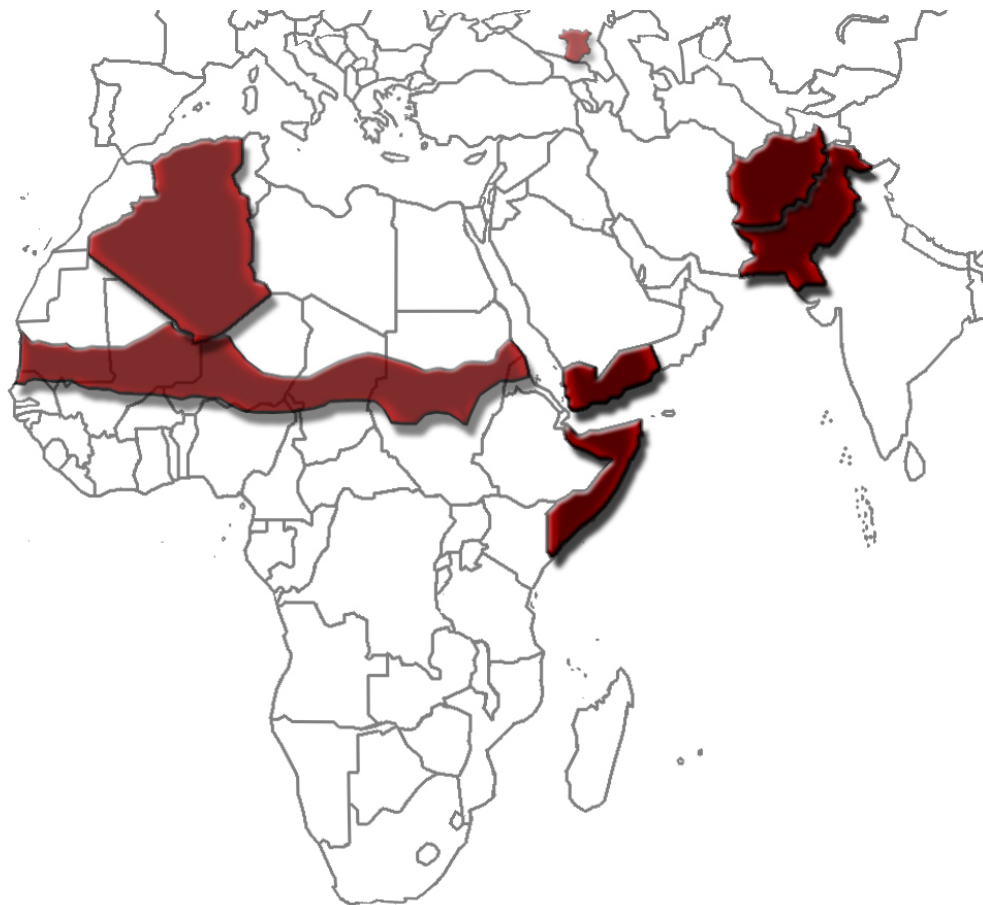


# FOREIGN FIGHTERS

*Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones*



Frank J. Cilluffo | Jeffrey B. Cozzens | Magnus Ranstorp

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### **About the authors**

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**Magnus Ranstorp** is the Research Director of the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish National Defence College (SNDC) where he has directed two major research projects in the last five years. Each project was funded by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency. One examined radicalisation processes and counterradicalisation policies within Europe; the other examined CBRNE (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, explosives) terrorism. Dr. Ranstorp has also led a Swedish cabinet study on radicalization (2008/9); a Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) funded project on counterradicalization efforts in Indonesia (2009); and an Armed Forces Headquarters study on forecasting terrorism in 2018 (2008). His most recent edited book is *Understanding Violent Radicalisation* (Routledge, 2010). In 2006 Dr Ranstorp was invited to join the European Commission Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, an official advisory body on all matters relating to violent radicalisation and recruitment of extremists within the EU.

### **About this paper**

This paper is intended to serve as a primer on an emergent threat. As such, it is an outgrowth of a report by the Swedish National Defence College's Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies (SNDC-CATS) based on a June 2010 conference "The Trajectories of Western Foreign Fighters: Shifts and Implications." Held under the Chatham House Rule, this invitation-only event included speakers and participants from the transatlantic intelligence, defense, law enforcement, and academic communities. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution made by members of the staff of both SNDC-CATS (in particular **Nathan C A Forsdyke**) and The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (specifically **Sharon L. Cardash** and **Brian E. Engel**). Without their help, this paper could not have been completed. The Homeland Security Policy Institute wishes to thank its sponsors for their generous support: The George Washington University, ICF International, Northrop Grumman Corporation, and Raytheon Company.

*The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any individual institution or government.*

# FOREIGN FIGHTERS

## *Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones*

### FOREWORDS

This report *FOREIGN FIGHTERS: Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones* is a very welcome contribution to transatlantic efforts to better understand and contend with the present critical terrorist challenges facing both the European Union (EU) and the United States. It clearly outlines the rapidly evolving nature and dynamic of the threat posed by expatriate fighters from and in both Europe and North America and offers relevant tactical as well as strategic policy prescriptions. Above all it demonstrates that this is an area where we need to deepen the EU-US Transatlantic Partnership in Countering Terrorism and leverage different levels of cooperation and instruments in a concerted fashion.

With the Treaty of Lisbon now in effect, the EU is better able to further the coherence of its counter-terrorism policies, especially with regard to the link between internal - external policy. A major part of my role is to outline the key counterterrorism challenges for the EU. In May 2010, in my report to the European Council on the implementation of the EU Counterterrorism Strategy, I underscored that monitoring terrorist travel should be a key priority for the EU.

Firstly, as demonstrated in this Report, a not insignificant number of radicalized EU nationals and residents are travelling to conflict areas or attending terrorist training camps and returning to Europe.

Secondly, the problem needs to be addressed in a comprehensive way, by enhancing the coordination between the relevant agencies within the EU, and taking advantage of the improved possibilities to define integrated policies offered by the Treaty of Lisbon.

It is clear that terrorist travel is also of great concern to the United States and we have much to gain from enhanced cooperation on this issue.

**Gilles de KERCHOVE**

European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator  
22 September 2010

The United States and the European Union face serious challenges in dealing with the flow of radicalized Westerners travelling into jihadi conflict zones. This report of the Homeland Security Policy Institute and Swedish National Defence College on this subject will be an important contribution to understanding the dimensions of this flow and how the US and EU must further collaborate to confront this increasing threat.

We saw al-Qaeda and affiliated networks increase their efforts in the 2005-2006 timeframe in appeals to US and European young Muslims to travel to Pakistan, Yemen, East Africa, and elsewhere for terrorist training – especially in the use of explosives.

Today, al-Qaeda recognizes that to conduct attacks successfully in the West, it must find radicalized Muslims, including converts to Islam. It needs individuals who understand Western culture; speak fluent English or other Western languages, and who can move comfortably in Western societies.

Its appeals have been conveyed through radical Imams and other extremists, espousing al-Qaeda's violent extremist ideology to those residing in the West. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab and Najibullah Zazi were examples of those who answered al-Qaeda's call; both plotted to kill hundreds of

Americans. Al-Qaeda has had other successes; dozens of young men from North America and Western Europe, especially from the United Kingdom, have found their way to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan and the safe-havens of Yemen and Somalia. Many have received training at al-Qaeda or affiliated camps of the jihadi network. Some Americans have fought in Afghanistan and at least two Somali-Americans have “martyred” themselves for al-Shabaab in East Africa. Western intelligence and investigative agencies have identified some of the Western jihadist fighters; many, however, have not been identified.

A stronger, more comprehensive effort between the United States and the European Union is urgently needed if we are to avoid serious attacks in the West. Thwarting terrorist travel is of the highest priority. Yet, more needs to be done. EU passenger data, for example, that flows to the Department of Homeland Security cannot be shared with US intelligence agencies. More progress is needed if we are to reach a level of collaboration that gives us the confidence needed to track extremists, who with the proper credentials and a ‘clean’ record can travel globally.

*FOREIGN FIGHTERS: Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones* is not only a vital addition to our understanding of this threat but will be a vital input into the thinking of policy officials responsible for negotiating US-EU travel agreements. We must continue our search for ways to interdict travel of individuals determined to do damage to Western interests, either in the conflict zones or, more likely, here in the West after having received the requisite training.

**Charles ALLEN**

**Former Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis,  
Department of Homeland Security;  
Former Assistant Director of Central Intelligence for Collection,  
Central Intelligence Agency  
22 September 2010**

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Western jihadi foreign fighters and the bridge figures that help inspire, radicalize, and motivate them pose a significant threat to the security of Western states, and to their counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions around the globe. Foreign fighters have the potential to bolster insurgent or terrorist factions within a given theatre of conflict, both operationally and motivationally.

Foreign fighters and bridge figures can boost morale by lending credibility to the notion that all jihadists are fighting for a calling that transcends any specific time and place. Foreign fighters also draw attention (especially from Western media) in ways that indigenous fighters cannot. Thus foreign fighters serve to globalize local conflicts and promote the jihadist narrative. Bridge figures legitimize the actions of foreign fighters and help recreate new recruits among populations living in Western host countries.

The present scale of foreign fighter training and activity is significant and increasing. However, the phenomenon is not new. A recent Congressional Research Service report estimates that between 1,000 and 2,000 American Muslims engaged in violent jihad during the 1990s. These individuals fought in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the phenomenon remains difficult to quantify, and much of the known data is held by Western

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an outgrowth of a report by the Swedish National Defence College’s Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies (SNDC-CATS), based upon a June 2010 conference, “The Trajectories of Western Foreign Fighters: Shifts and Implications.” The invitation-only event included speakers and participants from the transatlantic intelligence, defense, law enforcement, and academic communities, and was held under the Chatham House Rule. Items in this paper not otherwise cited may be attributed to the unpublished SNDC-CATS conference report.

<sup>2</sup> Bjelopera, Jerome P. and Mark A. Randol. 2010. “American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat.” Washington, DC; Congressional Research Service.

security and intelligence services and thus inaccessible to academic researchers.

The insidious potential of Western foreign fighters, the violent histories of some who have returned to the West, and the genuine possibility that Western security services' observations only touch the tip of a much larger, undocumented and undetected problem, necessitates a greater understanding of the global foreign fighters trend.

What motivates these individuals remains an open question – and there likely is no single answer. A 2010 United States Institute of Peace study of 2,032 foreign fighters found that many were seeking revenge, status, or simply a cathartic and defining experience.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of their motives, the actions of these individuals pose a grave risk to Western interests at home and abroad.



*Abdullah al-Faisal*

The attacks of September 11, 2001 and July 7, 2005 illustrate the magnitude of the threat posed by foreign fighters. The 9/11 terrorists were led by a core of educated, English-speaking extremists who resided for years in the West and trained with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The 7/7 terrorists who struck London were Britons of Pakistani and Jamaican descent motivated and radicalized by the teachings of jihadists, including Abdullah al-Faisal, a Jamaican immigrant. Both contingents participated in training in South Asia.

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<sup>3</sup> Venhaus, John M. 2010. "Why Youth Join al-Qaeda." Special Report 236. Washington, DC; United States Institute of Peace

These infrequent eruptions of foreign fighter-linked terrorism catalyzed far-reaching effects that changed the course of Western security and counter-terrorism policies.<sup>4</sup>

To clarify terms, "Western foreign fighters" or simply, "foreign fighters," refers to violent extremists who leave their Western states of residence with the aspiration to train or take up arms against non-Muslim factions in jihadi conflict zones.

Most of the foreign fighters discussed in this document participated principally in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, in Somalia, and in Yemen. Currently, these are the regions of greatest concern to Western security and intelligence services. Yet, foreign fighters have also participated in conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia, Kashmir, as well as in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Maghreb, and Sahel. As is clear, the use of foreign fighters by global jihadists is no longer limited to a particular conflict zone.<sup>5</sup>

The "foreign fighter" label fails to reflect the wide range of factors and dynamics driving individuals and groups to engage in foreign fighter activity across a wide spectrum of conflicts and causes. The term hides the complexity of the phenomenon and the fact that many of their actions and effects occur within Western host countries.

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of single events achieving significant effects are extensive. In 2004, the Madrid train bombings are widely regarded to have directly affected the outcome of Spain's national elections. The 2003 Baghdad Canal Hotel bombing that destroyed the UN field Headquarters in Iraq resulted in the complete halt of UN operations throughout the country. The 1983 suicide bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut led to the withdrawal of US forces from Lebanon. Given the ability of a single foreign fighter to have a significant political and propaganda effect, the risk posed by even minimal numbers of experienced and trained foreign fighter returnees to host nations is significant.

<sup>5</sup> Bergen, Peter and Bruce Hoffman. 2010. "[Assessing the Terrorist Threat](#)." Washington, DC; Bipartisan Policy Center. pp. 5-14

Foreign fighters may intend to fight abroad, but may instead be radicalized further, trained, and turned back home to attack Western states. This was the case with Najibullah Zazi.

Zazi, an Afghan citizen and legal resident of the United States, returned to Afghanistan with the intention of joining the Taliban. Trained by al-Qaeda in Waziristan, including in the use of explosives, Zazi was instructed to return to the United States in January 2009. In September of that year, he was arrested. Zazi later admitted that he and two former classmates who had accompanied him to Afghanistan (Zarein Ahmedzay and Adis Medunjanin – both US citizens) had planned to attack the New York subway system. The three planned to strap explosives to themselves and bomb the Grand Central and Times Square stations during rush hour on either September 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, or 16<sup>th</sup> (2009).<sup>6</sup>

The case of Adnan Gulshair el Shukrijumah provides additional illustration of the potential threat (though not an example of a US resident or citizen who trained and returned to the country). Born in Saudi Arabia, Shukrijumah is a naturalized US citizen and spent much of his youth in New York and Florida. He left the US to join al-Qaeda in June 2001. Although he started off doing menial tasks at training camps, he has worked his way up. Today, he is the senior leader of al-Qaeda's international operations and is tied to many recent attempted attacks – including Zazi's. Given his knowledge of the US, this makes him particularly dangerous.<sup>7</sup>

Turning a foreign fighter toward homeland-based attacks maintains the operational security of overseas jihadist networks on one hand, while dramatically increasing the chances for a successful strike in the West on the other. Foreign fighters returning to their Western host nations armed with operational expertise, jihadist “street cred” based upon their bona fides as *mujahideen* (those who strive and fight in God's path), and the capacity and intent to orchestrate domestic attacks represents a current and likely growing threat, especially as al-Qaeda-linked factions come under increasing pressure abroad. These fighters' familiarity with the targets they select adds to these individuals' capacity to cause harm; and if they do not have a criminal background or known affiliation with any terrorist or extremist organization, their so-called “clean skin” also furthers their ability to evade the authorities.<sup>8</sup>

Although the threat from foreign fighters is not new, it is now quickly growing in size and prominence. A fact recently noted by Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman in their report on the current terrorist threat: “A key shift in the past couple of years is the increasingly prominent role in planning and operations that U.S. citizens and residents have played in the leadership of al-Qaeda and aligned groups, and the higher number of Americans attaching themselves to these groups.”<sup>9</sup> The comments of Bergen and Hoffman have been echoed by U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano.

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6 Gross, Samantha, David Caruso, and Michael Rubinkam. 2009. “[Radical Influences All Around NYC Terror Suspect.](#)” New York, NY; ABC News. Wilson, Michael. 2009. “[From Smiling Coffee Vendor to Terror Suspect.](#)” New York, NY; *New York Times*. Johnston, David and William K. Rashbaum. 2009. “[Terror Suspect Had Bomb Guide, Authorities Say.](#)” New York, NY; *New York Times*. Marzulli, John. 2010., “[Zazi, Al Qaeda Pals Planned Rush-Hour Attack on Grand Central, Times Square Subway Stations.](#)” New York, NY; *New York Times*. Hawley, Kip, Frank J. Cilluffo, and Sharon L. Cardash. 2010. “[Stopping Terror In and On Its Tracks.](#)” Washington, DC; The Homeland Security Policy Institute

7 Alfano, Sean and Corky Siemaszko. 2020. “[Adnan Shukrijumah, believed to be the new head of global operations for Al Qaeda,](#)

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[FBI says.](#)” New York, NY; *The Daily News*. Candiotti, Susan and Ross Levitt. 2010. “[From dishwasher to al Qaeda leadership: Who is Adnan Shukrijumah?](#)” Atlanta, GA; CNN. Hirschhorn, Phil. 2010. “[Who Is Al Qaeda Figure Linked to NYC Bomb Plot?](#)” New York, NY; CBS News

8 Basham, W. Ralph, Sharon L. Cardash, Frank J. Cilluffo, and Daniel J. Kaniewski . 2010. “[No Longer On Auto-Pilot: Aviation Security and Intelligence Reform.](#)” Washington, DC; The Homeland Security Policy Institute

9 Bergen, Peter and Bruce Hoffman. 2010. “[Assessing the Terrorist Threat.](#)” Washington, DC; Bipartisan Policy Center. p. 1

Testifying before Congress in September 2010, Napolitano said the following about foreign fighters: “In their roles as terrorist planners, operational facilitators and operatives, these individuals improve the terrorist groups’ knowledge of Western and American culture and security practices, which can increase the likelihood that an attempted attack could be successful.”<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Robert Mueller recently testified to the following effect: “The fact that Zazi and his associates had access to the United States and were familiar with the environment here from an operational security and targeting perspective demonstrates how al Qaeda can leverage Americans. The potential exists for al Qaeda to use and train other Americans for additional homeland attacks.”<sup>11</sup>

The intent of this paper is to shed light on and contextualize the complex and volatile phenomenon of foreign fighters, which is of increasing concern to Western intelligence and law enforcement communities.

This paper is not a strict academic treatise designed to provide clear causal arguments. Given the complexity of this issue, such arguments would be difficult at best. Instead, it is a primer on an emergent threat, one crafted in such a manner as to provide a basic understanding of the challenges and opportunities at hand – from the perspective of those entrusted with stopping it.

## WESTERN FOREIGN FIGHTERS: A COMPLEX SYSTEM

Western foreign fighters occupy a unique niche in the contemporary landscape of non-state threats. Defined for the purposes of this paper as activists that leave their Western homes to fight – or train to fight – Islam’s perceived enemies, their challenge is as multifaceted as their typology.

The population of fighters includes struggling novices, who view trips to the front as rites of passage, and die-hard militants seeking mortal combat and martyrdom against non-Muslim militaries.<sup>12</sup>

The aura of legend, lore and extreme commitment that sometimes surrounds these militants bolsters the radicalization process in a variety of ways, and simultaneously undermines authority in Western Muslim communities.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, their travels can cement and revitalize key jihadi logistics networks. Even the often-modest training and indoctrination these militants receive at the front threatens Allied militaries and regional Muslim communities – the latter often bearing the brunt of al-Qaeda’s violence, as we have witnessed in Pakistan, Iraq, and Somalia.

Numbers on foreign fighters are hard to come by. The data is difficult to collect in the field; many of the most precise figures are held tightly by Western intelligence communities; media reporting is often unreliable; definitions of foreign fighters vary, inhibiting uniform data collection; fighters sometimes leave the West, fight or train, then return without publicity; moreover it is sometimes hard to determine whether certain individuals from

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10 Napolitano, Janet. 2010. "[Nine Years After 9/11: Confronting the Terrorist Threat to the Homeland](#)." Statement of Secretary Janet Napolitano before the United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Washington, DC; US Senate

11 Mueller, Robert S. 2010. [Statement Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs](#). Washington, DC; US Senate

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12 Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed. 2009. "[Western Recruits in Somalia](#)." Ontario, CA; *National Post*

13 See, for instance, two of the seminal jihadist works on the concept, obligation, and benefits of emigrating for combat and training: Abdullah Azzam, [Defence of the Muslim Lands](#) and ‘Esa al-Hindi’s (nom de guerre of convicted British terrorist and al-Qaeda-linked foreign fighter, Dhiren Barot) *The Army of Madinah in Kashmir* (Birmingham, UK; Maktabah Al Ansaar Publications).

majority-Muslim diaspora communities in the West have travelled to visit friends and relatives from their families' countries of origin, or if their intentions are more sinister.

From a methodological perspective, most of the more rigorous quantitative accounts of Western foreign fighters only observe them within the context of Western plots. Fighting in far-flung insurgencies or training in jihadist camps often goes unseen and thus unaccounted for in such reports. For now, we are left to cobble together imprecise figures that sketch only a rough quantitative composite of what qualitative analyses tell us could be a much more significant issue.

Paul Cruickshank quantified one dimension of the foreign fighter threat in his February 2010 report, "The Militant Pipeline." Of the 21 post-9/11 plots in Australia, North America and Europe, Cruickshank classifies as "serious"—those which were intended to kill at least 10 people and did not rely exclusively on undercover law enforcement agents to provide explosives – the majority (of the 21 plots) involved 37 Western residents who travelled to Pakistan's FATA, the central nervous system of global jihadi activism. Other cases cited by Cruickshank involved training in Yemen.

Brian Michael Jenkins's 2010 RAND study, "Would-Be Warriors," provides a perspective on American foreign fighters. Of the 46 "publicly reported cases of domestic radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorism" between September 11, 2001 and the end of 2009, Jenkins observes that 13 of these involve foreign training and direction. A quick survey of Jenkins' data shows that it actually includes over 60 individuals who qualify as Western foreign fighters under the definition used here.<sup>14</sup>

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14 Analyst Lorenzo Vidino, citing a former FBI official, writes that during the 1990's, "between 1,000-2,000 volunteers left the United States to fight or train with various jihadist outfits throughout the world, a number comparable to that of European Muslims who left the continent during the same years." See, Vidino, Lorenzo. 2009. "[Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the](#)

A June 2010 *Washington Post* story noted that "foreign fighters in Somali number 300-1,200," including "at least 20 Somali Americans," among them the rising jihadist media personality and alleged al-Shabaab field commander, Omar Hammami, an Alabama native.<sup>15</sup> Several of these individuals have become suicide bombers – including the first American (Shirwa Ahmed) to hold that distinction in modern times.<sup>16</sup>

In an attempt to arrest what US Attorney General Eric Holder labelled a "deadly pipeline" of money and fighters travelling from the US to al-Shabaab, American officials have stepped up efforts to indict and arrest US residents.<sup>17</sup> In June 2010, Mohamed Alessa and Carlos Almonte, both US citizens, were arrested at JFK Airport. The two were recorded by undercover officers of the New York Police Department as they planned to travel abroad to kill Americans. The two were stopped en route to Somalia where they hoped to link up with al-Shabaab.<sup>18</sup> This was, in fact, their second attempt to join the fight. In 2007, the two had gone to Jordan, with the aim of fighting US soldiers in Iraq, but for unknown reasons were not recruited.<sup>19</sup>

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[United States: A New and Occasional Phenomenon?](#) *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32. London, UK; Routledge. pp. 1-17

15 Elliott, Andrea. 2010. "[The Jihadist Next Door.](#)" New York, NY; *The New York Times*

16 Hsu, Spencer S. and Carrie Johnson. 2009. "[Somali Americans Recruited by Extremists.](#)" Washington, DC; *The Washington Post*

17 Miller, Greg. 2010. "[U.S. charges 14 with giving support to Somali insurgent group.](#)" Washington, DC; *The Washington Post*

18 U.S. District Court, District of New Jersey. 2010. [U.S. v. Mohamed Alessa and Carlos E. Almonte, Criminal Complaint, Magistrate No. 10-8109 \(MCA\)](#). Trenton, NJ; US Department of Justice

19 Finn, Peter and Jerry Markon. 2010. "[New Jersey Men Arrested Are Latest From U.S. Tied to Terrorist Groups.](#)" Washington, DC; *The Washington Post*. Sherman, Ted. 2010. "[FBI Followed Every Move of Two N.J. Terror Suspects for Years, Culminating in Airport Arrests.](#)" Newark, NJ; *The Star-Ledger*



In a recent comprehensive open-source analysis of American jihadi activism published to date, Congressional Research Service's September 2010 "American Jihadist Terrorism," authors Bjelopera and Randol note, "Fifteen of the (40) post-9/11 homegrown plots have featured individuals exclusively seeking to become foreign fighters..."<sup>20</sup> If we include those plots featuring individuals indicted for "intended or actual plotting or training abroad"—another of the authors' categories commensurate with this report's definition of foreign fighter activity—the number jumps to 24.<sup>21</sup>

A 2010 report from Danish analysts Michael Taarnby and Lars Hallundbaek notes that at least 25 Americans, up to 40 Australians, perhaps 100 Britons, and maybe as many as 80 Scandinavians (including more than 15 Danes), have fought in Somalia.<sup>22</sup>

The Swedish Security Service has officially reported that around 20-30 nationals have travelled to Somalia to fight for al-Shabaab and less than five have died in battle.<sup>23</sup> This recruitment process is facilitated by the fact that Fuad Muhammed Qalaf (otherwise known as Fuad Shangole) is a Swedish-Somali and a senior operational figure in al-Shabaab.

The same number of recruits is seen in neighbouring Denmark according to Somali community representatives and the Danish Security and Intelligence Service. However, in Denmark, a Somali individual with alleged contacts to al-Qaeda in East Africa and al-Shabaab were within seconds of axing

20 Bjelopera, Jerome P. and Mark A. Randol. 2010. "American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat." Washington, DC; Congressional Research Service. p. 26

21 Ibid, p. 25

22 Taarnby, Michael and Lars Hallundbaek. 2010. "[Al Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalisation Processes in Europe.](#)" Copenhagen, DK; Danish Ministry of Justice

23 Stiernstedt, Jenny. 2010. "[Svensk misstankt for terrorbrott.](#)" Stockholm, SE; Svenska Dagbladet

## HISTORICAL THEMES

Important lessons can be identified from historical precedents of foreign fighter activity. Foreign fighters espousing different causes have featured in conflicts ranging from Spain, to Afghanistan, to the Balkans. Although each case remains unique, there are themes, strategies, and tactics that are endemic to each.

Rhetoric focusing on defensive mobilization has been a feature in nearly all instances of foreign fighter activity. Recruiters consistently appeal to foreigners' ideological convictions and seek to align distant conflicts with an assault on a common identity. During the Spanish Civil War, both Francisco Franco's nationalists and anti-fascist republicans framed their respective struggles through a defensive lens and appealed to sympathizers on the basis of a greater moral duty. Fifty years later, the obligation to defend a transnational identity from an existential aggressor was used by Abdullah Azzam. In his call for support from Muslims worldwide against Soviet aggression in Afghanistan, defence of Islam was a duty incumbent upon all as part of their religious obligation to God. In the 1990s, similar language and reasoning was used by *mujahideen* leaders during the Bosnian War and the first Chechen war.

In the historical examples, there are important cleavages to be studied as well. Foreign fighters who travelled to Afghanistan in the name of 'jihad' often found themselves at odds with native Afghans whose culture, geography, and tribal society fosters a wariness of outsiders. This lack of acceptance of foreign recruits was prevalent during the Spanish Civil War as well. Foreign fighters often found themselves treated as expendable and their sacrifices viewed as 'second-rate.' This contributed to many returning home disillusioned with their 'cause.' Today, many of the foreign *mujahideen* fighters who settled in Bosnia now find themselves

to death the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard in his home in January 2010.

The heads of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and British Security Service (MI5) have raised concerns about Somali-linked foreign fighters. CIA Director Leon Panetta told reporters that such individuals raise “real concerns about the potential for terrorist activity” and “constitute a potential threat to the security of this country.” With more than 100 UK residents now fighting training in al-Shabaab camps in Somalia, Jonathan Evans, the

Director General of MI5, recently argued that “it’s only a matter of time before we see terrorism on our streets inspired by those who are today fighting alongside al-Shabaab.” Evans’ sentiment was echoed by the Chief of the UK’s Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), John Sawers.<sup>24</sup> Evans’ concern was highlighted less than a week after his remarks by the arrest of a British citizen of Somali descent by Dutch authorities as he attempted travel between Liverpool and Uganda.<sup>25</sup>

Some British terrorism experts, and a study by the United Kingdom’s Centre for Social Cohesion, point to the fact that “seven of the eight major terrorist plots in the UK included in their cells one or more individuals who had attended terrorist training camps; six of the eight of these had been in Pakistan.”<sup>26</sup>

Even in 2007, press reports quoting British government officials suggested “up to 4,000 Islamic extremists have attended terrorist training

24 Norton-Taylor, Richard. 2010. “[MI5 chiefs warns of terror threat from Britons trained in Somalia](#).” London, UK; *The Guardian*. Hsu, Spencer S. and Carrie Johnson. 2009. “[Somali Americans Recruited by Extremists](#).” Washington, DC; *The Washington Post*

25 2010. “[British terrorism suspect arrested at Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport](#).” London, UK; *The Daily Telegraph*

26 Clarke, Michael and Valentina Soria. 2010. “[Terrorism – the New Wave](#).” *RUSI Journal*. London, UK; Royal United Services Institute. pp.24-31

ostracized by their fellow Muslims.<sup>a</sup>

More historical background can be found in the following selected sources:

- Kohlmann, Evan F. 2004. *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe the Afghan-Bosnian Network*. Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers
- Malet, David. 2009. [Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts](#). Dissertation. Washington, DC; The George Washington University
- Malet, David. 2009. “[Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions](#).” *Orbis*. Philadelphia, PA; Foreign Policy Research Institute
- Moore, Cerwyn and Paul Tumelty. 2008. “[Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment](#).” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. London, UK; Routledge

<sup>a</sup>Wolker, Martin. 2007. “[Established Muslims Resist Neo-Salafists](#).” Website. Berlin, DE; *Qantara.de*

camps in Afghanistan before returning to Britain.”<sup>27</sup> MI5’s Jonathan Evans voiced serious concern in September 2010 about a “significant number of British residents. . .training in camps run by the al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabaab” and “that as many as 100 Britons of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and West African backgrounds had travelled to Somalia.”<sup>28</sup>

27 Leapman, Brian. 2007. “[4,000 in UK trained at terror camps](#).” London, UK; *The Daily Telegraph*

28 Gardham, Duncan. 2010. “[Britain facing a new wave of terrorist attacks, MI5 warns](#).” London, UK; *The Daily Telegraph*

Further, German officials have noted that there are “hundreds” of German residents (most from Turkish backgrounds) now fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan – primarily with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union. There are even growing indications that a German contingent of the Taliban has been formed.<sup>29</sup> The German Federal Police (*Bundeskriminalamt* or BKA) stated recently that there is concrete evidence linking 70 individuals to paramilitary training camps in Pakistan’s FATA along the Afghanistan border and that the agency has stopped 26 from going to Pakistan since early 2009.

Similarly, French terrorism experts acknowledge that France is facing the most severe threat from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) but estimate that there are a total of 30-50 French nationals in the FATA/Yemen area with 10-15 participating in the Yemeni theatre with al-Qaeda elements.<sup>30</sup>

In other smaller EU states the pattern seems to suggest fewer numbers. Austria has had one case in 2005 when 5 people received training in FATA while the Netherlands have had two cases of individuals going to Chechnya; one case in Iraq; two cases in Kashmir; four arrests in Kenya hailing from the Hague and two in Yemen.

The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee noted with concern in January 2010 that dozens of Americans may be involved in extremist activities in Yemen – including Anwar al-Aulaqi (al-Awlaki), a prominent Yemeni-American jihadi theoretician affiliated in some manner with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Media reports citing Yemeni security sources note that tens of Westerners have been arrested in security sweeps this year, including US citizens and Europeans

suspected of some level of involvement with AQAP.<sup>31</sup>

Although the exact scale of the problem is ill-defined, the empirical evidence suggests that a significant number of Western volunteers are attracted to violent extremist milieus like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. The underlying phenomenon and threat these figures highlight poses a grave threat to the security and strategic interests of Western nations.

### THE “SPIN” MODEL AND COMPLEX SYSTEMS ANALOGY

The framing of the multilayered and evolving nature of al-Qaeda and the foreign fighters in its service is a major challenge. The interlocking relationship between al-Qaeda “core”, its affiliates and localized cells is often not adequately captured by static categories of al-Qaeda’s constituent parts or changing geographic centres of gravity. A useful way to conceptualize the complexity of al-Qaeda’s interlocking components is offered by Arquilla and Ronfeldt and their adaption of the so-called SPIN model: the notion that al-Qaeda resembles a “segmented, polycentric, ideologically integrated network.”<sup>32</sup>

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29 Smith, Nicola and Bojan Pancevski. 2010. “[German militants seen in Taliban border unit.](#)” London, UK; *The Sunday Times*

30 Personal communication with Jean-Charles Brisard and other French intelligence specialists.

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31 Majority Staff. 2010. “[Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb.](#)” Washington, DC; U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

32 David Ronfeldt adapted this model from Luther Gerlach’s study in 1987 which focus on social movements in the 1960’s. See: Ronfeldt, David. 2008. “[Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates.](#)” Santa Monica, CA; RAND

### The SPIN model applied to al-Qaeda:<sup>33</sup>

- **segmentary** (composed of many diverse groups, which grow and die, divide and fuse, proliferate and contract);
- **polycentric** (having multiple, often temporary, and sometimes-competing leaders or centers of influence);
- **networked** (forming a loose, reticulate, integrated network with multiple linkages through travelers, overlapping membership, joint activities, common reading matter, and shared ideals and opponents)

More specifically it is useful to approach the foreign fighter phenomenon as a complex system: a series of interconnected parts and processes that, as a whole, ultimately exhibit telltale properties.

In this system, the most notorious characteristics include extremist combat and training in locales such as South Asia, East Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula as well as sporadic eruptions of violence in the West.

Like the ill-defined boundaries of any complex system, a foreign fighter's agenda is as theoretically open as the besieged *ummah* (a contested term defining the global community of Muslims).

Travel to Pakistan, Chechnya, Somalia, etc. – lands where jihadi theoreticians like al-Aulaqi explain that fighting is not only legitimate but also compulsory – present almost limitless options for aspiring Western *mujahideen*. The question becomes, how do they choose?

The decision-making that governs Western foreign fighters' choices for travel are nested within and affected by other choices. Elements that weigh into

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33 Gerlach, Luther P. 2001. "The Structure of Social Movements: Environmental Activism and Its Opponents." In *Networks and Netwars: the future of terror, crime and militancy*. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (eds.). Santa Monica, CA; RAND

their decisions include their ideological frame, the process by which they are radicalized, self-interested choices governing risk in activism, and diverse social, financial, and operational constraints. Each and all of these factors play a role in deciding not only where, but also when, how, and whom to fight.<sup>34</sup>

Further, like any complex system, external pressures and events affect regions of foreign fighter activity. Militants ebb and flow to different geographic regions in response to diverse and wide-ranging catalysts. These catalysts can include social and political opportunities and constraints in the combat areas; increased or decreased surveillance efforts in and by the West; multinational intelligence agency cooperation (or lack thereof); and even mundane matters such as weather, travel restrictions, or adequate kit.<sup>35</sup>

Even incremental developments can generate disproportional effects in overall processes and evolution. Events such as Pakistan's Red Mosque siege, which cemented for some Western jihadists the infidelity of the Pakistani state; the involvement of Ethiopian and African Union forces in Somalia; and al-Aulaqi's presence and activities in Yemen, for instance, appear to be more or less isolated events. Yet they also appear to have greatly influenced aspects of foreign fighter decision-making.

Finally, even in the dynamic foreign fighter system, the effects of collective memory are apparent. Shifting preferences in combat areas (for example, the apparent surge in Western foreign fighters in East Africa relative to their diminution in Iraq) and in operational methods like suicide bombings and targeting decisions amplify or dampen perceptions

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34 On a social movement theory approach to understanding framing processes and decision-making in jihadi activism, see: Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2004. "Framing Jihad: Intramovement Framing Contests and al-Qaeda's Struggle for Sacred Authority." *International Review of Social History*. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press. pp. 159-177

35 Rotella, Sebastian. 2009. "Al-Qaeda recruits back in Europe, but why?" Los Angeles, CA; *Los Angeles Times*

and affect future choices. In short, past events and memories of such affect the political and social ecosystem in which the foreign fighters operate.

Examples of past choices affecting current operations are not hard to find. For example, logistical networks that once supported fighters moving between North America and Europe to Afghanistan have also buoyed aspiring *mujahideen* headed to other venues. Alternatively, many of the same Western extremists and associated online fora that previously extolled militancy in Chechnya and Afghanistan, for instance, have used comparable ideological frameworks and methods to promote violence and training elsewhere. When these individuals or means grow silent, recant from jihadist activities, or become irrelevant, others will harness comparable themes rooted in system history and rise to prominence. These themes are maintained by a “jihadi culture” resident in the system—its glue—which can be defined as the shared and perpetually reinforced attitudes, values and beliefs that constitute a framework for action *in its ideal*.<sup>36</sup> Foreign fighters—especially “bridge figures,” which will be defined later in the paper—are among the most eager consumers and progenitors of this culture.

## INTERCONNECTIONS ACROSS THEATRES

### Training

Foreign fighter training is primarily based overseas in or near conflict zones, though some does occur within Western host nations. For example, training activities have been observed in the UK (especially in rural areas including Wales and Scotland), designed to pre-screen and prepare potential recruits. Jihadi training has also been discovered in Canada and the United States.

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36 Cozzens, Jeffrey B. 2007. “Approaching al-Qaida’s Warfare: Function, Culture, and Grand Strategy.” In *Mapping Terrorism Research*. Magnus Ranstorp (ed.). London, UK; Routledge

Training within Western host nations is often ad hoc and low grade, and frequently with extremely limited access to weaponry or explosive materials (if any). Ad hoc training over longer periods consists of organized physical exercise designed to establish an esprit de corps and basic exposure to operating within a relatively disciplined group environment under a leadership figure—all against the backdrop of extreme ideological learning.

This was the case with the Virginia jihadi network. In 2003, eleven men from Northern Virginia were charged with providing material support to al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba. The men engaged in paintball games as military training in preparation for jihad against the West.<sup>37</sup>

Often these leadership and group activities, as shown by Muhammed Siddique Khan and the 2005 London bombers, consists of paintball, white-water rafting or camping which fuses the group closer together and exposes critical elements of group dynamics to the leader and any potential weakness in commitment to the cause and overall mission.

The primary goal of this rudimentary training, however, may be to solidify the radicalization of foreign fighters and to ensure commitment to the group and the cause. Many accounts of life in jihadi training camps – including those from the primary sources – support this notion, indicating that socially reinforced religious learning and exercises focused on in-group cohesion represent a large part of the training regimen.

The exploits of the so-called Toronto 18 cell, which trained in the Ontario woodlands in 2005-2006 are instructive here. Like many other cells that train in the West, the impact of the exercises conducted by

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37 Associated Press. 2004. “[Two ‘Paintball’ Terrorists Sentenced.](#)” New York, NY; FOX News. Markon, Jerry and Mary Beth Sheridan. 2003. “[Indictment Expands Va. ‘Jihad’ Charges](#)” Washington, DC; *The Washington Post*. US Attorneys’ Office, Eastern District of Virginia. 2005. [News Release](#). Alexandria, VA; US Department of Justice. Markon, Jerry. 2005. “[Muslim Lecturer Sentenced to Life.](#)” Washington, DC; *The Washington Post*

the group – including obstacle courses, callisthenics, and multiple trips to a Tim Horton’s coffee shop to escape the cold – were quasi-comical. Perhaps the most crucial element of the training was simply spending time together listening to al-Aulaqi’s (originally Yusuf al ‘Uyayree’s) “Constants on the Path of Jihad.” On a frigid December night in a tent, this lecture hit home for the group, reminding them of their obligation to fight and die in God’s path, their status as a type of ‘persecuted chosen’, and the many ways in which the *mujahideen* find victory in jihad. In so doing, the ideological *raison d’être* for the planned “Battle of Toronto” was solidified.<sup>38</sup>

Foreign fighter training camps solidify the radicalization process by translating an individual’s rhetoric and intention into action and experience. The camaraderie of a small group under the influence of a leadership figure is a key step in deepening radicalization. This helps prepare the individual to carry out overseas- or home-based terrorist acts. The mere act of holding an illegal weapon for the first time is noted as both an act that enhances self-confidence and as a significant psychological step across legal and personal boundaries.

There is a significant capability difference between rhetoric/intention and action. Training – no matter the level of sophistication – bridges this transition.

Life in foreign and mobile terrorist training camps is not easy – a fact starkly underscored by AQAP’s INSPIRE magazine published in mid-2010. The online English language article aimed specifically at foreign recruits offered some basic advice – bring a friend.

INSPIRE noted that language barriers are difficult, but critical, to overcome; otherwise individuals may feel depressed and lonely. The article noted that language issues can also result in an individual missing out on operational details and make it difficult to effectively blend into the environment.

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38 Teotonio, Isabel. 2010. “[The Mujahideen in Washago](#).” Toronto, CA; The Star

### **JIHADIST CONFLICT THEATRES**

The Western foreign fighter phenomenon in jihadist conflict theatres began principally as a reaction to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Although the clear majority of jihadists fighting in Afghanistan during this time were of Arab origins, a minority were from European states and North Africa. The *mujahideen*’s perceived victory over the USSR generated confidence in the jihadist movement – not least because it ‘demonstrated’ that God rewards those who fulfil their obligation to defend Islam and Muslim lands – and created an enduring legacy that helps fuel the conflicts in Somalia, Yemen, and (again) Afghanistan. In each of these cases, endemic problems such as resource shortages, lack of government authority, weak institutions, and traditional religious, tribal, and ethnic cleavages have created ungoverned spaces which jihadists have successfully exploited.

Jihadist leaders have woven the politics of these local struggles into a global fabric. This facilitates the radicalization and recruitment of individuals to what jihadists portray as principled Muslim resistance against the imperialist ambitions of Western forces. Foreign fighters attracted to the notion of fighting in support of a transnational identity group have flocked to these areas and make up an important and growing segment of the jihadist arsenal. In addition, the “Islamic Maghreb” region of North Africa and the region of Central Asia have also shown signs of susceptibility to jihadist forces bolstered by foreign fighters.

#### **FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas)**

Most younger generation foreign fighters joining the jihad in the FATA zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan view themselves as a continuation of the heroic *mujahideen* resistance against a great power. (The critical role of US support to the

There are additional motivations behind INSPIRE's bring a friend suggestion. Bringing a companion and friend to the foreign training camps may serve multiple operational purposes. Being together with a friend reinforces the focus of the mission and reduces the chances an individual will turn back. Furthermore it helps support group cohesion. Additionally, it is a potentially useful safeguard against a single foreign intelligence operative infiltration (as two individuals may be easily played off each other during random interrogation and security checks). As testified by a Belgian-French group, who arrived in Waziristan in 2008, they were "expecting at least a welcome for 'our brothers from Europe' and a warm atmosphere of hospitality" but were instead subjected to lengthy interrogations by al-Qaeda officials.<sup>39</sup>

Even before the publication of INSPIRE's bring a friend advice, foreign fighters have been observed travelling in groups. The five Northern Virginia men (Uman Chaudhry, Ramy Zamzam, Ahmad Minni, Waqar Khan, and Aman Hassan Yemer) who were arrested in late 2009 by Pakistani officials had travelled as a group from the United States in the hopes of engaging in jihad against American forces in Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> Such was also the case with Najibullah Zazi – who was accompanied by two classmates (Zarein Ahmedzay and Adis Medunjanin) when he travelled from the US to Pakistan for terrorist training.<sup>41</sup> The Daniel Boyd group, a jihadi faction from North Carolina that trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan allegedly pursued combat in Israel and the Palestinian Territories (among other locations, including a planned attack against the

39 Rotella, Sebastian. 2009. "[Al-Qaeda recruits back in Europe, but why?](#)" Los Angeles, CA; *Los Angeles Times*

40 Bjelopera, Jerome P. and Mark A. Randol. 2010. "American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat." Washington, DC; Congressional Research Service. pp. 70-71

41 US Federal Bureau of Investigations. 2010. "[Two Charged with Terror Violations in Connection with New York Subway Plot.](#)" Press Release. Washington, DC; US Department of Justice

*mujahideen* against the Soviet Union in the 1980s through supply of anti-aircraft missiles and funding is ignored in the modern anti-Western extremist narrative.)

In the initial aftermath of Operation Enduring Freedom and the overthrow of the Taliban, some foreign fighters returned to their Western countries of origin. These foreign fighters returned with extensive combat experience and an element of street credibility within extremist milieus.

Al-Qaeda suffered heavy losses due to targeted operations that eliminated key leadership figures, and hampered their planning and communications efforts. Al-Qaeda links with the Taliban have reportedly deepened due to al-Qaeda supplying the Taliban with weapons, logistics and training—including religious indoctrination and use of arms and explosives. The deepening link is reflected in a more asymmetric Taliban strategy that has relied increasingly on suicide attacks to achieve maximum international media impact and undermine the local population's confidence in the authorities' capacity to provide security. Al-Qaeda foreign fighters also married Taliban and tribal daughters, thereby furthering bonds between and among these entities, and benefiting from consequent inclinations to protect.

Direct al-Qaeda activities in the FATA region focus largely on propaganda and limited operational support, while various Taliban entities conduct most insurgency operations. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is considered to have an international agenda and strong al-Qaeda links. TTP claimed responsibility for Faisal Shahzad's failed May 2010 attempted bombing of New York's Times Square. Shahzad testified that TTP had supplied him with explosives training and orders.<sup>a</sup> More recently TTP has reportedly shifted to primarily

Marine Corps base in Quantico, VA) offers yet another example.<sup>42</sup>

Yet being in a group may not alleviate difficulties in adjustment. The same Belgian-French group referenced above describes how in their training camps they felt frustrated and “increasingly cut off, bored, and fed up with the primitive living conditions in their mountain shacks. They often did not seem to know what their next orders would be or where their handlers would take them.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the group became more disillusioned when their handlers did not deliver on repeatedly empty promises to fight in Afghanistan and when they had to partially pay for their travel, training and weapons.

Overseas foreign fighter training courses are now often very basic and serve more as a final phase of indoctrination than as a phase of operation preparation. As Peter Nesser notes in one of the more extensive treatment of European foreign fighter training, today’s “second generation” Western jihadis are not necessarily groomed to become the mujahideen’s “special operators,” as they once were in the 1990’s.<sup>44</sup>

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42 Office of Public Affairs. 2009. [“Seven Charged with Terrorism Violations in North Carolina.”](#) Press Release. Washington, DC; US Department of Justice. Office of Public Affairs. 2009. [“Superseding Indictment in Boyd Matter Charges Defendants with Conspiring to Murder U.S. Military Personnel, Weapons Violations.”](#) Press Release. Washington, DC; US Department of Justice

43 Robertson, Nic and Paul Cruickshank. 2009. [“Recruits reveal Al Qaeda’s sprawling spread.”](#) Atlanta, GA; CNN

44 Nesser, Petter. 2008. “How did Europe’s Global Jihadis Obtain Training for the Militant Causes?” *Terrorism and Political Violence* London, UK; Taylor & Francis. pp. 234-256

propaganda operations, a fact that may reflect delicate balances reached with Pakistani government forces.

Lashkar-e-Taiba (‘Army of the Pure,’ abbreviated LeT) is the largest and most dangerous extremist group in Pakistan. Following the 2009 Mumbai attacks, they have increasingly adopted a global jihadist outlook and have expanded their operational focus to conduct attacks against ISAF forces in Afghanistan.<sup>b</sup>

Political, social, and ideological drivers of varying levels of sophistication are primary catalysts for foreign fighters engaged in the FATA.

Interviews with Western jihadists in combination with a wealth of primary source literature and public court transcripts indicate that many believe deeply in both the spiritual and temporal political benefits of fighting non-Muslim and ‘apostate’ forces in the FATA region. The region, steeped in jihadi tradition as the graveyard of communist forces, also carries some degree of eschatological significance as Khorosan, making it a highly desirable place to fight. Some would also argue that it is ideologically “purer” venue for combat, untainted by the brutal takfiri tactics of Abu Musa’b al-Zarqawi, whose activities were reminiscent of the Algerian GIA—a jihadi faction that fell out of favor with bin Laden owing to their wholesale excommunication and slaughter of innocent Muslims.

Foreign fighters from several western countries, especially those from Europe, are extremely active in the FATA region. German security services have identified 200 foreign fighters that have links to Germany. 65 of those identified have received training, with 90 believed to be in training and 30 involved in armed hostilities. Despite their activity in the FATA, foreign fighters pose a greater threat if they return home with expertise and credibility. This was the case





Eric Breininger

Beyond verifying that the would-be trainee is not a spy for Western intelligence agencies, the emphasis in the majority of cases seems to be to prepare them either as suicide bombers, marginally effective combatants, or occasionally propaganda showpieces. The roles of Eric Breininger, Adam

Gadahn and Omar Hammami illustrate the latter point. Indeed, typical overseas training is sometimes limited to one month in a temporary camp. Foreign fighters are often trained in basic bomb making, with limited knowledge of materials and methods. This was the pattern of training received by Daniel Maldonado. Maldonado, the first American criminally prosecuted for joining jihadists in Somalia, told authorities he was given an AK-47, uniforms, and then participated in physical fitness, firearms, and explosives training.<sup>45</sup>

Potential recruits that pass through such camps have very limited ability or time to improvise and adapt information to different scenarios or unpredicted events. This condition has in some instances undermined jihadi operations. It was a key factor in the failure of a terror plot in Denmark.

In a Danish case, Hammid Khursid, a 22-year old of Pakistani origin, had spent considerable time in

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<sup>45</sup> US Attorney's Office, Southern District of Texas. 2007. "US Citizen Pleads Guilty to Training to Fight Jihad." Press Release. Houston, TX; US Department of Justice

with Bryant Vinas.

Vinas, an American Muslim convert, was charged by US officials with providing material support to al-Qaeda and receiving military type training. In the FATA, Vinas received weapons and explosives training. He provided al-Qaeda with detailed information about the Long Island Railroad system – which was then used to help plan a bomb attack against the commuter rail system. Vinas was arrested by the FBI before he could carry out the attack.<sup>c</sup>

Both the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have extended propaganda activities towards Germany's mainland. Eric Breininger, a young German foreign fighter killed in Waziristan in May, 2010, featured in several IJU videos where he appealed to German Muslims to join the jihad or at least support it financially.<sup>d</sup>

Following his death, Breininger's memoir, *Mein Weg nach Jannah* (My Way to Paradise), appeared on a number of jihadist websites. Officials feared that Breininger's death and account of his journey would serve as motivation for other potential jihadists to attempt to engage in foreign fighter activity. The IJU and IMU have proven transnational agendas linked with al-Qaeda that focus on Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, as well as target troop contributing nations to ISAF, especially those with troops near the Uzbek border.<sup>e</sup> The IJU has also been linked to a plot to attack US military forces in Frankfurt, Germany.

### Somalia

The conflict in Somalia includes actors engaged in activities across the entire spectrum of warfare, including conventional warfare, urban warfare, insurgency, rebellion, acts of terrorism, and violent crime. The southern Somalia conflict zone contains small, highly mobile forces totaling less than 30,000 individuals. Foreign

Pakistan's Red Mosque during a confrontation with authorities in 2007. He had been radicalized and channelled to Jani Khel in Waziristan to attend one of Abu Ubaid al-Masri's mobile training camps for one month's duration.

At the Red Mosque, where he spent considerable time sleeping and 'hanging out' with his contact facilitator to al-Qaeda, he had copied down one of the bomb manuals in Urdu, containing explosives recipes and instruction on how to make a suicide belt.

Khurshid showed great proficiency in secure communications in public Internet cafes, having established several 'dead-drop' Internet accounts which he used to communicate with Muhammed Ilyas Subhan Ali, a well-known Saudi liaison and logistics officer between 'core' al-Qaeda and affiliates and members around the world.

When arriving home to Copenhagen with the bomb manual, Khursid managed to manufacture some triacetone triperoxide (TATP) for a test explosion but he had great difficulty improvising and replacing a 3 volt light bulb to be used in the circuitry board when the one he brought back from Pakistan broke.

Limits to improvisation mirrors frustration in some UK cases where returning fighters were disappointed in training levels as "they only practiced stripping AK-47's." There are more advanced courses and other UK cases point to opposite experience with much more advanced training courses – enhanced in some instances by the fact that there are training camps inside the UK for pre-selection. However, this constitutes the exception rather than the norm.

Foreign fighters gain the most significant experience, skills, and knowledge during actual fighting in conflict areas. Often, fighting NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or foreign invading forces is a principal reason for why they travelled to these conflict zones in the first place.

Foreign fighters seek to "graduate" to this level in order to prove their *bona fides*, especially with impressionable members of their extended social

fighters are a relatively new (year 2000) phenomenon, and make up less than 5-10% of the jihadists in Somalia.

The jihadist movements in Somalia are divided into two main, clan-based, factions: Al Shabaab and Hizb Al-Islam. As in Afghanistan, Somali clan/tribe affiliations take primacy over ideology and religious factors. The jihadists share a common agenda, but lack real coordination and even disagree on ideology.

Somalis expatriates holding foreign passports are present on both sides of the conflict—adding a new dimension to the foreign fighter phenomenon—while foreign fighters with no Somali background are few in number. Most foreign fighters are associated with al-Shabaab (estimates range from 200 to 1000 individuals).

Some contend that the media has overstated the impact of foreign fighters in Somalia and has understated the troubles they face integrating with the indigenous forces. It is argued that foreign fighters in Somalia are generally characterized as "jihadist tourists" by local fighters, who also question the foreigners' fighting capacity and competence.

Yet Jonathan Evans, Director General of MI5, believes foreign fighters with connections to Somalia present a real and growing danger.

With more than 100 UK residents now fighting or training in al-Shabaab camps in Somalia, Evans recently argued that "it's only a matter of time before we see terrorism on our streets inspired by those who are today fighting alongside al-Shabaab." Evans' sentiment was echoed by John Sawers, Chief of MI6.<sup>f</sup>

These concerns on the part of security services are well founded. According to Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, al-Shabaab "had managed to plant al-Qaeda-like ideas into the heads of even its American recruits, and has shown that it

groups and communities. Those who cannot reach this phase may miss out on the “rock star” status to which they aspire and instead face humiliation.

Due to their image and their ability to operate with a degree of competence upon returning to their Western host nation, veteran foreign fighters are thus the primary concern to host nations as opposed to trained foreign fighters with no applied experience.

There are foreign fighters that receive more advanced training in camps over a longer duration. The case of US citizen and convert Bryant Vinas, who between March and July 2007 attended three al-Qaeda training courses in handling explosives and weapons, is instructive of several elements of training practices, rigorous security procedures and how al-Qaeda adapts protectively against increasingly effective Predator or Reaper strikes. While training in the FATA, Vinas provided al-Qaeda with detailed information about the Long Island Railroad system – which was then used to help plan a bomb attack against the commuter rail system. Vinas was arrested by the FBI before he could carry out the attack.

Many of the previous al-Qaeda training camps which used to be stationary, larger scale installations have been replaced by small, mobile bivouac training camps consisting of reportedly around 300-500 Arab fighters divided into small units of around ten recruits in each and their trainers.

These recruits, often introduced through referrals, face rigorous background checks through several forms specifying personal details. Handing over passports and adopting an alias together with their mobile phones, the recruits then travel around living in safe houses and conduct small arms training. If they prove to be good enough, they may be given more specialized courses in the construction of suicide vests and the manufacture of improvised explosives. Much of the instruction occurs nowadays indoors and small arms training in small courtyards or remote valleys. Vinas’ experience was similar to

is capable of carrying out operations outside of Somalia.”<sup>8</sup>

Western foreign fighters are often unprepared for the harsh environment, limited medicines, linguistic problems, and religious cleavages they face in Somalia. Also, racism is an important dividing force between Arab and African jihadists that runs below the surface, but affects their ability to unite effectively to fight in common cause. Due to these factors, foreign fighters have grown disillusioned and returned to their host nations following only a limited period. The few that have remained in Somalia have often adopted an advisory role, providing training or propaganda work. The evolution of tactics regarding the use of improvised explosive devices stems from the presence of more experienced foreign fighters migrating to Somalia from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Events such as the Ethiopian intervention into Somalia or perceived western interference are recognized triggers for increased foreign fighter activity in Somalia. Nevertheless, the number of foreign fighters has decreased since the peak of fighting against Ethiopian forces in 2006/2007, but there is worry that al-Shabaab may push foreign fighters toward hitting soft targets abroad – a real concern, particularly in the wake of al-Shabaab having pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, which brings with it the need to demonstrate al-Shabaab’s capability.

### Yemen

The presence of bridge figure Anwar al-Aulaqi, the attempted Christmas day downing of an airliner by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, as well as continuing evidence that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operates with impunity make Yemen an attractive destination for foreign fighters. Indeed, both of the two successful post-9/11 jihadi attacks in the United States have links to Yemen. Abdulhakim Muhammad, who killed a US soldier in

that of a French-Belgian group who spent time in Waziristan in 2008.

The entry of Walid Othmani, a French recruit, into al-Qaeda's fold provides detailed insight into rigid procedural protocols that al-Qaeda handlers and trainers require to maintain discipline and security. Before being allowed to train, Othmani was required to sign forms pledging absolute obedience to the instructions of his recruiter and indicating whether he would volunteer to become a *shaheed*, a martyr, while at the end of the training the instructors provide written evaluation of performance.<sup>46</sup>

### Pipelines

As illustrated by, "The militant pipeline," a report by Paul Cruickshank for the New America Foundation – a link exists between jihadist conflict theatres and homeland terrorism.

The report surveys 21 "serious" terrorism plots against the West since 2004 and highlights the current danger posed by terrorist safe havens in Pakistan. In half the cases studied, the plotters either received direction from or trained directly with al-Qaeda or its allies in Pakistan.

Foreign fighter support and control structures are interconnected across jihadist conflict theatres. According to Bergen and Hoffman, this increases the danger presented by jihadi groups. For example, the authors note "the danger of al-Qaeda comes not only from its central leadership in Pakistan, but through its cooperation with other like-minded groups."<sup>47</sup>

This is often the result of common nodes capable of redirecting resources. Overlapping logistics and funding networks supply multiple conflict theatres

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46 Robertson, Nic and Paul Cruickshank. 2009. "[Recruits reveal Al Qaeda's sprawling spread](#)." Atlanta, GA; CNN

47 Bergen, Peter and Bruce Hoffman. 2010. "[Assessing the Terrorist Threat](#)." Washington, DC; Bipartisan Policy Center. p. 6

Arkansas in June 2009, was deported from Yemen earlier that year. Further, the perpetrator of the Fort Hood, TX, massacre, Nidal Malik Hasan, was in communication with the Yemen-based al-Aulaqi prior to the shooting.

Daniel Benjamin, US Ambassador-at-Large for Counterterrorism, recently noted that, "Terrorism emanating from Yemen is a major security concern for the United States." Benjamin has highlighted the risk posed by AQAP. He contends it is determined to strike the US homeland.

In a speech to The US Institute of Peace, Ambassador Benjamin singled out the threat posed by American-born Anwar al-Aulaqi. Benjamin told the audience that the American citizen "is not just an ideologue but someone who has been personally involved in planning terrorist acts against Americans."<sup>h</sup>

AQAP has exploited the Yemeni government's ineffectiveness to gain traction and support, especially in the Hadramout—the ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden and other important jihadist figures. As is the case in every jihadist conflict zone, AQAP has proven "adept at aligning grievances of Yemeni communities with its own narrative of what is wrong and who is responsible." Their ability to offer "a coherent narrative that is consistent with the core tenets of al-Qaeda's ideology but infused with themes that resonate locally" increases their salience, credibility, and audience acceptance.<sup>i</sup>

Yemen's location on the Arabian Peninsula poses additional problems. Analysts note that the country's access to the Bab al-Mandab, the strait of water which separates Yemen from mainland Africa, and by extension Somalia, is a mere 20 miles across. This proximity makes operational cooperation between al-Shabaab and AQAP a real and serious possibility.

and can readjust as necessary to reflect shifts in priorities and resource requirements.

Adjustments due to individual decision making add to the complexity of recognized networks. This was starkly revealed by David Headley (see also below), who provided the advance reconnaissance for Mumbai attack teams using GPS coordinates during his multiple visits to the sites, as he later pursued similar “casing” activity for an attack team against the Danish Jyllandsposten newspaper in Copenhagen and other public targets. In this case it appears that this operational strand was semi-independent as there seems to have been discussions and disagreement about target priority with Ilyas Kashmiri, one of the key operational leaders of Lashkar-e-Taiba and architect of the Mumbai attack.

Connections and interactions between individual foreign fighters and networks are also made through wide reaching organisations such as Al-Ummah (‘the people’) and the overarching concept of global jihad that binds non-aligned or even competing organisations. Western intelligence has also encountered cases where foreign fighters have even used the Tablighi Jamaat movement as a cover to facilitate travel.<sup>48</sup>

There are no clear travel patterns to any single identified jihadist conflict theatre, such as Somalia beside neighboring Kenya. Travel through multiple intermediary countries and cities is used as a tactic by foreign fighters to cover traces of activity in order to return unmonitored to their host nations.

It is possible to establish various travel patterns and concealment methods, from facilitation networks in Turkey as a route to the FATA region, and Eastleigh in Kenya as a route to Somalia, to Arabic language instruction as cover in Syria, Egypt, and Yemen, to name just a few possibilities.

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48 Interview with intelligence officers from EU states at the European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues (ENER).

As in Somalia and Afghanistan, but to a greater extent, Yemeni cultural norms also complicate the true fusion of indigenous and foreign fighter jihadist elements. Yemenis possess a longstanding hostility to outsiders—even those ostensibly fighting on their behalf.<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising that AQAP has stated on websites that they only require Western foreign fighters who possess specialized skills that bring added value. AQAP leaders have requested potential Western foreign fighters not to travel to the conflict area but instead to support AQAP by sending money. Al Zawahiri has been quoted as requesting Western followers to “contribute to jihad at home.”

As problems continue to mount for Yemeni authorities, AQAP will certainly attempt to exploit the situation for its own propaganda purposes. Yemen affords bridge figures and foreign fighters alike an unchallenged area of operations which permits them to conduct media, recruitment, training, and planning operations without fear of reprisal. Yemen also offers a variety of educational and religious centers that seem to attract Western Muslims, including some that have embraced violent extremism. If not addressed soon, Yemen has the potential to become an even more serious scene of terrorist and foreign fighter activity.

#### **The Caucasus**

Recent press attention has focused heavily on the aforementioned jihadist conflict zones; however the Caucasus remain an important component of the overall jihadist landscape. Chechen rebel leader, Doku Umarov, has sought to distance the insurgency from its original stated goal of Chechen independence and instead align it with the global jihadist narrative; a narrative which supports the establishment of an Islamic emirate in the Caucasus. To that end, the insurgents have become increasingly adept at using the Internet to post videos of successful

The primary routes to the FATA go usually through Turkey, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Egypt. While travel facilitators provide fake passports and ID-cards in Turkey, the routes go often through Baluchistan in Iran into FATA areas.

There are also two kinds of travel facilitators: firstly, for procurement of passports and ID-cards; secondly, those capable of providing high-tech equipment and organizing financial transactions for travel.

The Danish case of Ameer Saeed, an Iraqi refugee from Turkmenistan, reveals the modus operandi of travel facilitation which in 2006 and 2007 sent around 30 men from Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Denmark and Sweden via Syria to Iraq to conduct suicide operations against Western troops. Saeed organised logistically the travel via Syria and instructed the recruits to establish 'electronic dead-drop' e-mails (using shared usernames and passwords) for instruction and meetings with facilitators. One such intercepted message from 2006 read: "At Saladdins grave, inside the Al-Arnawi mosque, there will be someone with a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of Coca Cola. The other person will wear a black hat and will ask: where is Nourellidine's store? The other will answer: on the other street."<sup>49</sup> Saeed's facilitation network also organised the travel for Muhamed Moumou (Abu Qaswarah), a Moroccan-born Swedish national who rose to the position of second-in-command after Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Geographic vicinity is no guarantee for facilitation into conflict zones. For example, according to Spain's Guardia Civil, there is a bigger trend of trying to travel to Pakistan than to the Maghreb theatres (Algeria, Morocco and the Sahel countries). In other cases, the Chechen theatre has proven too difficult to gain entry to and has pushed instead

49 Maltesen, Bo. 2010. "Jakker eller selvmordsbombere." Copenhagen, DK; *Politiken*

attacks on Russian military and security personnel, to espouse a message of jihad, and to recruit new fighters to its ranks.<sup>k</sup>

In March 2010, Umarov announced that he had ordered the Moscow subway suicide bombings which claimed 40 lives and injured over 100. Russian authorities have linked him to other Chechen suicide attacks as well. They worry that jihadists in the Caucasus seek to expand the conflict into Russia proper; Umarov warned in video messages following the subway attacks that they would not be the last attacks aimed at Moscow.

Over the last year, public statements of support for Doku Umarov and other Caucasus rebel leaders have increased. Leading al-Qaeda mentor, Jordanian Sheikh Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, wrote in an open letter in 2009 "it is my great pleasure to express my alignment with, patronage for, and support to the Mujahideen of the Caucasus."<sup>1</sup> Considerable debate remains, however, over to the extent to which Chechen rebel leaders agree with Umarov's recasting of the conflict in a jihadist narrative. Many see the departure from the traditional nationalistic rhetoric of the Chechen rebels to jihadi language as an opportunistic move aimed at securing foreign financial and material support, and as a source of potential new recruits who identify with a transnational, Islamic identity.

<sup>a</sup> Kornblut, Anne and Karin Brulliard. 2010. "[U.S. Blames Pakistani Taliban For Times Square Bomb Plot](#)," Washington, DC; *The Washington Post*. Miller, Greg. 2010. "[Pakistan Arrests Man With Militant Ties Who Says He Aided Times Square Bomb Suspect](#)," Washington, DC; *The Washington Post*. US Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York. 2010. "[Faisal Shahzad To Appear In Manhattan Court](#)." Press Release. New York, NY; US Department of Justice

<sup>b</sup> Mudd, Philip. 2010. "[Evaluating the Al-Oa'ida Threat to the U.S. Homeland](#)," *CTC Sentinel*. West Point, NY; Combating Terrorism Center

recruits, like Mohamed Atta and later the German Sauerland cell, to the FATA theatre.<sup>50</sup>

Without targeted investigations and the assistance of third-party national security services, the final destinations of foreign fighters can be difficult to identify and monitor. Because of this, current estimates on foreign fighter activity likely underestimate the scale of the problem.

A variety of decision making factors shape the pipelines used. Which pipeline aspiring foreign fighters elect to use depends on access, opportunity and ideology – more than origin.

While Iraq, for example, has become an unpopular foreign fighter destination, the FATA, Somalia, and Yemen are the most attractive conflict areas for foreign fighters. In all cases, contacts within the conflict areas are critical in order to facilitate recruitment. All travel routes to conflict areas are considered viable for foreign fighters as long as they have connections to facilitation networks within the jihadist conflict region of choice.

## IMPACT OF INDIVIDUALS

### Bridge Figures

As identified in studies conducted by the United Kingdom's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre; key individuals and leadership figures have come to play an increasingly important role in foreign fighter activity. These 'bridge figures' play an important part in radicalizing new recruits and sustaining the jihadi network.

Bridge figures are primary actors in the radicalization process and serve as a major catalyst for recruitment. They play a noted role in developing new techniques which target at risk populations and

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<sup>50</sup> Steinberg, Guido. 2010. "Trial and Error: How a failed plot revealed a movement." *Jane's Intelligence Review*. London, UK; Jane's Information Group

<sup>c</sup> Bjelopera, Jerome P. and Mark A. Randol. 2010. "American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat." Washington, DC; Congressional Research Service. p. 88

<sup>d</sup> Musharbash, Yassin. 2010. "[German Jihadist Eric Breininger Killed in Pakistan, Group Claims](#)." Hamburg, DE; *Der Spiegel*

<sup>e</sup> Moore, Cerwyn. 2010. "[The Rise and Fall of the Islamic Jihad Union: What Next for Uzbek Terror Networks?](#)" Washington, DC; The Jamestown Foundation

<sup>f</sup> Norton-Taylor, Richard. 2010. "[MI5 chiefs warns of terror threat from Britons trained in Somalia](#)." London, UK; *The Guardian*

<sup>g</sup> Bergen, Peter and Bruce Hoffman. 2010. "[Assessing the Terrorist Threat](#)." Washington, DC; Bipartisan Policy Center. p. 110

<sup>h</sup> Benjamin, Daniel. 2010. "[US Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen](#)." Remarks to the US Institute of Peace. Washington, DC; US State Department.

<sup>i</sup> Harris, Alistar. 2010. "[Exploiting Grievances: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](#)." *Yemen: On the Brink*. Washington, DC; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

<sup>j</sup> Gnehm, Jr., Edward W. (2010) "[A Focus on Yemen](#)." The 2010 Annual Kuwait Chair Lecture. Washington, DC; The Elliott School of International Affairs

<sup>k</sup> Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. 2010. "[Hagiography, Bomb-Making, And A Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe](#)." Washington, DC; Broadcasting Board of Governors

<sup>l</sup> Ferris-Rotman, Annie. 2010. "[Global jihad creeping into Russia's insurgency](#)." London, UK; Reuters

align international jihadist efforts with local grievances thus making them more salient. They also provide legitimacy to the actions and aspirations of foreign fighters.

Bridge figures possess transnational salience; this makes them appealing to at-risk populations. Often they draw on their past associations with legendary jihadi ideologues and militant figures such as Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman, Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza al-Masri and others. A case in point is Said Mansour, a

veteran facilitator within Denmark who was sentenced to prison (now released) for possession and distribution of 3,000 CDs with vast amounts of terrorist propaganda material. When arrested Mansour had a list of visits to 73 senior jihadi leaders and militants in the West and the Arab world. These bridge figures have an ability to act as key leadership figures which adds a new and disconcerting dimension to the foreign fighter phenomenon.

Bridge figures, characteristically speaking, are eloquent, educated, often bi- or multilingual, and skilled at employing the tools of a globalized world. They use these skills to access specific subgroups of society – of which they typically have social and cultural knowledge of – to aid in recruitment to jihadi causes and to impart radical ideologies. Several recent foreign fighter plots have featured such leaders. Anwar al-Aulaqi, an American and Yemeni citizen active in AQAP in Yemen, was in extensive email contact with US Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan prior to his shooting rampage at Fort Hood, Texas – which left 13 dead and 32 others wounded. Al-Aulaqi also reportedly met with failed Christmas Day bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, in the fall prior to his attempt to blow up Northwest Airlines Flight 253.

Abdullah al-Faisal, a Jamaican, had ties to shoe bomber Richard Reid and Faisal Shahzad, the suspect behind New York's attempted Times Square bombing in May, 2010. Shahzad was reportedly in contact with al-Aulaqi as well. Both men have suspected ties to dozens of terror plots where they purportedly provided moral and spiritual guidance to the suspects.



*Anwar al-Aulaqi*

Al-Aulaqi and al-Faisal have been characterized by officials as adept at using technology, naturally charismatic, and quite capable of framing their extremist message in such a way that it is readily accessible to Western audiences and their cultural biases. It was apparently the speeches of al-Aulaqi that motivated Shaker Masri's failed attempt to enlist with either al-Shabaab or al-Qaeda.<sup>51</sup>

A Yemeni official familiar with counterterrorism operations in the country commented on al-Aulaqi's connections and recently characterized him as "the most dangerous man in Yemen. He's intelligent, sophisticated, Internet-savvy and very charismatic. He can sell anything to anyone, and right now he's selling jihad."<sup>52</sup>

In regards to al-Faisal, the head of the Islamic Council in Jamaica and an old friend of the cleric's, Mustafa Mohammad, remarked that Faisal's eloquence caused people to naturally gravitate towards him. This ultimately led the council to ban him from preaching in island mosques for fear that he would radicalize the youth.<sup>53</sup>

Both al-Aulaqi and al-Faisal remain active online. Faisal recently launched a chat room, the majority of whose regular members are believed to reside within the United States.

Moez Garsalloui is another interesting bridge figure. Garsalloui, a Tunisian immigrant is married to the widow of the man that killed Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masoud. The widow, Malika al-Aroud, was widely revered in militant circles as a widow of a martyr, for her passionate support for

51 Bjelopera, Jerome P. and Mark A. Randol. 2010. "American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat." Washington, DC; Congressional Research Service. p. 66

52 Coker, Margaret. 2010. "[Yemen Ties Alleged Attacker to al-Qaeda and U.S.-Born Cleric.](#)" New York, NY; The Wall Street Journal

53 Temple-Raston, Dina. 2010. "[Jamaican Cleric Uses Web To Spread Jihad Message.](#)" *All Things Considered.* Washington, DC; NPR



Bin-Laden's jihad and for administering an Arabic-language jihadi internet forum under the various versions of the name *al-Minbar*.

Al-Aroud's jihadi websites have served as important nodes for claiming responsibility for attacks and disseminating propaganda. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has employed the Internet to celebrate and promote its attacks. Ayman al-Zawahiri has used it to issue announcements. The first broadcast of *Sout al Khalifah*, a product of the Global Islamic Media Front; and the GSPC (originally known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, now al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) have also employed the internet as a conduit for reaching mass audiences.

For some bridge figures, the internet is critical for not only spreading their message, but directing action, and maintaining support.

Writing in French and known by her online pen name *Oum Obeyda*, al-Aroud, together with her husband Garsalloui, routinely and actively used the web. It served as the chief tool by which they actively sought to "bully Muslim men to go and fight and rall[y] women to join the cause."<sup>54</sup> Garsalloui used his wife's websites to search for potential recruits to join him to travel to Pakistan's tribal areas.

While Garsalloui is still at large with al-Qaeda circles in the FATA region, Belgian authorities arrested al-Aroud in Brussels in December 2008, charging her with inciting two French youths and four young Belgians to go to terrorist training camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Described by authorities as an "al-Qaeda living legend", a Belgian court sentenced her in May 2010 to eight years in prison for "creating, directing and funding the terrorist cell." According to the judges, Malika El Aourd used the *minbar-sos.com* website, which she had

established with her husband, to attract the most vulnerable surfers in an attempt to indoctrinate them and then recruit them to participate in the global jihad led by al-Qaeda.



*Malika al-Aroud*

The question of how to handle identified key leadership figures who aid radicalization and foreign fighter activity is a difficult one. It is complicated by the fact that bridge figures in particular are typically calculated in their use of language and operate close to, but within, the line of the law.

Overt monitoring of such figures can itself raise the individual's credibility and potential reach within their community – thus becoming counterproductive. As a result, security services and police forces are faced with a dilemma; whether to treat key identified leadership figures as primarily intelligence targets that reveal wider networks or to shut down these actors and protect the local community. The necessary balance requires calculation on a case by case basis.

Around-the-clock surveillance on key bridge figures is difficult, labour-intensive and costly. For example, in the 2007 Sauerland case, 300 officers worked intensively for six months providing surveillance on Fritz Gelowicz and his three accomplices. For every targeted surveillance operation at least 20 officers need to be allocated to sustain around-the-clock cover on the suspect. Pressures are added as former prisoners are released and require rehabilitation (if ever possible) and intense surveillance in some cases.

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54 Sciolino, Elaine and Souad Mekhennet. 2008. "For a jihadist blogger, 'Writing is also a Bomb.'" *New York, NY: The New York Times*

### Jihadist ‘Rockstars’

In addition to the bridge figures there has been the emergence of a class of jihadist ‘rockstars.’ Because of their foreign fighter activity and experiences, these individuals have celebrity appeal with at-risk populations.

These figures typically do not possess the eloquence or charisma of bridge figures, but they do resonate with groups at risk for radicalization. The salience of their message rests on perceptions of a shared identity.

Rockstars are critical to the cycle of radicalization; they provide a living example to which individuals can aspire. This in turn helps motivate and facilitate the recruit through the process.



*Omar Hammami*

Omar Hammami, an American citizen from Alabama and convert to Islam, travelled to Somalia to join al-Shabaab after his own radicalization. His training and experience helped seal his indoctrination of extremist ideas. Hammami rose through the ranks of the Shabaab militia; he was quickly recognized by leaders for his value as a propaganda tool. Hammami’s operational and leadership experience in the field imbues him with a level of legitimacy in the eyes of aspiring extremists.

In March, 2009, a thirty-one minute video featuring this American was released which was described by The New York Times as a “veritable homage to Hammami.” The video depicts him running in slow

motion followed by a group of fighters; a jihadist rap song plays in the background. The scene is followed by another of him reading from the Koran in both English and Arabic.<sup>55</sup> It concludes with Hammami offering a lecture in colloquial American English.

Analysts contend that Hammami’s identity as an American cast against the backdrop of jihadist activities provides at risk youth with an ideal type to which they may aspire.

Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax presents a similar ‘rockstar’ case. Faarax, a Somali-born naturalized American citizen, attended meetings in the Minneapolis area where he encouraged others to travel to Somalia and fight. He lectured potential recruits that his jihad had allowed him to experience true brotherhood. He assured them fighting would be fun, said they should not be afraid, and promised they would get the chance to use firearms.<sup>56</sup>

Eric Breininger, a German convert to Islam, offered a narrative similar to Hammami’s. Breininger joined the Islamic Jihad Union in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and, like Hammami, was involved in combat operations on the ground. Although he was not believed to have held an operational leadership role like Hammami he was featured in a number of propaganda videos as a means of eliciting popular support among other potential foreign fighters.

Breininger was reported killed in May, 2010 in a battle with Pakistani troops.<sup>57</sup> Following his death an unfinished memoir he penned entitled “Mein

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55 Cilluffo, Frank and F. Jordan Evert. 2010. [“Hammami the Jihadist Pop Star – Bridging Worlds: From Mobile to Mogadishu.”](#) Washington, DC; The Homeland Security Policy Institute. Elliott, Andrea. 2010. [“The Jihadist Next Door.”](#) New York, NY; *The New York Times*

56 Criminal Complaint, U.S. v. Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax and Abdiweli Yassin Isse, (D. Minn. 2009). Temple-Raston, Dina. 2010. [“Jihadi Cool: Terrorist Recruiters’ Latest Weapon.”](#) *Morning Edition*. Washington, DC; NPR

57 Musharbash, Yassin. 2010. [“German Jihadist Eric Breininger Killed in Pakistan, Group Claims.”](#) Hamburg, DE; *Der Spiegel*

Weg nach Jannah” (My Path to Paradise) was uncovered. Der Spiegel wrote that the work offered an “account of the day-to-day life of radical jihadi fighting in the Hindu Kush and an intimate look at the thoughts of a radical who is certain he is in the right.”<sup>58</sup>

Breining’s memoir is written in such a way that is accessible to those who share his cultural and social background. By evoking popular, cultural references he relates to foreign fighter recruits: “If the brothers would buy one doner kebab less a week it would be possible to buy almost 20 sniper bullets to fight the kuffar.”<sup>59</sup>

The online publication of Breining’s memoir – riddled with popular references and cultural nuances – following his death helped reinforce his status as a jihadist rockstar. Seen as a martyr in the eyes of extremists, Breining has been cast as a model for future foreign fighters.

### The Fighter

The foreign fighter himself – the target of bridge figures and the individual to whom the jihadist rock star appeals – plays a potentially indispensable role in inspiring and facilitating future foreign fighter activity.

Attempts by individuals to travel to jihadist conflict zones, whether successful or not, support the foreign fighter movement. By showcasing the attempts by individuals who share a perceived common identity, these efforts promote a sense of community. This feeling of a unity of purpose perpetuates foreign fighter activity and reinforces the radicalization process of other individuals.

David Coleman Headley, an American of Pakistani descent, was indicted and pled guilty (to avoid the

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58 Musharbash, Yassin. 2010. “[The Memoirs of a German Jihadist](#).” Hamburg, DE; *Der Spiegel*

59 Hegghammer, Thomas. 2010. “[Guest Post: The Story of Eric Breining](#).” Website. Washington, DC; Jihadica

death penalty) to conspiring with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistani terrorist group, in the 2008 Mumbai attacks in India. Headley conducted significant target surveillance in Mumbai prior to the attacks including the scouting of amphibious landing zones. He also compiled information and surveillance on targets in Copenhagen, including the Danish newspaper responsible for printing caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>60</sup>

Headley travelled with ease between the United States, Pakistan, and India and reportedly received specialized frogman training from members of the Pakistani Navy, which allegedly supports LeT. Headley also maintained contact with al-Qaeda operatives in North Waziristan. The revelation of these facts following his arrest in October, 2009 cast Headley as a capable and formidable operative. Experts suggest that others seeking to emulate the ‘James Bond super-spy’ lifestyle which Headley lived may prompt other potential foreign fighters to go abroad in search of adventure in the name of jihad.



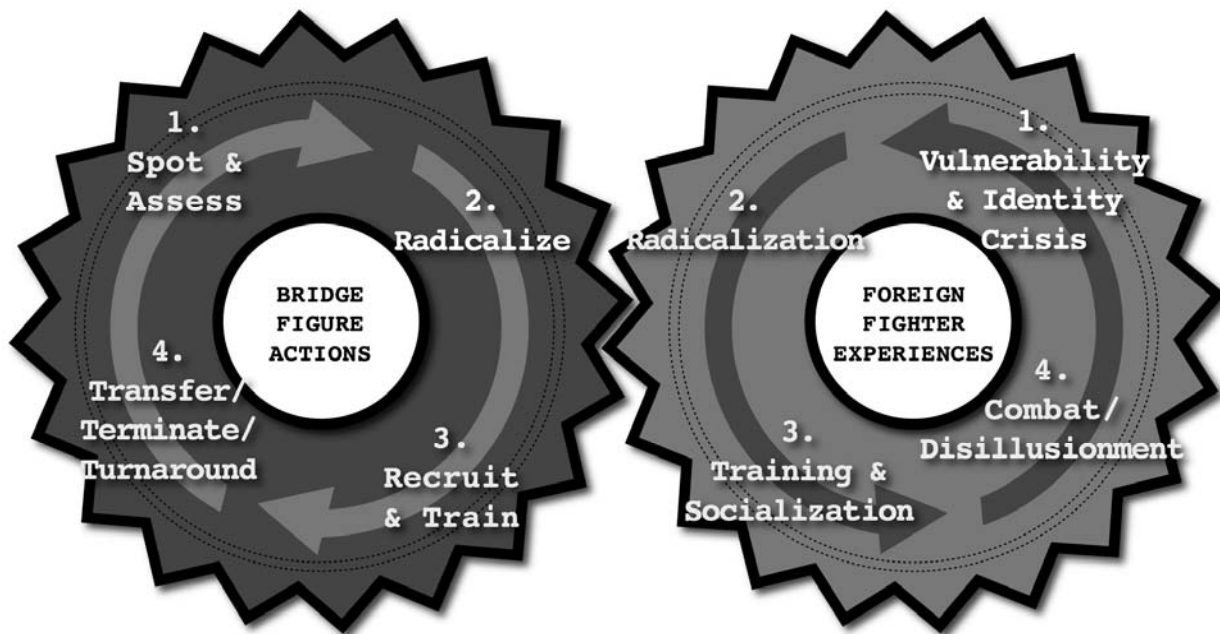
*David Coleman Headley*

The case of the 20 Somali men who left their homes in Minneapolis, Minnesota and travelled to Somalia with the intent to join al-Shabaab represents the largest group of American citizens yet who have attempted to engage in foreign fighter activity.

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60 Johnson, Carrie. 2010. “[U.S. citizen David Coleman Headley admits role in Mumbai attacks](#).” Washington, DC; *The Washington Post*

FIGURE 1: MANUFACTURING A FOREIGN FIGHTER – AN ACTION-EXPERIENCE RELATIONSHIP



Officials assert that this fact alone acts as a powerful motivator for other likeminded youth.

These Somalis, some of whom have reportedly been killed in the fighting, have the ability to resonate within diaspora communities like the one in Minneapolis. Officials worry that other at-risk populations will draw parallels between themselves and these men; identifying common denominators such as social pressures, economic hardship, demographic divides, and a similar psychological landscape. There exists a real risk that others seeking to assuage social pressures and serve a greater cause will follow in the men's footsteps and become active fighters. In August 2010, in helping close down this network and end recruitment from this community, the US Department of Justice brought nineteen indictments against individuals accused of supporting the provision of foreign fighters to al-Shabaab.<sup>61</sup>

Just as perceived success fuels additional attempts, failure too offers potential motivators and breeds follow-on efforts by others.

The recent unsuccessful attempt by Zachary Adam Chesser to travel to Somalia and join al-Shabaab showcases some of the effects of failure. Chesser, who chose to go by the name Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee, acted as a jihadi 'cheerleader' maintaining an extensive online footprint through Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and website profiles. Through these mediums he engaged in open debate, including an exchange about jihadism with Jarrett Brachman, a former Director of Research at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center. Chesser's arrest has called attention to his actions and makes him an example to at-risk populations, similar to jihadist rockstars.

Because figures like Chesser lack the operational experience which accords significant legitimacy, their impact, relative to rockstars and bridge figures is limited. Nonetheless, their exploits present a

<sup>61</sup>Office of Public Affairs. 2010. "[Fourteen Charged with Providing Material Support to Somalia-Based Terrorist Organization Al-Shabaab.](#)" Press Release. Washington, DC; US Department of Justice. New York, NY; FOX News. Pantucci, Raffaello. 2009. "[American Jihad: New Details Emerge About al-Shabaab](#)

[Recruitment in North America.](#)" Washington, DC; The Jamestown Foundation

danger and serve to fuel the foreign fighter phenomenon.

Another failed operational attempt is found in the case of five Virginian men who travelled to Pakistan with the intent to engage in jihad. Although the men, American citizens ages 19 to 25, were arrested by Pakistani officials after making contact with LeT and the Pakistani militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad – they never engaged in any foreign fighter activity.

Like Chesser, however, their arrest brought to light their efforts at jihad. The publicity surrounding the case risks their actions being perceived as noble attempts to support a worthy cause. Regardless of whether or not the men engaged in violent activity abroad, the perception of their intention to do so provides legitimacy and rhetorical credence to bridge figures and propagandists who can use it to fuel the cycle of radicalization.



*Zachary Adam Chesser*

The failures of Chesser, the Virginia five, and others have raised the issue of an implicit test presented to potential foreign fighters. Those who attempt to travel to jihadi conflict zones must exercise the operational security necessary to pass undetected.

The achievement of this level of operational awareness acts as a vetting process. Those who fail to pass undetected by security services or police are considered a threat to operational integrity of the jihadi network and will likely be turned away.

Individuals that trip security alarms do not proceed far enough to successfully enter into the jihadi theatre of conflict and make physical contact with the organization or they are interdicted along the

way by law enforcement or intelligence officials – as was the case with Shaker Masri. As a result, only minimally savvy recruits realize the opportunity to become foreign fighters.

The question of foreign fighters' ultimate intention is an area which requires further study. Variations in cases and a lack of statistical data make deducing patterns difficult. It remains unclear whether foreign fighters travel to jihadist theatres of conflict with the intent to engage in indigenous operations or to acquire training, operational experience, or some combination thereof and then return to their homes to engage in hostilities. Moreover, little is known about the precise inner processes of training foreign fighters while abroad, specifically the final phase of indoctrination which completes the process of radicalization. As a result, it is not clear whether recruits alter their original intentions to engage in local operations upon completing training and instead return home at the behest of leaders to commit violent acts. As a result, it remains unclear how best to detect, deter, and defend against the danger presented by foreign fighters.

### **Foreign Fighter Veterans**

Returning foreign fighters are an issue of great concern to law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

Still, the issue demands closer examination. Too little is known about their effect on domestic populations. In addition, opportunities to use them to the advantage of security services, or to distill lessons for protecting at-risk populations go unrealized.

No definitive profile of returnee fighters has been created. Among the profiles that have been produced, wide variations persist making substantive conclusions elusive.

Some officials contend that foreign fighters who return home following operations, or attempted travel, are likely to be disillusioned and weary. As a result, they argue, it cannot be assumed that

returning fighters will be active in radicalization and recruitment efforts.

Yet, regardless of whether or not such individuals are active, their mere presence in the community is seen as a powerful motivating factor for at-risk populations.

Veteran fighters who are active in facilitating foreign fighters play a predominant role. Their credibility and charisma is a product of their exploits (real or invented). Stories of their time abroad serve to bolster their appeal and notoriety. Such tales also legitimize and promote perceptions of the jihadi struggle.

In fact, Germany's Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst* or BND) and other intelligence services within EU warned that returnees have often a tremendous reputation with uncritical and unconditional support from those with whom they come into contact.

Developments in the Balkans are a major cause of security concern. There are signs of a rekindled theatre where old foreign fighters (veterans from within the 7<sup>th</sup> Muslim brigade in the Bosnian army who decided to remain locally), are mixing with a pool of returning fighters who have been to the FATA region for training. Recently Macedonian officials warned they are monitoring "up to 50 al-Qaeda volunteers recruited to fight in Afghanistan."<sup>62</sup> Additionally there is a parallel concern over expansion of Wahhabi and Salafist factions funded by Saudi organisations.

## RADICALIZATION

In recent years, there has been a significant amount of research on radicalization, including work done by the RAND Corporation and the New York Police

Department.<sup>63</sup> MI5's behavioural science unit trawled through hundreds of cases in the UK and found that there were strikingly different radicalization trajectories. What united these different cases was that most individuals had some vulnerability in their background that made them receptive to extremist ideology and that it was always influenced and driven by contacts with others.<sup>64</sup>

While drawing firm causal conclusions based on clear evidence remains a challenge, it is nonetheless possible to sketch a rudimentary radicalization profile of foreign fighters, both in terms of why they travel and the potential implications of this travel on their decision making.

A kaleidoscope of factors, much like vectors, pushes individuals towards radicalization and enables their recruitment. Dutch research has shown that three aspects play an important role in radicalization processes: the individual process, the interpersonal dynamic and the effect of circumstance.<sup>65</sup> Research into radicalization processes in Europe have underscored the interplay between individual psychological disposition; social factors; political factors; ideological and religious dimensions; cultural identity; traumatic experience and other triggering factors; and ultimately group dynamics (being the real radicalization 'engine').<sup>66</sup>

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63 Hoffman, Bruce, William Rosenau, Andrew Curiel, and Doron Zimmerman. 2007. ["The Radicalization of Diasporas and Terrorism."](#) Santa Monica, CA: RAND. Silber, Mitchell, and Arvin Bhatt. 2007. ["Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat."](#) New York, NY: The New York Police Department Intelligence Division

64 This MI5 report is extensively referred to in: Travis, Alan. 2008. ["The Making of an Extremist."](#) London, UK; *The Guardian*

65 Meah, Yousiff and Colin Mellis. 2008. *Final Report - EU Project Recognising Radicalisation (RECORA)*. Paris, FR; European Forum for Urban Safety

66 2010. *Understanding Violent Radicalisation*. Magnus Ranstorp (ed). London, UK; Routledge

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62 Pancevski, Bojan. 2010. ["Saudis fund Balkan Muslims spreading hate of the West."](#) London, UK; *The Sunday Times*

Profiles of foreign fighters highlight cultural identity confusion and conflict at the core, combined with a superficial religious knowledge and political naivety and other factors influenced by individual circumstance. Conspiracy theory belief is another common characteristic of foreign fighters. Attraction to convenient narratives centred on victimization over an actual desire for seeking truth is indicative of an unquestioning character. It is important to distinguish actual belief in an extremist narrative over support for a conspiracy narrative purely as provocation or sympathy to a cause. Individuals taking part in foreign fighter training are often only inspired to take part in action unlinked to a deeper purpose of exploring the ideology, although the ideological and social component of “jihadi culture” should not be dismissed as motivating factors.<sup>67</sup>

Boredom, intergenerational tensions leading to rebellion against parents and local community, individual search for greater meaning in life, perceived adventure, attempts to impress the local community or the opposite sex, desire for increased credibility amongst peers and local community granted by foreign fighters’ experience, desire to ‘belong’ and peer acceptance, revenge, misguided conflict experience expectations, and promise of marriage within conflict area, are all recognized drivers of radicalization, though not all occur in every instance.

Strong personal or family links to jihadist conflict theatres increases individual or community vulnerability to radicalization. Personal connections to conflict areas serve both to emotionalize reported developments and act as a strong guide for selecting a jihadist conflict zone in which to fight.

The role such connections play is illustrated by the success al-Shabaab has enjoyed in recruiting individuals from the area around Minneapolis. A

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67 Cozzens, Jeffrey B. 2009. “The Culture of Global Jihad: Character, Future Challenges and Recommendations.” *Future Actions Series*. London, UK; International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation

number of US residents, including Shirwa Ahmed – the first US suicide bomber (in modern times) – have been recruited to fight in Somalia. Others have become willing to provide a US based network to support such efforts. Amina Ali, Hawo Hassan, Mohamud Said Omar, Abdiweli Isse, and Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax have been identified by the US Department of Justice as providing funds and encouragement to potential recruits.<sup>68</sup>

Individuals in vulnerable periods of their lives are at most risk from radicalization if these periods correspond with meeting charismatic or extremist personalities that can adopt a leadership role in the individual’s life.<sup>69</sup> In some cases, Somali communities in the EU are vulnerable to social pressures exercised within the community with threats of retribution against relatives in Somalia as the ultimate sanction.

Investigated domestic cases of foreign fighter activities have included a direct or indirect foreign link, such as Internet-based propaganda or support information that has influenced foreign fighters’ decision making within the host nation.

### Travel and radicalization

Beyond examining the dynamic and varied profiles of those who become foreign fighters, it is of equal if not greater importance to international security to

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68 2010. “[Al Shabaab’s American Recruits: Introduction](#).” New York, NY; Anti-Defamation League. Office of Public Affairs. 2010. “[Fourteen Charged with Providing Material Support to Somalia-Based Terrorist Organization Al-Shabaab](#).” Press Release. Washington, DC; US Department of Justice. Associated Press. 2010. “[Netherlands terror Suspect Fights U.S. Extradition](#).” New York, NY; FOX News. Cilluffo, Frank J. and Daniel Kimmage. 2009. “[How to Beat al Qaeda at Its Own Game](#).” Website. Washington, DC; *Foreign Policy*. Pantucci, Raffaello. 2009. “[American Jihad: New Details Emerge About al-Shabaab Recruitment in North America](#).” Washington, DC; The Jamestown Foundation

69 Weine, Stevan, John Horgan, Cheryl Robertson, Sana Loue, Amin Mohamed, Sahra Noor. 2010. “[Combating the Radicalization of U.S. Somali Refugee Youth: A Psychosocial Perspective on Counterterrorism](#).” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*. London, UK; Routledge

examine the impact that travel itself has on the radicalization process.

First, travel from the West to a ‘zone of jihad’ for combat or training results from and contributes to the establishment of the *ghazi* (‘raider’ or ‘warrior’) archetype—a concept that looms large in the backdrop of contemporary jihadi ‘pop culture’. The British militant behind the infamous “Gas Limos” plot, Dhiren Barot, wrote, “Simply interacting with *ghazis*...can help to alter one’s outlook and influence oneself to procure a taste for this noble path in their blood, making it akin to their nature.”<sup>70</sup>

*Ghazis*, who emigrate from the comforts of Western life on *ribat*—that is, in defence of Islam and its borders—follow in the footsteps of their predecessor *mujahideen* and continue a generational migratory pattern that began with Abdullah Assam and his contemporaries in the late 1970’s. Fulfilling their perceived obligation to ‘lift the siege’ on Islam in the face of overwhelming Western military power, and now, increasingly exchanging the keyboard for the assault rifle or suicide vest, *ghazis* exemplify to star-struck aspiring fighters<sup>71</sup> supreme dedication, obedience to God and transformational action when the rest of the *ummah* is accused of slumber.<sup>72</sup> Given the light-speed qualities of online martyr biographies and footage from the front, the power of *ghazis* to inspire other Western militants cannot be overstated.<sup>73</sup> This ‘rock star’ factor leads to a cyclical dynamic, where new recruits are often inspired by the mere presence of returnee foreign fighters in

their community and desire the same community adoration.

Second, travel for training or combat also provides a catalyst within the radicalization process. By its very nature, making the transition between an urban Western context and Pakistan’s FATA, for instance, is a rite of passage—a liminal process wherein identities are stripped down, interaction with fellow *mujahideen* takes place (supposedly) on an equal footing, and ideas about what one can and should do are reformulated. Given the overall power of this experience, including the socialization with jihadi networks involved in facilitating travel, training, or combat, and the potential impact of these activities on Western extremists—especially those ‘lucky’ enough to make it to the combat zones—preconceived ideas about front-lines and legitimate targets can shift quickly. In other words, like the 7/7 bombers, who originally seemed intent on fighting in Afghanistan, a week spent praying in the ranks of *mujahideen* and listening to hardcore global jihadis discuss *dar al-harb* (the ‘abode of war’) theory can shift the focus of fighting back to Europe, even if this was not the travellers’ original intent. Such is the often-overlooked impact of entering into jihadi battlefield culture.

The explanation for the apparent contrast between large numbers of available extremists and the small number of individuals who become active foreign fighters appears to be due to a set of inhibiting factors: including, a lack of individual determination to act beyond rhetoric, individual shortcomings, or simply a lack of opportunity or resources.

The potential for an expansion in the scale of current foreign fighters does exist, if jihadist networks can discover new ways to reduce the impact of such inhibiting factors.

The case of German recruits is instructive to the complexity of these issues. As Yassin Musharbash, a veteran terrorist reporter with *Der Spiegel* has observed, the German recruits have revealed two insights: firstly, while it was easy to convince recruits through appealing recruitment videos, it seems

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70 al-Hindi, Esa. 1999. *The Army of Madinah in Kashmir*. Birmingham, UK; Maktabah Al Ansaar Publications. p. 124.

71 For more on the impact of these “heroes” within the global jihadi trend, see: Yousafzai, Sami and Ron Moreau. 2010. “[Inside Al Qaeda](#).” New York, NY; *Newsweek*

72 The essay of Sayf-ad-Din Al-Ansari (no title) in Majallat al-Ansar (ed.) “The real story of the raids on New York and Washington” in *Book commemorates September 11 'raid'*.

73 Yousafzai, Sami and Ron Moreau. 2010. “[Inside Al Qaeda](#).” New York, NY; *Newsweek*



these bonds are not firmly cemented by the experience in situ. “At least two alleged fighters have tried or succeeded in leaving their militant groups, many more are believed by authorities to be disappointed by the circumstances they met.” Secondly, there appears to be no “typical foreign fighter identity. While most of them are either German converts or re-born Muslims with a Turkish background, they also include radicals with an Eastern European, Kurdish, Arab, Iranian Shiite background – in addition to the fact that quite a few of them chose to travel together with their wives and even children. The only common denominator seems to be a relatively homogenous age structure: few are younger than 20 or older than 30 years of age.”<sup>74</sup>

### Recent Findings

In an attempt to identify patterns of key drivers of radicalization, the United Kingdom’s Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) conducted a study identifying extremist hotspots in the UK. The report, which focused on 20 regional areas, provided useful information on the limitations of current knowledge. Furthermore, it reinforced existing beliefs regarding the importance of bridge figures.

A key finding of the study was this: there exists no clear pattern to explain why extremism was prevalent in some towns and not in others. In addition, there were no consistent patterns between urban density or size of the Muslim community and identified locations of extremism. Moreover, the study identified no correlation between community deprivation or employment levels and extremism.

Studies conducted in Canada found a similar pattern. Canadian cases of foreign fighters also showed no connection between urban density or poverty and higher recruitment rates of foreign fighters.

What the UK and Canadian studies did find was this: local perception of deprivation was a key factor in radicalization.

These studies and others have identified community leaders as a key factor capable of decreasing levels of extremism locally. However, charismatic extremist leadership figures were identified as a consistent element present in all studied extremist areas of concern, illustrating that community leadership is a powerful tool for both sides. Thus, charismatic extremist leadership figures are recognised as key intelligence targets and points of intervention against broader radicalisation.

### Media

The Internet and various forms of social media have played new and important roles in propagating messages of radicalism. Moreover, their ubiquity in today’s world allows bridge figures to connect to a wide range of at-risk societal subgroups.

In the past, recruitment to radical causes was a laborious process which required extensive one-on-one time. Now, the Internet and social media allow bridge figures to target and indoctrinate recruits much more quickly.

For bridge figures, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and message boards, audio recordings, DVDs, and websites, have become vital tools in the radicalization process. Often they operate hidden discussion forums inside open social forums where entry is regulated and entirely based on introductions to ensure security.

These tools provide forums through which bridge figures can relate to social subgroups in a medium that is familiar, comfortable, and understood by the target audience.

Electronic media, joined with bridge figures’ eloquence and cultural adeptness, has allowed such figures to navigate transnational boundaries, spread their message, and recruit followers much more effectively.

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74 Personal communication with Yassin Miusharbash, 23 September 2010.

Interestingly, there is a selective nature to extremist exploitation of propaganda opportunities. Many such opportunities are ignored.

A cursory search reveals a large pool of possibilities for exploitation by extremists capable of generating ‘outrage’ and gaining recruits; including, cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammad, controversial political acts such as the banning of head scarves in French secular schools, or foreign policy issues such as participation in the Iraq or Afghanistan conflicts. Potential propaganda is limitless and uncontrollable, as highlighted by recent Islamic ‘outrage’ over a single Facebook user website entry that encouraged users to post cartoons of the Islamic prophet Mohammad. The latter case led to wide scale protests and a temporary ban on Facebook.

A better understanding of why so many opportunities for ‘outrage’ are ignored, and why some succeed in capturing international attention and reaction is needed. Possibilities or answers include deliberate timing convenient to the politics of the moment or simply chance.

Radicalization from abroad is a primary and effective dynamic in which video propaganda often taken directly from a conflict zone is delivered through the Internet to vulnerable individuals inside host western nations. The power of video and Internet should not be underestimated, with trends indicating growing sophistication and quality of extremists’ multimedia skills and propaganda products. As Phil Mudd, a former senior CIA and FBI official, observed recently the velocity of radicalization is today driven as much by ideology (which was very evident in driving the 9/11 plotters) as by al-Qaeda’s deliberate efforts to strike at emotions through powerful war zone videos and imagery designed to invoke intense moral shock for mobilization purposes.

### **Current research shortcomings**

Radicalization is a key part of the foreign fighter recruitment cycle, but a better understanding of the drivers of radicalization is necessary.

A combination of limited empirical foreign fighter data and limited access to the classified data held by security services, hinders research opportunities for academia and outside experts.

Furthermore, there is a recognised danger that counter-terrorism intelligence analysts are being asked to fill anthropology and psychology research roles for which they are not trained. Outside cooperation with experts in these specialised areas is therefore necessary.

From a scientific perspective, even with full access and sharing of data, the scale of recorded foreign fighter activity limits the potential of analysis and risks incorrect conclusions. With so little data, it becomes difficult to differentiate outlying cases from true patterns. Because of the lack of evidence, extreme care is needed when forming policy recommendations.

### **FUTURE TRENDS AND SCENARIOS**

The proliferation and character of foreign fighter-linked plots in the West in 2009-2010, in combination with the trajectories of dogged—and in some cases, waxing—jihadi insurgencies in places like the FATA, Somali and Yemen, presents a sort of window for assessing the future. What is important to know about tomorrow’s foreign fighter threat to the West?

*1. An enduring threat.* The West will almost certainly contend with the threat posed by Western foreign fighters so long as Western states and their perceived surrogates are involved in military operations in majority-Muslim countries. Indeed, the narrative of foreign fighters revolves around travelling to aid co-religionists perceived to be suffering at the hands of non-Muslim forces. The phenomenon of violent Western extremists attempting to attack Western countries will therefore continue for the foreseeable future. Here the United States is as vulnerable to attack as the European theatre – hence there is common purpose

to address this challenge jointly both in tactical and strategic terms.

*2. The lesser of two evils?* Counter-radicalization efforts in Western countries are primarily geared towards preventing domestic attacks. These initiatives work hand-in-glove with a pre-existing framework from Islamic jurisprudence (*'aqd al-aman*) that proscribes attacking the non-Muslim state under which Muslims live in a “covenant” relationship. Even some jihadists share this perspective.<sup>75</sup> However, the aspiration to fight abroad in the perceived defence of Muslim lands is an aspiration that generally accrues much greater acceptance than fighting at home in segments of Western Muslim communities. Indeed, not all foreign fighters share al-Qaeda’s worldview. In fact, some Islamists interviewed by the authors who are presently enlisted by Western states to bolster domestic counter-radicalization efforts will not disavow the “legitimate” obligation to “liberate” and “defend” Muslims in foreign conflicts. This showcases the difficulties inherent in a one-size-fits-all approach to counter-radicalization in an age of jihadi insurgency against the perceived sources of Muslim “oppression.” As noted in Point 2 (above), foreign fighters will find legitimacy so long as the narrative of victimization is alive—despite apparent success in Western counter-radicalization programs. This is a “wicked” problem that will endure for the foreseeable future.

*3. The price of success in the FATA.* While Western forces are successfully pressuring ‘core’ hierarchical networks associated with al-Qaeda in the FATA, the resultant atomization of these factions due to various hardships creates other challenges. First, foreign fighters will be displaced to other jihadi conflict zones, fomenting additional instability in places like Somalia and Yemen. Their presence lends both legitimacy and operational capacity to jihadis

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75 al-Tartousi, Abu Baseer. (accessed 27 July 2008). “[Covenants and Security in Islam](#).” Website. Muhammad, Omar Bakri. 2004. *The World is Divided into Two Camps*. London, UK; Ad-D’awah Publications. pp 67-70

fighting regimes in these areas, raising the spectre of future platforms for plotting against the West. Second, Western foreign fighters will find travel to the FATA increasingly challenging, raising the possibility that they will choose to strike at home rather than risk travel. Third, given that mass casualty plots against the West such as the 9/11 attacks require operational space, time and usually, considerable training to develop—assets that are likely in short supply for Al Qaeda in the FATA—the trend for plots against the West emanating from that region will be smaller in scale, simpler in design, and increasing in frequency. Western foreign fighters will therefore be in increasing demand to stage such attacks, given their greater mobility (owing to their Western documents, and in the case of converts, appearance), familiarity with targeted areas and their knowledge of the cultural and linguistic dimensions of their operating environment.

*4. The Madrid effect.* There is a looming danger that re-directed Western foreign fighters could again foment the “Madrid effect” in a Western nation—the process by which a catalytic terrorist attack directly influences, or is perceived to directly influence, a Western nation’s election and subsequent foreign policy. This happened in Madrid in 2003. It has been an issue with the German contingent in ISAF – vulnerable to pressures and threats in order to pull out of the coalition. As such, there were pressures around the German elections similar to that which occurred in Spain.

The failure of jihadis to secure the upper hand in insurgent theatres plus the widely discussed cascading effects of the 2003 attacks in Spain risks inspiring (along with other stimuli) a refocus of foreign fighter (many are currently fighting overseas) targeting and operations back to their Western nations of residence. Indeed, Ayman al-Zawahiri’s original strategic paradigm for al-Qaeda—striking the West to undermine regional regimes—was developed after observing floundering and ineffective jihadi insurgencies in the majority-Muslim world. The recent Times Square bombing attempt

by an individual trained in Pakistan, supported by Taliban-associated planners and funders may be an early indicator of the re-emergence of the Madrid effect, as might some of the other plots associated with al-Aulaqi's inspiration. For now, most discussion of Western foreign fighters centers on their actions "over there"; the danger is that the discussion might shift strategically to their actions "over here."

## ADVERSARY VULNERABILITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Though the primary intent of this paper is to discuss the threat posed by foreign fighters and to chart the future trajectory of the phenomenon, a few brief comments on the vulnerabilities of the foreign fighter networks are in order.

First, though foreign fighter returnees pose a significant radicalization threat in addition to an operational threat, Western governments are not doing enough to highlight the disillusioned returnee foreign fighters. These fighters represent a potential counter propaganda resource. Their story needs to be relayed loudly and publicly in host nations.

Second, Western security services should not overlook opportunities to infiltrate jihadist networks wherever and whenever these jihadist networks rely upon (or simply allow) foreign fighter groups to train and fight alongside their own members. This should be done to undermine and erode trust and foster suspicion among members of jihadist networks.

Third, Western governments might also consider finding ways to advertise the lack of operational impact foreign fighters have had in jihadist conflict zones. Such might be a way to increase the number of individuals who, despite holding extremist views, elect not to act upon those views.

Fourth, Western governments should invest in voluntary testimonies from former al-Qaeda recruits about the harsh realities of life in the training camps. These testimonies should be broadcast in the media with a focus to de-romanticize the notions of glory

and expectations of a triumphant welcome reception. As testified by Walid Othmani, a French recruit to Waziristan, "what you see in videos on the Net, we realized that was a lie...[our chief] told us the videos . . . served to impress the enemy and incite people to come fight, and he knew this was a scam and propaganda."<sup>76</sup>

Fifth, Western security services should consider paying close attention to how jihadist networks utilize homogenous groups of foreign fighters. If jihadists consistently use such groups for missions into third-party countries and on missions having a low probability of success, it would present an opportunity for Western security services to exploit differences between the jihadist networks and the foreign fighters.

Sixth, backlash reactions within communities when one of their own commits atrocities against innocent civilians—especially other Muslims—can provide openings for authorities to support vulnerable communities and improve relations. A case in point is the 24-year old Somali-Dane who carried out a suicide bombing in a Mogadishu hotel during a graduation ceremony in early December 2009, killing 24 people including three Somali government ministers. This 'overkill' created a backlash against al-Shabaab recruitment in Denmark and neighboring states. It also creates positive atmospherics to establish trust between minority communities and authorities and increased willingness to support vulnerable individuals from falling prey to recruiters.

Seventh, from a legislative perspective, all 27 EU states should adopt the EU Framework decision on terrorism incitement, training and recruitment into their national legislation and where possible implement appropriate legal measures to vigorously prosecute individuals violating this legislation. Often some EU states wait and observe illicit flows – such as terrorism financing efforts – and do not intervene as a matter of urgency as the security problem is not

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<sup>76</sup> Rotella, Sebastian. 2009. "[Al-Qaeda recruits back in Europe, but why?](#)" Los Angeles, CA; *Los Angeles Times*

directed at them. This needs to change. EU states must do more to prosecute not just acts of terrorism – but incitement and support for such as well.

Finally, there may be patterns that emerge from tracking common failures—specifically where most individuals fall off the foreign fighter recruitment cycle. If such were done across Western countries for all of the jihadist conflict zones, it might reveal actionable information for where future resources might be best employed.

## CONCLUSIONS

The legacy of foreign fighter veterans returning to host nations is the key danger of the foreign fighter phenomenon. Bridge figures and jihadi veterans are also of concern, because they are major catalysts in the transformation and radicalization of individuals into foreign fighters, including those that threaten Western nation states. Foreign fighter socialization within extremist facilitation and combat networks is also worrisome for its explosive potential, in the event these turn their sights on the West, as is the even rudimentary operational education some of these individuals receive abroad. Foreign fighters comprise a complex, systemic global threat that needs to be more comprehensively apprehended and appreciated and more aggressively researched. To this end we offer the following concluding observations and suggestions:

1. Academic research on Western foreign fighters offers tremendous strategic value to Western intelligence agencies. Western security services require a better understanding of the foreign fighter threat both at the tactical and strategic levels. The security services do not have an adequate grasp of the “value-added” of foreign fighters in particular theatres, nor do they yet know the ceiling for strategic scalability. Such research should be initiated internationally and across disciplines and should be vigorously supported.

Key themes identified for future research on foreign fighters include:

Why do individuals choose to fight abroad? What are the tipping points?

Is foreign fighter intention shaped by emotive incidents such as the Red Mosque incident or prophet Mohammad cartoons? And to what degree?

How can Western law enforcement and intelligence services effectively harness and employ the negative (rather than glamorous) stories of foreign fighters who found their experiences abroad to be less than ideal? It seems these experiences might serve as vital weapons in the fight to erode the culture of jihadi activism at the community level in the Western context.

Capability and opportunity also remain key foreign fighter dynamics. Facilitation networks and funding pipelines are therefore two very important factors on which Western intelligence services should focus.

2. Although the paper intentionally avoided a lengthy discussion on radicalization, this is an important component affecting both the “recruiting” and “joining” processes inherent to the foreign fighter cycle. True, factors driving radicalisation may be at risk of over-analysis. Some argue that both the ideological and psychological dimensions, for example, are accorded too much weight. However, it is evident that these factors and many others apply as radicalization catalysts, and should be thoroughly examined as they apply to the decision-making of Western foreign fighters. Indeed, drivers include a mixture of social, generational, and ideological dynamics that demand comprehensive analysis by a range of experts. Extensive evidence-based transatlantic research is necessary to identify potential universal factors or patterns of contrast along the radicalization continuum across host nations and communities. Committed multiyear research efforts of this phenomenon will also afford a strategic perspective that only time and extensive data gathering can produce. Theory and best guesses on the drivers and impact of foreign fighter radicalization and operational patterns need to be grounded in social scientific methods.

3. We need to better understand the tactical foreign fighter threat as well as the strategic consequences of currently limited levels of foreign fighter activity in the West. In other words, why do few of these individuals represent a kinetic problem when they return, what are they doing now, and what does this data suggest? What prompted these individuals to disengage from violence upon their return home? Further, how do Western foreign fighters make use of and publicize their experiences and operational learning acquired overseas? When and where do they share this material and why? The findings will likely have important implications for counter-radicalization initiatives, especially at the community level, and will also further our understanding of the potential severity of the threat.

4. The number and impact of Western foreign fighters is limited, but remains essential to wider jihadist movements and propaganda. A significant but undetermined number of these individuals are converts, many of whom proceed directly to violent extremism, as opposed to expressions of “mainstream” Sunni Islam. These are extremely useful as props in the global jihadis’ propaganda war. Other converts such as al-Faisal are significant bridge figures that dramatically impact the radicalization process.

5. The legacy of accomplished and well-connected foreign fighter veterans returning to host nations is

considered the key danger and challenge of the current foreign fighter phenomenon. *Ghazis* often bring charisma, a near-mythic status and sometimes, operational know-how to Western extremist milieus. They impact the radicalization process significantly, and are boons to the development of plots against Western states. Fortunately, there do not appear to be too many of these individuals who make it back to the West (for a variety of reasons), but this dimension of the threat is exceedingly difficult to quantify and cannot be overlooked.

6. There is no single pathway to becoming a Foreign Fighter, nor is there a static profile of the fighters themselves. Ideology, social circumstances, adventure-seeking, political grievances, and so on, all appear to impact individuals’ choices in this regard. Foreign fighters’ socio-economic circumstances also appear to be highly variable while not altogether unimportant to understanding why and how foreign fighters make the choices they do. Plugging these variables into a social movement theory approach might yield interesting insights with respect to foreign fighter decision-making.



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