate in the war.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Hegghammer explained that these volunteers are joining an insurgency in another country despite lacking “citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions” or “affiliation to an official military organization.”<sup>7</sup> David Malet defined these volunteers as “noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts.”<sup>8</sup> Kacper Rekawek defined them as “non-indigenous, non-territorialised combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict to participate in hostilities.”<sup>9</sup> Idean Salehyan defined them as “transnational rebels”; and “armed opposition groups whose operations are not confined to the geographic territory of the nation-state(s) that they challenge.”<sup>10</sup>

Currently, the term “foreign fighters” is mostly associated with Salafi Jihadism, and the threat posed by Islamist transnational terror organizations such as Al Qaeda or ISIS, which are known for their recruitment and mobilization of Westerners to battlefronts,<sup>11</sup> and towards domestic terrorism. As Henry Tuck, Tanya Silverman, and Candace Smalley explained in their study on anti-ISIS volunteers, this term “is commonly associated” with Jihadists, and “there has been far less attention paid to the hundreds of other ‘foreign fighters’ who have specifically travelled to fight against ISIS, predominantly from Western countries.”<sup>12</sup>

Although Tuck et al. claimed that hundreds flocked to fight ISIS, there is a lack of data about these fighters and their numbers may be higher, as this article will later show. In this regard, the potential risk that these foreign fighters pose to their countries of origin upon their return, and elsewhere, requires attention.<sup>13</sup> Academic literature on the subject mainly addresses foreign fighters from the United States who are affiliated with left-wing ideologies. Nonetheless, they are tremendously valuable and contribute considerably to the understanding of this aspect of the war in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

This article will focus on the Western right-wing and left-wing political extremists who have volunteered to fight against their perceived enemies—but overseas, in Syria and Iraq. Another category of foreign fighters excluded from this study are those recruited by involved countries such as Russia, Iran, or the Syrian regime. These include, for example, Greek right-wing extremists,<sup>15</sup> Serb mercenaries,<sup>16</sup> and Norwegian neo-fascists that joined Assad’s forces.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, there is evidence that Iran recruited Shiite combatants from Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan to fight for the Syrian regime.<sup>18</sup>

The recruitment of Europeans and other internationals to the Syrian forces fighting ISIS, the Kurds, or rebels takes place online.<sup>19</sup> For example, the European Solidarity Front for Syria (ESFS) serves as a wide network for recruitment and pro-Assad propaganda, and according to its website, it has a presence in twenty-four countries (Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain, Czech Republic, Ireland, Romania, Finland, Portugal, Poland, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Sweden, France, Great Britain, Germany, Malta, Belgium, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Cyprus).<sup>20</sup>

Expressions of support for the ESFS among right-wing extremists are not rare.<sup>21</sup> For example, Bastion Social (BS), a new French extreme-right movement, organized on August 18, 2018<sup>22</sup> a conference about the historical and social roots of the war in Syria. It aimed to “demonstrate how the regime of President El Assad remains the best rampart against U.S.-Israeli imperialism in the region and against Islamism.”<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, BS’s position towards the war in Syria comes as no surprise as this movement appears to be linked to Russia.<sup>24</sup>

Another example of extreme right-wing support for Assad can be found in the case of the Italian neo-fascist group CasaPound (CP), which held protests to express the group solidarity with, and commitment for Assad; in which group members raised the national flags of Italy and Syria, as well as the flags of ESFS.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, CP's official band is ZetaZeroAlfa, which was founded and headed by CasaPound's leader Gianluca Iannone.<sup>26</sup> In 2017 ZetaZeroAlfo released its latest album, *MoriMondo*,<sup>27</sup> that included the song "For Syria, For Assad" (*Per la Siria! Per Assad!*), which can be seen as another attempt by CP to mobilize its supporters to the battlefield of Syria by using music.<sup>28</sup>

Since the 1930s it has been clear to high-rank Nazis and Islamist leaders that both sides share a common enemy—the Jewish people, who were blamed for controlling the capitalist West and the communist East, while they plot to enslave and destroy Aryans/Muslims and conquer their lands. This cooperation extended into the post-World War II era, and this hatred drove white supremacists such as Ahmed Huber and David Myatt,<sup>29</sup> August Kreis,<sup>30</sup> Matthew Heimbach,<sup>31</sup> and many others, to support the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Al Qaeda, and other Islamist terrorist organizations.

### Identifying Western extremist ideologies in Syria

In addition to these pro-Assad foreign fighters, the ongoing civil war in Syria has attracted other foreigners who joined local, non-Muslim militias that emerged from the war. Sometimes the volunteers sought to join a group that suited their ideology; in other cases, they had to compromise in order to fulfil the goal that drew them to the battlefield to begin with—eliminating ISIS, but also to protect persecuted minorities such as the Kurds or Iraqi Christians. Thus, evidence shows that Europeans of both right- and left-wing ideologies have joined Kurdish militias, mostly the People's Protection Units (YPG).<sup>32</sup> In other words, both sides of Western political extremism claim to have representatives fighting in the ranks of local militias in Syria (and Iraq).

This article poses several questions: What is known about these fighters? Which ideological affiliations do they represent? How do they portray the war against ISIS? Do these foreign fighters pose a potential threat, and if so, to whom, how, and from who? How are the wars in Syria and Ukraine linked? To answer these questions, the article employs a textual and visual analysis of primary sources and secondary sources that will shed light on trends of recruitment and mobilization of contemporary foreign fighters.

A methodological challenge to the article is the lack of direct contact with the subjects of the research. People are not always interested in talking, and those approached by the author have not responded. However, valuable information can be found in media interviews, and more importantly, in social networks (such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube) that in addition to reflecting the phenomenon itself, play an active role in recruiting and mobilizing these foreign fighters.<sup>33</sup> The academic papers published to date on this topic provide important information, including interviews with fighters as well as with some returnees. However, most of these studies focus on Jihadi foreign fighters.<sup>34</sup> While less attention has been given to left-wing volunteers,<sup>35</sup> even less attention was given to the other side of the coin—right-wing foreign volunteers in Syria-Iraq.

Anti-Muslim sentiments are not rare among Western nationalists in general, and white supremacists<sup>36</sup> in particular. The latter reflect the "traditionalist" (and well-known) forms of right-wing extremism, which represents a web of movements from North America,

Europe, and Australia that combine neo-Nazis and skinhead gangs, occultist and neo-Pagan racists, Christian Identity believers, Sovereign Citizen Movements, and anti-government militias. In recent years, another form of right-wing extremism emerged: the Counter-Jihad Movement, that is supposedly driven only by anti-Muslim sentiments and “cultural nationalism” instead of biological nationalism.<sup>37</sup>

Since the war in Syria broke out, both the “new” and the “traditionalist” forms of right-wing extremists have advocated fighting ISIS and its sympathizers at home and abroad, in Syria-Iraq. For example, the Spanish Falange movement organized a conference that advocated a crusade against ISIS.<sup>38</sup> Nationalists. Facebook pages also advocates a “crusade” against ISIS.<sup>39</sup> However, it seems that the “traditionalists” are much more pro-Assad, whom they openly support, while the “counter-Jihadists” support the rebels, and especially minorities that were persecuted by ISIS. Both groups are perceived by their left-wing rivals as “fascists.” Thus, the “new” extreme left is associated with “anti-fascism.”

Mark Bray, the author of *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, explained that the opposition to forms of right-wing extremism (past or present) can be defined simply as “anti-fascists.” Anti-fascism, according to Bray, is “a method of politics, a locus of individual and group self-identification, and a transnational movement that adapted preexisting socialist, anarchist, and communist currents to a sudden need to react to the fascist menace.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it is “illiberal politics of social revolutionism applied to fighting the Far Right, not only literal fascists.”<sup>41</sup>

In recent years, and as a reaction to the surge of right-wing violent extremism, it seems that anti-fascists abandoned non-violent activism (also known as non-violent direct action) for violent and even militant confrontations with different forms of “fascism.” According to Europol’s 2017 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (Te-Sat), left-wing extremists “remained a public order threat in a number of E.U. Member States” as they are responsible for “riots, arson attacks, criminal damage and spreading propaganda.”<sup>42</sup> It also noted the involvement of European left-wing extremists in Syria (and Iraq) but referred only to Spanish nationals.<sup>43</sup>

Syria has attracted three types of Western contemporary political extremism. Jihadism is just one of them. While they share a common will to use the most extreme form of violence for their cause (by joining a war), they are markedly different from one another in quantitative and qualitative terms as well as in terms of ideology and goals. Anti-ISIS volunteers in general are mainly mature men; and most of them veterans from the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, although women from these countries have also volunteered.<sup>44</sup> Most of these anti-ISIS foreign fighters are ethnically attached to a persecuted community in Syria and Iraq, such as the Kurds or other non-Muslim minority. All these three forms of extremism share the same goal to “defend” their fellow counterparts on the one hand, and to eliminate the enemy on the other.<sup>45</sup>

## Foreign fighters—the historical context

From an historical perspective, foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon, and its roots can be traced to the eighteenth century.<sup>46</sup> It seems that such fighters both perceive and portray the war they joined as a dichotomy between good and evil. As Dietrich Jung noted, European philhellenes who joined the Greek war for independence from the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century (1821–1833) saw it “as a war between

civilisation and barbarism, as an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of good and evil, which called for their active engagement.”<sup>47</sup> This dichotomist worldview, in which the sides are portrayed as “good” and “evil,” is also manifest in Syria—where ISIS represents the “forces of evil” and a threat to humanity.<sup>48</sup>

The Middle East and Europe offer additional examples of conflicts that drew foreign fighters. In the beginning of the Israeli-Arab conflict “pan-Arab volunteers ... fought against the Zionist movement.”<sup>49</sup> In the 1930s, fascist and anti-fascist volunteers flocked from Europe and beyond to Spain to join the civil war and fight with the republican-loyalist side, whose “propaganda portrayed the civil war ... as an existential struggle between Fascism and democracy,” and part of the global struggle against General Franco and the Spanish nationalists supported by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.<sup>50</sup>

At the beginning of the 1980s, Spanish, German, and Italian neo-fascists—some of them with alleged links to the Bologna Massacre—trained in the Falange camps in Lebanon.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, most of the twenty-first century (to present-day) foreign fighters were Muslims. Thousands of Muslims traveled to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet occupation (1979–1988), and some of these foreigners would later form the “global Jihad movement.”<sup>52</sup> Most of these volunteers did not turn to terrorism after returning to their countries of origin. However, some built Jihadi networks and cells that eventually perpetrated attacks in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>53</sup>

The Yugoslav Wars, which attracted many Muslim volunteers,<sup>54</sup> also attracted a subgroup of foreign Western fighters who were not Muslim, and included right-wing extremists such as neo-Nazis.<sup>55</sup> According to Kyle Burke, “some 200 American neo-Nazis had traveled to Croatia in 1992 ..., joining right-wingers from France, Germany, Austria, and elsewhere who had also volunteered.”<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the Yugoslav wars also attracted left-wing extremists such as anarchists.<sup>57</sup> Muslim foreign fighters were also spotted also in the Caucasus, in Iraq after the U.S. invasion (2003), in Mali, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Somalia.<sup>58</sup>

None of the post-1990s arenas attracted so many foreign fighters in such a short period of time as in the case of Syria.<sup>59</sup> It raises questions about the possible future involvement of these fighters in domestic terrorism. According to Hegghammer, there are two processes that might drive an ex-foreign fighter into domestic terrorism: “enlistment” and “socialization.” The former “refers to a trajectory in which the foreign fighter is drawn into domestic fighting by a calculating second party,” and he eventually “finds himself in a training camp operated by a group with plans to attack in the West.”<sup>60</sup> The latter refers to the changing preferences of the fighter, who “is pushed toward domestic fighting by a gradual change in perceptions on the legitimacy of domestic fighting.”<sup>61</sup>

In other words, there are grounds for assuming that other ideologically-motivated extremists (i.e., non-Jihadist foreign fighters) will undergo similar processes that correlate with their worldview. This does not of course dictate that anti-ISIS foreign fighters will become terrorists, but the experience and the sense of community that they presumably shared on the Syrian-Iraqi battlefields can facilitate future paramilitary networks of war-experienced extremists back at home. Indeed, Hegghammer’s data “point to a veteran effect that makes returnees significantly more effective operatives.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, this may apply not only to Jihadists but to non-Jihadist foreign fighters as well.

## Foreign fighters in the twenty-first century

Right-wing extremism, explained Per Anders Rudling, “has a long tradition of orienting itself towards the Middle East.”<sup>63</sup> This orientation led Western right-wing extremists to support, for instance, Assad’s regime in Syria,<sup>64</sup> and to accept financial support from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Libya.<sup>65</sup> In 2006 neo-Nazis from the Czech Republic even expressed their willingness to join the Iranian army in order to fight the State of Israel.<sup>66</sup> I will discuss these relations on the following pages.

Cas Mudde argued that right-wing extremism is not merely a socio-political challenge for public order but an actual security threat, since its hostile stance towards the state has turned “from (passive) support to (armed) opposition.”<sup>67</sup> Andres Breivik’s 2011 attacks in Norway represented this shift.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, it appears that paramilitarism, a problem once largely confined to Eastern Europe, is now a common concern throughout all of the continent as it is in the United States, and it poses “a threat to public order and inter-ethnic relations.”<sup>69</sup> In a way, we can even see Breivik in the context of a foreign fighter. After all, he saw himself as a Templar knight—a Christian knight stationed far from his homeland, engaged in a holy war against his religious enemies—which are currently threats to his homeland, his religion, and so forth. However, for Breivik and his right-wing fanatics, the enemy is already within the gates, and it poses a threat because of left-wing and liberal politics.

Although the Ukrainian arena is not at the focus of this article, it is important to notice that it has turned into an attracting point for foreign fighters of different ideologies; and that it is directly linked to Syria, due to the involvement of both Russia and foreign fighters. Some foreign fighters chose to continue their war against the same enemy, but on a different front. Instances for this can be found in reports on Chechen Jihadists who fought in Syria and later traveled to Ukraine to participate in the fighting against Russian-backed separatists,<sup>70</sup> as well as in a report on a Dutch right-wing extremist who fought in the ranks of a Ukrainian right-wing militia against the separatists, and later traveled to Syria and joined the (left-wing) YPG.<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, a volunteer from India who fought with the separatists in Ukraine said that he wanted “to go to Syria ... and fight for the Kurds.” His Scottish comrade said the same, and hoped that the combat experience he gained in Ukraine would help him join a Kurdish militia.<sup>72</sup>

Most of these foreign fighters do not intend to continue the fight back home, but as in the past, when radical leftists from Europe trained with Palestinian terrorist organizations in Lebanon with the intent of carrying out attacks on European soil, it is possible that political extremists who fought in Syria (or elsewhere) will decide to use their experience back at home and to engage in domestic violence, either against the state (including its representatives) or against their perceived direct enemy (the extreme right or left, or “Islamists”).

Ross Frennet and Tanya Silverman identify three main motives driving foreign volunteers to the battlefronts. The first is “outrage at what is alleged to be happening in the country where the conflict is taking place and empathy with the people being affected.” The second is “adherence to the ideology of the group an individual wishes to join,” and the third, “a search for identity and belonging.”<sup>73</sup> These three motives can also apply to the foreign anti-ISIS fighters of both right- and left-wing ideologies.

Western extremists, from both right- and left-wing ideologies, perceive ISIS as an agent of evil that must be eradicated. Both are outraged by the actions of ISIS, particularly those directed against an “other” with whom they sympathize, such as Christian minorities or

the Kurds, and are willing to take up arms against ISIS. Both adhere to radical ideologies that call for drastic actions to protect their allies and eliminate their enemies. Additionally, one may assume that both seek a sense of belonging to a like-minded community.

Tuck et al. referred to “push factors” and “pull factors” driving the anti-ISIS volunteers. “Push factors” include frustration with foreign policy regarding the conflict, a “desire for belonging and a lack of purpose” in the volunteers’ lives.<sup>74</sup> “Pull factors” include an “altruistic desire to defend persecuted minority populations and defeat ISIS,” a veteran desire to continue the war against a familiar enemy, and the “seeking [of] an adrenaline-filled adventure.”<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, as Arielli claimed, it is “the combination of push and pull factors” that helps to explain why people join an overseas war.<sup>76</sup>

A combination of “ideals and self-fulfillment” motivated many of the Westerners who joined Kurdish militias in Syria, as Arielli has demonstrated.<sup>77</sup> And as was noted at the European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues (EENeT) 2017 conference at Wiesbaden, there is also an ideological aspect to the foreign anti-ISIS volunteers that the study of Tuck et al. barely addressed: Western political extremists, from both right- and left-wing political orientation, are on the ground in Syria. According to the Norwegian organization Hate Speech International, it is clear “that fledgling jihadists are not the only young Europeans capable of picking up military experience and further radicalization in foreign wars.”<sup>78</sup>

Dean Evans, for example, is a British national who joined the Kurds. He was recruited online through Facebook, after being in touch with a Kurdish militiaman. According to Kyle Orton, Evans told him that he wanted to “wage war against all forms of fascism and capitalist hegemony that try to enslave people and destroy nature,”<sup>79</sup> so he joined what can be defined as “the anti-ISIS Caravan.” There are other left-wing foreigners like Evans who joined the Kurds; however, right-wing extremists too are among those who joined the “anti-ISIS caravan” in Syria and Iraq.

## **Manifestations of Western extreme right and the extreme left in Syria**

As noted by Malet, ideology is a form of identity that connects the individual to a wider transnational community.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, and in the Syrian context, “this identity ranged from communism and left-wing activism, to Catholicism and ethno-nationalism.”<sup>81</sup> Yet, perhaps because of the prominence of Jihadist terrorism and the global interest in it, the current academic literature on other, non-Jihadist foreign political extremists involved in the Syrian conflict, and the potential threat of this phenomenon, is still lacking. Orton cautioned that the war in Syria established a connection between Western anarchists and radical left-wing terrorists, and their counterparts in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, especially in Turkey and Greece.<sup>82</sup>

It is not baseless to assume that right-wing extremists will continue their activity back home, and make use of their experiences and connections. According to Ebner, we are living in an era that “is characterised by a vicious circle of emotionally driven action and reaction.”<sup>83</sup> As Neumann observed, there is a “danger to European societies by the prospect that Jihadists and Far Right radicals will drive each other to further extremes.”<sup>84</sup> Ebner called these two extremes “the two sides of the same coin,”<sup>85</sup> however, this is in fact a three-way dynamic.

Just as Salafi-Jihadists provoked the extreme right, so too has the extreme right provoked the extreme left. Additionally, Salafi-Jihadists also provoked the extreme left.

By the same token, one may assume that left-wing extremists will also continue their struggle upon their return home, and will probably use their own experience and connections to further their ideological goals and continue their fight against fascism in its various forms. According to one Westerner anti-fascist fighter in Syria, there are more similarities between ISIS and the extreme right than differences:

They both believe in many of the same things, such as subservient gender roles, capital punishment, an intolerance to homosexuality, that some cultures are superior to others, societal purity and that all must live under the one dominant value system. And as much as the far-right are too stupid to realise it, they play right in to the hands of the fascist Islamists.<sup>86</sup>

It seems that right-wing and left-wing extremists transplanted their domestic ideological rivalry into the Syrian scene, where they can actually fight and experience war. Using violence, or in our case—becoming a foreign fighter—is among the highest manifestations of the “extreme.” Furthermore, it is possible that the convergence of European Islamists in Syria ignited a reaction not only from right-wing extremists, but also from left-wing extremists. In other words, we are witnessing Roger Eatwell’s “cumulative extremism” theory,<sup>87</sup> in which one extremist group evokes a reaction from another extremist group. Within this context extremists are clashing at home (in Europe), and abroad (in Syria).<sup>88</sup>

Extremists are feeding each other and just as the right-wing “needs” the Islamists, so the left-wing “needs” its “fascist” nemesis, either in its right-wing form or Islamist form. All of these extremist ideologies are currently fighting in Syria. As Orton explained, Western volunteers began arriving in Syria after ISIS invaded Kurdish towns in the north of the country. “The initial wave of volunteers mostly comprised apolitical military veterans, who became known informally as the Lions of Rojava,” he explained; “however, the YPG would soon switch its recruitment pattern to focus on the Western extreme left.”<sup>89</sup> The “revolution in Rojava” and the involvement of Western left-wing extremists in it still needs to be studied in depth.<sup>90</sup>

There is no official or definitive data—neither quantitative or qualitative—about right- or left-wing extremists joining overseas wars, such as in Syria and Ukraine. According to David Malet, “hundreds of foreign volunteers” arrived in Syria to fight and oppose Jihadists, and they could do so “alongside Kurdish and Christian fighting groups.”<sup>91</sup> Edwin Bakker and Mark Singleton noted that these fighters number anywhere between a few dozen to several hundreds, and include American, French, Dutch, Canadian, German, British, and Spanish citizens.<sup>92</sup>

According to one estimation, since 2013 as many as 2,000 fighters had joined the war against ISIS; and they included English-speaking veterans with right-wing views; left-wing radicals from Greece, Germany, and Italy; and “miscellaneous adventurers” with different backgrounds.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, Alexander Ritzmann, the co-chair of the European Commission’s Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN),<sup>94</sup> noted that Western fighters in Syria and Ukraine comprise “Ca. 600 members of extreme left militias; Ca. 400 members of extreme right militias; [and] Ca. 800 members of Christian militias.”<sup>95</sup>

In regard to these figures, there are grounds for assuming that those who joined the Christian militias will include some right-wing extremists, such as anti-Muslim activists representing the so-called “new crusaders.”<sup>96</sup> Ritzmann raised a figure of about 1,800 fighters in total but he referred to the fighters both in Syria and in Ukraine. Therefore, it

seems impossible to know how many of them were only in Syria, how many were only in Ukraine, how many of them moved from one front to the other, and to which ideology they belong on the basis of their fighting unit. Nonetheless, it is possible that the figure of 1,800 is even higher, as some reports indicate that in Spain alone nearly 1,000 people were interested in embarking on a crusade against ISIS.<sup>97</sup>

Contemporary right-wing extremism is fueled by a sense of obligation to defend Europe from “the perceived totalitarian ideology of Islam,”<sup>98</sup> as well as from domestic and foreign enemies who try to erase the white race and the Western civilization. This ideology fueled the terrorist and self-proclaimed “crusader” Anders Breivik,<sup>99</sup> who also inspired a wave of anti-left and anti-Muslim attacks that occurred in Europe.<sup>100</sup> More self-proclaimed “crusaders” engaged in anti-Muslim violence in the years that followed Breivik’s attacks. Some of them traveled to Syria to form a Christian army.

Some Spanish self-proclaimed “crusaders,” among them well-known militant neo-fascists,<sup>101</sup> joined the Kurdish forces, but they soon realized that they were better with Christian militias such as the *Dwekh Naksha* (Self Sacrificers)<sup>102</sup> that emerged after the persecution of Christians and other minorities in Iraq.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, some right-wing volunteers regarded the Kurdish forces, with their radical left-wing stance, as “a bunch of damned Reds,”<sup>104</sup> and deserted the Kurds and joined Christian forces instead.<sup>105</sup>

Christianity clearly played a central role in driving volunteers to join the “anti-ISIS Caravan.”<sup>106</sup> Patin noted that for the American volunteers in particular, “the moral outrage and dismay that compelled them to act is directly connected to their strong Christian faith.”<sup>107</sup> Orton claimed that “the only truly ideological motivation that drove Western recruits to Rojava in the early stages was Christianity, whether defined wholly religiously or in the form of solidarity with co-religionists being persecuted by the Islamic State.”<sup>108</sup>

As Christians and other minorities were targeted by ISIS, some decided to better-organize a military response to push ISIS back. This is the case of Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), a public-funded project “which are currently focused on helping the Iraqi Assyrian Christian community in Iraq in the fight against ISIS.”<sup>109</sup> Founded by the U.S. veteran Matt Van Dyke as a reaction to the brutal murder of his good friend, the journalist James Wright Foley (the first US and foreign captive that was beheaded by ISIS), SOLI is dedicated to helping Iraqi Christians. According to its “Mission Statement,”

[SOLI] provides free security consulting, training, supplies, and other services to vulnerable populations to enable them to defend themselves against terrorists and insurgents. We provide these services to communities that would otherwise not be able to afford them.<sup>110</sup>

In August 20, 2016, exactly two years after Foley’s murder video was posted online by ISIS, SOLI posted on its YouTube channel a three-minute video under the title “Meet the Trainers,” in which three U.S. veterans who joined SOLI explained why they have decided to travel to Iraq and to fight ISIS. The trio: Tom from Michigan, Neil from Alaska, and Dave from Washington, said that they want to train local persecuted Christians to fight against ISIS themselves. Neil said that it is important to fight ISIS in Iraq because if it is not be stopped in Iraq, it will reach the U.S.<sup>111</sup>

All of SOLI’s volunteers came to Iraq due to a mix of motivations, but mainly because they could not ignore the atrocities committed by ISIS. As Tom for example explained, he was “tired watching the news and seeing the atrocities ISIS was committing,” especially

against Iraqi Christians.<sup>112</sup> Nonetheless, SOLI also appears to be dedicated to the fight against other Jihadists, even beyond Iraq or the Middle East. For instance, in April 13, 2018, Van Dyke posted the following message on his personal Twitter account:

I have returned from a mission to Asia, met with a force at their jungle base. Sons of Liberty International planning support to help them defend their people as we expand missions beyond #Iraq and the fight against #ISIS. Can't release details yet due to security concerns.<sup>113</sup>

SOLI is not the only initiative by Americans who wish to fight ISIS. A *Russia Today* report from 2015 revealed a group of men who planned to join the fighting against local Jihadists in the Philippines, some of whom are affiliated with ISIS.<sup>114</sup> It is important to note that while Christian volunteers do not necessarily identify with right-wing extremism, neo-Nazism or other forms of political extremism, some employ militant Christian symbolism and rhetoric such as the Templar Knights' flag in order to recruit volunteers and manifest their presence in Syria and Iraq.<sup>115</sup>

In this regard, a relatively new and barely known Italian group named the Crusader State (CS) established an online presence in recent years, with a Facebook page with more than 10,000 likes, YouTube channel(s), and a website that was launched in February 2018.<sup>116</sup> Via these platforms the CS advocates a Christian holy war (a crusade) for the sake of Europe and Christendom:

The way for salvation of our souls and of our beloved land is that of the crusade, a crusade against the enemies of truth, against the enemies of religion, against sin, against secularism, against modernism, against falsehood, against hypocrisy. Arm yourself with the weapons of truth and fight the good fight, not tomorrow, brothers, but today. The true faith encourage[s] you to annihilate the sleep imposed by modern governments and exhort you to live as true Christians, because there is no faith without fighting. Reunifying the world under the symbol of the Cross.<sup>117</sup>

As one can learn from the CS posts on its Facebook page, the “enemies of Christ” gathered in a coalition that includes feminists, Satanists and neo-Pagan believers, communists, Hispanic and black gang members, Jihadi-terrorists, the LGBT community, liberals, and, above all—the demonic Jew. Against this “anti-white” coalition stands only the unity of Christian warriors.<sup>118</sup> The videos CS produced reveal the group's legitimization of violence; and they also demonstrate how right-wing extremists mimic Jihadists. Its contemporary neo-Nazis propagate the idea of “white Jihad” and “white Sharia,” and even screen ISIS videos in training camps.<sup>119</sup>

CS videos are reminiscent of the videos produced by ISIS, but with a few changes: the ISIS slogan *Baqiya wa Tatamadad* (Lasting and Expanding) was replaced by “the Crusade State remain”; the Islamic *Nasheed* (chant) was replaced by a Christian hymn; Muslim knights were replaced by Christian ones; and the black banner was replaced by the Templar knights banner. Both sides believe that they are the true representatives of God and seek to implement his laws. It is thus requiring that one engage in a transcendental fight between the forces of good and evil; and this sense is reflected in both sides' propaganda videos.

As ISIS, CS videos also features battle scenes from Hollywood films (such as the 2005 film *Kingdom of Heaven*),<sup>120</sup> real-time battle footage, military trainings, and religious, historical, and political narratives (such as the ongoing ancient battle between Islam and

Christianity) which are usually accompanied by incitement against the “enemies of God” and calls for a new holy war.<sup>121</sup> For example, in a video titled “It’s the time to call all crusaders to fight the enemies of God” which was uploaded to the CS Facebook page in February 2016 (and was later deleted) the narrator “call[s] all crusaders to fight,” as the “enemies of God are trying in every way to destroy the Christian doctrine.” Thus, according to the video, “it’s the time to fight to destroy the pagan demon of the money; for a clean and Crusader state.”<sup>122</sup>

### Online recruitment

Right-wing and left-wing groups recruit foreign fighters via social networks in general, and in particular through several Facebook pages in English, Spanish, French, and other languages that are dedicated to recruiting and mobilizing anti-ISIS volunteers. On Facebook, for example, we can find the American “Veterans for the Protection of Christians Against ISIS International,” the French “Dwekh Nawsha France et Beaufort,”<sup>123</sup> and the Spanish “Apoyo Voluntarios Españoles Contra DAESH.”<sup>124</sup> These pages are politically affiliated with the right-wing, and it is possible that volunteers would join Christian militias rather than the “leftist” YPG, whose “hard-left politics ... led to tensions with some Western Christian recruits, who had not understood the ideological inclination of the militia they had joined.”<sup>125</sup>

Although some right-wingers have joined Christian and Yazidi militias, these militias do not seem to hold any aggressive or hostile attitude towards the West; nor do Western countries regard them as terrorists. Yet, supporters of Dwekh Nawsha portrayed themselves as modern crusaders and the war against ISIS as “holy war.”<sup>126</sup> This approach and crusader symbolism links these “modern crusaders” to Christian militant fundamentalists and other right-wing extremists in the United States and Europe who share more or less the same vision about the inevitable epic battle between (white-Christian) Europe and Islam.

Unlike the Dwekh Nawsha and other non-Muslim militias that attracted Western political extremists, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK)<sup>127</sup> was designated as a terrorist organization by states and international institutions such as European Union,<sup>128</sup> which in 2017 “continued its fundraising, propaganda and recruitment activities” in various European countries.<sup>129</sup> And as the PKK—which in Syria operates as the YPG/trains and probably indoctrinates Western militant anti-fascists and anarchists, it may not only pose a security challenge but also blur the boundaries between Europol’s definitions of “left-wing terrorism” and “ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism.”

Facebook pages and Twitter accounts are also being used to recruit and mobilize Western left-wing volunteers to join the ranks of the YPG.<sup>130</sup> Those who joined the YPG but did not share its political worldview, indoctrination, and goals were free to leave the group and join other militias. According to Tuck et al., the YPG’s left-wing orientation led to “political and religious disagreements, with some Western fighters leaving for other groups ... due to the YPG’s strong left-wing, secular views.”<sup>131</sup> Indeed, some of these volunteers had joined Yazidi and other Christian militias, among them Spanish right-wing volunteers who ended up in a Kurdish prison.<sup>132</sup>

Orton’s research on PKK’s foreign fighters reveals the importance of social networks, especially Facebook, in recruiting foreign fighters for Kurdish militias. Many of these

volunteers identify with radical left-wing ideologies, and are active in social media platforms such as the “Lions of Rojava” Facebook page. Orton noticed that these platforms help “communists, anarchists, and other hard-left militants” flock to Syria to “create a revolutionary society,” to find shelter from persecution, and to gain combat experience.<sup>133</sup> Some of these left-wing radicals and revolutionaries are engaged in criminal and terrorist activities in southern Europe, and their connection to Syria therefore contains a real threat. As Orton indicated,

Allowing European left-wing terrorist organizations to acquire training and experience in urban warfare from the PKK, as well as to forge transnational connections and to recruit among YPG volunteers, is deeply undesirable. The potential for such recruits to be drawn into lone-actor terrorism, whether individual or directed by a foreign terrorist organization, has to be taken seriously.<sup>134</sup>

Unlike ISIS, both right-wing and left-wing extremists are able to openly recruit funds and volunteers via social networks. While the online activity of ISIS is heavily monitored by governments, non-governmental organizations, private internet users, and social media companies, the recruitment and mobilization efforts of the other extremists go largely unnoticed. ISIS propaganda is more sophisticated, and its official and unofficial propagandists are very active online;<sup>135</sup> however, the propaganda of other extremists poses no less of a security challenge and a threat to public order, and could ultimately lead in the same direction as Jihadist propaganda: violence against perceived enemies.

There is no shortage of online information regarding how to join anti-ISIS forces, and foreign fighters of different ideological persuasions and motives can easily find instructions and tips on joining Christian militias or Kurdish forces. On the Quora website, for example, one user asked “how can one join the Christian militias that fight against ISIS? How can one get in touch with them?” This question received an explicit answer with instructions and links to related social media pages and other relevant information.<sup>136</sup> Plenty of information is available online to those seeking to join Kurdish forces too, such as an “eight step guide” for anti-ISIS potential volunteers.<sup>137</sup>

## Left-wing foreign fighters in Syria

Although some Christian volunteers and extreme right-wing activists from the West travelled to Syria, it seems that the anti-ISIS foreign fighters are mostly left-wing volunteers. During the Spanish civil war, thousands of left-wing radicals from around the world converged in Spain to fight the fascists, represented by General Franco. As one American anti-fascist volunteer who traveled to Spain and joined the International Brigades made clear, “fascism had to be defeated in all its manifestations throughout the world.”<sup>138</sup> Decades later, the same now applies to Syria, where ISIS represents the “fascists.”<sup>139</sup> As one Greek anti-fascist volunteer explained:

I used my art and politics to defend the Muslim community from attacks initiated by fascists of the Golden Dawn party, but I consider IS jihadists as 21st century fascists posing a greater global threat as they barbarically spread Islamo-fascism on an international level. I believe that the YPG is therefore leading the greatest anti-fascist struggle of our time by fighting against IS jihadists... . I joined this struggle to fight against global fascism in defence of democracy and peace in Kurdish Rojava.<sup>140</sup>

The war in Syria offered Western left-wing radicals the opportunity to fight for a new revolutionary entity and against their common “fascist enemy,” and they could do so in the ranks of the International Freedom Battalion (IFB).<sup>141</sup> Part of the YPG, the IFB is highly promoted by various Western anti-fascist and anarchist online platforms, and in different languages.<sup>142</sup> It was portrayed as the appropriate anti-fascist response, necessary to block modern fascism in its religious-Islamic form. One pro-IFB flyer posted on Twitter by the New York-based anarchist center The Base illustrated this approach well. The image showed a rifle-mounted bayonet skewering two black hands, with a swastika on one and the ISIS flag on the other,<sup>143</sup> with the words “death to the forces of hate.”

The IFB was established in June 2015 as a union of six Marxist and Communist groups: The Marxist-Leninist Communist Party; The Liberation Army of the Workers and Peasants of Turkey; United Liberation Forces; Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Forces – Revolutionary Front; The Communist Reconstruction; and the Revolutionary Union for International Solidarity. Its Facebook page was opened the same month. The “About” section describes the IFB as “a fighting force in the revolution of Rojava that includes revolutionary fighters from various nationalities.” By the end of June 2015 the page had gained some 3,800 “likes” and by the end of August there were more than 4,500 “likes.”<sup>144</sup>

Besides the IFB, there are additional designated Facebook pages for recruiting potential volunteers to the Kurdish forces, such as the Lions of Rojava, the Peshmerga International Volunteers, or the International Brigades of Rojava (IBR) that operate under the umbrella of the YPG.<sup>145</sup> The IFB receives support not only from ethnic Kurds, but from the European far-left as well. For example, the Greek anarchist group The Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity announced that its members had joined the IFB to fight for Rojava.<sup>146</sup>

Within the IFB operates an anarchist group known as the International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), which has attracted many Westerners. The IRPGF was operating from March 2017 to September 2018,<sup>147</sup> and gained media attention after establishing a subgroup named The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA) in late July.<sup>148</sup> Homosexuals and women have been persecuted by ISIS since the organization conquered territories in Syria and Iraq. Thus, the IRPGF represented itself as a genuine “anti-fascist” militant group, seeking to protect the defenseless minorities and establish a new society in Kurdish areas in Syria while fighting fascism in its different forms.<sup>149</sup>

Its first statement (accompanied by a propaganda video) said in English that the IRPGF “is a militant armed self-organized and horizontal collective working to defend social revolutions around the world, to directly confront capital and the state, and advance the cause of anarchism.” At the end of the video, which shows IRPGF members shooting rifles and rocket-launchers, as well as detonating an improvised explosive device, the speaker said that they “declare our open struggle with all imperialist, fascist and counterrevolutionary forces.”<sup>150</sup>

The IRPGF is active in social networks, but its official accounts did not attract many “likes” (on Facebook) or “followers” (on Twitter).<sup>151</sup> However, this group uses online anarchist platforms to establish links with other Western anarchists and militant left-wing radicals, publish communiques and solidarity campaigns, communicate with supporters,

and recruit volunteers. They can also mobilize their followers to a confrontation, either at the battlefronts of Syria, or on the streets of their own countries. The “fascist enemy” is everywhere. In an interview published on the Kurdish Question website, members of the group revealed their worldview that combined feminist, LGBT, and ecological activism with anarchism and militancy.

We decided to come to Rojava to defend the ongoing social revolution unfolding here and in the broader region. We wanted to support the revolution not only with words and with solidarity events but with our physical presence and our lives. The revolution’s primary focus on women’s liberation and ecology are vital to any liberatory revolution and thus something we not only support and defend but also seek to spread. Additionally, we wanted to learn as much as we could about tactics and practices from the various militant Apöist and communist parties as well as create a space for anarchist militants in the revolution.<sup>152</sup>

From the interview we learn that IRPGF members do not focus their efforts only in Syria, but in their own countries as well. They suggested to “develop decentralized defense militias that can go to war with the State and its lackeys (cops, boneheads, etc.). In short, this is a time in the West when anarchism may either succeed or fail completely and the path it will take is in all of our hands.”<sup>153</sup> This shows how militant anti-fascism and anarchism can become a potential risk for security agencies, most of which are currently concerned with the foreign Jihadist fighters. The anarchist threat is concrete, and lessons from history should be implemented in order to counter this under-researched phenomenon.

The Internet, and especially social networks, facilitates a bilateral discourse between the IRPGF and anarchists around the world. Since its foundation, the IRPGF has published messages of support and solidarity with their “brothers” overseas. These textual and visual (video) communiques included appeals to the governments of Belarus, Bulgaria, and Argentina to free imprisoned anarchists,<sup>154</sup> as well as messages of solidarity with feminists in China<sup>155</sup> and anarchists world-wide.<sup>156</sup>

This outreach was met with online and offline messages of support from international anarchists, mainly from the United States and Europe. Thus, it builds transnational networks that link the IRPGF and other militant anti-fascists and left-wing radicals, such as the Revolutionary Abolishment Movement in the United States, the Revolutionäre Jugend Gruppe (Young Revolutionary Group) in Switzerland,<sup>157</sup> the 161 Crew in Poland,<sup>158</sup> as well as similar groups in Germany, France, Britain, Spain, and elsewhere. The IRPGF intentions are clear: to continue the revolution in Syria and to help insurrectionists worldwide. In an interview with the anarchist website Enough is Enough!, members of the group said:

IRPGF is not just a militant group for anarchists to join and fight against DAÎŞ [ISIS], but it is also a group that is creating infrastructure that will enable anarchists to join and learn how to advance the anarchist struggle once they return home... . We believe it is crucial that anarchists coming to Rojava gain experience in both civil and military projects ... in order to develop a more comprehensive conception of what the revolution truly looks like on the ground. The IRPGF will be there to fight and work within social revolutions around the world while upholding certain principles that we see as a precondition for a liberated life. Revolutions and insurrections are messy but we are ready to get our hands dirty.<sup>159</sup>

In another interview published on the American anarchist website *It’s Going Down*, IRPGF members recommend that Western anarchists develop a sense of community

within their neighborhoods and their historical and contemporary context. “To recreate this sense of community in Western societies,” they argued, “we will first need to revolutionize ourselves and our relationships with each other.” Also, they said, “call outs on social media need to be done away with.” Anarchists are asked to build an alternative to their governments, and to “create groups that enable people to begin to rely on each other again instead of the State.” As for militant and violent struggle, the IRPGF called upon anarchists to “develop decentralized defense militias that can go to war with the State and its lackeys (cops, boneheads, etc.)”<sup>160</sup>

Support among anarchists is expressed via propaganda, protests, marches, and action. In the Syrian context, “the revolution in Rojava,” as it is called by Western anti-fascists and their local Kurdish counterparts, is facing two forms of “fascism”: Turkey and ISIS, both of which are trying to oppress this “revolution.”<sup>161</sup> The Turkish army attacks and invasion of Rojava and Afrin in Northern Syria was denounced mostly by anarchists. Some of them protested against Turkey and in support of the Kurds,<sup>162</sup> or expressed their solidarity online.<sup>163</sup> Others responded with calls to avenge the invasion and defend the “revolution.”

On January 22, 2018, an “urgent message from an anarchist in Afrin” aimed at Western anarchists was published on the *Insurrection News* website.<sup>164</sup> The message accused the United States, the European Union (E.U.), Russia, and the anti-ISIS coalition of betraying the Kurds who fought ISIS, and “playing blind” to Turkey’s actions. “We won’t forget,” the message warned, that “Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Armenian, Assyrian, Greek peoples are sold by U.S., Russia and the International Coalition. **So make them regret this** [bolded in the original text].”<sup>165</sup> On the same day YPG foreign volunteers clarified that they will fight “terrorist Turkey” in Afrin;<sup>166</sup> and several days later this message was repeated by YPG volunteers “from Germany to China, from the United States to Britain,” who announced their will to fight Turkey as they fought ISIS.<sup>167</sup>

On January 30, *Insurrection News* reported an arson attack against the Turkish consulate in Zurich,<sup>168</sup> and on February 11 it reported a firebombing attack against a Turkish-owned furniture company in Athens.<sup>169</sup> These may not be the last attacks. On February 13, *Insurrection News* published a communique from Westerner foreign fighters in Afrin that united under the name Anti-Fascist Forces in Afrin (AFFA) as a unit encompassing communists, anarchists, and anti-fascists.<sup>170</sup> In this communique, AFFA attacked Turkey for its actions in Syria and pledged to continue the fight “against fascism, imperialism and terrorism.”<sup>171</sup> According to AFFA,

The resistance of Afrin is one of the most critical moments in the struggle against fascism of our time; The time to act is now; We call for international solidarity with the struggle of Afrin; We call on determined international revolutionaries to join our struggle; We also call upon widespread civil actions against the Turkish state around the world; In unity, we will be triumphant. In solidarity, we will defeat our enemies.<sup>172</sup>

Although it appears that most anti-ISIS foreign fighters are affiliated with left-wing ideology, evidence suggests that right-wing extremists too have traveled to the Middle East to partake in the war against ISIS. Yet, those identifying with extreme right-wing ideologies are less inclined to express their politics openly, unlike their radical left-wing rivals and counterparts. Either way, the fact that Western political extremists of both kinds have established a presence in Syria should be cause for concern for security and

intelligence agencies. The potential threat embodied in the anti-ISIS phenomenon for Europe and North America is serious, although incomparable in its characteristics and scope to that posed by Western Jihadists.

On September 24, 2018, the IRPGF has published a “final communique” in which the group announced its dissolution. According to the communique, group members still support the idea of armed struggle, “with even more determination and resilience,” but they have “matured” and changed their “perspective on armed struggle and way of organizing.” The IRPGF urged anarchists to continue “the struggle against hierarchy in all its forms,” and “to develop their own militant movements.”<sup>173</sup> Indeed, on January 10, 2019, an anarchist group called the Tekoşîna Anarşîst (Anarchist Struggle, AS) has announced via Twitter its presence in Rojava.<sup>174</sup> Four days later, AS posted a message of solidarity “with indigenous struggles, whether it be here in Rojava or elsewhere such as the Americas.”<sup>175</sup> Days later, the US-based anarchist group Revolutionary Abolishment Movement has responded to AS with an expression of solidarity and a call for “direct actions, demonstrations, and messages of support for our comrades.”<sup>176</sup>

The presence of armed anarchist militants is not limited to war-zones such as Syria or to Ukraine, where an armed anarchist underground known as the Rev Dia (Revolutionary Action) was recently established with the goal to fight the local fascist forces.<sup>177</sup> In the United States, for example, we can find the armed Redneck Revolt, which defined itself “as an anti-racist, anti-fascist community defence formation.”<sup>178</sup> This armed anarchist presence is a reaction to the rise of the extreme-right and fascism. Hence there is an online and offline struggle aimed to eradicate the fascist threat. Thus, the interaction between anarchists from various parts of the world and the anarchists in Syria and the Ukraine seems disturbing, as it may inspire other anarchist militants to adopt violence and armed struggle as a measure to confront the fascists.

## Conclusions

In addition to the well-researched aspect of foreign Jihadist fighters, it is clear that the war in Syria involves other types of contemporary Western political extremism. Foreign extremists of both right- and left-wing ideologies are participating in the war to protect their ideological allies and counterparts. Relatively little is known about this phenomenon, and there is more than meets the eye. We do not know exactly how many of these extremists have joined the fighting or where they are exactly, and fully understanding the extent of this phenomenon and its potential threats requires additional research on national and international scales.

Europol’s Te-Sat 2017 report on terrorist trends, which only referred to Spanish left-wing extremists who traveled to Syria, stated that “it remains to be seen how their participation in the conflict will affect their activities on Spanish soil.”<sup>179</sup> The report did not mention the right-wing extremists that flocked to Syria and the potential threat they pose, or other Western left-wing (anti-fascists) extremists that enlisted to groups such as the IRPGF or Tabur International. Indeed, the war in Syria has spread to the West, but not only via the Jihadists.

Although many of the anti-ISIS volunteers have joined the YPG, this does not necessarily suggest that all foreign fighters are left-wing or that they are driven by anarchism or other radical left-wing views. On the contrary, we know of neo-Nazis from Spain, and

other European and American right-wing extremists that have joined the YPG despite its clear political stance. In this regard, and in terms of political agenda, Christian militias such as the *Dwekh Naksha* would be much more suitable for these so called “new crusaders.”

Historically, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not new, and has nothing to do with Islam. Non-Muslim foreign fighters participated in different warzones around the world in the twentieth century, such as the Spanish civil war or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and later, in the twenty-first century, in the Yugoslav wars. With the rise of Salafi-Jihadism it seemed that most foreign fighters are Jihadists, but the recent warzones in Ukraine and Syria remind us that this phenomenon is not unique to Islamist extremism.

The Ukrainian arena revealed the potential threat posed by political extremists drawn to this war, such as the case of the French citizen that plotted to attack Jewish and Muslim targets. This arena, which attracts European and other Western volunteers from both the extreme right and the extreme left, highlights the prospects of extremists to acquire weapons for future attacks in Western Europe. Moreover, it is a place where extremists can be trained in the use of various weapons, and to gain combat experience. As we see, Syria too attracted foreign volunteers with extreme ideologies from both right and left, and this arena can be exploited in the same manner. This harbors a new and largely unknown threat, and a challenge for European security agencies.

If a Western transnational extremist movement that advocates, condones, and justifies violence, and worse, acts on this abroad or at home, is establishing networks that train volunteers in battlefield and urban warfare, the use of firearms and explosives and actual combat experience—it should be considered a threat. In the case of Jihadism—it is. The case of the other extremists who volunteer to fight in Ukraine or Syria has not yet gained this recognition, but it should, especially as these arenas attracted Western neo-Nazis from Europe who joined Assad’s forces.

While the phenomenon of foreign fighters itself is not new, the Syria arena revealed a new and unfamiliar type of foreign fighters: the right-wing “counter-Jihadists.” Although this type of fighter appears to be markedly different from Jihadists or left-wing volunteers in quantitative and qualitative terms, their willingness to use violence against their (Jihadist) enemies does not appear to be limited to Europe. For “counter-Jihadists” one transnational holy war (Jihad) must be met with another transnational holy war (crusade).

Some of the Western foreign fighters do not conceal their political stances that might reflect rival ideologies (extreme right/left) while fighting under the same banner, for example the YPG, because they are fighting a common enemy (ISIS). It is plausible that once they return home, they will turn against each other, only this time they will be well-trained in combat, weapons, and military organization. Thus, the potential challenges posed by foreign fighters of the political extremes to European countries may not be overlooked.

It is hard to predict whether these foreign fighters will become domestic terrorists or even involved in political violence in their home countries. Yet, this is an era of online and real-life reciprocal extremism and radicalization in Western liberal democracies—an era in which extremist movements flourish and in which they attract, recruit, and mobilize people to confront perceived enemies. As a result, the “Syria veterans” of the extreme right and left pose a security and public order threat, and a real challenge for the

authorities. The risk of future confrontations between opposite groups or movements in the West taking the form of armed struggle is considerably increased.

One must not exaggerate the threat contemporary political extremism poses to the West, and keep a proportionate view of the involvement of extremists in battlefronts such as Ukraine or Syria. Unlike Ukraine, the involvement of extremists in the Syrian arena is an under-researched topic, and as of yet the academic literature is insufficient to shed light on this unfamiliar aspect of the civil war in Syria, and its possible direct and indirect ramifications. At the same time, Western democracies must not ignore this socio-political and security challenge.

This article indicated the considerable role that social networks such as Twitter or Facebook play in recruiting and mobilizing people to violent confrontations with their perceived enemies. While the online propaganda, recruitment, and mobilization efforts of ISIS are heavily monitored and blocked by authorities, right- and left-wing extremists seem to be able to carry on fairly freely, and their online presence, pages, and accounts remain mostly available. On occasion, Twitter has shut down accounts of right-wing activists or groups, some of which promoted the “crusade” against ISIS. However, other channels affiliated with extremists on both right- and left-wing that engage in recruitment and mobilization remain active and available.

The decline of ISIS is likely to result in a significant decrease in the flow of foreign fighters and eventually in the return of these fighters to their countries of origin. While Jihadist returnees are a known source of concern that receive adequate attention from the authorities, other revolutionary extremists returning from overseas battlefields receive little attention as a potential security threat. This group of foreign fighters include both the “traditionalist” (neo-Nazi) right-wing and the “new” anti-Islam right-wing, as well as left-wing extremists such as militant anarchists. Although there is only evidence for potential left-wing aggression when the fighters would return to their home countries, one should not ignore the hostility of right-wing extremists towards what they would define as “multi-culti-liberal-anti-Christian/Western establishment”; nor towards the left-wing or Muslims (and other minorities as well).

Reaching a definitive answer as to why these volunteers join the war in Syria is complicated, as are the derivative questions. Will these foreign fighters lay down their weapons upon returning home, or will they continue the war against their rivals in their countries? Will these veterans contribute to the formation of paramilitary vigilantes? Will their military training and combat experience become a lethal threat to European and non-European countries? These and others remain to be seen in the coming years. In the meantime, it is worth paying attention to this unfamiliar potential threat.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Notes

1. This quote was taken from Ritzmann's Twitter account, and it was written in the context of the European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues (EENET) annual conference, which was held in Wiesbaden, Germany, during November 2017. See Ritzmann's tweet <https://twitter.com/alexRitzmann/status/931152827367469056> (accessed November 17, 2017).
2. These Polish fighters took part in operation "Wrath of the Euphrates" in which U.S.-led forces, mostly Kurdish, fought to retake ISIS strongholds in Syria. More photos of, and information about, anti-ISIS foreign fighters from Poland are available via the Facebook account of "Archer," one of these fighters: <https://www.facebook.com/ArcherPL/> (accessed November 15, 2017); see also this *YouTube* channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbHkileD2PdFu79Mvvyx1sw> (accessed November 15, 2017); and, "Polish Soldiers Fighting ISIS outside Raqqa," *Radio Poland* (thenews.pl) <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/306484> (accessed May 11, 2017), Polish-soldiers-fighting-ISIS-outside-Raqqa.
3. The photo was uploaded on October 17, 2017, to Archer's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/ArcherPL/photos/a.416419705374410.1073741829.412403462442701/510118842671162/> (accessed November 15, 2017).
4. Nir Arielli, *From Byron to bin Laden: A History of Foreign War Volunteers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 40.
5. Nir Arielli, "In Search of Meaning: Foreign Volunteers in the Croatian Armed Forces, 1991–95," *Contemporary European History* 21, no. 1 (December 15, 2011): 1–17, 1–2.
6. *Ibid.*; Arielli, 2018 (see note 4), 4–8.
7. Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/11): 53–94, 57–58.
8. David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (UK, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.
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144. The International Freedom Battalion Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/International-freedom-battalion/1597451687171173> (the page is not available) (accessed August 25, 2015).
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146. A.Σ.M.II.A, “The International Freedom Battalion of Rojava and participation from Greece,” *Athens.indymedia*, July 7, 2015. <https://athens.indymedia.org/post/1546646/>; And also: “The International Freedom Battalion of Rojava and Participation from Greece,” *Insurrection News*, July 15, 2015. <http://insurrectionnewsworldwide.blogspot.com/2015/07/the-international-freedom-battalion-of.html> (accessed October 31, 2015).
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148. Jack Moore, “First LGBT Unit ‘Created to Fight ISIS’ in Syria. Its Name? The Queer Insurrection,” *Newsweek*, July 24, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/first-lgbt-unit-created-fight-isis-syria-its-name-queer-insurrection-641148>; Announcement of the formation of TQILA, from the IRPGF official twitter account: <https://twitter.com/IRPGF/status/889460892450115588> (accessed July 25, 2017); See also: Jack Moore, “Kurdish Militia Denies Ties to Foreign Fighters Claiming New LGBT Unit in Syria,” *Newsweek*, July 26, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/kurdish-militia-denies-ties-foreign-fighters-claiming-new-lgbt-unit-syria-642002>.
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  - Twitter: <https://twitter.com/irpgf>.
152. “Interview with the International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces,” *The Kurdish Question*, May 1, 2017. <http://kurdishquestion.com/article/3915-interview-with-the-international-revolutionary-people-s-guerrilla-forces> (accessed February 15, 2018).
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154. See, for example: “From Rojava to Belarus: Solidarity with the Anarchist Prisoners,” *Insurrection News World Wide*, April 3, 2017. <https://insurrectionnewsworldwide.com/>

- 2017/04/03/from-rojava-to-belarus-solidarity-with-the-anarchist-prisoners/; “Raqqa, Siria: IRPGF Comunicado por Santiago Maldonado,” *Insurrection News World Wide*, September 2, 2017. <https://insurrectionnewsworldwide.com/2017/09/02/raqqa-siria-irpgf-comunicado-por-santiago-maldonado/> (accessed January 18, 2018).
155. See the following IRPGF tweet from April 28, 2017: <https://twitter.com/IRPGF/status/857992789954527232> (accessed January 18, 2018).
156. See: “Building Anarchist Forces: The IRPGF and the International Struggle,” *Its Going Down*, April 28, 2017. <https://itsgoingdown.org/building-anarchist-forces-irpgf-international-struggle/> (accessed January 18, 2018).
157. See: the Revolutionäre Jugend Gruppe (Young Revolutionary Group) YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqkqERu\\_dN\\_0NjuMGsyarEA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqkqERu_dN_0NjuMGsyarEA) (accessed January 18, 2018).
158. 161 Crew is an anti-fascist group; some of its members traveled to Syria and joined the IRPGF. Online platforms of 161 Crew (accessed January 18, 2018):
- Website (Tumblr): <http://161crewpoland.tumblr.com/>
  - Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/161CrewPolska/>
  - Twitter: [https://twitter.com/161\\_crew](https://twitter.com/161_crew)
  - Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/161.crew/>
159. See: “Interview with IRPGF Comrades: “The IRPGF will be There to Fight and Work Within Social Revolutions Around the World,”” *Enough is Enough*, April 8, 2017. <https://enoughisenough14.org/2017/04/08/interview-with-irpgf-comrades-the-irpgf-will-be-there-to-fight-and-work-within-social-revolutions-around-the-world/> (accessed January 18, 2018).
160. “Building Anarchist Forces: The IRPGF and the International Struggle,” *Its Going Down*, April 28, 2017.
161. See, for example: “Anarchist Federation Statement on Rojava,” Anarchist Federation (UK), December 1, 2014. <http://afed.org.uk/anarchist-federation-statement-on-rojava/> (accessed February 15, 2018).
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