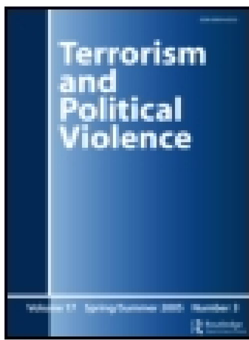

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The Turkish Foreign Fighters and the Dynamics behind Their Flow into Syria and Iraq

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ABSTRACT

During the past decade, the flow of foreign fighters into conflict zones has emerged as a serious problem that deserves policy intervention. Based on latent content analysis of 89 interviews conducted with Turkish nationals, we examined the factors that influenced the mobilization of foreign fighters into Syria. Informed by the existing literature, the analysis revealed that the decision to engage in foreign fighting was influenced by five factors: a) peer pressure coming from religious networks; b) socialization with Islamic State fighters; c) low levels of risk associated with travel; d) favorable life conditions compared to previous jihad locations; and e) the opportunity to exact revenge. Our findings indicated that Turkish individuals' decisions to participate in foreign fighting is predominantly influenced by peer pressure coming from preexisting networks. The risk of being acknowledged as a coward, a hypocrite, or disloyal, and the risk of exclusion from religious networks motivated Turkish foreign fighters' decision to travel to conflict zones.

KEYWORDS

Foreign fighting; Islamic state; radicalization; jihad; Turkish fighters

Foreign fighting occurs "when a non-citizen of a state experiencing civil conflict ... arrives from an external state to join an insurgency."[1] While only recently receiving worldwide recognition, foreign fighting is not a new phenomenon. Before the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, the world witnessed various foreign fighter mobilizations in Israel (1967), Lebanon (1978, 2007), Afghanistan (1978, 2015), Bosnia (1992–95), Tajikistan (1992–97), Algeria (1991), Chechnya (1994), Philippines (1968), Kashmir (1989), Somalia (1991), Kosovo (1998), Eritrea (1998), Palestine (2000), and Iraq (2003).[2] The idea of foreign fighting, however, has never held as much influence over individuals as it has in the Syrian conflict. Research indicates that approximately forty thousand foreign fighters have so far travelled to Syria to fight for the IS.[3]

This quandary points out that IS can no longer be considered a local or regional concern since it is likely that some of these foreign fighters will eventually return to their host countries; whether it be the United States, Australia, or somewhere in Europe. For example, a study conducted on British foreign fighters revealed that more than half of the seven hundred British foreign fighters have returned to England.[4] Taking into consideration the intensive military and/or ideological training that many of these fighters are now undergoing, along with their exposure to years of firsthand experience within violent environments, these returnees will potentially pose a serious threat to global security and stability. In fact, some European

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returnees have already undertaken deadly missions in their host countries, such as the recent attacks in Paris and Brussels.[5]

This situation—the emergence of "foreign fighting" as an increasingly salient security issue, has also resulted in a proliferation of foreign fighting research across academic disciplines.[6] The fields of radicalization, counterterrorism, political science, psychology, sociology, and criminal justice have not remained untouched by this trend. Over the past couple of years, the motivational factors leading individuals into foreign fighting have been a major preoccupation of scholars from different academic backgrounds.

A close look at the previous research indicates that various factors—prominence of religious discourse, low prospects for the future, demographic variables, personal networks, facilitators, poor socioeconomic conditions, and the levels of risk—are at play when explaining the motivation of individuals for fighting someone else's war.[7] The variation in the motivation of foreign fighting is mainly due to three factors. First, although exceptions exist (c.f., Hegghammer, GW Program on Extremism, START Center, ICSR), many studies have relied on evidence from secondary data (e.g., media reports, open source news, court records) rather than primary data that would allow an in-depth analysis of foreign fighting. Second, most of these studies were unable to derive conclusive inferences because they used relatively small samples, which were nonrandom in nature. Nonrandom samples are not inherently negative or avoidable given the population being studied but they do limit the generalizability of findings. Third, researchers used different groups of foreign fighters (American, Canadian, English, Belgian, Danish, Dutch, Turkish, Tunisian, Saudi Arabian, Jordanian, etc.) and thus arrived at different conclusions regarding the motivational factors behind the mobilization of individuals. In other words, motivational influences could differ and it is important to understand factors that impact decisions for groups separately.

The emphasis on studying foreign fighters has provided new insights into these events and illuminated how these individuals operate. However, variations in findings limit conclusions that can be drawn across samples. Thus, the present study attempts to extend prior literature by analyzing interviews from a sample of Turkish foreign fighters to assess influential factors in the mobilization of these individuals into Syria and Iraq. The purpose of this study is to determine which factors are most important for motivating individuals from this subpopulation of fighters. As such, the following section will first outline the motivational influences of foreign fighters identified in prominent studies.

The Islamic State and motivational influences for Muslim foreign fighters

During the past decade, the rise in the number of foreign fighters travelling to conflict zones helped trigger a new research agenda; the "motivation for foreign fighting" was now a worthy object of study. Several researchers attempted to specify the sources for the mobilization of individuals, but the overarching conclusion was that there was no parsimonious explanation to predict who would become a foreign fighter.[8] Instead, it was noted that various factors including religiosity, lack of meaningfulness in life, superficial knowledge of religion, troubled backgrounds, lack of sense of belonging, low prospect for the future, fulfilling religious commands, economic constraints, existence of personal social networks, emergence of new religious social movements, the decrease in the cost of ocean freight, air transport, and telephone calls, and the use of social media for religious propaganda played a role in an individual's decision to become a foreign fighter.[9]

Despite this variation, one of the most robust findings in the literature regarding the mobilization of foreign fighters has been the prominence of religious discourse and religiosity (Table 1). For example, Hegghammer conducted simple sufficiency tests and asserted that reduced cost of international travel and advances in communication and publishing technologies constituted the enabling factors for foreign fighter mobilization.[10] However, after analyzing the recruitment propaganda for three jihadi locations—Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Iraq—he concluded that the increase in the number of foreign fighters was largely due to the emergence of a new social movement in the mid-1980s that favored the application of military jihad. More specifically, Hegghammer discovered that after the 1980s, the extremist Islamic ideologues invoked Islamic law and declared that fighting against outside enemies is an individual religious duty of all Muslims, whether or not they live in the contested area.[11] Three years later, using open source data, Hegghammer analyzed the variation between domestic and foreign fighting. He observed that foreign fighting was frequently correlated with religiosity.[12] According to him, most jihadists preferred foreign fighting because the majority of the clerics in the Islamic world have condemned or put certain reservations on launching domestic terrorist attacks that targeted civilian populations in Western countries.[13] Thus, the radicalized individuals began to see fighting in Muslim conflict zones as a more legitimate means of fulfilling their jihadi requirements after observing the dominant view among religious authorities.

A resounding sentiment by scholars is that "prominence of religious discourse and solidarity with fellow Muslims were important driving forces" for the mobilization of foreign fighters. Multiple analyses have supported this notion including: Dawson and Amarasingam's interviews with 20 Syrian and Iraqi foreign fighters; Noonan and Khalil's profile analysis of nine North American foreign fighters;[14] Vidino et al.'s extensive study on IS-related activities in the United States;[15] Quantum Communications' psycho-contextual analysis on Western foreign fighters;[16] Dawson, Amarasingam, and Bain's study of individuals fighting under IS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other small groups in Syria;[17] and Johnston, Shapiro, Shatz, Bahney, Kung, Ryan, and Wallace's document analysis.[18] In fact, Johnston et al. concluded that IS preferred to use foreign fighters over the local Sunnis when carrying out suicide missions and irregular attacks[19] as they were often more ideologically committed to their cause. Despite their stress on the importance of religion, these researchers argued that some structural and personal factors might have interacted with ideological motivations to influence these individuals' decision to become foreign fighters.

This proposition, that motivations to become a foreign fighter often resulted from moral and religious reasons, did not remain unchallenged. Using qualitative data, Coolsaet compared the Western foreign fighters of today with those of past decades.[20] He discovered that, today, foreign fighters are composed of young individuals with superficial knowledge of religion who often suddenly decided to travel to conflict zones without a thoughtfully planned decision. According to Coolsaet, there are two distinct groups of European foreign fighters fighting for the IS. The first group is composed of troubled youth with gang membership and criminal skills. The second group includes adolescents who are discontented with the flow of their lives due to the feeling of exclusion and lack of sense of belonging to the mainstream societies in which they live. According to Coolsaet, traveling to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq provided the youth a way to escape from their meaningless lives.[21]

Table 1. Correlates of foreign fighting.

Author (s)	Social Media & Internet	Prominence of religious discourse	Quest for greater purpose in life	Low Prospect for future	Poor Economic Conditions	Being Young	Troubled Backgrounds	Low Risk	Personal Networks
Bakker & Grol (2015)	+		+	+	+				
Benmelech & Klor (2016)		+			N				
Carter et al. (2015)	+								
Coolsaet (2016)		N		+		+	+		
Dawson & Amarasingham (2017)		+			N				
Dawson et al. (2016)	+	+		N	N				
Dragon (2015)	N								+
Fishman et al. (2008)	N	+							+
Hegghammer (2010)	+	+							
Hegghammer (2013)		+						+	
Johnston et al. (2016)		+							
Noonan & Khalil (2015)		+							
Quantum Communications (2015)		+							
Reynolds & Hafez (2017)	P								+
Vidino & Hughes (2015)			+						
Weggemans et al. (2014)	N		+	+	+				

+ Positive relationship
N No significant relationship
P Partial support

Several studies have illustrated the importance of understanding foreign fighters' troubled backgrounds to better account for their decisions. An analysis of public documents on Swedish foreign fighters by Gudmundson indicated that foreign fighters were generally unemployed, often came from low-income families, and/or had criminal records.[22] Another study conducted by Bakker and Grol found that Dutch foreign fighters were often drawn from youth who did not have any prospect for the future.[23] Similarly, Weggemans et al.'s study on wannabe foreign fighters also revealed that economic disability and lack of employment opportunities were important determinants of one's decision for participating in foreign fighting.[24] Furthermore, studies examining Dutch foreign fighters by Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol[25] and Bakker and Grol[26] indicated that sense of purpose and belonging also played roles in their subjects' motivation to travel to Syria. Both studies indicated that leavers and non-leavers came from low- and low-to-mid-class backgrounds and were raised in relatively bad neighborhoods. The authors discovered that leavers felt apathy, lack of meaningfulness, and had significant disappointments (i.e., loss of a loved one) in their lives before they left for Syria.[27] The wannabe fighters were more influenced by economic disability and lack of employment opportunities.[28] Thus, economic constraints or dissatisfaction with past life events were more important determinants of one's motivation for foreign fighting than the prominence of religious discourse.

Nevertheless, Benmelech and Klor's analysis of the interaction between the economic, political, and social conditions, and the flow of foreign fighters into conflict zones revealed that the foreign fighting did not arise from poor economic conditions but from extremist ideology.[29] In support of this argument, Dawson and Amarasingam also discovered that motivations to become a foreign fighter often resulted from moral and religious reasons, rather than economic constraints and lack of future prospects.[30] More specifically, the researchers stated that the motivation to become a foreign fighter was not influenced by socioeconomic marginalization.

Another commonly cited reason for the flow of foreign fighters into IS was the use of social media and the Internet. Influenced in part by the visual and printed media news, an increasing number of researchers attempted to specify the sources of foreign fighter mobilization as the outcome of developments in social media. The findings indicate that the effect of social media on foreign fighting is complex. For example, examining Dutch foreign fighters, Weggemans et al. found that the Internet did not play a decisive role in their sample's radicalization.[31] In line with this, Fishman et al. also found out that only a few jihadists used the Internet and social media to meet other jihadists and to travel to conflict zones.[32] One can argue that much has changed since Fishman et al. collected their data in 2008. Nevertheless, a recent study by Dragon also noted that social media did not play a role in the recruitment or the mobilization of the foreign fighters.[33] Bakker and Grol proved the opposite—wannabe foreign fighters frequently used social media and the Internet to chat with likeminded individuals.[34] Carter, Maher, and Neumann's and Dawson et al.'s studies further lend credence to Bakker and Grol's findings. Carter et al. analyzed 190 Western foreign fighters and discovered that social media was an important tool for the mobilization of the individuals into Syria.[35] Similarly, Dawson et al. discovered that the Internet and social media, especially the online lectures provided by Anwar al-Awlaki, played an important role in individuals' decision to participate in foreign fighting.[36]

In another advancement, Fishman et al. and Dragon asserted that personal social networks mattered more than other factors including social media and the Internet.[37] In line with Marc Sageman's propositions,[38] Fishman et al.'s analysis indicated that personal social networks were important factors in the development of extremism, radicalization, and recruitment—approximately 65 percent of the foreign fighters who travelled to Iraq were recruited through the members of local extremist groups and other personal networks (friends, family, and relatives).[39] By analyzing 20 profiles of Western foreign fighters, Dragon also discovered that approximately 80 percent of Western foreign fighters were recruited into IS via traditional social networks (i.e., family, friends, occupational and religious groups).[40] Further, a recent study conducted by Reynolds and Hafez also proposed that social networks were the most important influential factors for the mobilization of German foreign fighters into Syria.[41]

Finally, Hegghammer observed that extremist individuals preferred foreign fighting because this type of fighting involved less risk than carrying out attacks in their host societies.[42] The researcher argued that attacks in Western countries are often one shot before getting killed or captured because these countries have strict security and monitoring measures to prevent such terrorist missions. Thus, according to Hegghammer, the desire to fight for a prolonged period (due to the reduced risk of being killed or arrested) encouraged individuals to fight abroad.[43]

As described above, numerous studies have appeared during the last decade explaining the various aspects of the foreign fighter issues among different nationalities and ethnicities (Canadian, Dutch, Belgian, German, English, American, African, Middle Eastern, and others). The present study aims to advance the current literature by analyzing the motivational factors that encouraged the mobilization of Turkish foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq through an original data collection on this relatively understudied group. By examining one subgroup of foreign fighters, the current analysis allows for a detailed assessment of the push-and-pull factors that have driven the Turkish foreign fighter phenomenon.

Methods

The current study used latent content analysis to examine interview data from incarcerated IS fighters. Turkish police conducted the interviews between December 2012 and June 2014. During these interviews, the police collected information from the subjects regarding their a) backgrounds, b) demographic characteristics, c) reason to travel to Syria and Iraq, d) participation in other conflicts as a foreign fighter in the past, and e) knowledge of IS's organizational structure, capabilities, and potential future attacks. The researcher, who used to work for the counterterrorism department, acquired this data after obtaining permission from the Turkish Ministry of Justice in March 2015. Due to ethical considerations, and also in an effort to protect the subjects' privacy, the Turkish police provided the interview notes to the researcher after all of the identifying information was deleted from the documents. As such, only general descriptive statistics (age and gender) were provided.

The sample consisted of 89 foreign nationals who fought for IS and were captured by security agencies as they crossed into Turkey for provisions or to visit their parents. The main characteristics of these arrested Turkish foreign fighters included: 92% male and 8%

female; mean age 34; age interval 19–45. Importantly, 74 of the foreign fighters were found to have prior ties with other extremist groups in Turkey; including the affiliates of Al Qaeda. Even though we cannot know for sure, the large number of individuals with past associations with extremist groups in our sample may be due to the timeframe of the arrests. It is highly probable that individuals who had ties with religious groups were the first to travel to the conflict zones. Despite that, the interview notes indicated that the majority of the individuals that participated in these extremist groups did not go beyond fundraising and recruitment activities (e.g., sponsoring the families of prisoners and fighters, dispensing books and pamphlets, setting up websites and blogs to share religious information).

However, due to the overrepresentation of veteran fighters in this sample, the average age of the individuals is older (34) than many other studies. For example, the Center for Terroranalyse (CTA)[44] found Danish foreign fighters in Syria are typically between 16 and 25 years old. Additional studies corroborate this finding. Felter and Fishman[45] found that the age range of Arab foreign fighters is between 22 and 23 years old, Jensen et al.[46] found that the average age of American foreign fighters is 24 years old, and the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC)[47] found that the average age of British fighters in Syria is 26 years old. While the current sample tends to be older than foreign fighters from prior studies, the interviews could provide a more detailed account of motivations and activities from individuals involved in foreign fighting for longer.

The latent content analysis technique was used to make specific inferences from the interview notes. Data were analyzed by organizing the text and the explanatory sections and using themes, which emerged around the motivation for foreign fighters to join the Islamic State.[48] The first round of the analysis was separately conducted by two researchers. The documents were analyzed one by one and the responses of the interviewees were translated into categories that were created and revised in the course of the analysis. The number of categories increased (or some of them were combined into one larger category) as more data became available.

To maintain the quality and validity of the analysis, each document was studied two more times (separately by each researcher)[49] and the responses of the IS fighters were placed into categories that were defined previously. After the end of the third review, the categorization results were discussed to reach a consensus. In the end, the researchers created five categories, which were similar to previous research; especially to the 2015 study conducted by Hafez and Mullins.[50] The five categories are as follows:

(a) Peer pressure coming from the preexisting religious networks
(b) Socialization with IS fighters in religious gatherings
(c) The low level of risk associated with travel
(d) Favorable life conditions compared to previous jihad locations
(e) The solid opportunity for revenge

Categories were quantified and frequencies were used when interpreting the results and drawing conclusions.

During analysis, there were three potential issues that could reduce the credibility of the findings. First, assessing the representativeness of the sample was complicated due to the lack of a nonrandom, larger sample. There is no diversity in our sample as it is limited to

only Turkish foreign fighters. However, considering the difficulty of surveying a terrorist group like IS, the content analysis of the 89 interviews still provides important insights on the motivational forces that led thousands of individuals to travel to IS territories. Further, even though the insights revealed in these documents might not be used for generalization—because they do not produce definitive results—these experiences and descriptions of events can illustrate many of the key issues discussed by the theories of radicalization and terrorism. Therefore, the issue of generalizability should not necessarily be the sole factor in judging the value of this study. At a minimum level, findings of this study will reveal at least several pathways into terrorism/foreign fighting.

Second, because the data for this investigation came from individuals who are under police custody, questions of reliability naturally arise. One may simply argue that individuals who are facing the prospects of stiff punishment may not have been completely candid and honest about their reasons for traveling to Syria. Thus, the current study's authenticity may be questioned because an investigation record is essentially a self-report of subjects' lives. Although they offer the advantage of portraying subjects' own view of the circumstances, the nature of the circumstances raises the question of how much the subjects distorted the events of their reasoning to join the IS.

The insights that are acquired from these records depend on the honesty of the participants. Psychologists have argued that participants are less likely to be honest on issues relating to sensitive information about their lives such as drug use, sexual interests, and crimes.[51] For example, Rettig, Torres, and Garret argued that interviewees' interpretation of events and personal experiences often undergo a filtering process. During this process, subjects usually search for ways to rationalize their acts in a way that enhances their own image. That is, they tend to portray the facts in ways that increase their standing. As a result, there will be a potential distortion factor in any self-reporting of events.[52] Despite that, researchers also argued that other kinds of research methods used by social scientists also carry the risk of self-reporting. For example, data gathered through questionnaires represents the respondent's own perception of reality and events. Although it is hard to determine the veracity of the information provided by respondents, this does not mean that these data are useless and the results acquired by using these methods are invalid.[53]

Further, as W. I. Thomas argued, even the highly subjective record has a value for behavioral study because the subjects' view of the situations and events may be the most important factor for understanding the source of their behavior. Therefore, although it is not possible to fully assure that the subject described his life situations objectively, statements of fabrications, prejudices, and exaggerations will also be important to reveal the subject's own personal attitudes.[54] Indeed, even these misleading statements allow us to interpret a former IS member's attitudes, values, and personality.

> In human affairs it is not the absolute truth about an event that concerns us but the way in which persons react to that event.[55]

Third, there is always the risk of subjectivity when conducting the latent content analysis of the text. The categorization was not accomplished by directly placing the pieces of text into relevant themes because some text was ambiguous. Thus, the researchers first had to interpret the underlying meanings of the responses and then categorize them. Nevertheless, the reliability of the findings was secured by the independent analysis of the texts by two different researchers.

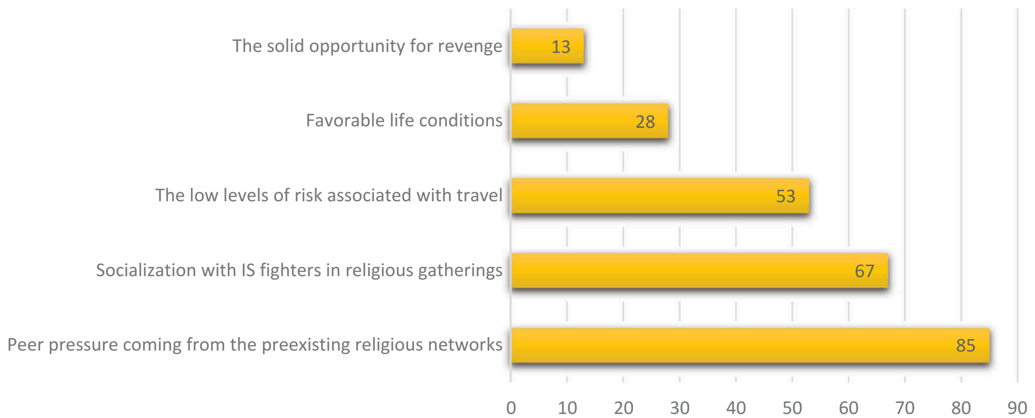

Figure 1. Factors influencing the mobilization of foreign fighters.

Results

Figure 1 presents the frequency of motivational factors received by each of the five categories. The categories are arranged in rank order. Different from the existing literature on mobilization of foreign fighters, our analysis evidenced the widespread citation of "peer pressure" as a mobilizing factor for foreign fighting. Nearly all of the interviewees cited the pressure coming from preexisting networks and interpersonal ties for their reason to travel to Syria. The tendency of interviewees to ascribe "peer pressure" to their mobilization could be a function of either the "prominence of religious discourse" or the "fear of being acknowledged as a coward/hypocrite or fear of exclusion from the social networks"—an issue that will be addressed in detail later. Notably, however, the frequency score for the other factors (which could also be named under a general title of *enabling factors*)—socialization with IS fighters in religious gatherings, the low levels of risk associated with travel, and favorable life conditions—were also higher in our research than that reported by the previous studies. Additionally, lending credence to the existing literature, some foreign fighters cited their grievances against the Assad regime for foreign fighting, though this category was not as frequently cited as the previous categories.

Peer pressure coming from religious networks (n = 85)

The frequency score for the "peer pressure" category is significantly higher in the present research. There may be several reasons for this but the interview notes indicate that the differences in participation rates, in this case of Turkish foreign fighters, originated from the IS's change in mobilization efforts compared to its former ally and predecessor, Al Qaeda. The analysis of the documents revealed that, unlike the IS, Al Qaeda has not required most of its sympathizers to travel and join the fight (aka military jihad) in the conflict zones. Instead, Al Qaeda preachers often advised their followers to fulfill their jihadi responsibilities by engaging in different activities including recruitment, online propaganda, and financial support.

The members who were encouraged to stay behind were asked to recruit more individuals into their religious circles and also create and participate in discussion groups on YouTube channels, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and various internet blogs to help boost the indoctrination activities. Al Qaeda also stressed the importance of fundraising activities. In fact, some of the documents included statements in which the foreign fighters were told in religious gatherings that the reward for financial jihad was more than the physical jihad; which is in line with the online jihadi material posted by Al Qaeda on several internet blogs:

> Probably the most important contribution the Muslims of the West could do for jihad is making jihad with their wealth since in many cases the mujahedeen [fighters] are in need of money more than they are in need of men.[56]

> The financial jihad has preceded the physical jihad in every verse except one. This is to point out to us the importance of the jihad of wealth, because jihad depends on it. In other words, no money means there will be no jihad and the jihad needs lots of it. That is why, according to Al Qurtubi in his tafseer, the reward for money given as Sadaqah is multiplied by ten, but the reward for money spent in jihad is multiplied by 700![57]

Interestingly, a majority of the Turkish foreign fighters in the "peer pressure" category stated that, in the past, they only engaged in recruitment and fundraising activities as their religious leaders asked them to do by citing the readings of Anwar Al-Awlaki—"The 44 Ways to Support Jihad."[58] That is, religious groups used Anwar Al-Awlaki's guide to direct the attention of their followers into two main activities: a) financial aid and logistical support (provision of money for the supply of weapons, arms, medical equipment, clothes, provisions, and accommodations; fundraising for the fighters; sponsoring the families of prisoners and fighters, etc.[59]) and b) propaganda and religious advertising (dispensing books, pamphlets, and guides to their friends and family members, posting jihadi material online, setting up websites and blogs, forming email lists to share information with other Muslims, etc.[60]).

Nevertheless, the analysis of the text indicated that, in the subsequent years, these networks asked the individuals to travel to Syria in small groups. Different from the past, foreign fighting was depicted as an obligation to help fellow Muslims suffering in Syria and the necessity of travelling there was continuously stressed in religious gatherings. It should be noted that our data included individuals who were caught by the Turkish police between December 2012 and June 2014. On September 21, 2014, IS's spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, shifted the call to Muslims around the world to fight the enemies wherever they are, not just in Iraq and Syria. Adnani said: "If you cannot make your way to Syria then the best thing you can do is to make an effort to kill an infidel, French, American, or any other of their allies… smash his head with a rock, slaughter him with a knife, run him over with a car, throw him from a high place, choke him or poison him."[61]

Our findings indicated that many sympathizers, even the ones with slight ideological tendency toward extremist teachings, travelled to Syria because they felt a pressure within their religious groups to join the fight in Syria. Over time, it became very hard for these already radicalized people to stay apathetic toward physical (military) jihad in Syria because they were repeatedly told that it was necessary to join the fight during religious gatherings. Under such peer pressure, these people had no option but to travel to the conflict zones because the statements in this category revealed that if they declined, they

would be acknowledged as cowards and disloyal, accused of being hypocrites, and then potentially excluded from their network of friends.

Findings indicated that this constant pressure was so high that even people who were the least likely to engage in physical jihad, the ones who only occasionally attended religious meetings and talks, sought ways to travel to Syria. For example, one of the Turkish IS fighters indicated in his statement that:

> The emergence of internal conflict within Syria created an elusive opportunity for many of us. We, as a group, initially decided to monitor developments there. Later, with the spread of war all over the Syrian territories and the engagement of Al Qaeda affiliated groups into the fight, we were asked to make plans to travel to Syria to join in. We were told other Islamic organizations, even small ones, were making preparations to send their members to Syria. This was different than past. In the past, we were never asked to travel to Afghanistan, but to make jihad through other means. Now, our imams were telling us no one should have any excuse good enough to miss the jihad occurring in Syria. I was ready to go. It was something I have always wanted. But, interestingly, our imams put heat on the ones who were unwilling to travel to Syria too. The pressure within the group was so high that even the newbies who were still not finished with their ideological training felt like they had to go to Syria as most of their friends were already gone.

Our documents did not explicitly show the reasons for IS's insistence on foreign fighting. However, as Johnston et al.'s report on IS and Al Qaeda revealed, this insistence on foreign fighting most likely originated in 2006 when the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) experienced serious human capital challenges both for administrative and military positions due to the high mortality rates among its members.[62] This situation worsened in the subsequent years—especially after IS acquired large territories in Syria. Thus, IS might have undertaken this change to overcome its human capital shortage.

Socialization with IS fighters in religious gatherings (n = 67)

"Socialization with the actual IS fighters in social and religious gatherings" was also a frequent motivation in the present research. The analysis of the text indicated that IS preachers managed to influence Turkish individuals by bringing them into direct contact with foreign fighters involved in armed action in Syria—largely due to the close proximity of the conflict zone to the potential recruits.

Sixty-seven of the interviews contained information that individuals participated in meetings in which they listened to the IS fighters from Syria before they decided to engage in foreign fighting. As depicted by one of the fighters: "The jihad in Syria was different. We would have new fighters visiting us each week telling us what was happening there. These fighters would bring videos and pictures of their battles against the infidels." During these information sessions, the sympathizers were told about the situation in the conflict zone, the fight of their "brothers" against the *kuffar*, and the necessity of travelling into Syria to undertake one of many important responsibilities. Telling their stories of bravery in an epic tone and stressing the importance of travel into IS territories, these role models influenced the followers to travel to the conflict zone.

Interestingly, some documents within this category also included statements that direct contact/socialization with the fighters was rare or non-existent in the former conflicts. According to the interviewees, this was largely because of two things: a) the remoteness of the former conflicts made it almost impossible for the fighters to travel around the world to

hold meetings with sympathizers and b) the majority of the Al Qaeda recruits were unable to make it back to their host countries as they had lost their lives during the fights in Afghanistan.

The low levels of risk associated with travel (n = 53)

The individuals in this category cited the absence of physical security along the Turkish-Syrian border as an enabling factor for their travel into Syria. In fact, a majority of the fighters noted that the unprotected borders between Turkey and Syria not only facilitated their travel but also helped with the supply of provisions when needed:

> We each paid 50 Turkish Liras [approximately 14 dollars] to a guide to help us cross the border. It took only 20 minutes to get into Syrian territories. There was no security at all. We met the brothers waiting for us with trucks on the other side of the border. In the subsequent months, these same routes were frequently used for the provisions of the supplies and transfer of more recruits.

Some documents also revealed information that the potential fighters in Europe were asked to use the Turkish border when crossing into IS territories in Syria and Iraq. Turkey's popularity as an attractive tourist venue had made it difficult for the Turkish security agencies to single out the Europeans with the motivation of foreign fighting from the ones who were visiting as tourists. These findings are in line with the existing literature, which indicated that thousands of IS sympathizers used Istanbul as their first stop before crossing into Syria.[63]

Interestingly, some former Al Qaeda members within this category compared the circumstances before and after the emergence of IS, when they explained the issue of low levels of risk associated with travel into Syria. The analysis indicated that the Syrian conflict has made the phenomenon of foreign fighting easier for three reasons. First, Al Qaeda required its new recruits to obtain letters from the senior fighters in Afghanistan to be considered eligible for travel to the training sites. Statements indicated that this requirement limited the number of individuals travelling to conflict zones because it required years to obtain a letter. Contrary to Al Qaeda, IS made it mandatory for all followers to travel to Syria: "O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory."[64]

Second, Al Qaeda expected the soon-to-be Turkish foreign fighters to find the money required for their travel to training sites. Thus, Al Qaeda not only limited the number of individuals who wanted to travel to Afghanistan, because of its strict requirement on obtaining a letter, but it also did not provide financial assistance to fighters: "It was not easy back then. You needed somewhere around $700 to $800 for accommodation, food, and to hire a local guide who would lead you from Iran to Pakistan without getting caught."

Third, the travel to Al Qaeda training camps, located in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas of Afghanistan, was difficult because it was long, tiresome, and often involved the risk of death or capture by the security officials. As noted in one of the interview documents:

> Majority of the members, including myself, crossed into Iran illegally through the city of Van in Turkey. After days of walking, we took our first break in the city of Mashhad. Here, we joined a large group of jihadists who had travelled from different parts of the world using different routes. We waited there for a couple days until the group reached to a certain number. When the day came, we each paid $400 to the new guides who showed us the secure

> way from Mashhad to Zahedan. Our guides carried out long reconnaissance activities before moving from one point to another. Sometimes, without food and water, we would be asked to hide in filthy places for several days until the guides made sure that crossing the Iranian-Pakistani border was safe.

In the past, the soon-to-be Turkish foreign fighters were able to reach the camps, located in Waziristan, only after a competitive selection process and the time-consuming, expensive, tiresome, and difficult journey. These risks were reduced in the Syrian conflict (largely due to the close proximity of the conflict zone to Turkey) in part because IS offered support and financial aid to encourage its recruits to engage in foreign fighting in Syria. Below is the transcript of a text message obtained from the parents of a 19-year-old Turkish female foreign fighter that exemplifies this situation:

> We are being paid $100 a month. Sometimes they even pay us extra money. I am happy here and life is going its normal way. We go out for shopping, hang out with friends, and help each other. I will soon start resuming my dentistry education here. Show my messages to others mom. Tell them not to believe what they see on TV.

Favorable life conditions (n = 28)

The analysis of the documents indicated that the life conditions in the conflict zones also mattered when it came to foreign fighting. The interviewees cited the existence of cozy lifestyles, job opportunities, and monthly payments for the individuals who travelled to Syria as factors influencing their decision to engage in foreign fighting. In fact, the statements indicated that the individuals not only were presented with the comfort of living in houses and apartments previously owned by the Syrians, but also were provided with opportunities to further their education and occupational experiences.

Further, Turkish individuals who used to fight for Al Qaeda also stated the differences in the circumstances among the camps in Afghanistan and the conflict in Syria. It was stated that the foreign fighters in Afghanistan suffered from harsh weather conditions, shortage of provisions, lack of communication with parents, and the difficulty of living in mountainous terrain. For example, a fighter indicated in his statement:

> We had to hide in cold and rugged places, sometimes for weeks, just to protect ourselves from airstrikes. We never had enough food or water, and the conditions were horribly unsanitary. Beyond that, we had next to no opportunity to get in touch with our families.

The opportunity for revenge (n = 13)

The final factor that influenced the mobilization of foreign fighters into Syria is related to the psychological need for vengeance. Individuals in this category stated that "exacting revenge from the *kuffar* due to the tragedies occurring in the Muslim world" played a role in their decision to travel to Syria.

Despite the fact that none of the individuals directly suffered from these tragedies, statements revealed that watching highly graphic content videos in their religious gatherings (images of the destruction of houses, murder of children, women, and the elderly; the depiction of cruel treatment measures applied to people in the conflict zones) and the continuous discussion of these issues in their networks created the feeling of hatred and also a desire for revenge. For example, one Turkish fighter noted the impact of watching a

video where a father held his deceased son after the United States attacked the area: "I was so angry. I put myself into this father's place and thought about what a desperate situation that was. I made up my mind that I would have these people feel the same pain in their hearts by killing their loved ones—their children and wives."

Similar to previous categories, some of the former Al Qaeda members compared the circumstances in Afghanistan when explaining the issue of exacting revenge. They complained about the absence of reward structures in Al Qaeda fronts in Afghanistan. Here, the word "reward" should not be interpreted as monetary compensation. Rather, as the satisfaction of various desires including revenge, victory, and the joy of inflicting pain on the enemy. The interview notes indicated that even though they were able to travel to conflict locations in Afghanistan, many of these individuals failed to ever engage in direct encounter with enemy targets due to the nature of the fight there. More specifically, foreign fighting in Afghanistan did not necessarily mean that one would have an actual chance for revenge, due to coalition forces' heavy reliance on air strikes. Two of the fighters exemplified this situation:

> In Afghanistan, direct contact with the enemy was not available for us most of the time. The coalition forces did not dispatch their land forces anywhere near the Al Qaeda camps. They carried out air strikes instead. Many mujahedeen lost their lives before engaging in a single battle because of this.
>
> After some time, we began to question our presence there, thinking that all the suffering was for nothing. We thought we would be able to inflict pain on them. We believed we would scare them to death. We were wrong. I stayed there two years. I did not encounter a single kuffar. Yet many of my friends were killed by their air strikes.

According to these fighters, the online broadcasts of the various atrocities (e.g., beheadings, burning alive, mass murders) by IS in Syria and Iraq served the purpose of sending a warning message to their enemies and acted as a signal for prospective foreign fighters that there were opportunities in this conflict zone for exacting revenge on the enemy.

Discussion

In 2008, Silke reported that "since 9/11, 65 percent of articles are still essentially just reviews. Research providing new information [to the field of jihadi radicalization] is uncommon and where there is new information this is mostly gleaned indirectly from reports in the media."[65] In some respects, this trend may be experiencing a reversal. However, there is little dispute with Dawson et al.'s observations that "we are still at a much more preliminary and exploratory stage of knowledge generation, and will be until more primary data is available" and that "research into the process of radicalization continues to be hampered by a lack of appropriate primary data."[66] Nor can there be much disagreement with Weggemans et al.'s claim that "more empirical research is needed to be able to arrive at a set of well-defined factors, circumstances or dynamics that will help us to understand this phenomenon."[67]

In recognition of the significance of these comments, the present study was undertaken in an attempt to fill this void in the existing literature. In particular, we have endeavored to address an issue that has thus far received only limited consideration: Turkish foreign fighters. By conducting a latent content analysis of the 89 documents, we have been able to

suggest several propositions regarding the Turkish individuals' motivations for foreign fighting.

First, the increase in the number of Turkish foreign fighters in Syria arose from the strategy adopted by IS—the peer pressure coming from religious networks. Individuals found it difficult to avoid this duty since their religious networks criticized and eventually excommunicated anyone who had doubts about foreign fighting. Thus, our data indicated that the "peer pressure coming from religious networks" is a more important motivational factor than the existing literature's emphasis on religiosity and other factors. While recognizing that the limitations of our sample make our results tentative, studies by Fishman et al.,[68] Dragon,[69] and Reynolds and Hafez[70] furnish further confidence that religious networks are important when trying to understand an individual's mobilization into foreign fighting. For example, Dragon's analysis revealed that social networks such as kinship, occupational, and religious groups are the most effective for the recruitment and mobilization of foreign fighters.[71] Fishman et al.'s 2008 analysis of foreign fighters in Iraq indicated that foreign fighters' mobilization into Iraq was predominantly influenced by the local jihadi sympathizers and personal social networks.[72] Finally, and similar to the present study, Reynolds and Hafez's 2017 study on German individuals also indicated that "peer to peer networks are the most important factors for the mobilization of foreign fighters."[73]

However, one may not be persuaded by this line of reasoning. For one thing, the distinction among religiosity and the peer pressures coming from the religious networks are tenuous at best. Admittedly, the boundaries between these categories are not entirely clear. This issue has been previously addressed by Hafez and Mullins: "It is not clear how one can disaggregate ideology from radical networks."[74] Thus, one might argue that the "peer pressures coming from the religious networks" may not be in conflict with the influence of religiosity on foreign fighting. As Dawson and Amarasingam stated, "the individuals they choose to be friends with and the groups they consider to be authentic are colored by their religious outlook. Others are dismissed as sellouts and apostates."[75]

In other words, the relationship among ideology and networks are interdependent and also complex. As our findings suggested, the Turkish foreign fighters chose the path of foreign fighting because they did not want to jeopardize their relationships with their peers in their social networks. These individuals established personal relationships in religious networks by coming together with likeminded people—based on their ideological orientation.[76] In turn, these networks provided them with the sense of empowerment and belonging "to further a common interest, or secure a common goal, through collective action."[77] When the pressure to travel into Syria came from their peers, a majority of these individuals obeyed because they cared about being loyal to their friends and valued the validation they received when working to achieve the group's goals. In the end, the risk of being excluded from networks if they were labeled as a coward, a hypocrite, or as disloyal influenced the way in which the Turkish individuals perceived the seriousness and necessity of foreign fighting.

Second, contrary to the existing literature, the large citation of the "peer pressure coming from religious networks" for Turkish foreign fighters suggests that each host country should be analyzed separately when examining the underlying factors that push

or pull individuals into foreign fighting. That is, what might be true for the Turkish foreign fighters may not be the case for the American or European foreign fighters.

Third, consistent with the previous research, four other factors (which could also be listed under a more general category such as *enabling factors*) were found to exert influence on foreign fighting. However, there were considerable discrepancies in the frequencies of different types of factors.

Despite the fact that the present study shed light on the motivational factors behind the mobilization of Turkish foreign fighters into IS territories, the findings should be treated with caution; this study relied on a nonrandom sample and derived conclusions from descriptive analyses. Even though a triangulation technique was used in the latent context analysis, human mistakes are always possible due to personal bias and interpretation errors.[78] Further, the statements of the foreign fighters should also be treated with caution as these individuals might have tried to justify their behaviors rather than telling the truth behind their motivations to engage in foreign fighting. As Dawson and Amarasingam stated in their recent study, "when researchers are dealing with highly controversial subjects, care must be taken in interpreting the significance of comments made by interviewees,"[79] and "everyday life, history, the social sciences, and the law demonstrate that there is much potential for inaccuracy and deception (including self-deception)."[80]

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