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FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE? AN ASSESSMENT OF THE POTENTIAL THREATS OF WESTERNERS FIGHTING AGAINST ISIS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

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PhD in History, Studies of Security and Defense

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Resumo

Desde o início da Guerra Civil Síria em 2011, mais de quarenta mil combatentes estrangeiros de diferentes partes do mundo fizeram seu caminho para a Síria e o Iraque para se juntar a vários grupos armados. Existem três grupos principais de combatentes estrangeiros: em primeiro lugar, combatentes estrangeiros pró-ISIS que estão associados a grupos jihadistas como o Estado Islâmico no Iraque e a Síria (ISIS); em segundo lugar, combatentes xiitas pró-regime que são filiados ao governo Assad; e, finalmente, combatentes estrangeiros ocidentais anti-ISIS, lutando com grupos curdos e cristãos contra o ISIS e outros grupos jihadistas na Síria e no Iraque.

O nível de radicalização e uso de violência dos combatentes estrangeiros ocidentais anti-ISIS aumentou significativamente nos campos de batalha sírio-iraquianos. Eles se engajaram ativamente no uso de armas de fogo, explosivos, táticas urbanas e guerrilhas. Eles construíram conexões e redes extremistas transnacionais para incitar e recrutar indivíduos com ideias semelhantes. Alguns combatentes estrangeiros ocidentais anti-ISIS de orientação política fundaram seus próprios grupos armados na Síria. Alguns participaram da preparação para ações terroristas após retornarem a seus países de origem. Este estudo, portanto, analisou os perfis de combatentes estrangeiros ocidentais anti-ISIS, avaliou ameaças potenciais que eles podem representar e concluiu que os combatentes estrangeiros ocidentais anti-ISIS extremistas de extrema esquerda e os grupos armados aos quais estão filiados são uma ameaça séria para seus países de origem e segurança internacional porque têm a capacidade e a intenção de realizar atos terroristas.

O número crescente de ataques terroristas recentes no Ocidente levou organizações internacionais e países a desenvolver políticas para enfrentar a ameaça representada por combatentes estrangeiros. Muitos países ocidentais, entretanto, não trataram os combatentes estrangeiros ocidentais anti-ISIS como seus homólogos pró-ISIS. Portanto, é necessária uma política abrangente contra os combatentes estrangeiros ocidentais anti-ISIS. Nesta política, todas as medidas tomadas para a prevenção, acusação e reintegração de combatentes estrangeiros ocidentais pró-ISIS também devem ser aplicadas aos combatentes estrangeiros ocidentais anti-ISIS.

Palavras-chave: ISIS, Combatentes Estrangeiros Ocidentais Anti-ISIS, Radicalização, Segurança Internacional

Abstract

Since the Syrian Civil War started in 2011, over forty thousand foreign fighters from different parts of the world have made their way to Syria and Iraq to join various armed groups. There are three main groups of foreign fighters: firstly, pro-ISIS foreign fighters who are associated with jihadist groups like Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); secondly, pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters who are affiliated with the Assad government; and finally, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, fighting with Kurdish and Christian groups against ISIS and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq.

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters' level of radicalization and use of violence have significantly increased in Syrian-Iraqi battlefields. They have actively engaged in use of firearms, explosives, urban tactics and guerrilla warfare. They have built transnational extremist connections and networks to incite and recruit like-minded individuals. Some politically oriented extremist anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have founded their own armed groups in Syria. Some have participated in preparation for terrorist actions after returning to their home countries. This study, thus, analyzed the profiles of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, assessed potential threats that they might pose and concluded that far-left extremist anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and the armed groups that they are affiliated are a serious threat to their countries of origin and international security because they have the capability and intent to conduct terrorist acts.

The increasing number of recent terrorist attacks in the West has led international organizations and countries to develop policies to tackle the threat posed by foreign fighters. Many Western countries, however, have not treated anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters like their pro-ISIS counterparts. Therefore, a comprehensive policy against anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters is required. This dissertation, on this account, presented recommendations on how international organizations and Western governments should manage the issue of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

Keywords: ISIS, Anti-ISIS Western Foreign Fighters, Radicalization, International Security.

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Glossary of Acronyms

A

AD – Action Directe (Direct Action)

AFFA – Antifascist Forces in Afrin

AGIA – Apoist Youth Initiative Europe

AMO – American Mesopotamian Organization

ANTIFA – International Antifascist Battalion or Antifascist Internationalist Tabur

API – Advance Passenger Information

AQ – Al-Qaeda

AQAP – Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

AQI – Al-Qaeda in Iraq

ARGK – Artêşa Rizgariye Gêle Kurdistan (People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan)

ASALA – Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia

B

BCB – Bob Crow Brigade

BfV – Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution)

BÖG – Birleşik Özgürlük Güçleri (United Freedom Forces)

BR – Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades)

C

CCC – Communist Combat Cells

CDU – Christian Democratic Union

CET – Canadian Extremist Traveler

CTA – Centre for Terror Analysis

CVE – Countering Violent Extremism

D

DAESH – Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi l-Iraq wa-sh-Sham (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)

DHKP-C – Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front

E

ETA – Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty)

EU – European Union

F

FARC – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

FAS – Anti-System Front

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

FRAME – Foreigner Registration, Assessment, Management and Extraction

FSA – Free Syrian Army

FTF – Foreign Terrorist Fighters

G

GIFCT – Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism

H

HAD – Humanitarian Defense Abroad

HPG – Hêzên Parastina Gel (People's Defense Force)

HQ – Headquarters

HVE – Homegrown Violent Extremist

I

ICCT – International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague

ICSR – International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence

IED – Improvised Explosive Device

IFB – International Freedom Battalion

IID – Improvised Incendiary Devices

IPV – International Peshmerga Volunteers

IRA – Irish Republican Army

IRGC – Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

IRPGF – International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces

IS – Islamic State

ISD – Institute for Strategic Dialogue

ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

K

KADEK – Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress

KCK – Koma Civakên Kurdistan (Kurdish Communities Union)

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê)

KKK – Koma Komelên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Confederation of Communities)

KNC – Kurdish National Council

KONGRA-GEL – Kurdistan People's Congress

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

M

MLKP – Marksist-Leninist Komünist Partisi (Marxist–Leninist Communist Party)

MSF – Syriac Military Council

N

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

NPU – Nineveh Plain Protection Units

P

PAK – Parti Azadi Kurdistan (Kurdistan Freedom Party)

PCDK – Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party

PFLP – Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

PJAK – Kurdistan Free Life Party

PKK – Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)

PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê)

PYD – Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)

R

RAF – Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Faction)

RAM – Rise Above Movement

RAN – Radicalisation Awareness Network

RUIS – Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity

S

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces

SOLI – Sons of Liberty International

SPD – Social Democratic Party

START – National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

T

TEO – Temporary Exclusion Order

TE-SAT – Terrorism Situation and Trend Report

TEV-DEM – Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk (Movement for a Democratic Society)

TKEP/L – Türkiye Komünist Emek Partisi/Leninist (Communist Labour Party of Turkey/Leninist)

TKP/ML – Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist (Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist–Leninist)

TQILA – The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army

TSG – The Soufan Group

TTPs – Tactics, Techniques and Procedures

U

UNCCT – United Nations Centre for Counter-Terrorism

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

UTGAM – International Center for Terrorism and Security Studies

Y

YDG-L – YPG/J Defense Group-London

YPG – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units)

YPJ – Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units)

Introduction

The conflict in Syria continues unabated in its tenth year. Local peaceful protests in a small city of Syria in 2011 have quickly spread out to other cities to become a countrywide war. Rebel forces, composed of hundreds of armed groups feeding from the Syria's Sunni majority, started to fight against Bashar al-Assad regime which was grounded in the Syria's Alawite minority sect. As the sectarian clashes began to grow, they started to attract more Sunni and Shiite fighters from neighboring countries. Having "started as a local political, sectarian and ethnic conflict," the Syrian Civil War became regional (Bakker & Singleton, 2016, p.10).

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (former Jabhat al-Nusra and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) in 2012 and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013 were born in such a turbulent environment. In a very short period of time, ISIS established control over a large area in Syria and Iraq. Such that, in the height of its strength, ISIS occupied nearly a third of Iraq and half of Syria (Hassan, 2017). In June 2014, ISIS declared a caliphate and called upon all the Muslims from all over the world to the territory under its control. Tens of thousands of foreign fighters from more than 100 countries responded to this invitation and flowed to the Syria–Iraq theatre. The spill-over effects of the war have exceeded the borders of the region and devolved into a global threat for international security.

In both Syria and Iraq, foreign fighters "from all continents have joined various [armed] groups and fractions on all sides of the conflict" (Bakker & Singleton, 2016, p.10). There have been three mainstream groups of foreign fighters: firstly, pro-ISIS foreign fighters who are associated with the Sunni jihadist groups such as ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Hegghammer, 2013; Byman & Shapiro, 2014; Obe & Silverman, 2014; Schmid & Tinnes 2015; Barrett, 2017); secondly, pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters who are affiliated with the Assad government (Zelin, 2013b; Byman, 2014; Heistein & West, 2015); and finally, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who are from Europe, North America and Australia and fighting with Kurdish and Christian groups against ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria and Iraq (Jaklin, 2015; Tuck et al., 2016; Orton, 2017b; Koch, 2019).

The aim of this study is to assess whether and how anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters pose a threat to their countries of origin and to international security. To that end, this dissertation 1) explores the profiles of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, 2) examines their capabilities and intents, and 3) provides policy recommendations to international organizations and Western governments.

1. Research Topic

Foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon. There have been many historical examples of conflicts involving foreign fighters. Over the course of history, the ideological background of foreign fighters "ranged from communism and left-wing activism, to Catholicism and ethno-nationalism" (Bakker & Zuijdewijn, 2015, p. 2). In recent decades, however, most of foreign fighters have gathered under the banner of jihadism in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Yemen or Somalia. Last but foremost, the advent of ISIS in 2014 have led to a flow of unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq. Such that, the term foreign fighters have become a substitute for Sunni Muslims who enrolled extreme jihadist groups including ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Bakker & Singleton, 2016).

That being said, it is of paramount importance to recognize that not all foreign fighters engaged in the conflict in Syria and Iraq are Sunni jihadists. Thousands of Shiite fighters from neighboring countries are fighting for Assad regime (Heistein & West, 2015). Moreover, Kurdish and Christian armed groups are also recruiting many Westerners to fight against ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Koch, 2019).

This dissertation assesses whether and how anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters pose a threat to international security and especially to their home countries. For this purpose, this dissertation provides background to anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, namely the Europeans and North Americans fighting in lines of Kurdish and Christian armed groups in Syria and Iraq. This study enhances the understanding of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in terms of their demographics, motives, recruitment and vetting processes as well as their role in the fight against ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. In light of the information obtained from the profile analysis, this study presents a threat assessment based on the capabilities and intents of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. What is more, this dissertation presents recommendations on how international organizations and Western governments should manage the issue of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

2. Research Questions

This study mainly aims at assessing if and how anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters pose a threat to international security and to the countries that they are originated. Based on this objective, the following research questions guide the study:

- Do anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters pose a threat to international security and/or to their countries of origin? What are their capabilities and intents?
- What are the backgrounds and motivations of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters? Are there any promoters?
- How should international organizations and Western governments manage the issue of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters? Should they set fighting against ISIS free or employ some security measures and prevention efforts or make it completely illegal?

Before the facts are laid out, the author of this dissertation has two predominant hypotheses: firstly, there are sub-groups, if not all, among anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters that present significant level of threat to their countries of origin and global security, and secondly, international organizations and Western states do not take necessary measures to deal with possible security threats that may arise from anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

3. Significance of the Dissertation

In contrast to the prevalence of literature on pro-ISIS foreign fighters, there has been a limited number of academic studies on pro-regime Shiite and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters (Tuck et al., 2016). They have never become a center of attraction for analysts and researchers (Koch, 2019). With the exception of some media articles, no significant attention has been given to these individuals.

This dissertation attempts to make three major contributions to the literature. The first is a wide-ranging understanding of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in terms of their backgrounds, motives, and the processes of their radicalization, mobilization, recruitment and vetting as well as their roles in the conflict. There is no doubt that developing deeper insights into anti-ISIS foreign fighters will contribute to the global apprehension of Western citizens' radicalization and de-radicalization courses (Koch, 2019). Moreover, this dissertation may also be beneficial for understanding separate and joint radicalization effects of extreme right and extreme left ideologies. On this subject, the Council of the European Union (2021) expresses the necessity of knowing more about "the background of present-day left-wing and anarchist violent extremists and the factors underlying their radicalisation, comparing for example factors leading to left-wing and right-wing violent radicalisation, as well as the phenomenon of reciprocal radicalization" (p. 12).

There is a large collection of available research specifically addressing the threat posed by pro-ISIS foreign fighters. Different types of threats that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may

pose, however, has yet to be studied (Tuck et al., 2016). That is why, the Council of the European Union (2021), for example, emphasizes the importance of "research into the risks associated with the non-Jihadist foreign fighter phenomenon, focusing on Europeans who have joined Kurdish militias in Syria as well as Europeans who have joined militias fighting in Ukraine" (p. 12). The second contribution of this dissertation, thus, is a threat assessment on anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. This assessment, based on the information obtained through profile analysis, presents to what extend these individuals are radicalized, physically and emotionally damaged, prone to violence and in need of psycho-social support. Furthermore, as Schuurman & Eijkman (2015) pointed out, utilizing behaviors and expressions to identify anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters' and their armed groups' intentions to commit acts of terrorism will be another contribution to the "small but growing" literature in this field.

Many governments regard the risks of returning anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters negligible, if not absent. Hegghammer (2010), however, explains that "volunteering for war is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy" (p. 53). A complex combination of factors that leads Westerners to join armed groups fighting against ISIS seems to require a tailored approach. Therefore, based on the results of the threat assessment, the third contribution of this study is a series of policy recommendations to international organizations and Western countries.

4. Methodology

This dissertation seeks to define, firstly, who anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are; secondly, explore if and how they pose a threat to their home countries and to international security; and, lastly, provide recommendations about how international organizations and Western governments should handle this issue. This study scrutinizes a theme to which less attention has been paid. This dissertation, on this account, is a qualitative study based on analysis of written and visual sources about anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

The first step was to provide a historical development process of the concepts of terrorism and radicalization supported by some examples from different terrorist groups. Additionally, the term of foreign fighters has been discussed. A background of the conflict in Syria and Iraq as well as three different groups of foreign fighters have been introduced. Four types of threat related to foreign fighters have been discussed. To this end, official documents like government reports and criminal complaints as well as newspapers and media articles have been utilized. Reports, prepared by international organizations and research centers devoted to counter-

terrorism and counter-radicalization, such as the United Nations Centre for Counter-Terrorism (UNCCT), International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Centre of Excellence and the Soufan Group (TSG), proved to be invaluable sources. State archives, however, were unfortunately unavailable due to the classification.

The second step was to trace the appearance and buildup of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in Syrian-Iraqi battlefields. Emphasis has been put on better understanding of how anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters radicalized and why they mobilized to Syria and Iraq. As Borum (2011b) stated, there have been three repositories of data extensively used in the field of radicalization: firstly, biographical information gathered from news sources, public documents, news-film footages, blogs and social media posts, secondly, semi-structured and/or open-ended interviews and thirdly, both biographical information and interviews together. In this study, demographic profiles of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters along with their backgrounds and motives have been scrutinized. To this purpose, in-depth profile studies prepared by investigative journalists and interviews of reporters with anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters that were published in the media are extensively used. Those individuals who have frequently come into view in the media have shed valuable insights about anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. These insights are further promoted by the information obtained from social media sources.

As Schmid (2013) construed, it is also important to recognize the importance of the wider milieu wherein anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters operate. “Knowledge of the background against which a terrorist threat emerges can be crucial for correctly assessing the intentions and threats posed by individuals or groups of interest” (Schuurman et al., 2018, p. 1192). Thus, after uncovering of who anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are, the third step was to take a closer look at the armed groups that they were affiliated. In addition to individual level profile analyses for anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, profiles of the main armed groups that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are associated with are also analyzed. Detailed historical background information has been presented for the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Assyrian Christian Militias such as Dwekh Nawsha and Ninevah Plains Protection Units (NPU), as these groups have attracted main bulk of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. For this purpose, the most effective social media means like Lions of Rojava and International Peshmerga Volunteers (IPV) have been examined as well.

The analysis of armed groups also provided insights for a better understanding of the social surrounding that leads to radicalization and mobilization of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and the formation of terrorist organizations. In some cases, analysis of armed groups also

showed their interactions between each other and foreign diasporas that provide human and monetary supply. In this vein, special attention has been paid to private security companies, such as the Sons of Liberty International (SOLI) and Humanitarian Defense Abroad (HDA) for their role in recruitment and training of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

Throughout these steps, official documents, media articles, weblogs and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, are used to a large extend. In the absence of any opportunity for an on-the-ground research due to the insecurity in the region, foreign fighters' shares and posts across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and other platforms provided easily accessible resources. Internet search tools like Google were used to find both western and local news, articles and interviews with foreign fighters as well as their family members, relatives and friends. It is worth noting that some Facebook groups created by anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who originate from the same country, as in the examples of Spanish "Apoyo Voluntarios Españoles contra DAESH" (Support Spanish Volunteers against DAESH) and French "Collectif des Combattantes et Combattants Francophones du Rojava" (the Collective of French-Speaking Combatants of Rojava), and the posts they make in these groups are very effective in terms of obtaining information. Use of information obtained from local actors in their own languages, such as French or Arabic, enabled gaining important primary source information that might not have been discovered otherwise.

The fourth step was to assess the extent of threat that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may pose to their home countries and to transnational security. As Meloy et al. (2011) explained, a "threat assessment is concerned almost wholly with the risk of targeted violence by a subject of concern, and has a behavioral and observational policing focus" (p. 257). Thus, the threat assessment in this study started with an evaluation of the risk presented by current and returning anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. The role of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in radicalization, motivation and training of future internal and foreign fighters has been explored. The possibility of using their expertise to perpetrate terrorist attacks in their own states or third-party countries has been analyzed.

To disclose possible indications of prospective intentions of involvement in terrorist activities in their home countries, the interviews with anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and their revelations on social media platforms were carefully assessed. According to Schuurman et al. (2018), most lone actors do not pay much attention to operational safety and secrecy. In some cases, months or even years before the attack, they reveal their intention and ability to attack in various ways. Meloy et al. (2015) named this phenomenon as "leakage" which stands for "the communication to a third party of intent to do harm to a target through an attack" (p.

216). As Schuurman and Eijkman (2015) argued, a person's intentional or unintentional acts and words might reveal his or her intention and ability to carry out a terrorist attack. Even though behaviors and especially verbal expressions shared on social media may not reveal true intentions, they can still be helpful when assessed as an accessory to each other. There are many examples of attackers, like activists and school shooters, sharing their views and thoughts on the Internet before they carry out a terrorist attack (Cohen et al., 2013).

In addition to intents, the analysis of capabilities is also a necessity in order to conduct a comprehensive threat analysis. As Schuurman et al. (2018) expressed, "an actual threat does not occur unless that motivation [intent] is matched to at least a rudimentary level of capability" (p. 1192). With the same point of view, Brynielsson et al. (2013) emphasize the difficulty of detecting terrorist acts planned by individuals using traditional policing methods. Lone wolf terrorists, for example, often act alone in the planning and execution stages of their attacks in real life. When it comes to the virtual world and especially social media environments, however, these individuals are very active in sharing their radical thoughts. This situation, thus, makes the Internet a vitally important resource for unmasking terrorist intentions. Such that, if the "weak signals" meticulously analyzed, "the actual social media content can indicate that someone is planning a terror attack" (Brynielsson et al., 2013, p. 2).

Brynielsson et al. (2013) have delineated three criteria, namely "intent", "capability" and "opportunity", to assess if someone is a potential terrorist (p. 4). They have identified 16 indicators that enable uncovering whether a person has an intention to commit a terrorist act. Among these indicators are "[being] active on radical web pages", "radical expression in postings" and "leakage" which is defined as "the communication to a third party of an intent to do harm to a target" as well as the "identification with a group or cause" (pp. 7-9). According to Meloy et al. (2015), being tempted by the "warrior mentality" and identifying with violent role models, adopting weapons, materials, and dressing styles of these role models are important potential warnings for resorting to violence.

Brynielsson et al. (2013) have also mentioned that the "behavioral markers can be used as indicators supporting that someone intends to commit a terror attack" (p. 3). In this regard, Schuurman and Eijkman (2015) argued that the "activities aimed at increasing physical fitness or at acquiring the expertise and experience necessary to carry out terrorist attacks, such as travel to overseas paramilitary training camps" are some indicators of "attack preparation" (pp. 224-225). Viewed in this way, Schuurman et al. (2018) added that activities aimed at obtaining skills and expertise, such as traveling abroad for participating in a firearms course or a military training, are crucial indicators in terms of capability development.

In light of above discussion, in this study, those anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who have 1) joined armed groups and organizations in Syria and Iraq that adopted extremely violent political views (Schuurman and Eijkman, 2015; Schuurman et al., 2018), 2) gained capabilities to perpetrate violent acts (Meloy et al., 2015; Schuurman et al., 2018), 3) actively shared their radical views on traditional or social media platforms (Brynielsson et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2013; Schuurman et al., 2018) and 4) instigated other people to inflict harm on some targets (Meloy et al., 2015) are assessed as a threat to their country of origin and international security. Examples of some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who were found to meet these threat analysis criteria are presented in appropriate sections of the study.

As the last step, current policies of international organizations and Western countries concerning foreign fighters in general and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in special have been discussed. In this setting, direct comparisons are made between pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. As Rabasa et al. (2010) expressed, "one of the most glaring gaps in the literature is the failure to examine the similarities and differences between Islamist militants and other types of extremists and then to determine the implications of these findings for the processes of disengagement and deradicalization." (p. 26). The aim, therefore, was to shape an international approach to counter the threat that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may pose. To this end, policy implications and their direct and indirect effects have been analyzed.

5. Overview of Upcoming Chapters

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. After the introduction sets the research goal and the tone to the work that is described in rest of the dissertation, Chapter 1 discusses the concepts of terrorism, radicalization and the term of foreign fighters. Chapter 1 also provides an overall background for three different groups of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq as well as four types of threats concerning these individuals.

Chapter 2 thoroughly scrutinizes anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. A general introduction of the chapter is followed by an analysis of many specific aspects of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, namely their demographics (section 2.1), their motives (section 2.2), the armed groups that they joined (section 2.3) as well as their recruitment and vetting (section 2.4), mobilization (section 2.5), training (section 2.6) and their life on the frontline (section 2.7).

Chapter 3 assesses the threat that may be posed by anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. To this end, after the necessity of such an assessment is introduced, capabilities (section 3.1) and

related threats and intents (section 3.2) of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are analyzed and the result of threat assessment have been discussed (section 3.3).

Chapter 4 analyzes current governmental policies regarding foreign fighters in general and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in special (section 4.1) and presents policy recommendations (section 4.2). Chapter 4 is followed by a conclusion.

Chapter 1 – Literature Review

This chapter provides an insight into foreign fighters. In this context, firstly, the concepts of terrorism and radicalization are presented from historical and definitional perspectives, secondly, definition of the term "foreign fighter" is discussed, then, a synopsis of the three sub-groups of foreign fighters is provided, and lastly, the four types of threat concerning foreign fighters are outlined.

1.1 – The Concepts of Terrorism and Radicalization

Terrorism has undergone a profound change to become a serious threat of the 21st century. The concept and character of terrorism have changed over the course of history with developments in technology, transportation, media and communication. Terrorism has become more sophisticated and lethal as the identity, aims and methods of those involved diversified.

A number of different groups or states in the early or medieval ages used terror in forms of coercive or punitive violence in order to achieve political gains. The Zealots of Judea, for instance, was one of the first groups to use systematic terror. Known as the Sicarii, or dagger-men, this first-century Jewish group murdered or kidnapped Romans and their Jews collaborators in order to engender a mass revolt against Roman occupation forces in Judea (D'alessio & Stolzenberg, 1990). As another example, the Hashhashin, a breakaway faction of Shia Islam known also as Ismailis-Nizari, "seriously threatened the governments of several states, especially those of the Turkish Seljuk Empire in Persia and Syria" (Rapoport, 1983, p. 664) for almost two centuries between 1090 and 1275. The "assassination became the symbol and the most common modus operandi" (Oehmichen, 2009, p. 46) of the Hashhashin that their name gave way to the English word "assassin".

The words "terrorism" and "terrorist" were used in 1795, for the first time, to describe the Jacobin Reign of Terror initiated by the Revolutionary Government in France. "The *Académie française* dictionary in 1798 defined *terrorisme* as a 'system, or regime of terror' and *terroriste* as 'an agent or partisan of the Terror that arose through the abuse of revolutionary measures" (Rapport, 2015, p. 63). Put differently, "the term 'terrorism', when it first appeared in European languages, referred in fact to state terrorism rather than terrorism against the state" (Oehmichen, 2009, p. 46). The French Revolution provided a preliminary example of dictatorial governments' using terrorism as "the systematic inducement of fear and anxiety to control and direct a civilian population" (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 380) to establish a democratic order.

Nearly a century after the French Revolution, in late 1870s, small revolutionary groups seeking a radical transformation of society began to emerge. Narodnaya Volya, also known as The People's Will, was the first terror rebel movement to be formed in Russia in 1879. Trying to overturn the autocratic regime of the Tsars, Narodnaya Volya adopted terrorism as a necessary tool to "raise the consciousness of the masses" (Rapoport, 2001, p. 420) and turned to "the targeted killing of the leaders of oppression" (Roberts, 2002, para. 1). Narodnaya Volya, in furtherance of its aims, selected the tsar, popular royal family members and senior officials of the government as victims due to the political and/or emotional effects that their deaths would produce (Hoffman, 2006). Narodnaya Volya, after several unsuccessful attempts, assassinated Tsar Alexander II with a suicide-bombing in St. Petersburg in 1881.

The killing of the Tsar Alexander II reinforced the belief that terrorism can leverage revolution (Gamblin, 1999, p. 305) and paved the way to the assassination of many other political leaders and heads of states in the West. According to David C. Rapoport (2017), the "anarchists produced the 'Golden Age of Assassination' (1892–1901) in which more monarchs, presidents, and prime ministers were assassinated than ever before" (p. 1). The anarchists, in this most violent period of anarchist history, killed President Carnot of France in 1894, the Spanish Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas del Castillo in 1897, King Humbert of Italy in 1900 and the American President McKinley in 1901 to name a few. In the wake of the assassination of President McKinley, the new president, Theodore Roosevelt, asked for "international treaties among all civilized powers to make anarchism a crime against the law of nations" (Jensen, 2001, p. 16) in December 1901.

The twentieth century has witnessed the rise of non-state armed groups applying to terrorist tactics with an ethno-nationalist agenda. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), for example, aimed at forming an independent republic, rather than being part of the Great Britain. Some other non-state armed groups, founded in the second half of the twentieth century, such as Basque Homeland and Freedom (Euskadi ta Askatasuna - ETA), the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), used terrorist tactics to ask for greater autonomy or independence for some territory.

At the end of 1960s, terrorist groups came up with novel modes of attack - hijacking commercial airliners and taking hostages. In July 1968, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) seized Israeli El Al Flight 426 that departed from Rome and headed to Tel Aviv. The PFLP diverted the plane to Algeria and held the passengers as hostages for weeks.

The PFLP released hostages with no fatalities once Israel agreed on releasing Arab prisoners (Roser et al., 2013).

Hijacking incident in 1968 gained a significant media coverage that eventually made it an increasingly popular weapon. Having realized the high payoffs in term of publicity, terrorist groups resorted to skyjacking and hostage taking more often. On 6 September 1970, members of the PFLP hijacked four planes soon after their take-off from different European airports. Although one aircraft landed safely to London after hijackers were subdued by the passengers, terrorists were able to direct three other aircrafts to Jordan and blew them up on the ground after letting the passengers free (Tristam, 2017). On 5 September 1972, during the Munich Olympics, two members of Israeli Olympic team were killed and nine others were held hostage by Palestinian terrorists. Subsequent negotiations over the course of the day and a series of poorly managed events at an airfield near Munich resulted in killing of all the hostages and five of the terrorists (Finnane, 2015). In following years, terrorist groups increasingly organized similar attacks at foreign venues to capture the world's attention, such that, "over a hundred occurred every year during the 1970s" (Rapoport, 2001, p. 420).

The 1970s and early 1980s have witnessed the emergence of left-wing terrorist groups such as the Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse - BR) in Italy, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Red Army Faction (Rote Armee Fraktion - RAF) in Germany, Direct Action (Action Directe - AD) in France, the Popular Forces of April 25 (Forças Populares 25 de Abril - FP-25) in Portugal, Revolutionary Left (Dev Sol) in Turkey and the Communist Combat Cells (CCC) in Belgium. These groups waged an armed struggle with an ultimate aim of overthrowing conservative or capitalist systems and establishing a communist or anarchist society. In addition, they protested against the "Americanisation of Europe" and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). They resorted mostly to kidnapping and assassination of symbolic figures, as well as to bombing of commercial agencies and NATO facilities. For this reason, according to Hoffman (2002a), left-wing terrorist organizations were adjudged to present the biggest jeopardy to Western society during the Cold War.

Late 1980s and early 1990s can especially be earmarked for the emergence of most of the modern actors with new motivations and rationales. Among these "new generation" terrorist groups, the number and efficacy of those religiously motivated ones constantly increased. While the number of terrorist groups that could be catalogued as "religious" was zero in 1968, it increased to 11 in 1992, 16 in 1994 and 26 in 1995, representing nearly half (46 percent) of the 56 known terrorist groups active that year (Hoffman, 2002a).

The attacks of September 11, 2001, mostly called as 9/11, have been a significant milestone in the long history of terrorism. According to Hoffman (2002b), magnitude of the attacks that led to killing of nearly 3,000 people and meticulousness lying in the coordination of these attacks have opened a new page in the history of terrorism. Aran Kundnani (2012), thus, argued "the 'old terrorism' of nationalist or leftist political violence" gave place to "the 'new terrorism', seen as originating in Islamist theology" (p. 5). In this respect, Jackues (2011) mentioned that this

> new kind of terrorist movement had a cause, and a network, that was not confined to any one state, and whose adherents were willing to commit suicide if they could thereby inflict carnage and destruction on their adversaries, as they did on September 11. (, 2011, p. 51)

In this new phase of terrorism, tens of thousands of foreign fighters who traveled to battlegrounds for jihadist motives played an evident role. The rise of al-Qaida, as the most prominent case in point, was a direct result of foreign fighter flow to Soviet-Afghan War. As Hegghammer (2010) noted, "indeed, a majority of al-Qaida operatives began their militant careers as war volunteers, and most transnational jihadi groups today are by-products of foreign fighter mobilizations" (p. 53).

The start of "war on terror" following the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011, and more importantly, the foundation of ISIS in 2013 and its declaration of a caliphate in 2014 as well as the onset of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 have paved the way to a flow of thousands of foreign fighters. For many countries, foreign fighters became the main security concern. Such that, the United Nations (UN) resolution 2178, which was adopted on 24 September 2014, has linked foreign fighters with terrorism. Resolution 2178, pointing to the "grave concern over the acute and growing threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters", has criminalized the travel, recruitment, and financial activities of foreign fighters as terrorist offences (United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), 2014, p.2).

The huge number of foreign fighters in war-torn countries expanded "the available reservoir of Western passports and 'clean skins' that terrorist planners could recruit to carry out terrorist missions against the West" (Jenkins, 2014, para. 2). The scenario that battle-hardened Western citizens who fought in Syrian-Iraqi battlefields will return and use their know-how to commit terrorist acts as well as radicalize others and found new terrorist groups has been a source of raised concern. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before this scenario became reality and returning foreign fighters have become linked to terrorism. For example, after the Paris attacks in November 2015, it was revealed that six of the 10 perpetrators had previously been with

jihadist armed groups in Syria and Iraq. Similarly, at least three of the attackers in Brussels in March 2016 had earlier been in Syrian/Iraqi combat zone (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017).

As the historical overview presented above portrays, the term has been in languages for more than two centuries and the threat has been, and still is, affecting many aspects of daily life. However, no definitional consensus has been reached on the concept of terrorism. Schmid and Jongman (1988), as cited in Nasser-Eddine et al. (2011), for example, analyzed more than one hundred definitions of terrorism in the 1984 edition of the journal of Political Terrorism and revealed that no one definition could globally be agreed upon. For one thing, terrorism has multiple faces and may be hiding under a religion, politics, ideology or any other name (Ştibli, 2010). And for another, as Ifeoma Okoye (2017) explained, "the concept of terrorism depends on labeling, specifically who is labeled what and by whom" (p. 42). From the perspective of laws and the government, the perpetrator of such an act is a terrorist, but from the perspective of the followers or supporters, the perpetrator is a freedom fighter.

Due to the inevitably subjective nature of the concept, scholars as well as international and governmental organizations have presented definitions from various perspectives. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), for example, has come up with two definitions, namely domestic and international terrorism, based on the source and aim of the terrorist organization. The FBI defines international terrorism as "violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are inspired by, or associated with, designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations (state-sponsored)" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018, para. 2). As seen, this definition is highlighting the role of the states and transnational organizations. Domestic terrorism, on the other hand, is defined from the perspective of aim. According to the FBI, domestic terrorism is "violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018, para. 3)

The European Union's Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism of 2002 defined 'terrorist group' as "a structured group of more than two persons, established over a period of time and acting in concert to commit terrorist offences". The European Union's Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism of 2002 also defined terrorism as

> Criminal offences against persons and property that, given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or international organisation where committed with the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; or unduly

> compelling a Government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, economic or social structure of a country or an international organization. (Council Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism, 2002, p. 4)

In the absence of an internationally accepted description, because it refers to various aspects of terrorism, the author will adopt in this dissertation the definition that is provided by the United Kingdom: The Terrorism Act 2000 (2000) which describes terrorism as

> The use or threat of action designed to influence the government or an international governmental organisation or to intimidate the public, or a section of the public; made for the purposes of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause; and it involves or causes:
>
> - serious violence against a person;
> - serious damage to a property;
> - a threat to a person's life;
> - a serious risk to the health and safety of the public; or
> - serious interference with or disruption to an electronic system. (ch.11, pt. I, s. 1)

In comparison to the term terrorism, the term radicalization is a relatively recent one. According to many scholars, the events of 11 September 2001 have led to introduction of the term radicalization. Peter Neumann (2008), director of ICSR based in King's College London, mentioned that the term radicalization was rarely referenced in the academic literature on terrorism and political violence before the early 2000. Even when the term was used, it was still far from a conceptual sense explaining the process that leads individuals to violent extremism. Sedgwick (2010), a historian who specialized in modern Islam and the history of terrorism from Aarhus University in Denmark, explained that radicalization has been accepted as a term after it was extensively used by the media between 2005 and 2007.

Literature on the concept of radicalization reached controversial conclusions about the link between radical beliefs and terrorist acts. For some researchers and scholars, there is a direct link among radical ideas, violence and terrorism. For these, the adoption of radical beliefs is a precursor to involvement in terrorist activities. For some others like Borum (2011a), having and/or expressing radical beliefs does not necessarily lead to violent or terrorist actions. Conversely, not all those involved in terrorist activities automatically embrace radical and

extremist ideas. According to some other researchers like McCauley & Moskalenko (2008) and Sedgwick (2010), who take a more comprehensive approach in trying to reveal the drivers of terrorist behavior, radical thoughts will only help drawing meaningful conclusions when evaluated together with other possible motivations. On the other hand, after a survey of post-2000 literature, Nasser-Eddine et al. (2011) concluded that academic and field research fail to explain why some people become radicalized or terrorists, while others remain unaffected, despite experiencing similar radical and/or terrorist influences.

As stated by Al-Lami (2009), the only issue on which the vast majority of experts working in the field of radicalization agree is that radicalization is a process (as cited in Nasser-Eddine et al., 2011). Neumann (2008) put in a more concise explanation that radicalization is "what goes on before the bomb goes off" (p. 4). In this vein, Jensen (2006) described radicalization as "a process during which people gradually adopt views and ideas which might lead to the legitimisation of political violence" (as cited in Schmid, 2013). Schmid (2013) expressed that "ideology often plays an important role in [radicalization] that it can provide the true believers with a license to kill" (p. 20). In this wise, Alonso et al. (2008) explained that

> Ideology appears as a constant feature in the radicalisation process related to various forms of terrorism. Indoctrination constitutes a relevant factor in the radicalisation of a small but significant minority of persons dissatisfied with the socio-political context in which they live. This, in turn, contributes to consolidating violent ideas and attitudes and eventually generates a sub-culture of violence. (p. 14)

Before 9/11, according to Kundnani (2012), "the term 'radicalisation' had been used informally in academic literature to refer to a shift towards more radical politics (usually not referring to Muslims)" (p. 7). Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. launched the "War on Terror" and invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. According to Alex Schmid (2013), the majority of publications in the literature of terrorism have been triggered by "a 'blowback' reaction to the US-led intervention to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003" (p. 1). Al-Qaida type terrorist attacks in Western countries between 2001 and 2004 have been regarded "as the extreme form, and hence as a logical consequence of Islam related radicalization" (Roy, 2008, p. 1). In this sense, Kundnani (2012) noted that "the concept of radicalisation has led to the construction of Muslim populations as 'suspect communities', civil rights abuses and a damaging failure to understand the nature of the political conflicts governments are involved in" (p. 3).

There are many facets in which extreme violence manifests itself. There have been many ideologies that lead to radicalization and engagement in terrorist acts of people (Nasser-Eddine et al., 2011) and especially foreign fighters, as they are directly related to the subject of this dissertation. Much of the recent literature on radicalization, however, has focused predominantly on jihadism. Tens of thousands of foreign fighters who flocked to Syria and Iraq after 2011 have clearly shown that people from different social layers of societies with diverse characteristics can become radicalized for a wide variety of reasons (Abrahams, 2017). These radicalized foreign fighters of the Syrian Civil War, who later became battle-hardened as well in Syrian-Iraqi conflict zones, expanded the boundaries of terrorism through relentless terror acts in both their countries of origin and international arena.

Among the foreign fighters who went to Syria and Iraq, there are Westerners who have adopted the extreme right or left political views and fought against ISIS (Patin, 2015; Tuck et al., 2016; De Craemer, 2017, Koch, 2019). It is important to realize that it was not only Westerners who fought with jihadist armed groups that become a threat. Likewise, those Westerners who joined armed groups fighting against ISIS in Syria and Iraq have led to rise of concerns (Jaklin, 2015). A common concern was that Westerners with military backgrounds embraced violent extremist political views on the battle zone, while those already have far-right and far-left extremist views acquired military capabilities (Koch, 2019).

It is also crucial to recognize that there are considerable similarities between the processes that lead to jihadist terrorism and far-left, far-right as well as nationalist separatist terrorism (Alonso et al., 2008). As emphasized in a discussion paper prepared by EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator and presented to the delegations of the EU Council, "just like Europeans who have joined Jihadist groups, left-wing and anarchist violent extremist [anti-ISIS Western foreign] fighters in Syria [and Iraq] acquire or strengthen combat skills, which could in principle be used in terrorist activities in Europe" (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 11). Moreover, these fighters have forged international solidarity with other like-minded organizations in other countries. Some of these far-left anti-ISIS Western foreign have become inspiring examples or, in some cases, after their return to their countries of origin, led other radicalized citizens to turn to terrorist acts (Fitzpatrick, 2020; *United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker*, 2021).

All in all, fixing mostly on jihadism led to negligence of other ideological forms of radicalization and terrorism, such as right-wing, left-wing, ethno-nationalist or anarchist. Indeed, most of the time, the indicators about threats that are important to international security did not receive the attention they deserved (MacKenzie & Kaunert, 2021). That is why, Schuurman (2019) emphasized the necessity of "a balanced research agenda that is broad in its

focus, not tied solely to the latest threat and free to imagine and research both potential future threats and the shortcomings of contemporary policy" (pp. 465-466). As MacKenzie and Kaunert (2021) concluded, "we need to know more about the foreign fighters who participated in the conflict, including what attracted them, who they met up with, and what they did on return from the conflict" (p. 12). Therefore, this study, among other things, also aims to contribute to the existing literature by examining ideological motivations that might have caused the radicalization of Westerners fighting against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

1.2 – The Term Foreign Fighters

Similar to the terms of terrorism and radicalization, there is no globally accepted definition for the term foreign fighter despite its widespread use among scholars, policymakers and journalists. David Malet (2015a) simply describes foreign fighters as "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts" (p. 457). People, according to Malet, can be described as foreign fighters when they 1) are foreign, 2) join an insurgency, and 3) do not expect any monetary gain for their service (Fritz & Young, 2017).

Thomas Hegghammer, a professor of political science at the University of Oslo, provides a more restrictive definition in his 2010 study. A foreign fighter, according to Hegghammer (2010), is an agent who, "(1) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid" (pp. 57–58). In 2013, on the other hand, Hegghammer removed his former restrictions on joining insurgency and lacking kinship ties.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) draws upon a new term of "Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF)" in its Resolution 2178 (2014). The UNSC defines FTF as

> individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict, and resolving to address this threat. (United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), 2014, p.2)

Over time, some countries have developed definitions that refer to emerging criminal elements of foreign fighting. The 2018 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada, for example, has changed the terminology around the foreign fighters and begun naming them as "Canadian Extremist Travellers" (CETs). A CET, according to the report,

> refers to an individual with a Canadian nexus who has travelled abroad to participate in extremist activity. Extremist activity is defined as any activity undertaken on behalf of, or in support of, a terrorist entity. It can include, but is not limited to: participation in armed combat, financing, radicalizing, recruiting, media production, and other activity. (*2018 Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada*, 2018, Canadian extremist travellers section, sidenote para. 2)

The term foreign fighter, with its current use, is too broad and indistinctive. The definitions that Malet and Hegghammer provided do not differentiate among those who travel for fighting and those who travel for various non-violent purposes such as humanitarian aid. Moreover, all the above-mentioned definitions, including the UN definition, fail to distinguish which side of the conflict that foreign fighters support (Holmer & Shtuni, 2017). However, as mentioned by Mendelsohn (2011), "rather than one coherent group of foreign fighters, we often find diverse groups" (p. 192) in a conflict. This study, thus, will classify and analyze foreign fighters according to the side of the conflict that they partake, namely pro-ISIS foreign fighters, pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

1.3 – The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon

Although the term foreign fighter gained popularity with the Afghan-Soviet conflict in the 1980s, the phenomenon of foreign fighters has a long history. Malet (2015b) claims that foreign fighters have taken part in nearly "100 civil wars since the late 18th century" (para. 5). Malet (2015b) asserts with a cautious "estimate that there have been 100,000 foreign fighters worldwide over the past 250 years" (para. 5). The most referred historical cases of foreign fighters are the American Revolution of 1770s, the Greek War of 1820s, "the Spanish Civil War of 1930s, the Afghan-Soviet War of 1980s and the Balkan and Chechen conflicts of the mid-1990s. More recently, foreign fighters have participated in conflicts in Somalia, Yemen, Mali and Libya" (Tuck et al., 2016, p. 4).

The conflict in Syria and Iraq, however, witnessed the fastest and the largest mobilization of foreign fighters in history (Byman & Shapiro, 2014). The flow of foreign fighters to Iraq followed the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. The anti-U.S. insurgency and the sectarian strife attracted thousands of foreign fighters mainly from the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa to Iraq (Fishman & Felter, 2007). Foreign fighters started to appear in Syria in 2011, but the surge became compelling by late 2012 and early 2013 (Fainberg, 2017). There were believed to be around 1,000 armed groups in Syria and Iraq that foreign fighters could

enlist in 2013 (Lister, 2013). The three prevailing categories of armed groups were those associated with Sunni jihadism, such as ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham; Shiite groups and militias fighting for the Assad regime; and pro-Kurdish groups like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the People's Protection Units (YPG). Thousands of foreign fighters have traveled to Syria and Iraq to take part in all sides of the conflict (Bakker & Singleton, 2016).

1.3.1 – Pro-ISIS Foreign Fighters

In 2011, peaceful mass protests in Daraa, a city in southwestern Syria, against President Bashar al-Assad's regime were brutally suppressed by the government. This event has ignited the fuse of a civil war (Sterling, 2012). Amid the instability, Jabhat al-Nusra, in January 2012, and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), in April 2013, broke out into the scene on the territory of Syria and Iraq (Schmid, 2013). ISIL rapidly expanded the area under its control. Such that, in June 2014, the Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura) of ISIL declared a "caliphate" in the name of "Islamic State" (IS). Subsequently, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the new caliph, called upon all Muslims to settle in IS controlled territory and to support the building and expansion of this rising state (Weggemans et al., 2016). Thousands of foreign fighters, allured by the impressive success of IS and the glamorous life portrayed by its sophisticated social media campaigns, accepted caliph's invitation and joined the fight in Syria and Iraq (Byman, 2015a).

The number of foreign fighters in Syrian-Iraqi battlefields, according to Schmid and Tinnes (2015), increased from less than 1,200 in 2011 to more than 3,500 in 2012 and more than 8,500 in 2013. In April 2013, the ICSR estimated in its first report that between 2,000 and 5,500 foreign fighters had joined the fight in Syria since 2011 (Zelin, 2013a). Eight months after its first report, in December 2013, the ICSR increased its estimation of the number of foreign fighters in Syria to between 3,300 and 11,000 (Zelin, 2013b).

The Soufan Group (TSG), a New York-based strategic security research and analysis firm, published a comprehensive study regarding the foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict in June 2014, shortly before the declaration of the caliphate by ISIS. In this study, TSG observed approximately 12,000 foreign fighters from 81 countries (Barrett, 2014). The second half of 2014 and the first half of 2015 was the "golden age" (Fainberg, 2017, p. 32) of the flow of foreign fighters. ISIS's declaration of the caliphate is followed by a sharp increase in the number of foreign fighters. Such that, when revised its study of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq in December 2015, TSG realized that in nearly eighteen months since its previous research,

the number of foreign fighters more than doubled to 27,000-31,000 from at least 86 countries (The Soufan Group, 2015).

The U.S. Department of Defense estimated in April 2017 that approximately 40,000 foreign militants have joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq from at least 120 countries since the conflict began in 2011 (Parrish, 2017). Providing the highest estimation of all time, the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Centre of Excellence argued that more than 42,000 foreign fighters joined ISIS and Hay'at Tharir al-Sham from over 120 countries between 2011 and 2016 (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017).

There is a common agreement among the scholars that there is no single profile of foreign fighters. Richard Barrett (2014), former head of counterterrorism at the British Secret Intelligence Service, indicated that the preponderance of pro-ISIS foreign fighters were predominantly men between the ages of 18–29, disillusioned Muslim or newly converted to Islam, without any military combat experience and showing no indication of misdeed or extremism. David Anderson (2014) contributed that most of pro-ISIS foreign fighters did not have definite plans, local knowledge and language skills as well.

Dodwell et al. (2016) analyzed records of more than 4600 foreign fighters recruited by ISIS between early 2013 and late 2014. Dodwell et.al. demonstrated that pro-ISIS foreign fighters in their dataset were relatively well-educated in comparison to educational level in their home countries. On the other hand, most of them had been working in lower skilled positions before they joined ISIS. Dodwell et al. concluded that the gap between the educational level and working position could be a source of disillusionment. They mentioned that nearly 10 percent of the recruits had had previous jihadist experience. Merely 12 percent of the foreign fighters disclosed that they would prefer a suicide role over a more traditional role. Dodwell et al. (2016) also declared that "those who had claimed advanced knowledge of sharia (Islamic law) were less likely to express a desire to fill a suicide role than those with limited knowledge" (p. v). The analysis of nearly 22,000 forms that pro-ISIS foreign fighters had filled out on their joining ISIS showed in April 2016 that an average foreign fighter was "male, 26, single, quite well-educated but not an expert on the Quran" (Dearden, 2016a, para. 1).

Decision of joining ISIS has resulted from consideration of various push and pull-factors for each foreign fighter. Schmid and Tinnes (2015) presented five "main push factors" that drove pro-ISIS foreign fighters to radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism. These push factors were:

> (1) Reaction to (vicarious) traumatic experiences of violence, (2) Anger and individual or collective desire for (vicarious) revenge, based on humiliation

> and/or experience of discrimination and injustice, (3) Estrangement from mainstream society by uprooted migrants in refugee camps and diasporas, aggravated by socio-economic marginalisation, relative deprivation and/or political exclusion, (4) Personal identity crisis; individual search for meaning and purpose in life; frustrated aspirations; lack of future perspectives at home and desire to escape; seeking redemption, and (5) Unresolved political conflicts and perceived absence of solutions by state actors. (Table 14)

Religious push factors, such as perception of widespread discrimination against Muslims, the Quran-burning events and publishing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, have been influential igniters. According to the ICSR, however, the brutality of the Assad regime played more important role in radicalization and mobilization of pro-ISIS foreign fighters. The ICSR, in its first report in April 2013, noted that

> The most commonly cited reasons for joining rebel forces are the horrific images of the conflict, stories about atrocities committed by government forces, and the perceived lack of support from Western and Arab countries. In many cases, these individuals fully adopt the jihadist doctrine and ideology only when they are on the ground and in contact with hardened fighters. (Zelin, 2013a, Motivations section, para. 2)

In addition to push factors, Schmid and Tinnes (2015) introduced seven "major pull factors" which have attracted people to becoming a pro-ISIS foreign fighter. These factors are

> (1) Existence of extremist ideology that provides justifications for attacks against outgroup members (e.g. non-believers), (2) Presence of charismatic leader who translates grievances into incentives to engage in jihad, (3) Existence of like-minded militant local peer-group that reinforces individual inclination to become foreign fighter, (4) Lure of adventure, fed by images of 'heroism' of jihadi fighters on social media, (5) Imitation (contagion effect) of publicised and seemingly successful terrorist mode of operation, (6) Personal recognition: prospect of recognition as valiant fighter for a good cause and opportunity to boost one's (self-)image from near 'zero [in own country] to hero' [in the land of jihad], and (7) Promise of rewards on earth and in afterlife (paradise). (Table 15)

The flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq was not limited only to Muslim men. ISIS has given special importance to attract Muslim females and children to its territory and make them start families as a building block of becoming a nation and a legitimate state (Storey,

2016). Muslim women are encouraged by female-only recruitment strategies to migrate to ISIS territory either alone or with groups/families to marry jihadist fighters and raise their children to ensure the future of ISIS (Zheng, 2017). As soon as female foreign fighters join ISIS, they have been asked to help recruitment of other Muslim women, as well.

ISIS founded a school for women, Al Zawra, in 2014. The declared aim of the Al Zawra, in its mission statement, was to "prepare sisters for the battlefields for jihad" (Kulze & Shiloach, 2014, para. 1). For this purpose, Al Zawra provided training in some areas such as housewifely works, medical first aid, Sharia and Islamic law, weapons as well as social media and computer programs. Another function of the school was to help recruitment of more women, especially young girls, for ISIS (Kulze & Shiloach, 2014). ISIS established the Al-Khansaa Brigade, a female-only policing unit, in Raqqa in 2014. The mission of the Al-Khansaa Brigade, as one of ISIS's officials explained, was to "raise awareness among women, and arrest and punish women who do not follow the religion correctly" (Al-Bahri, 2014, para. 3).

Exact number of the females and the children who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the ISIS has not been determined since the accessible estimates are various. TSG claimed in its 2014 report that 18 percent of pro-ISIS foreign fighters were women (Barrett, 2014). A study by ICSR reported that until June 2018, 41,490 individuals from 80 countries, of whom 4,761 (13%) were recorded to be women and 4,640 (12%) were minors, had joined ISIS in both Syria and Iraq (Cook & Vale, 2018).

The percentage of the women and children among the overall pro-ISIS foreign fighters differs from country to country. According to French Intelligence Agencies, the portion of the pro-ISIS French female fighters in total of French citizens joined ISIS has risen to 35 percent, representing 220 women, by December 2015 (Ball, 2016). General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands declared in July 2017 that at least 80 Dutch children, only less than 20 percent were nine years of age or older, were in ISIS controlled territory as of February 2017. Belgium was reported to have around 78 minors in the conflict region. While nearly half of them traveled to Syria or Iraq with their parents, the other half were born in there (General Intelligence and Security Service, 2017).

Saltman and Smith (2015), researchers on Women and Extremism Program led by Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD), examined how women were radicalized, why they decided to travel Syria and Iraq, what roles they played for ISIS and how this process could be stopped. Saltman and Smith (2015), analyzing ISD-ICSR database that included more than 100 Western females joining ISIS, found that there was no overarching profile of "Western female

migrants." Most of these females, however, were "in their late teens to early twenties, with the youngest known female migrant being only 13 years old" (Saltman and Smith, 2015, p. 16).

Saltman and Smith (2015) argued that not only the profiles of women joining ISIS but also their motivations and roles in the conflict showed diverse variety. Saltman and Smith, opposing to the assumption that the only motivation of women traveling to the conflict zone has been to become "jihadi brides", identified three pull factors having impact on the decision of Western females to travel to ISIS-controlled territory. These factors were firstly, a religious duty to build an ideal "Caliphate state", secondly, "belonging and sisterhood" and, thirdly, "romanticization of the experience" (p. 13).

According to the RAN, some of the female foreign fighters who traveled to Syria and Iraq were motivated by "utopian ideals" projected by ISIS in forms of a society free from inequity and perfect conditions of life. Some other women were driven by other motives, such as "discrimination (perceived or experienced)", excitement, finding the meaning of life or marrying with a "warrior." For some female foreign fighters, their travel was "a revolt which could free them from parental restrictions and traditions, enabling them to find their identity, community and a sense of belonging" (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017, p. 21).

A distinctive feature of the pro-ISIS foreign fighters has been the involvement of unprecedented number of Western citizens (Fainberg, 2017). The ICSR estimated in April 2013 that between 135 and 590 persons, corresponding to 7-11 percent of the total number of foreign fighters, were Western European (Zelin, 2013a). When the ICSR updated the number of Western European fighters in its December 2013 report, the figure was between 396 and 1,937, almost three times more than its previous estimation (Zelin, 2013b). Neumann argued in February 2015 that 4,000 of 20,730 foreign fighters were from Western Europe. A U.S. Homeland Security Committee report (2015) stated in September 2015 that 4,500 of over 25,000 foreign fighters were Westerners. According to the estimations of both the U.S. Department of Defense (Parrish, 2017) and the RAN (2017), about 5,000 out of the overall 40,000 and 42,000 pro-ISIS foreign fighters, respectively, were from Europe.

Karen J. Greenberg (2016), director of the Center on National Security in Fordham University School of Law, released a report in July 2016. Analyzing 101 ISIS-related cases in the U.S. federal courts, Greenberg presented that the average age of the individuals was 26, while 77 percent were the U.S. citizens, nearly 80 percent were dissatisfied with the U.S., 87 percent were male and one third was converts to Islam. Based on her findings, Greenberg concluded that identity crises and alienation from society were common among the cases. Greenberg, therefore, defined foreign fighters as "seekers". According to Greenberg, while

some of these individuals were seeking religious or political attachment, some others – at least 10 percent – were simply searching for a spouse. Greenberg (2016) also added that "more than 10% have been under some kind of treatment for mental illness, or have been diagnosed as schizophrenic, bipolar or suspected of suffering from acute anxiety" (p. 3).

Pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters had various motivations to join the fight in Syria and Iraq. Defending the Syrian people against the cruelty of the Syrian regime was the primary motivation of many foreign fighters at the early stage of the Syrian conflict. A few, on the other hand, dedicated themselves to global jihad from the very beginning. They worked for both defending their racial and religious siblings and establishing a worldwide caliphate. Several other fighters traveled to the region to experience a way of living in a "true Islamic society". Some of them have even brought their family members with them. For a great majority of the fighters, nonetheless, main sources of motivation were gaining popularity in their social circles and/or feeling "excitement and adventure" (Byman & Shapiro, 2014). In addition to these motivations, as Obe and Silverman (2014) mentioned, individuals became foreign fighters for some other reasons, such as "boredom, the search for greater meaning in life, to belong or gain peer acceptance and misguided conflict experience expectations" (p. 13).

An ICCT report emphasized in 2016 that religious ideology was not the only factor directing young Western Muslims to becoming foreign fighters. In this context, ideology was indeed used to legitimize acts of violence rather than to incite them (van Ginkel et al., 2016). As for the other factors, Magnus Ranstorp, the Research Director of the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish National Defence College, explained that the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad published in a daily newspaper in 2005, led to deepening polarization of the Danish society and triggered discrimination against immigrants (Braw, 2014). Preben Bertelsen, a professor of psychology at the University of Aarhus in Denmark, revealed that "the jihadists often have a life story of exclusion" because "… even a well-functioning society has its shadow sides with de facto lack of equal opportunities and exclusion, and the political rhetoric has sometimes been anti-immigrants or racist, so immigrants feel unwanted" (Braw, 2014, para. 9).

1.3.2 – Pro-Regime Shiite Foreign Fighters

Syrian Civil War has had a sectarian nature from the very beginning. As it became clearer that the objective of the Sunni rebel forces was to oust the regime and reports of attacks on Shiite population, mosques or shrines increased, the Shiite fighters began to convene around Assad's government (Byman, 2014). While foreign fighters from all over the world were joining the

rebel forces, Shiite militias were flocking to the regime side, as well (Solomon, 2016). The U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported in December 2012 that "as battles between Government forces and anti-Government armed groups approach the end of their second year, the conflict has become overtly sectarian in nature" (United Nations, 2012, para. 10).

Pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters began to join the Syrian War in the second half of 2012 (Gilbert, 2013). The Lebanese Shi'a militant group Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias started to cross into Syria in 2013 (Orhan, 2015). The main motivations lying behind the mobilization of Shiite foreign fighters were to defend the Shiite holy sites and to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power (Heistein & West, 2015). Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, publicly confirmed active military involvement of Hezbollah in Syrian conflict in a TV speech in May 2013 (Agencies, 2013). He declared "if the battle with these takfiri terrorists requires that I and all Hezbollah should go to Syria, we will go for the sake of Syria and its people and for the sake of Lebanon and its people" (Dakroub, 2013, para. 11). While Hezbollah took over the control of the Lebanese border, Iraqi Shiite militias, together with Hezbollah, played critical role in defense of some settlements such as Damascus and Aleppo. Hezbollah, in particular, with its 5,000-6,000 fighters and thanks to its vast experience in urban combat, provided significant support to Assad regime's survival (Orhan, 2015).

The flow of pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters to the conflict was more systematically organized than that of pro-ISIS foreign fighters (Byman, 2014). Iran, a consistent ally of Assad regime, orchestrated many aspects of the influx of Shiite foreign fighters. Iran encouraged the Iraqis to set up committees to recruit young fighters and helped traveling of Iraqi Shiite fighters to Syria along with weapons and supplies (Ghazi & Arango, 2012). Iranian diplomats in Kabul conducted clandestine recruitment campaigns to persuade young Afghan Shiites with religious and financial incentives (Reuter, 2014). Foreign fighters from Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen were trained in the camps in Iran which were established and controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force - Iran's primary foreign military arm responsible from the external operations (Shawn, 2017). After training, fighters were transferred to Syria with the help of local contacts (Anzalone, 2013).

There have been six countries mainly providing Shiite fighters: Lebanon with Hezbollah, Iran with the IRGC and paramilitary volunteers, and Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan as well as Yemen with various numbers of combatants operating under many different armed groups. There is, however, no reliable information regarding the number of Shiite foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Lund (2013) echoed from Aarron Y. Zelin, an analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, that the total number of Shiite foreign fighters in Syria was estimated to

be about 10,000 in December 2013. Between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters of this group were provided by Hezbollah. The number of Iraqi Shi'ite fighters, on the other hand, was between 3,500 and 4,000. According to Zelin, the remaining 1,000 to 1,500 Shiite fighters were belong to the IRGC (Lund, 2013).

TSG estimated the number of Hezbollah fighters between 3,000 and 4,000 in May 2014 (Barrett, 2014). Smyth (2015), a researcher at the University of Maryland and the author of the blog "Hizballah Cavalcade", presented the number of Lebanese Hezbollah fighters in Syria as around 5,000-7,000 and the number of Iraqi Shiite fighters as 5,000-10,000 in 2015. He argued that there were probably a few thousand fighters of the IRGC.

The Afghan Shiites fighting in Syria established the largest group among non-Arab foreign fighters. Before the war, there were nearly 2,000 Afghan Shiites who had already taken refuge in Syria after the Iraqi government's operations in 2007. A larger group of Afghan Shiite fighters, recruited mostly by Iran, traveled after 2014 (Nadimi, 2016). Afghan Shiite fighters composed the Fatimiyun Brigade (Liwa' Fatimiyun) which was fighting under the auspices of Hezbollah Afghanistan. According to the Iranian Sacred Defense News Agency, early in 2015, the Fatimiyun brigade was lifted to division level to include between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters (Reuter, 2015). The late deputy commander of the Fatimiyun Division Sayyed Hassan Husseini, known as Sayyed Hakim, claimed that the number of fighters had reached to somewhere between 12,000 and 14,000 (Toumaj, 2016). The Guardian, however, estimated the number of Afghan Shiite fighters in the Fatimiyun Division between 10,000 and 12,000, yet the second largest Shiite group after Hezbollah fighting for Assad regime (Dehghan, 2015).

The Pakistani Shiite fighters began to enter the Syrian theater of war in 2013 after the Salafi militias organized a rocket attack on the shrine of Zainab in Damascus (Zahid, 2016). The Pakistanis fought initially as a part of the Fatimiyun Brigade. As their numbers increased, they have established their own separate unit known as the Zaynabiyun Brigade (Liwa' Zaynabiyun), named for the Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter (Smyth, 2015). The core members of the brigade came from al-Mustafa International University, a religious institute located in Qom, a northwestern city of Iran (Nadimi, 2016). According to one of its commanders, volunteers harassed by Sunni radicals from Parachinar, a northwestern city of Pakistan at the Afghanistan border, and Shia Pakistanis expelled from United Arab Emirates late in 2014 or early 2015 formed the main human resource of the Zaynabiyun Brigade (Alfoneh, 2017). Although the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency claimed to be over 5,000, the total number of the fighters of the Zaynabiyun Brigade is estimated to be not more than 1,000 (Nadimi, 2016).

There have been very few Shiite fighters attempted to join the fight from Western countries. A Lebanese American Shiite from Detroit was arrested in March 2014 before flying to Syria to join Hezbollah (*Dearborn Man Accused of Supporting Terrorist Group Hizballah*, 2014). There were also two Los Angeles gang members who released a video showing themselves fighting in Syria for the regime (Trowbridge, 2014).

In the early years of the foreign fighter flow to Syria, some scholars argued that the Shiite foreigners joining the regime side were highly competent fighters. Among these scholars, Aaron Y. Zelin, for example, mentioned that "those who have come into Syria at the behest of Iran are professional fighters. They have ample experience, either against Israel or against American forces in Iraq" (Lund, 2013, para. 13). Byman (2014), making a comparison between pro-ISIS foreign fighters and pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters, claimed that

> Most important, many of the Shi'a traveling to Syria are excellent fighters. Although some Sunnis come from established jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda in Iraq, most do not. Many Sunnis who travel to fight are inspired by the horrors of the war and strong anti-Shi'ite sentiment, but they are inexperienced. They make fine suicide bombers, but are less useful on the battlefield. The Shi'a hailing from Iraq, in contrast, often earned their spurs in the brutal sectarian conflict there during the Iraqi civil war, which ended in a triumph for the Shi'ite militias. The Lebanese Shi'a are even more formidable. Hizballah is perhaps the most militarily accomplished substate group in the world. Its forces have repeatedly scored tactical victories against the Israeli military--no easy task. (para. 9)

Shiite foreign fighters who joined the fight in Syria and Iraq were motivated by a variety of factors. As mentioned earlier, protecting the Shiite holy sites along with vulnerable Shiite civilians and keeping al-Assad's Alawite regime in power were the main stimuli (Taylor, 2015). Financial gain was another motivating factor for some Shiite Afghan fighters. Various media articles claimed that the Afghan-origin fighters were paid a monthly salary of $500 to $1000 by Iran. In addition, Iran encouraged undocumented Afghan refugees by offering legitimate residency status and work permits (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Refugees who refuse to fight were threatened with deportation (Heistein & West, 2015). For some other Afghan fighters, on the other hand, Syrian War was a new opportunity to continue their fight against the U.S. and its allies. An Afghan Shiite fighter explained their motivations by saying:

> We want to go there for two reasons one is to fight against those who are being assisted by Americans in Syria and secondly Iran pays us to fight in Syria.

> …Those who fight against Assad regime are America's slaves. That is why we want to fight them and kill them. (Walsh, 2014, para. 14)

The Pakistani Shiite fighters, like their Afghan comrades, were targeted with similar financial incentives by Iran. In a social media recruitment ad in December 2015, physically able Pakistani men between the ages of 18 and 35 were offered a monthly income of nearly $1,000 and a two-weeks holiday for every three months. Furthermore, in case of being killed in combat, children's education expenses of the recruit were promised to be taken over and pilgrimage trips to Iran, Iraq, and Syria be given to his family members (Dehghanpisheh, 2015).

1.3.3 – Anti-ISIS Western Foreign Fighters

ISIS captured large swaths of territory in both Syria and Iraq in summer of 2014. During its sweeping expansion, ISIS "systematically targeted non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities, killing or abducting hundreds, possibly thousands" (Amnesty International, 2014, p. 4). The ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Assyrian Christians, Turkmen Shi'a and Yezidis, were subjected to "a range of gross human rights abuses, including murder, physical and sexual assault, robbery, wanton destruction of property, destruction of places of religious or cultural significance, forced conversions, denial of access to basic humanitarian services, and forced expulsion" (UN Assistance Mission for Iraq/UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014, p. 11).

In addition to perpetrating atrocities against minority groups or individuals, ISIS brought all its barbarities to international attention as a part of its propaganda to threaten foreign leaders and those who disagree to submit to its control (Yan, 2014). In this context, ISIS began to disseminate images and videos on social media platforms showing its members beheading unarmed Western hostages. The video displaying the decapitation of American photojournalist James Foley in August 2014 is followed by those of Steven Sotloff, the British aid workers David Haines and Alan Henning as well as the American aid worker Abdul-Rahman Kassig (Friis, 2015).

Widespread media reveals showing the brutality of ISIS against minorities and hostages had a substantial impact on sentiments of Western citizens. As a response, many Westerners have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the fight against ISIS. Their main motivations, inter alia, were, firstly, a recognized incompetency of the international community to react to the violence in Syria and Iraq (Jaklin, 2015), secondly, a moral obligation to defend oppressed minority populations and lastly to defeat ISIS (Tuck et al., 2016). A while later, however, backgrounds

of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq have dramatically changed to include mostly far-left oriented individuals with anarchist, Marxist-Leninist or Stalinist motivations.

As will be presented in the second chapter, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have originated from almost all the Western countries (Tuck et al., 2016). Compared to the nearly 5,000 Westerners who joined the ranks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the number of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters is quite modest. Some of them hold national, religious, ethnic and family ties to the region such as Kurdish and Syrian origin (Jaklin, 2015). There have been even bikers with Kurdish roots from Germany and the Netherlands (Lucy et al., 2015). Americans, however, have established more than one third of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (Tuck et al., 2016). Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have mostly fought in lines of the YPG, Kurdish Peshmerga and Christian/Assyrian militias.

1.4 – The Foreign Fighters Threat

Since the Syrian Civil War started in 2011, over forty thousand foreign fighters from different parts of the world have made their way to Syria and Iraq to join three sides of the conflict, ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham on one side, Assad regime on the other, and the armed groups such as the PKK, YPG, YPJ and the Christian militias on the third side. The ICCT argued in June 2017 that the rise of foreign fighters in historically unprecedented numbers caused a continuum of four threats which were distinct but closely inter-related per se. Van Ginkel et al. (2016) and Reed et al. (2017) discussed the threats that stem from foreign fighters in four headlines: firstly, the foreign fighters' traveling to the theatre of conflict; secondly, the foreign fighters' turning back to their countries of origin; thirdly, the lone actors and sympathizers conducting terrorist acts at their home countries and, finally, the polarization of the society. In succeeding part of this study, the four threat classes mentioned above is followed.

1.4.1 – Traveling Foreign Fighters

The first threat related to the mobilization of Muslims, both Sunnis and Shiites, as well as non-Muslims, was the accumulation of thousands of foreign fighters under control of various armed organizations in Syria and Iraq. These foreign fighters have been a source of human supply for terrorist groups (Committee on Homeland Security House of Representatives, 2015). The number of foreign fighters in previous mobilizations such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, and

Chechnya were between 2-8 percent of the total number of fighters (Fainberg, 2017). In Syria and Iraq, however, foreign fighters were estimated to constitute at least 40 percent of ISIS's overall fighters in 2013 (Schmid, 2015). Abu Mohammed al-Julani, the head of Jabhat al-Nusra, noted in 2015 that foreign fighters had established nearly 30 percent of his group (Al Jazeera, 2015).

The UNCCT argued that existence of foreign fighters not only led "the intensification and prolongation of the conflict" (El-Said & Barrett, 2017, p. 7) in Syria and Iraq but also increased its brutality. In August 2017, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a research and academic center and the custodian of Global Terror Database, released a report analyzing terrorist attacks in 2016. In this report, the START announced ISIS as "the deadliest terrorist organization" (Miller, 2017, p. 2) of the world in 2016 due to carrying out more than 1,400 attacks that led to more than 11,700 deaths.

Foreign fighters' travel to the conflict zone has contributed to their radicalization and tendency to use extreme violence (Jenkins, 2014). They have learned how to use weapons and explosives and practiced different methods of execution such as beheading (Reed et al., 2017). According to the UNCCT, involvement of the foreign fighters in the conflict has "increased the brutality of the fighting, the frequency of human rights violations, the violent discrimination against minorities, and the increase in transnational organized crime, including the trafficking of people and drugs" (El-Said & Barrett, 2017, p. 7).

One prominent feature of foreign fighters' mobilization was its continuity. Brett McGurk, the then U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, declared in July 2017 that ISIS fighters, around twelve thousand in total including both locals and foreigners, were regrouping in small towns along a short stretch of the Euphrates River Valley and the surrounding desert between Syria and Iraq. McGurk, furthermore, added that they have created a database of 19,000 foreign fighters that attempted to participate in ISIS and most of them were still alive (Wright, 2017a).

Although ISIS has lost its entire territory in Syria and Iraq as of December 2017, it will remain viable for a long time in some forms in the region or in other parts of the world. Malet (2015a) claimed that a remarkably big group of foreign fighters will be moving from conflict to conflict in weakly-governed zones of the world in the future, due to the fact that most of foreign fighters were planning not to turn back to their home countries. As TSG concluded "anyone who wishes to continue the fight will find a way to do so" (Barrett, 2017, p. 7). Some of them will join one of the three dozen self-proclaimed provinces of ISIS. In August 2017, the U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson informed about the transition of some pro-ISIS fighters

from Syria and Iraq to the Philippines (Windrem, 2017). Such that, at least one of the nine suicide bombers had reportedly traveled to Syria and trained with ISIS prior to the coordinated Easter attacks that killed more than 250 people in Sri Lanka in April 2019 (Mandhano et al., 2019).

1.4.2 – Returning Foreign Fighters

As the number of foreign fighters increased in Syria and Iraq, fears developed about the threat they might pose when they return to their home countries. This threat was based on two premises: firstly, returning foreign fighters could benefit from their battlefield experience and global terror network connections to carry out more lethal terrorist operations (Leduc, 2016). Secondly, returning foreign fighters could be recruiters and/or trainers of new foreign fighters. As Janet Napolitano, former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, underscored, "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" (Homeland Security, 2010, para. 8).

Europol (2017), in its annual Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT), provided an overview of terrorism trends in Europe in 2017. According to Europol,

> It is important to emphasise that a particularly strong security threat is posed by individuals who have received prolonged ideological indoctrination, military training in the use of weapons and explosives, or have gained combat experience during their stay in a conflict region. They may also have established links to other FTFs abroad and become part of capable transnational networks. These returning fighters will have increased proficiency in terms of carrying out attacks, either under direction or independently. In addition it is assessed that individuals who have joined terrorist groups like IS will be more brutalised and prone to violence; the influence being greater if their stay was lengthy. (p. 14)

Marrero Rocha (2015), a professor of International Relations at the University of Granada/Spain, mentioned that Western foreign fighters may return with a military expertise and can serve as trainers of new fighters. According to Rocha, this training can influence individuals who have no intention or ability to join terrorist organizations abroad but wish to become "internal combatants" (p. 93). As Malet (2015b) underlined, returning foreign fighters can become a recruiter of his citizens and thus increase the number of foreign fighters or

facilitate the radicalization of new recruits, as well. Considering technological progress and use of social media, foreign fighters returning to Western countries can easily reach new audiences for recruitment and training (Klausen, 2014).

TSG claimed in 2014 that 20-30 percent of foreign fighters had returned to Western countries (Barrett, 2014). Schmid and Tinnes (2015), supporting TSG, asserted that "more than thousand out of some 5,000 foreign fighters originating from the European Union have already returned home" (p. 3) as of 2015. TSG reported in October 2017 that at least 5,600 foreign fighters from 33 countries had already returned home despite the fact that many countries don't know or share information about the number of their returnees (Barrett, 2017). The RAN, argued in 2017 that the return rate for the foreign fighters of European countries was about 30 percent, although there were some, such as Denmark, Sweden and the UK, having almost half of their anti-ISIS fighters already returned. The RAN argued that between 1,200 and 3,000 pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters were expected to return in a slow but steadily climbing rate in the following years (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017). An ICSR study reported in 2018 that out of 41,490 foreign fighters who joined the ISIS from all over the world, 7,145 – 7,366 (or 17 – 20 percent) have returned to their home countries (Cook & Vale, 2018).

The RAN has introduced a manual in July 2017 outlining practical responses to enable states engage in foreign fighters and their families returning or planning to return from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq to European Union countries. In this manual, the RAN advised to consider returnees as two separate generations, although there was no clear-cut distinction between them. The first generation of returnees consisted of mostly men who were "more prone to disillusionment, arguably less violent and relatively free to leave the terrorist-held territory" (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017, p. 20). The second generation of the returnees, on the other hand, was more combative, ideologically committed and likely to have violent intentions to harm EU citizens.

Rob Bertholee, the chairman of the Dutch Secret Service (AIVD), expressed in February 2017 that foreign fighters of ISIS returning to their home countries recently might pose a greater threat than earlier returnees. He explained that they were supposed to have more battle training and develop networks of like-minded extremists as a result of staying longer in war territory. Bertholee, furthermore, urged that not only foreign fighters returning to the Netherlands but also their children could pose a danger. He claimed that boys could participate in training camps from the age of nine and engage in fighting and other violent acts thereafter. Bertholee concluded that "children in the IS area have lost their innocence due to all the violence" (*Dutch Secret Service*, 2017, para. 4). In the same line with Bertholee, the RAN assessed that the

returning children most likely had developed war trauma as a result of being exposed to extreme levels of violence in executions and punishments, and, moreover, being forced to execute people in some cases (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017).

A confidential report of German Security Services analyzed 784 Germans between the ages of 13 and 62 who had joined ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Iraq and Syria. According to this report, almost one-third of those analyzed were still in the conflict zone. The other one-third were most likely either in another country or their statuses were unknown. The last one-third (274 individuals) were known to return to Germany. The report showed that half of these returnees remained loyal to extremist ideology and maintained their contact with other extremists. Only 10 percent returned after they had become disillusioned or frustrated. Eight percent of returnees might only have come back to recover or to procure new equipment or money before rejoining extremist groups in Syria and Iraq (*Half of Returning Jihadists Still Devoted to Cause: Report*, 2016).

Among all the returning foreign fighters, counterterrorism researchers put special emphasis on individuals who joined the terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq to gain new skill sets, such as small-arms training, explosives manufacturing expertise, etc., together with combat experience, and returned to their homeland to conduct terrorist attacks. As Jenkins (2014) explained, "of greatest concern is a scenario in which Western volunteers who initially went to fight in Syria or Iraq are recruited, trained and supported for terrorist operations in the West" (para. 5). Byman (2015b) described these returning foreign fighters "as hardened veterans, steady in the face of danger and skilled in the use of weapons and explosives…" (para. 2).

Hegghammer (2013) studied returning Western foreign fighters who had fought in jihadi groups in some countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Yemen and Somalia between 1990 and 2010. Hegghammer created a framework of "domestic fighter" and "foreign fighter". He claimed that while most Western jihadists preferred being foreign fighters, a minority became domestic fighter and attacked at home. Having found that "only about one in nine foreign fighters returned for an attack in the West" (p. 7), Hegghammer argued that returning foreign fighters presented a low possibility of taking part in domestic terrorist events. He added, however, that the presence of returning foreign fighters in terrorist plots increased the effectiveness of attacks and the number of casualties. In this respect, Hegghammer (2013) noted that "the presence of a veteran increases—by a factor of around 1.5—the probability that a plot will come to execution, and it doubles the likelihood that the plot will kill people" (p. 11).

Hegghammer and Nesser (2015) analyzed ISIS-related attack plots in Western Europe, North America, and Australia from early 2011 to mid-2015. They found that 16 of the 69 plots

had involved at least one foreign fighter. Nine of these 16 plots had included foreign fighters who had been to Syria. Of these nine Syria-linked foreign fighter plots, six had included people who had trained with ISIS. Hegghammer and Nesser (2015), thus, concluded that

> the blowback rate – the proportion of outgoing fighters who return and plot attacks against their home country or region – from Syria is thus far very low indeed: 11 plotting returnees from an outgoing contingent of around 4,000 makes for a blowback rate in the order of 1 in 360. (p. 20)

Lister et al. (2018) reported that ISIS or its regional affiliates "conducted or inspired more than 140 terrorist attacks in 29 countries other than Iraq and Syria" (para. 1), causing at least 2,043 people to be killed and thousands more to be injured since ISIS's pronouncement of the caliphate in June 2014. According to RAN,

> The terrorist attacks in Brussels in May 2014 (Jewish Museum) and March 2016 (airport and metro station), as well as the multiple attacks in Paris in November 2015, were all atrocities perpetrated to some degree by FTF returnees. In the Paris attacks, at least six of the perpetrators were FTFs returning from Syria, while three out of five Brussels attackers were FTF returnees. (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017, p. 15).

Byman (2014) argued that "because of their strong anti-Western views and tendency toward international terrorist activities, the Sunni fighters have become an obsession of intelligence officials in Western capitals" (para. 1). In this respect, Schmid (2015), articulated that

> The current Western focus on foreign fighters in Syria is somewhat blind on one eye, as those Shia and Alawite Muslims and Christians who have gone and continue to go to Syria to support the Bashar al-Assad regime in the west or the Kurdish separatists in the north of the country remain largely uncounted. Presumably this has to do with the fact that they are not deemed a danger to Western democracies when they return to their countries of origin. (p. 7)

Heistein and West (2015) mentioned that "while much has been said about the dangers of Sunni foreign fighters returning home, the return home of the far more numerous Afghan and Pakistani Shia foreign fighters has received noticeably less attention" (para. 1). According to Heistein and West, a considerable number of pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters, especially those who have been recruited from Afghanistan and Pakistan, will return to their home countries when the strife in Syria and Iraq is over. Byman (2014) thinks that returning Shi'ite fighters will keep on playing a violent role when they are back at home, possibly, according to Heistein and

West (2015), as members of new branches of Hezbollah which Iran has an ambition to establish in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Orton (2017b), a Middle East analyst and research fellow at the Henry Jackson Society, urged that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who joined the YPG could "pose a domestic security risk [upon their return to their home countries], irrespective of whether their motivation for joining the war in the Levant was ideological or not" (p. 122). Orton, furthermore, suggested that returning YPG fighters could "contribute to the PKK's criminal-terrorist activities" (p. 4) or be pulled by other extremist groups into "lone-actor terrorism" (p. 4) on home soil.

According to some media reports citing security sources, 125 out of nearly 300 anti-ISIS German foreign fighters who joined the PKK or the YPG and actively engaged in combat in Syria and Iraq came back to Germany in late 2017 and early 2018. A spokesman from the Federal Interior Ministry told that security agencies were closely monitoring the returnees and taking all the necessary precautions to prevent illegal activities of the PKK. He also added, although they did not notice any significant threat for that moment, they "… take this phenomena very seriously" (*Returning PKK Terrorists Threaten Germany's Security*, 2018, para. 6). In this context, an anti-ISIS Western foreign fighter mentioned that

> Many Kurdish friends, in different situations, repeated the same thing to me: 'Return to your people and continue the same fight over there', 'We don't need Western martyrs, we need a revolution in Western countries!' So personally I absorbed the learning and experience in Rojava, and now is the time to see what is happening in our Western countries with this growth of racism and fascism. (*Experiences in Rojava: Interview with an Anarchist YPG Volunteer*, 2017, Would you want to go back? section, para. 2).

1.4.3 – Stay-at-Home Fighters

In 2014, ISIS's capturing and controlling large swaths of territory and cities in Syria and Iraq along with the growing threat of foreign fighters stimulated many countries to take action (Fainberg, 2017). The seizure of Mosul, the second largest city of Iraq, by ISIS in June 2014 and the besiegement of tens of thousands of Yezidis in Mount Sinjar later in summer, triggered an armed intervention of a number of countries. The airstrikes of the U.S fighter jets and deployment of nearly 3,000 U.S. soldiers to Iraq in August 2014 (Zapfe, 2014) were followed by a more comprehensive military campaign, the Operation Inherent Resolve, carried out by the U.S.-led coalition that consists of sixty-nine nations and four partner organizations (Wright,

2017b). In the meantime, the international community enhanced the intelligence sharing and improved the legislative and legal measures to prevent the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq (Fainberg, 2017).

ISIS lost nearly 20 percent of its territories in Syria and 45 percent in Iraq until May 2016 as a result of the coalition airstrikes (Michaels, 2017). Furthermore, the shrinking of its territories caused notable decline in ISIS's income in as much as "from around $80 million a month in mid-2015 to $56m a month by March 2016" (Agence France-Presse, 2016b, para. 15). These losses, together with other factors, led to a drastic fall in the flow of foreign fighters from 2,000 persons per month to almost 50 (Witte et al., 2016).

As a response to the air strikes of the international coalition, in September 2014, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, the spokesman and a senior leader of ISIS, encouraged their supporters to attack the citizens of the countries that participated in the coalition (Bayoumy, 2014). ISIS came up with a new strategy of "enabled or remote-controlled attacks" (Callimachi, 2017, para. 6). In April 2015, after Sid Ahmed Ghlam, a 24-year-old student, shot himself in the leg and called for an ambulance, it was discovered that he had been planning an attack to a church in Paris (Willsher, 2015). A search in his laptop and phone revealed that he had been guided from Syria by a pair of handlers who were French citizens that joined ISIS. This was the first plot that European officials described as remote-controlled (Callimachi, 2017).

Remote-controlled attacks perpetrated by returning pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters or sympathizers show that "violence conceived and guided by operatives in areas controlled by the Islamic State whose only connection to the would-be attacker is the internet" (Callimachi, 2017, para. 6). In encouragement phase of the promising recruits to carry out a plot, ISIS handlers assume the role of close friends, mentors or therapists. As soon as the recruit or a cell of recruits is persuaded to undertake an attack, ISIS handlers provide operational and technical support with the design of the attack and act as enablers (Callimachi, 2017). Some of the latest attacks showed that ISIS handlers keep communicating with the attackers in order for supporting and leading them until the last minute or sometimes even the very last seconds of the attack. Furthermore, throughout all this process, because recruits are coached to use encrypted messaging applications, ISIS handlers or "virtual planners" remain concealed (Gartenstein-Ross & Barr, 2016).

The more ISIS dwindled under increased military pressure and the options of foreigners to travel to Syrian and Iraqi battlefields diminished, the more ISIS requested them to stay at home to perpetrate attacks. Before May 2016, ISIS was propagating that traveling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS was a religious obligation for all the Muslims in the world. ISIS named this travel

as “hijrah” referring to the Prophet Muhammad’s journey to escape torment in Mecca (Callimachi, 2017). In his speech on 21 May 2016, al-Adnani, however, no longer requested their sympathizers travel but remain in place. He said

> If the tawaghit [tyrants] have shut the door of hijrah in your faces, then open the door of jihad in theirs. Make your deed a source of their regret. Truly, the smallest act you do in their lands is more beloved to us than the biggest act done here; it is more effective for us and more harmful to them. (Kamolnick, 2016, No more hijra! Murder, terror and mayhem is your ticket to paradise! section, para. 2)

Following al-Adnani’s speech, stay-at-home fighters became the most salient threat for Western countries. Greenberg (2016), after analyzing 101 ISIS-related cases in U.S. federal courts, showed that while desire of becoming a foreign fighter in Syria had substantially dropped in 2016 among the cases, the focus had shifted to remaining and carrying out acts of violence in the U.S. Such that, the number of terror attacks dramatically increased from 16 in 2015 to a total of 40 in 2016 and most of the actors were stay-at-home fighters (Fainberg, 2017).

Stay-at-home fighters included Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs) or lone-wolves who did not join any armed groups in Syria or Iraq but remained in their home countries to conduct terrorist attacks (Sinai, 2016). HVEs and lone-wolves were self-directed, had little or no contact with ISIS but often subjected to ISIS’s propaganda and at least felt sympathy to organization’s ideology and methods (Byman, 2015a). The individuals who were prevented from traveling abroad, stopped on their way or failed to travel for other reasons were accepted as stay-at-home fighters, as well.

Hegghammer and Nesser (2015) argued that plots by ISIS sympathizers can be considered as a threat for two reasons: they are more frequent and more likely to be executed than plots involving returned foreign fighters. Besides, it is difficult for security services to track the activities of such individuals, making their behavior highly unpredictable. Orton (2017a) discussed that

> those individuals who act totally alone are, on the one hand, the most difficult to stop because the only preparation occurs in their own mind, and, on the other hand, are — generally — the least efficacious because the lack of assistance hampers the sophistication of these ‘lone wolves’. (p. 2)

1.4.4 – Polarization of the Society

Violent jihadist activities in the West have reached historically high levels in recent years. There occurred 14 jihadi attacks only in 2015 and 2016, about 3.5 times more than the biannual average of 6 for the preceding fifteen years (Hegghammer, 2016). Dramatic increase in the number and consequences of the jihadist attacks has fundamentally changed the rhetoric about Islam and immigration. The actions of returning and stay-at-home pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters in their countries have created a backlash from the Christian populations and given impetus to establishment of a violent anti-Islamic front in the West. The number of violent anti-Muslim incidents and coercion of Muslims have risen throughout Europe (Bakker & de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2015). Only in Germany, 3,533 attacks in total - with an average of 10 per day- were carried out on migrants and asylum hostels in 2016. The Interior Ministry of Germany revealed that 560 people injured, including 43 children, in these attacks (*Germany Hate Crime*, 2017). As MacKenzie and Kaunert (2021) mentioned, "intolerant attitudes are on the rise and have even been encouraged by far-right leaders, some of whom have managed to achieve a level of popularity" (p. 11).

As another aspect of the socio-political polarization, extremist violence associated with both far-right and far-left has escalated in the West. Germany is one of the leading Western countries wherein political polarization has constantly been growing. Hans-Georg Maassen, the head of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz or shortly BfV), Germany's domestic intelligence agency, declared in 2015 that "the Right-extremist scene is networking on a European level, and in some cases, with connections in the United States" (Rothwell, 2016, para. 3). He also added that "we have seen in a series of cases that there are numerous people in the far-Right extremist scene who are ready to do anything and who have joined forces to create Right-wing terrorist cells" (Rothwell, 2016, para. 4). The BfV revealed in its annual report that the number of far-right violent acts in Germany had risen by 42 percent to 1,408 in 2015 (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2016). Moreover, the number of arson attacks against refugee centers had surged to 75 from just five a year earlier. The BfV asserted in its report of 2016 that "the number of violent right-wing extremist crimes with a xenophobic background rose once again; the percentage of violent criminal offences against accommodation centres for asylum applicants remained at the high level of 2015" (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2016, p. 7). The BfV estimated that Germany was home to 12,100 violent far-Right extremists as of 2016.

Free University in Berlin announced in 2016 that one-sixth of the Germany's population (West Germany: 14 percent, East Germany: 28 percent) hold far-left opinions. While seven percent of all Germans support politically motivated violence, 14 percent of far-left Germans do so (*Studie: Linksextreme Einstellungen Sind Weit Verbreitet* [Study: Left-Wing Extremist Attitudes Are Widespread], 2015). According to annual report of the BfV, the number of violence-oriented left-wing extremists totaled 8,500 in 2016. The number of violent acts by members of far-left groups was 1,201 still remaining unacceptably high although dropped in comparison to 1,608 in 2015. The report said those attacks often targeted far-right activists or the police (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2016).

Left-wing extremist groups of foreigners have become another source of threat to Europe. In Germany, for example, the BfV estimated 17,550 individuals were associated with the left-wing extremist groups as of 2016. The PKK had the lead with 14,000 followers. The BfV defined the PKK as "the largest extremist organisation of foreigners in Germany in terms of membership and efficiency" (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2016, p. 28).

A group of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who joined the YPG established the International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF) in April 2017, as a cell within the anarchist International Freedom Battalion (IFB). Its members "self-identify [themselves] as anarchists, anarcho-communists, anarcho-syndicalists, social anarchists, queer anarchists, anarcha-feminists, libertarian communists, libertarian socialists and anti-authoritarian marxists" (*Not One Step Back*, 2017, para. 7). The long-term plan of the IRPGF is a revolution in northern Syria and southern Turkey. For these international anarchists and other ideological volunteers in Northern Syria, the fight against ISIS has only been a front in their global revolution. Black October, a pseudonym for a Western fighter of the IRPGF, said

> The IRPGF is the first major strictly anarchist formation in Rojava whose intentions are not only to fight in Rojava but to defend social revolutions around the world, to fight against the state and capital and advance the cause of anarchism around the world. That means world revolution…while we are under the YPG's authority and therefore legally in alliance with every group in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) we want to make it clear that our politics and the revolutionary struggle are not simply confined to Rojava [northeast of Syria]. (Maxwell, 2017, para. 8)

Predictably, as will be shown in Chapter 3 especially with the examples of Florian D. (Fitzpatrick, 2020) and Daniel Alan Baker (*United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker*, 2021), the terrorist threat posed by some westerners who adopted the extreme left ideology

began to manifest itself soon after returning to their home country after fighting against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Chapter 2 – Anti-ISIS Western Foreign Fighters

Since the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, tens of thousands of foreign fighters from all over the world have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join various armed groups. There have been three prevailing groups of foreign fighters: firstly, pro-ISIS foreign fighters who are associated with the Sunni jihadist groups such as ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham; secondly, pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters who are affiliated with the Assad government; and finally, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, from Western Europe, North America and Australia, fighting with Kurdish and Christian groups against mainly ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria and Iraq.

Much has been written about pro-ISIS foreign fighters and, to a lesser extent, about Shiite foreign fighters. The most underemphasized group of foreign fighters, however, has been that of Westerners fighting against ISIS. Surprisingly, with the exception of some media articles, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have drawn far less attention (Tuck et al., 2016). There has not yet been an agreed-upon name for this group of foreign fighters among the scholars. Some call them as "Western Volunteer Fighters" (Jaklin 2015), "transnational volunteers" (Fritz & Young, 2017), "Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters" (Koch, 2019) or "reverse jihadists" (Jayakumar, 2014) while it is even possible to see them named as "vigilantes" (Percy, 2015).

Despite their smaller number, some governments and security agencies are worried that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters "will build on their experiences and engage in further recruitment and radicalisation, or, in the worst-case scenario, carry out terrorist attacks in their home countries" (Mans & Tuitel, 2016, p. 3) after their return. Thus, this dissertation aimed at assessing if and how anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters pose a threat to their countries of origin and to international security. To that end, this chapter develops a deeper understanding of these individuals in terms of their demographics (section 2.1), their motives (section 2.2), the armed groups that they have joined (section 2.3) as well as their recruitment and vetting (section 2.4), mobilization (section 2.5), training (section 2.6), and life on the frontline (section 2.7).

2.1 – Demographics

The forerunners of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters began to appear in Syrian conflict in the second half of 2014 (Percy, 2015). Jordan Matson, a then 29-year-old Army veteran is supposed to be the first American to travel to Syria in September 2014 (Patin, 2015). Matson was immediately followed by other Western foreign fighters, such that, in October 2014, the media started to report on many other American former soldiers joining the fight against ISIS (Muir,

2014). In mid-November 2014, a then 22-year-old Danish woman of Kurdish descent, Joanna Palani (Whyte, 2016), and Gill Rosenberg, a then 31-year-old Jewish-Israeli-Canadian woman and a former Israel Defense Forces soldier, were identified as the pioneers of anti-ISIS Western female foreign fighters to join the Kurdish groups in Syria (Townsend, 2014).

Not long after their first emergence on the battlefield, did the first death among anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters occur. Ashley K. Johnston, a then 28 years old Australian Army veteran, was shot dead by ISIS on 23 February 2015 (Loveluck, 2015). Two weeks after Johnston's death, on 2 March 2015, a British former Royal Marine, Konstandinos Erik Scurfield, was killed while fighting for the People's Protection Units (YPG). Ivana Hoffmann, a then 19-year-old German woman fighter of the YPG became the first anti-ISIS Western female foreign fighter to die battling against ISIS on 7 March 2015 (*German Woman, 19, Dies Fighting Islamic State in Syria*, 2015). Despite the deaths, hundreds of Westerners have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of foreign fighters.

The total number of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters has been unknown due to the ambiguity on the ground and lack of obtainable official figures. Tuck et al. (2016) emphasized difficulty of determining the exact number of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters since there were only a few estimates available. It was assessed in February 2017 that between 800 and 1,000 Westerners had joined the war against ISIS (Blake, 2017c). In the same year, De Craemer (2017) predicted that "between 500 and 1,000 ethnic Kurds from the European diaspora alone have joined the conflict" (p. 14). The Turkish Police Academy estimated in May 2017 that more than 400 anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, both men and women, were fighting for the YPG (Soner, 2017).

As mentioned for pro-ISIS foreign fighters earlier in this dissertation, there is no one single profile to describe anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, as well. Tuck et al. (2016) from Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) analyzed 300 anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Tuck et al. presented that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in their dataset comprised of individuals from different backgrounds. While a vast majority of them were males (97%), there was still a minority of females. Although the highest proportion of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were in 20s (48%), there were individuals of different ages with the youngest being 14 years old and the oldest 67. There were both Christians and Muslims.

Anti-ISIS foreign fighters in Tuck et al.'s (2016) database were originated from a total of 26 mainly Western countries, such as the U.S. (38%), the U.K. (13.7%), Germany (8%) and France (6.3%). It is important to note that the rate of Americans among anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, 38 percent, is well above the ratio of Americans among pro-ISIS Western

foreign fighters which is only around 5 percent (Bergen et al., 2016). In this regard, it has to be also noted that the U.K., Germany and France were the top three providers of pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters, as well (Tuck et al., 2016).

De Craemer (2017) analyzed 366 foreign fighters including 350 men and 16 women. He found that anti-ISIS foreign fighters came from all the continents, except Africa and Antarctica. The U.S., taking the lead with 27 percent, was followed by the UK and France, mostly consisting of non-ethnic Kurds. Ages of fighters ranged from 14 to 68, with an average of 35, most of them, however, were in their twenties. The majority, 59.6 percent, of anti-ISIS foreign fighters in the dataset joined the YPG/YPJ while five individuals preferred the PKK. Out of 366 foreign fighters, 33 were killed in action, as such the YPG suffered the most losses with 28. In parallel with having the most fighters in the dataset, the U.S. suffered the most casualties as well. In this regard, Germany and the UK followed the U.S.

Patin (2015), an independent researcher, analyzed Americans who had joined the various armed groups fighting against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Patin presented that all anti-ISIS foreign fighters in his dataset of 108 were male but one. Most of them were in their 20s and 30s with an average age of 31. At least 73 (68 percent) of 108 individuals had a backdrop of military service in the U.S. Armed forces or French Foreign Legion, as is the case for two individuals. Patin identified three main groups that anti-ISIS American foreign fighters joined: Roughly half of American foreign fighters in his dataset fought with the YPG while 40 percent fought with the Peshmerga and 10 percent with a Christian militia, either Dwekh Nawsha or the Ninevah Plains Protection Unit.

In 2017, Orton (2017b) provided a detailed analysis of 60 anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters from 12 countries who joined the YPG or YPJ. Orton declared that an overwhelming majority of the YPG and YPJ foreign fighters, 55 out of 60, were male and slightly more than 60 percent were younger than 30. Two main sources of recruitment were the military and the universities. The rate of the military veterans in his sample, however, dropped from 64 percent in 2014 to 36 percent in 2015 and 11 percent in 2016.

Jayakumar (2019) introduced a database including 500 anti-ISIS foreign fighters of whom 22 were women. Jayakumar presented that while 60 percent of the individuals in the database joined the YPG or the YPJ, 15 percent were fighting for the Kurdish Peshmerga and 4 percent for the Christian militias. Similar to findings of previous studies, a great majority of the anti-ISIS fighters in the dataset, 173 individuals, were American. The U.S. was followed by the UK (61), France (29), Canada (27), Germany (19), Italy (18) and Sweden (17). 126 of the individuals (25 percent) in the dataset, including 67 Americans, had previous military

experience. 61 (12 percent) of the total 500 anti-ISIS foreign fighters were killed, including 45 in battles with ISIS.

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters hold national, religious, ethnic and family ties to the region (Jaklin, 2015). "Kurdish is the most common ethnicity among anti-ISIS foreign fighters" while there is also a small number of ethnically Assyrian and Yazidi fighters (Tuck et al., 2016, p. ii). There are German bikers with Kurdish roots as well as bikers from the Netherlands (Lucy et al., 2015). Three bikers from the "No Surrender Banditos", a Dutch motorcycle club, joined the Kurdish forces fighting against ISIS in Iraq in 2014 (Saul, 2014). German bikers of the "Median Empire Motorcycle Club", who have strong Kurdish links, have followed the Dutch bikers (Jones, 2014).

Despite the vast diversity in their backgrounds, there is one important and common invariable that many anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are former soldiers (Jaklin, 2015). While veterans from the U.S. and the UK constitute the majority, it is also possible to find some ex-soldiers from the French Foreign Legion (De Craemer, 2017, p. 30). Fritz and Young (2017) examined American foreign fighters who traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight against ISIS as well as Jabhat al Nusra and then compared these fighters with pro-ISIS jihadi foreign fighters. For this purpose, Fritz and Young compiled two separate datasets, one with 34 anti-ISIS American foreign fighters and the other with 21 pro-ISIS American foreign fighters. Fritz and Young found that 82 percent of 34 anti-ISIS American foreign fighters in their dataset had a military background with nearly half of them served in Iraq, 29 percent in Afghanistan and around 12 percent in both. Fritz and Young also showed that anti-ISIS American foreign fighters were on average older than pro-ISIS American foreign fighters, with a mean age of 32.5 and 25.3 years respectively.

In addition to having a background of military service, there are several other personal factors common among anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. According to Tuck et al. (2016),

> These [common personal factors] included boredom, loneliness, persistent unemployment, relationship difficulties, or a more general lack of purpose. Some are attempting to escape a life in which they feel they have no place, prospects or future, others mention feeling trapped. … Others suffered from health issues such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder or depression. (pp. 22-23)

As discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, women foreign fighters "joining ISIS are typically employed in domestic and matriarchal roles, with some also participating in propaganda activities or enforcing strict moral codes through the group's all-female al-Khansaa Brigade" (Tuck et al., 2016, p. ii). Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, in comparison to pro-

ISIS Western foreign fighters, are less likely to comprise women or children. Only 3 percent of foreign fighters joining anti-ISIS groups are female. Those women who are included, especially in the all-female YPJ, however, are more active in combat roles (Tuck et al., 2016).

2.2 – Motives

Fritz and Young (2017) showed that the primary mobilization rationales stated by anti-ISIS American foreign fighters were "group grievance" and "personal motivation". The "group grievance" was concerning a group of people with whom anti-ISIS American foreign fighters felt connection and became the victim of the atrocities perpetrated by ISIS. The "personal motivation", on the other hand, included a wide array of exclusive reasons such as missing the camaraderie of military life, gaining more combat experience, and seeking risk and status.

Patin (2015) found that the motivations of American foreign fighters to join fight against ISIS have been "moral outrage or dismay, Christianity, adventure or boredom, missing military camaraderie, missing combat, or trouble adapting after service [and] displeasure with US policy" (p. 19). According to Tuck et al. (2016), for many ex-military fighters, the idea of 'finishing the job' to make certain that their previous losses of military comrades were not futile has also been a source of motivation. Some non-veteran fighters, on the other hand, have been motivated by a strong desire to fight and experience combat as an adrenaline-filled venture.

The motives for joining the conflict in Syria and Iraq are as heterogeneous as the anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters themselves. Moreover, they often have more than one reason for taking part in the war. For each individual, the decision of joining to one of the armed groups in Syria or Iraq is a product of a coalescence of several factors (Tuck et al., 2016). As Amarasingam and Dawson (2018) adeptly articulated "the choice to become a foreign fighter is the result of a perfect storm of diverse factors, operating in somewhat different ways and to different degrees in each case" (p. 5).

The most common motives that are encountered while examining the related literature and profiles of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are discussed below.

2.2.1 – Moral Obligation to Defend Persecuted Populations

A sense of responsibility to protect persecuted local populations, such as Yazidi, Assyrian or Kurdish, and defeat the "evil on behalf of all humanity" (Orton, 2017b, p. 124) played an important role for many Westerners to become an anti-ISIS foreign fighter. Feeling incensed

by the merciless atrocities conducted by ISIS along with an annoyance due to the lack of a global response, anti-ISIS foreign fighters, though having no explicit ties to the region, felt a moral obligation to defend oppressed minority populations (Tuck et al., 2016). In this respect, Jonathan Rieth, a U.S citizen then at 39, who fought with the Kurdish Peshmerga as an Emergency Medical Technician, voiced his motivation:

> For me one of the tipping points was a graphic image of a Christian woman kidnapped by Daesh, raped thirty times a day, beaten, mutilated, that didn't kill her, they took a crucifix and jammed it in her throat . . . that image is frozen in my mind. (Sfrantzman, 2016, 0:26)

The ISIS genocide against Yazidi people that began in August 2014 was a critical trigger for most of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters to take action (Jaklin, 2015). As Jeremy Woodard, a then 29-year-old U.S. Army veteran who served in Iraq and Afghanistan for two and a half year in total and then joined the YPG in Syria, expressed that "they [ISIS] kill innocent people daily. They rape women and children and sell them into slavery. Killing an Isis [Islamic State] member, to me that's doing a good deed to the world. All of them need to get wiped out" (Muir, 2014, para. 7).

Terrifying news in global media on ISIS's abuses in Kobani in mid-September 2014 led many Westerners to join the fight against ISIS to help and defend the Kurdish people. A German fighter of the YPG said "… when the terrorist Daesh attacked Rojava and start attacking the Kurds, I decided that I wanted to come and join them, and join the YPG in their fight" (Mans & Tuitel, 2016, p. 7). Similarly, explaining his motivation, an Austrian fighter of the YPG said

> I want to help people. What ISIS is doing is very bad and the whole world is looking and nobody supports. I think we have to stop them before they come back to our homes in Europe. And also it is very bad what happened here with Kurdish people and yeah, that is the reason why I come here. (Mans & Tuitel, 2016, p. 9)

2.2.2 – Frustration with Responses to the Syrian War

A strong grievance related to atrocities being committed against civilians in Syria and Iraq and a sense of frustration regarding the incompetency of the international community to respond to that violence have been sources of motivation for many anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters (Jaklin, 2015). They heavily criticized the inaction of Western governments and accused worldwide leaders of paying no attention to the continuing misery in the conflict zone (Tuck et

al., 2016). Paradoxically, a very same kind of frustration with their governments has been observed among pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters as well. In this context, Tuck et al. (2016) concluded that the "foreign policy can play an important role in the decision making processes of both foreign fighter cohorts" (p. iii).

A great majority of anti-ISIS foreign fighters frequently stated explicit displeasure with their respective government's response to ISIS. Joe Akerman, a British Army veteran, briefly explained his main reason to join fight in Syria that despite witnessing the persecution of innocuous people, "no one was stepping in to do anything about it" (Silverman, 2017, para. 4). Tim Locks, then 38-year-old former construction worker and a bouncer, has sold his house and traveled to Iraq to fight with Dwekh Nawsha. Locks expressed his frustration with the British government that "Britain has done nothing to help the situation. I have done more to help people here in a week…" (Wyke, 2015, para. 32). James, who served in the British Army for seven years, said

> Daesh is growing in Great Britain. Unfortunately, in my country, I can't do anything, I can't say anything, or I will go to prison. My only other option to do something about it is to come here [Syria], where I can get a weapon, where I can fight Daesh. (Neuhof, 2015b, para. 24)

2.2.3 – Religion

For a number of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, their strong Christian faith was the main factor that enforced them to join the battle against ISIS (Patin, 2015). As such, they felt a strong moral obligation "to protect Christian minorities and heritage in the region" (Tuck et al., 2016, p. 27). According to Orton (2017b), "the only truly ideological motivation that drove Western recruits to Rojava in the early stages was Christianity, whether defined wholly religiously or in the form of solidarity with co-religionists being persecuted by the Islamic State" (p. 120).

Dean Parker, a then 49-year-old American, left his job to join the fight against ISIS after watching terrible circumstances of local Yazidi population confined in Mount Sinjar in Iraq by ISIS fighters on TV. Parker said that he had heard "God's call to take up arms and fight against ISIS" (Parhlo, 2015, para. 3). Jordan Matson, having served in the U.S. Army for one and a half year, specifically mentioned his coreligionists, "I couldn't just sit and watch Christians being slaughtered anymore. I got sick of giving online sympathy. Five minutes of lip service does nothing. These people are fighting for their homes, for everything they have" (Cousins, 2014, para. 4).

Brett Felton, a then 28-year-old devout Catholic and an American Army soldier who served in Iraq before having been discharged in 2007 as a disabled veteran, traveled to northern part of Iraq to join Dwekh Nawsha in August 2014. Felton, describing himself as a "soldier of Christ" (Moran, 2015, para. 1), said "I'm not here serving my country. I'm here serving Christians" (Desmond, 2015, para. 3). Felton also told "these are some of the only towns in Nineveh where church bells ring. In every other town the bells have gone silent, and that's unacceptable" (Coles, 2015, para. 9). Later, he added

> People ask me, 'Why you?' I come back and I say, 'Why not? Why just me? Where's everyone else at? … Jesus says, you know, 'What you do unto the least of them, you do unto me'…. I take that very seriously. (Moran, 2015, para. 2-3)

Anders Högström, who founded the National Socialist Front in Sweden in 1994 and who was sentenced to prison for involvement in the theft of the well-known Arbeit Macht Frei (Work sets you free) sign from the Nazi-run Auschwitz concentration camp in 2010, joined the fight against ISIS in Iraq in 2016. Högström said

> I am a Christian and belong to the Pentecostal church, so the purpose of my presence here is quite obvious. For me it is a matter of course to do this. What IS or Daesh expose the world to is not human and there are no grayscale. (Hult, 2016, para. 5)

Keith Lewis Broomfield, a then 36-year-old production manager of his family's manufacturing firm in the U.S., was killed in Syria in June 2015 making him likely the first U.S. citizen to die fighting alongside the YPG. Donna, Keith's mother, said "I didn't want him to go [to Syria] but I didn't have a choice in the matter…. He turned his life over to the Lord and he decided this was God's will and God wanted him to do it" (Omar et al., 2015, para. 2-9). Tom Broomfield, his father, remembering that Keith had gotten into trouble with the law, said "there was a lot of things that Keith tried that we won't even mention, but it breaks your heart to see your children do that" (Father of American Killed Fighting Isis, 2015, para. 5).

2.2.4 – Ideology

There are, as seen above, many different profiles of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters such as humanitarians, former soldiers, and adrenaline seekers. As the fight against ISIS lengthened, these profiles have become less common, providing more scope to the ideologues. As one anti-ISIS Western fighter said "politically speaking… [fighters] come from all the nuances of the extreme left including Trotskyism, Stalinism, IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] type and

insurgent neutral, 'apolitical' leftist, right-to-center-right, conservative or religiously enthusiastic Christian working class" (De Craemer, 2017, p. 34). However, among ideologically motivated fighters, the absolute majority has been the leftist. Captivated by the idea of starting a new revolution, in the interest of women's rights, democracy and freedom of religion, many Westerners have joined the YPG and the leftist brigades working with the YPG in northern Syria (*Fight IS, Start 'Revolution': Why Foreigners Join Syria Kurds*, 2017).

Brace Belden, a then 27-year-old American with no military experience before joining the YPG, described himself a "lumpenproletariat, a lowlife punk and petty criminal with a heroin habit who started reading Marx and Lenin seriously in rehab" (Harp, 2017, para. 5). Belden was in the YPG ranks fighting with "a group of about 75 hardcore leftists, anarchists and communists from Europe and America" when the major offensive to Raqqa was started in November 2016 (Harp, 2017, para. 3).

Kimberley Taylor, a then 28-year-old activist who was thought to be the first British woman to join the YPJ in 2016, was allured by the anti-capitalist and feminist ideology that she encountered while visiting the region on behalf of a newspaper. For Taylor, the reason to join the YPJ was their recreating a "society putting women at the front of everything" (Blake, 2017c, para. 18). She said, "I thought, why am I reading books in Sweden about politics when I can live in a revolution?" (*Fight IS, Start 'Revolution': Why Foreigners Join Syria Kurds*, 2017, para. 7). Taylor also added that "for so many years I've thought we need a revolution in Europe. In Europe everyone's depressed or has money problems or is losing jobs. Life is losing its meaning because of the capitalist system" (Blake, 2017c, para. 23). Later in 2018 Taylor said that "Isil are finished, but this isn't just a fight against Daesh. The YPJ will still be fighting, but this time for women's rights in the Middle East. We won't stop until the job is done" (Blake, 2018a, para. 15).

Anna Campbell is considered to have become the first British woman to be killed fighting with the YPJ against Turkish forces in Afrin in March 2018. Dirk Campbell, her father, told "that's why she went to Rojava: to help build a world of equality and democracy where everyone has a right to representation" (Blake, 2018c, para. 16).

Ivana Hoffmann, a then 19-year-old German woman and a member of the Turkish-Kurdish Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP), traveled to Syria in 2014 to join the YPG. In a video posted on social media after her death in March 2015, Hoffmann explained her motive saying "I decided to come to Rojava because they are fighting for humanity here, for rights and for internationalism that the MLKP represents. We are here as the MLKP to fight for freedom. Rojava is the beginning. Rojava is hope" (Khalil, 2015, para. 12).

Joaquin Diaz, a then 45-year-old truck driver from Spain with no prior military experience, joined the YPG in November 2018. He has later adopted the alias of Baran Guivara in tribute to Samuel Prada Leon, the first Spaniard who was killed in the northwestern Syrian region of Afrin in February 2018. When asked about his motivation to become an anti-ISIS Western fighter, Joaquin responded:

> In Spain I had a good life, I had a job, a house, a good car, family and many friends, but I had the feeling of an emptiness, I wanted to give a meaning to my life that was different from that which governs capitalist society, I learned the project of Rojava, and I decided to leave everything to come here. (Badia, 2019, para. 6)

A member of the socialist Bob Crow Brigade (BCB), when asked if he had any concerns about his personal security, answered: "Never…dying in a car crash is a tragedy, dying for socialism is an honour" (Dearden, 2017, para. 11). A British member of the International Freedom Battalion (IFB), founded in June 2015 by a group of leftist foreign fighters, said "I have absolutely no faith in liberal democracy's ability to resist fascism, only an international socialist movement can" (Blake, 2018a, para. 21).

2.2.5 – Lack of Belonging or Purpose

"A desire for belonging and a lack of purpose in their lives" have been sources of motivation for many anti-ISIS foreign fighters (Tuck et al. 2016, p. iii). For them, the war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq has served as an opportunity to fight and a cause to believe in (Blake, 2017b). Olivia Mefras, a Swedish fighter of the YPJ, said "we all want to do something meaningful. We know it doesn't make a difference to the people here -- they would fight anyway. But it makes a difference to us in our lives" (Hennessy-Fiske, 2017, para. 24). Jeremy Woodard, a U.S. Army veteran, who was fighting against ISIS in Syria and Iraq expressed:

> After I graduated, I went straight to the Army. I was 17 when I went in. And I just know war. That's it. I'm still searching. I'm still searching. Searching for what, I don't know, searching for a part of myself, where I belong. I belong in a place like this. (Biggs, 2015, para. 51)

Jac Holmes, a then 24-year old former Information Technologies worker and a decorator from the UK, was reported to be one of the longest-serving foreign fighters of the YPG with three tours to Syria since August 2015 when he died clearing mines in Raqqa in October 2017

(Farmer, 2017). His mother, Angie Blannin, while describing Holmes' motivations, expressed that

> He didn't feel like he was doing anything constructive in the UK; fixing computers and painting walls. He felt there were a lot of things happening in the world and he was angry at the apathy in the UK. This fight gave him a purpose he hadn't found in the UK. (Blake, 2018a, para. 6)

Mrs. Blannin later added for Holmes that

> He was just a boy when he left the UK, a little bit lost. He told me he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. But by going out there, he found something that he was good at and that he loved. (Farmer & Ensor, 2017, para. 7)

Tommy Mørck, a Danish now in his thirties, had lived his childhood and youth in a tumultuous home and usually changing country, school and job. In this context, Mørck said that he "never could find anything that could stick. Not people, not occupations, not places" (Harp, 2017, para. 42). Furthermore, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive disorder, and suffered from heavy depression. A year after discovering the YPG, he traveled to Syria to join the fight against ISIS (Harp, 2017).

Regarding the pursuit for belongingness and social acceptance, one anti-ISIS Western foreign fighter has written

> We live in a time of social media, and a constantly ongoing popularity contest here in the west [sic], and the members of my unit fell into the same ways. Photos were taken and uploaded onto facebook [sic] every minute, and the likes came pouring in. People that had been useless nobodies back in their country, suddenly found themselves admired, both on social media, but also when civilian locals would come up to you and pat your back and thank you in broken English. (Oldwornout, 2016, para. 6).

Foreign fighters on the other side of the Syrian conflict have been driven by similar push factors as well. Pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters have commonly experienced feelings of alienation and isolation as well as a lack of social bonds and belonging to their country. According to Tuck et al. (2016), "other factors common across both groups [pro-ISIS foreign fighters and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters] included boredom and a lack of purpose or meaning in life, tied to dissatisfaction with aspects of individuals' personal or professional lives" (p. 24).

2.2.6 – Trouble Adapting to Civilian Life

For some war veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, problems that they faced about adaptation to civic life on return to their home countries played an important role on their decision to become a foreign fighter. Adrian Bonenberger, a writer and a U.S. Army veteran who was also deployed at Afghanistan, explained this phenomenon:

> Their skill set was fighting and infantry…Then they came back [to the US] and they were qualified for very few jobs ... For those people, who felt alienated from society and didn't have sufficient social networks there to help them back in, to reintegrate them into the civilian world, there must be – and I know because I've felt it myself – a powerful draw to go and use those skills that you've accumulated and those experiences you had overseas and the acclaim you got when you were fighting the enemy. (Hawramy & Jalabi, 2015, para. 28)

Louis Park, a then 25-year-old former U.S. Marine veteran who also served in Afghanistan and later joined Dwekh Nawsha, said "I missed the combat from Afghanistan. I saw a lot of combat out there and I really missed it. I had difficulties adjusting to the fact I was going to be a civilian again" (Neuhof, 2015b, para. 16). Jeremy Woodard, while describing his feelings when he returned home after spending years fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan, said

> It was hard to get a job. You barely can get a job at McDonald's flipping a burger. They look at you, they see your resume for serving in the U.S. Army honorably, but they look at you like you're a hazard, you know, you're going to hurt somebody. (Biggs, 2015, Jeremy Woodard section, para. 1)

Likewise, some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, either with or without a military background, have had difficulty to adjust to civilian lifestyle on their return after fighting against ISIS in Syria or Iraq. Joe Robinson, a then 22-year-old former British soldier who fought for Kurdish forces for five months in Syria, compared his life in his home country and the combat zone. Robinson said

> When you go [to a war zone] with the military you're getting paid, you're getting lots of support, you have decompression and stuff like that. When I came back, I'd spent every penny I had to get over there, I left my job to get over there. I've had nowhere to live. I've come back with nothing, no support and nobody to talk to. (Halliday, 2016, para. 3)

For some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), joining a fight in any part of the world was far better than being at home. Jamie Lane,

an American former soldier with a four-year of service in Iraq, told "in order to aid my recovery from PTSD, I have taken it upon myself to fight on my terms, against an enemy I know is evil" (Janssen, 2015, para. 3). Bryan G., another anti-ISIS American foreign fighter who admitted his chasing for war in order to cope with his PTSD, said

> I'm having a great time out here [in Iraq]. I feel more comfortable here than I ever felt in America…. In the States, there is too much idle time, too much time just doing nothing or sitting around and drinking, or anything like that. It's better here. (Patin, 2015, p. 29)

2.2.7 – Escaping from a Criminal Past

There are documented cases of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters with criminal records who fled to Iraq or Syria to escape prosecution. Barry Hall, one of the most ill-reputed anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, traveled to Syria to join Kurdish forces before being sentenced to seven years in prison for rape and sexual assault (*Convicted Rapist Barry Hall 'Fought Islamic State' in Iraq*, 2016). Joe Robinson, a then 22-year-old Army veteran, left the UK to join the YPG in "Syria after a warrant was issued for his arrest in July. He'd admitted breaking a teenager's jaw but failed to appear in court" (Rkaina, 2015, para. 3).

Michael Windecker, a U.S. citizen presenting himself as a freedom-loving warrior of the Kurdish Peshmerga, had had 28 arrests that "range from domestic violence and weapons violations to the felony sexual assault charge, for which he was convicted and sentenced to two years" (Siegel, 2015, para. 10). Patrick Ryan Kasprik, a then 25-year-old American citizen, joined the YPG after he had been charged with spitting in a police officer's face, using some obnoxious language, and then drawing his fists (NBC2 News, 2017*)*.

Gill Rosenberg, a Jewish-Israeli-Canadian woman and a former Israel Defense Forces soldier who joined the YPG in 2014 and later to Dwekh Nawsha, was indeed seeking atonement for her extensively criminal past. Between 2005 and 2009, Rosenberg participated in a fraud that conned hundreds of US aged citizens more than $25 million (Hartman, 2015). After spending more than four years in prison Rosenberg contacted "Lions of Rojava" and traveled to Iraq. She said "I think to some extent I was trying to do the right thing. I guess it's [Syria and Iraq] the wrong place to seek redemption, but I try to make amends for my past" (Hartman, 2015, para. 18).

2.2.8 – Longing for the Military Life

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters having no prior military experience were yearning for living through the military life, its senses of purpose and camaraderie. For these fighters, joining an armed group in Syria or Iraq provided a chance to make their dreams come true. William Savage, a then 27-year-old cook, joined the YPG in January 2015. He became the second American to die fighting with the YPG against ISIS when was killed during the clashes in the city of Manbij. Reginald Savage, his father, said that enlisting in the U.S. army was William's ambition, but he was rejected due to an illness that he got through in his childhood (Kajjo, 2016).

Levi Shirley, a then 24-year-old American, had a dream to become a U.S. Marine throughout all his life. He was turned down because of his poor eyesight. Having lost his purpose of life and interest in school, Shirley decided to join the YPG in February 2015. His fellows in the YPG told after his death that Shirley had persistently claimed to have served in the U.S. Navy (Kelly, 2016).

Some veteran anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, as well, expressed similar motivations about their desire for another chance to be at combat or live the military camaraderie. For Patrick Maxwell, a former sergeant in the U.S. Marine, fighting against ISIS was a second chance. Maxwell, referring to his deployment to Iraq in 2006, said "we patrolled every day, got shot at, mortared, hit by I.E.D.s [Improvised Explosive Devices], one of my friends was killed…. But I never saw the enemy, never fired a shot" (Philipps & Brennan, 2015, para. 2). Jeremy Woodard, another U.S. veteran, stated "I'm living the kind of life I really want. It's not much, but I feel like I'm the richest person in the world right now, with what I have. Friends that you can actually count on …" (Muir, 2014, para. 5).

2.2.9 – Finishing the Job

"Finishing the job" is a feeling that some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have developed (Tuck et al., 2016). This feeling is pronounced mostly by veteran fighters who are driven by a frustration towards their governments' failure in ensuring the region's security (Silverman, 2017). Ex-military foreign fighters attributed different meanings to this sentiment.

Some veterans declared that they were actually struggling to complete the job that Western governments had initiated before (Silverman, 2017). They also described the region as a kind

of “second home” due to long-term military deployments there (Tuck et al., 2016). An American YPG fighter expressed

> My friends and I, when I was in the United States Marine Corps, fought really hard for the safety and security of Iraq, and when I saw ISIS was taking back control, I wanted to come and help the Iraqi people and the Kurdish people… (De Craemer, 2017, p. 29)

Some other veteran foreign fighters emphasized that they were trying to ensure their previous efforts and their own military compatriots that had been killed or injured were not in futile (Tuck et al., 2016). Pointing to the deaths of his soldier friends in Iraq, Woodard said “all those people who got killed over here for fighting for a cause, I didn’t want them to die in vain” (Biggs, 2015, Jeremy Woodard section, para. 2).

Several other veterans, on the other hand, blamed themselves for leaving the army before 9/11 and thus missing the opportunity of deploying to Afghanistan or Iraq (Orton, 2017b). John Gallagher, the first Canadian fighter to die fighting alongside the YPG, expressed this belief by saying “psychologically, I guess that makes it pretty easy to explain why a lot of us are here [in Syria]. We feel like there’s more that we could be doing. We feel like we haven’t done enough” (Logan, 2015, para. 16).

2.2.10 – Aggression, Adventure and Adrenaline

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are motivated by a desire to kill other people or “simply seeking an adrenaline-filled adventure” and excitement (Tuck et al., 2016, p. iv). Referring to some Western foreign fighters that obsessed with killing Muslims, a manager of the YPG’s foreign fighter training program said “we have this kind of people, which is weird, because most of the Kurdish people here are Muslims. But according to those people, everyone with any kind of relation with Islam must be killed” (Didziulis, 2016, para. 11). An administrator of the Facebook page of the YPG wrote that

> While we do get some activists and revolutionaries, as well as some specialists like scientists, engineers, etc., the majority are what we call ‘cowboys’… who don’t care about democracy, women or freedom. They just want to kill Islamists for nationalist or religious reasons, or just for the sake of killing. (Cohen, 2016, para. 6)

Patrick Maxwell, a former U.S. Marine who served in Iraq in 2006, said “when I’m enlisted, I’m there to serve my country, protect my country, obey the orders of the officers appointed

over me. As a private citizen, I'm going to have an adventure, essentially, and that's my own business" (Raphael, 2015, para. 3). Maxwell also articulated his disillusion about some American foreign fighters by calling them "guys who had nothing to live for and just wanted to lay down bodies" (Philipps & Brennan, 2015, para. 28).

In the sense of adventure and adrenalin, a then 28-year-old former Polish soldier, a week after returning from Syria where he had spent four months with the Peshmerga, explained his motive as "I missed the adrenaline. I tried bungee-jumping and sky-diving but nothing matched the rush of combat" (Blake, 2017b, para. 17). A then 31-year-old British man, operating under a pseudonym of Macer Gifford, have quit a top job in the UK to join the YPG in 2014. Before traveling to Syria to fight against ISIS, he worked with a human rights lawyer in Zimbabwe, protected boats from pirates in the horn of Africa, mapped the pygmy villages in the Democratic Republic of Congo – regarded as one of the most dangerous country in the world in that time, and involved in currency trading in Ethiopia and Somalia (Tomlinson et al., 2015).

2.2.11 – Fame and Monetary Gain

Alan Duncan, a then 46-year-old Gulf War veteran mentioned that

> The vast majority of people who come [to Syria or Iraq] don't last here and only come because they want some extra likes on Facebook and get their 15 minutes of fame. To join the Peshmerga is like applying for any job. You have to have a skill. You can't just be an Xbox warrior. (Hall, 2015, para. 33)

As stated before, some Dutch and German bikers joined the fight against ISIS in Iraq. A police chairman of German state of North-Rhine Westphalia, from where most of the German bikers are originated, announced that many of these individuals have been tried in connection with organized crime. According to the police chief, the main reason lying behind these bikers' fighting with the Kurds against ISIS may be to send a message to rival gangs that "you better watch out for us. We are damn tough" (Faiola, 2014, para. 7).

The case of Jamie Read and James Hughes was a good example of opportunism. Read and Hughes, former British soldiers, claimed that they had traveled to Syria to join the YPG in order to fight against ISIS to avenge aid worker Alan Henning's beheading. However, further investigation by the media revealed that they were in Syria not to fight but to prepare videos and pictures via which they could make money (Murphy, 2014).

Michael Enright, a British YPG fighter known for his minor roles in some well-known movies, annoyed other fighters due to his apparent lack of efficiency and his trying to sell his

story in combat (Shute, 2015). Jordan Matson, a former U.S. Marine who also acts as a spokesperson for anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, posted on Facebook that Enright was a "mentally unstable actor who was there to work on a movie script" (McKay, 2015, para. 9). Matson wrote that Enright, who was considered as a threat by his fellow fighters, "was in danger of being killed by one of many Westerners and Kurds who want to bury him" (McKay, 2015, para. 10). Matson even named several YPG volunteers that could authenticate this truth.

2.2.12 – Drifters and Lunatics

Kevin Howard, a then 30-year-old U.S. Marine Corps veteran, classified anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in three groups: (1) "the anarchists and socialists" or "the starry-eyed dreamers", (2) "the people that are running away from their past" and (3) "the people that are legitimately crazy" (Hennessy-Fiske, 2017, para 32). Parallel to this classification, many stories have been told about drifter and lunatic anti-ISIS foreign fighters such as "a British man who petted the dead ISIS bodies. Another who used his psychic abilities to hear ISIS fighters speak. … Another was known for looking around and saying, 'Did the C.I.A. send you?'" (Percy, 2015, para 34).

Harp (2017), while describing the characteristics of the early groups of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and how some of them behaved, said

> British and American veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, many of them evangelical Christians, who came to kill ISIS and were ignorant of the Kurds' revolutionary politics. They bickered among themselves and caused problems for the Kurds; a few of them did horrible things. Three separate times I was told of a British veteran known only as Tim [the Cannibal], a crack shot, and by all accounts a cheerful guy, who enjoyed tasting the blood of the slain and was once seen gnawing on a severed foot [of a killed ISIS member]. (para. 28)

Petti (2017) echoed from Robert Amos, an American Jew fighting in lines of the YPG, "one fighter declared himself an officer and tried to fight a Kurdish general, while another threw a tantrum and fired his gun over a lack of fast food" (para. 19). Amos added that "there were some people [anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters] that came that didn't get weeded out. People that you probably wouldn't want to sleep next to" (Petti, 2017, para. 20).

2.3 – Affiliations

The YPG, Syrian offshoot of the PKK, and the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq are the most preferred armed groups among anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Some other groups to fight alongside with are the Assyrian Christian militias, such as Dwekh Nawsha and Ninevah Plains Protection Unit, or the YPG's all-female YPJ units. Moving between different groups, on the other hand, is a common phenomenon among anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters (Tuck et al., 2016).

2.3.1 – The PKK/PYD/YPG and YPJ

The Kurdistan Workers' Party, commonly known as the PKK, was established by Abdullah Ocalan in November 1978. As declared in its first assembly, the PKK aimed at establishing an "Independent United Kurdish State" through getting hold of areas from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria (Gurcan, 2014). The PKK completed its preparation for armed actions in the period of 1978-1984. Within this time frame, the PKK built its force mainly in Syria and Northern Iraq. In August 1984, the PKK initiated an armed terrorist campaign against Turkey's national and territorial unity. "Among its tactics were suicide bombings, car bombs, kidnapping foreign tourists, attacking Turkish diplomats in Europe, as well as symbolic representatives of the Turkish state in the Southeast, such as teachers" (Roth & Sever, 2007, p. 905) doctors and nurses. The PKK attacked hospitals and burned hundreds of schools. Only between 1984 and 1987, did the PKK kidnap or kill 217 teachers (Philips, 2007).

Syrian regime has supported the PKK since its foundation. Benefiting from flagrant support of Hafez al-Assad's regime, the PKK headquartered in Syria from 1979 to 1998. In order to weaken its Northern neighbor – Turkey, Hafez al-Assad provided safe haven for both the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and the PKK's training camps (Ose, 2015). Bashar al-Assad, following his father's steps after his taking over the presidency in 2000, has encouraged thousands of Kurds from Northern Syria to join the PKK to fight against Turkey. Brandon (2007) from the Jamestown Foundation noted that the PKK had recruited almost twenty percent of its militants from Northern Syria. Kani Xulam, the head of the American Kurdish Information Network located in the Washington D.C., stated that in the last three decades nearly 5,000 Syrians were killed while fighting for the PKK (Goudsouzian & Fatah, 2012, para. 16).

On 16 October 1998, as a result of Turkey's increasing pressure, Syria signed the Adana counter-terror agreement, designated the PKK an armed terrorist organization and forced it to leave Syrian territory. Syria expelled Ocalan from Damascus in 1999. While in seek of asylum

in several European countries, the Greek government moved Abdullah Ocalan to the Greek embassy in Kenya, where he was captured by Turkish Special Forces. In June 1999, a State Security Court in Turkey convicted Ocalan of treason. His punishment was later commuted from death to life imprisonment at a high security prison on a Turkish island (Philips, 2007).

Ocalan, while in prison, underwent an ideological conversion. Influenced by the ideas of Murray Bookchin, an American socialist philosopher who developed the theory of "Libertarian Municipalism", Ocalan abandoned Marxist-Leninist nationalism and ended the PKK's demands for independence (Petti, 2017). In accordance with a pamphlet written by Ocalan in 2011 (Harp, 2017), the PKK adopted "democratic confederalism which calls for decentralized governance, direct democracy, religious freedom, ethnic pluralism, and gender equality" (Petti, 2017).

The PKK, in its 8th congress in 2002, changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) and announced its dedication to non-violent activities to leverage Kurdish rights (Keskin, 2008). More importantly, in this congress, the PKK determined to "create a Democratic Union Movement of Syria or Democratic Union Party, and support it ..." (Soylu, 2016, para. 12). To this end, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has been founded in 2003 as a subsidiary of the PKK in Syria. In this respect, Osman Ocalan, the younger brother of Abdullah Ocalan, said "I founded the PYD, as I did PJAK (the PKK's Iranian arm). We did not use the word 'Kurdistan' in the party's title since we did not want to provoke the Syrian regime. The PYD is connected to the PKK, and acts upon on PKK orders" (Soylu, 2016, para. 14).

Following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the PYD has emerged as one of the significant regional actors. While the Syrian Kurds opposing to the regime lost ground, the PYD came into prominence by establishing an alliance with the Assad regime. After simultaneous withdrawal of the Assad forces in a pre-arranged manner and handing local administration over the PKK in 2012, the PYD, together with some other smaller political parties, declared the so-called "Democratic Self-Rule Administration" in "Rojava". Indeed, to represent three cantons - Afrin, Jazira and Ain al-Arab (Kobani) - in Northern Syria, the PYD preferred "Rojava", a word meaning "the west" in Kurdish, instead of "Syrian Kurdistan" or "West Kurdistan". By doing so, the PKK tried to avoid infuriating the Syrian regime (Ose, 2015). The PYD-led administration founded law enforcement agencies such as security forces, courts and prisons. In 2004, the PYD formed an armed wing under the name of the People's Protection Units (YPG) (Acun & Keskin, 2017).

The YPG initially involved in the Syrian conflict to protect the Kurdish-majority regions. With support of the U.S. and several other countries, however, the YPG has become the West's primary ground force battling the ISIS (De Craemer, 2017). As Henri Barkey, a former U.S. State Department analyst, said, "the U.S. has become the YPG's air force and the YPG has become the U.S.'s ground force in Syria" (Bradley & Parkinson, 2015, para. 16). The cooperation with the YPG, nonetheless, has put the U.S. on a collision course with Turkey. At this point, as General Raymond Thomas, the then commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command, explained, the U.S. encouraged the YPG to rebrand itself to mask its PKK nature (Orton, 2017c). To this end, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which was formally a coalition of Kurds, Arabs and Assyrians but actually dominated by the YPG, has been founded in October 2015 (Orton, 2017e). Later acts of the SDF, nevertheless, such as raising a large portrait of the PKK leader Ocalan after the liberation of Raqqa, showed its true nature (MEE Staff, 2017).

Both the PKK and the YPG has been and still are open to foreigners, while the former has received a smaller number of Western foreign fighters. The more coverage the war against ISIS received, the more Western foreign fighters joined the PKK. Exploiting the strong effect that the images from the fight for Kobani has awoken on the Kurdish diaspora, the PKK has increased its recruitment activities in European countries. Many European countries, especially Germany, have served as a safe haven and a hotbed of recruitment for the PKK. Specially trained recruiters of the PKK have specifically tried to induce young men by fomenting their feelings of adventure, idealism and patriotism. Once new recruits were enlisted, they were sent to the Netherlands or Belgium to receive ideological training and then near the Turkish border for the military training (Diehl & Schmid, 2014). In November 2019, the BfV revealed that roughly 270 individuals had been recruited from Germany by the YPG/PKK (*YPG/PKK Recruits 270 Terrorists from Germany*, 2019).

The YPG, on the other hand, has received the most foreign fighters in Syria, only second to ISIS. In the early period of the conflict, subsequent to the PJAK's declaration of a cease-fire in Iran in September 2011, the PKK moved 3,000-4,000 militants into Syria (Times: Türkiye'den Ayrılan 1500 PKK'lı Suriye'de Savaşıyor [Times: 1500 PKK Members Who Left Turkey are Fighting in Syria], 2013). Additionally, in this period, a great number of Western foreign fighters traveled to Northern Syria to join the YPG (Ahmad, 2014).

The composition of the Western foreign fighters in the YPG has changed throughout the Syrian War. The initial wave of Western foreign fighters tended to be mostly non-ideological military veterans. As Orton (2017b) explained, military veterans "formed a clear majority of

the recruits in 2014, though that number has declined every year since as the YPG has altered its outreach strategy, focusing on the political far-left" (p. 3). In this period, some Western fighters departed from the YPG due to its extreme leftist ideology and joined other groups such as Dwekh Nawsha (MacDonald, 2015). As such, Orton (2018c) noted in March 2018 that "the majority of non-Kurdish foreign fighters with the YPG/PKK are far-left ideologues" (para. 29).

The YPG, while consists primarily of ethnic Kurds, includes Arab and Christian fighters as well. Despite YPG's claims to have more than 40.000 militants, the real number was assessed to be around 20.000-25.000 by some independent sources (Acun & Keskin, 2017). Within the YPG many other relatively smaller armed groups operate, such as the Women's Protection Units, or YPJ, and the International Freedom Battalion. Some of these sub-groups, the International Brigade for one, have been more virulent and ideologically committed than the YPG.

The YPJ is a female only brigade. The ultimate aim of the YPJ is to eradicate the patriarchal structure which they think that oppresses women, and design an equal society. As one of the senior members of the YPJ mentioned' "it's an ideological fight against the patriarchal system, it starts with fighting the mentality of Daesh, then the mentality of the male, the patriarchal mindset" (Townsend & Ochagavia, 2017, para. 31). In this respect, following the retaking of Raqqa from ISIS, the YPJ command stated that

> Women have freed themselves of the exploitative male regime in political, social, cultural and military aspects, and became a solution to the problems and builder of morals. The establishment of women's army against Ahrar al-Sham, Nusra and ISIS was a response to the powers in Syria, and a major step serving for the peoples of Syria. (MEE Staff, 2017, para. 4).

2.3.2 – The Peshmerga

The Peshmerga has been the second most successful group in recruiting anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters (Tuck et al., 2016). The Peshmerga, which means "one who confronts death" in Kurdish, is the military force of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. The force is divided between two rival Kurdish political parties: The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP or the KDP Peshmerga, as frequently named) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, sometimes called the PUK Peshmerga) (Patin, 2015). Accordingly, each of these political parties has exercised a firm control on the use of force within their zones.

The KDP and the PUK have adopted opposite official stance on recruitment of Western foreign fighters. The KDP Peshmerga, though initially let Westerners join, began to turn them away afterwards due to objections of Western countries. The PUK Peshmerga, on the other hand, tended to be consistently more lenient towards accepting Western foreign fighters (Neuhof, 2015b). One foreign fighter mentioned that "KRG rules regarding volunteers became gradually stricter soon after our arrival. KDP was trying to send them away or keep them off the frontlines, PUK would help them but did not have the power of renewing their visas" (De Craemer, 2017, p. 54).

According to Maxwell, an American foreign fighter, the reason why the KRG rejects foreign fighters is his coincidental meeting with the U.S. troops in Iraq. Maxwell argued that shortly after the American Special Operations Forces recognized him in the battlefield, the U.S. authorities instructed the Peshmerga not to allow American civilians engage in battle. Consequently, the Peshmerga declared an end to recruitment of foreign volunteers (Philipps & Brennan, 2015). Jabar Yawar, the secretary general of the Peshmerga, said

> We do not accept any foreigners joining the Peshmerga forces. We are an army, not a militia. The law does not allow us to accept these foreigners. Those volunteers who are now with the Peshmerga forces have nothing to do with us. (Hawramy & Jalabi, 2015, para. 41)

Kurdish authorities have urged other foreign states to deter their citizens' joining the Peshmerga (Kalin, 2016, para. 22). Instead of human supply, they asked for weapons and military equipment. A Kurdish officer said "we don't need exactly people to come fight for us. We need weapons. We need equipment, supplies from American government, from the — from different countries" (Biggs, 2015, para. 37).

The KRG's rejection of foreign fighters had an impact on other volunteers trying to join the PKK/YPG in Syria. Despite a brief period of cooperation in the second half of 2014 when ISIS attacked Kobane, the KRG generally had cold relations with the YPG due to considering the YPG as a subsidiary of the PKK. Especially after the clashes in March 2017 between the KDP and the PKK/YPG over territory and control in Sinjar, the KRG became tougher on foreign fighters and tightened border control. The KRG introduced imprisonment for illegal border crossings and fines for expired visas for foreign fighters of the YPG. Joe Akerman, a British YPG fighter, for example, was imprisoned due to an expired visa. Akerman said "it hasn't been like that from the beginning that [YPG] volunteers get into trouble with the KDP. In the beginning it was all cool" (van Wilgenburg, 2017, Crackdown on foreiners section, para. 4).

2.3.3 – The Assyrian Militias

Among a handful of Assyrian Christian armed groups, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters mostly preferred joining either Dwekh Nawsha or the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU). Both militias were formed in order to resist against ISIS's advance in north of Iraq in 2014 that caused displacement of tens of thousands of people (Cetti-Roberts, 2015). Both Dwekh Nawsha and the NPU are open to any Assyrian man, from the region or abroad, independent of the church or party affiliation. For the members of both militias, the main motive to join in has been the protection of the people in their ancient homeland. To this end, both militias hoped to amalgamate under a unified force. However, the Dwekh Nawsha works with the KDP Peshmerga, while the NPU go along with the federal Iraqi government (Henderson, 2014).

2.3.3.1 – Dwekh Nawsha

Dwekh Nawsha, whose name translates as "self-sacrificers" in ancient Aramaic, was established in late 2014 to defend Assyrian Christians from ISIS. Following the withdrawal of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in June of 2014 which let the Nineveh plains fell to ISIS, the Assyrian Patriotic Party felt necessity to form "lightly armed bands of politically-aligned militias" (Cetti-Roberts, 2015, para. 5). As Emmanuel Khoshaba, the leader of the Assyrian Patriotic Party, explained, main aim of Dwekh Nawsha has been to "show the world that Assyrian Christian people are not afraid of the fight for their rights and can defend their land if they have support" (Lucente, 2015, para. 13).

Dwekh Nawsha not only cooperates with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), but also receives material and funding from the KDP Peshmerga (Cetti-Roberts, 2015). Dwekh Nawsha is additionally sponsored by Christian and Assyrian communities living abroad. A Catholic charity, Aid to the Church in Need, for example, endowed $4 million between 2014 and 2017 (Allen & Martin, 2018).

Dwekh Nawsha was reported to consist of roughly 300 men most of whom had been trained by Sons of Liberty International (SOLI) since autumn 2015. Dwekh Nawsha has mostly recruited Western Assyrian and Christians. Additionally, Dwekh Nawsha has incorporated a handful of Westerners who did not join Kurdish groups. Such that, due to its religious nature, Dwekh Nawsha magnetized those foreign fighters who see themselves as modern-day crusaders, participating in a "holy war", or oppose the YPG's politics and ideology (De Craemer, 2017). An American Army veteran, called Scott, had initially planned to join the YPG,

but later changed his mind in favor of Dwekh Nawsha due to the growing suspicions about the YPG's ties to the PKK (Coles, 2015) and the YPG's leftist ideology as he called the YPG "a bunch of damn Reds" (Krohn, 2015, para. 24).

2.3.3.2 – The Nineveh Plain Protection Units

"The Ninevah Plains lie east of the Tigris [river] where it flows through Mosul. Historically, the area was home to many of Iraq's Assyrian Christians, who trace their ancestry to the ancient Assyrian empire" (Henderson, 2014, para. 4). From 2003 till June 2014 when the ISIS's advance started, security in the region has been provided by both the Iraqi federal forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga. Additionally, to work with these security forces, local protection committees were organized by the Assyrian Democratic Movement, a Christian political party in Iraq (Henderson, 2014). These committees, however, were not able to protect the region when the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army fled in face of ISIS, leaving a taste of betrayal in locals' hearts and minds.

The Assyrian Democratic Movement has formed the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) to safeguard uncaptured Assyrian towns and to reclaim their territory from ISIS (Nelson, 2015). It was reported in February 2015 that the NPU had 5,000 Assyrian men waiting to be trained while 500 were already under training and other 500 were in battle zone (Tsarpa, 2017). Athra Kado, an Assyrian Christian member of the NPU, said

> The idea is to help to retake our towns and villages, and after that to hold our ground. We don't want a repeat of what happened in Mosul with the Iraqi army, or in Nineveh with the Peshmerga. We trusted the forces in Iraq but they did not stay and fight, they did not even spend one bullet. (Neuhof, 2015a, para. 15)

The NPU, unlike Dwekh Nawsha, operates independently of the Peshmerga and trained by SOLI. SOLI makes public in its homepage that it has trained, advised and supplied the NPU since 2014. SOLI, furthermore, "provided more than half the funding for the construction of the first Iraqi Assyrian Christian military base" (*Current Missions,* n.d., para. 1) and continues to supply body armor to the NPU. Just as Dwekh Nawsha, the financial support of the NPU is coming mostly from various organizations affiliated with the U.S. Assyrian community and many non-Assyrian American donors. The Nineveh Plain Defense Fund, for example, has been established in 2016 upon the NPU's call for the creation of a direct funding organization with a purpose of easing the burden that the NPU "soldiers" carry on behalf of the Assyrian community worldwide (*About the NPDF*, n.d.).

2.3.4 – Left-Wing

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the composition of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who enrolled in the PKK and its subsidiaries in Syria, namely the YPG and YPJ, have dramatically changed over the course of the Syrian War (*Foreign Volunteers for the Syrian Kurdish Forces,* 2017). "The initial waves of non-Kurdish western foreign fighters to join the YPG tended to be largely apolitical military veterans" (Orton, 2018e, p. 161) whose main motive was to fight against ISIS in order to help persecuted populations. The YPG extensively used these fighters to spread its message in pursuit of immediate help from the West. When western support was obtained, the YPG began to show its extreme-left nature. Those who joined the YPG and YPJ thenceforth tended to be coming from the hard left. While those who were unaware of the extreme-left nature of the YPG began to depart (MacDonald, 2015), scores of anarchists, socialists, and Marxist revolutionaries began to fill up the YPG and YPJ ranks (Soner et al., 2017).

The PKK, thus, has coalesced not only its regional subsidiaries such as the YPG and YPJ, but also many other far-left terrorist organizations such as the Turkish Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP) and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C) (Soner et al., 2017). Furthermore, new radical leftist groups, working within existing structures of the YPG have constantly been formed.

In February 2017, the Carter Center released an overview of different leftist foreign units in Syria. As seen in Figure 1 (*Foreign Volunteers for the Syrian Kurdish Forces*, 2017), there are two main coalitions of far-left groups: The Peoples' United Revolutionary Movement - Halkların Birleşik Devrim Hareketi in Turkish - and the International Freedom Battalion (IFB). While the Peoples' United Revolutionary Movement contains mostly Turkish Stalinist, anarchist, Marxist-Leninists and Leninist groups, the IFB includes units that are explicitly comprised of Western foreign fighters (*Foreign Volunteers for the Syrian Kurdish Forces*, 2017, p. 1). It is also important to notice in Figure 1 that some units have multiple affiliations.

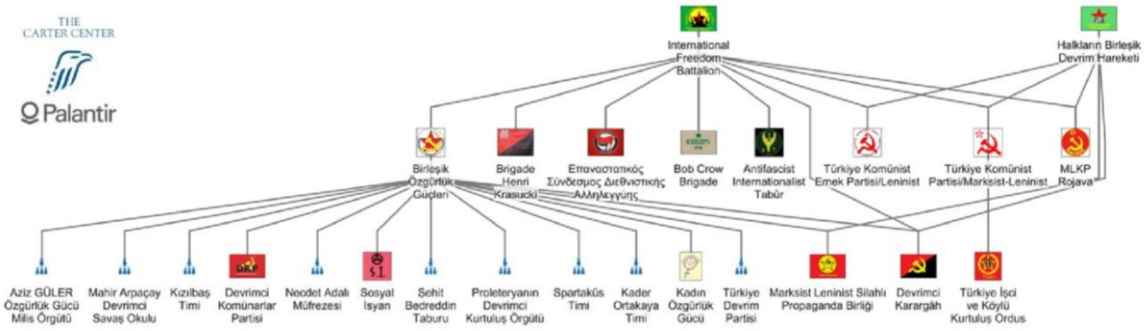

Figure 2.1 Chart of Foreign Units in Northern Syria

Note: From "Foreign Volunteers for the Syrian Kurdish Forces," by The Carter Center, 2017, p. 1 (https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/foreign-volunteers-for-syrian-kurdish-forces-2017.02.23.pdf).

The International Freedom Battalion (IFB) is the largest leftist group of non-Syrian communists, anarchists, socialists and revolutionaries fighting ISIS under the aegis of the YPG. The IFB, inspired by the International Brigades that were set up during the Spanish Civil War in the second half of the 1930s, was established in Northern Syria in June 2015 (Orton, 2015). An umbrella organization, the IFB consists of several Turkish and Western leftist groups, Figure 2 (*Foreign Volunteers for the Syrian Kurdish Forces*, 2017, p. 2).

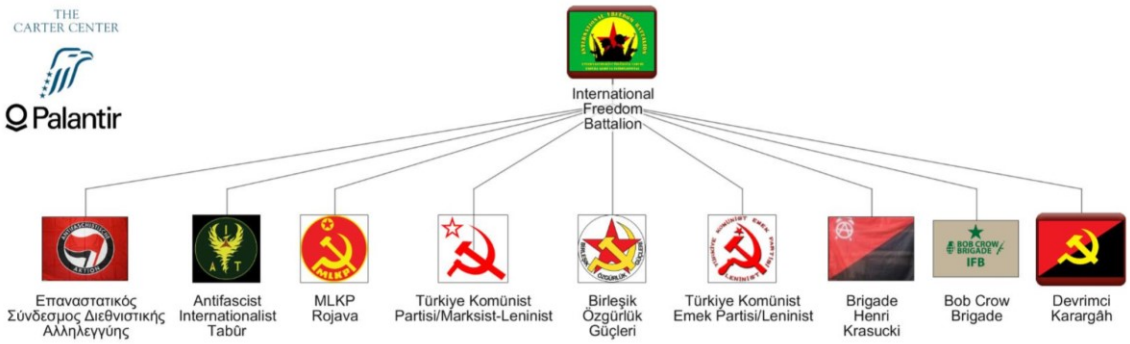

Figure 2.2 Chart of IFB Subunits in Northern Syria

Note: From "Foreign Volunteers for the Syrian Kurdish Forces," by The Carter Center, 2017, p. 2 (https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/foreign-volunteers-for-syrian-kurdish-forces-2017.02.23.pdf).

Turkish-origin leftist organizations, such as the Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist–Leninist (Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist - TKP/ML), the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (Marksist-Leninist Komünist Parti - MLKP) and the United Freedom Forces

(Birleşik Özgürlük Güçleri - BÖG), claim a dominant role within the IFB. The BÖG, the largest group within the IFB, was founded in December 2014 as a joint organization incorporating other Turkish leftist organizations like the Revolutionary Communard Party (Devrimci Komünarlar Partisi), the Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Union-Revolutionary Front (Marksist Leninist Silahlı Propaganda Birliği), the Revolutionary Party of Turkey (Türkiye Devrim Partisi), the Social Insurrection Front (Sosyal İsyan Cephesi), and the Proletarian Revolutionary Liberation Organization (Proletaryanın Devrimci Kurtuluş Örgütü). The BÖG, has a women's unit, as well, the Women's Freedom Forces (Kadın Özgürlük Gücü).

In addition to abovementioned groups, there are more units within the IFB that have explicitly recruited Western foreign fighters. These units have pledged allegiance to the IFB and coordinated directly with the YPG (*Foreign Volunteers for the Syrian Kurdish Forces*, 2017). The Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity (RUIS), an anarchist military group from Greece; the Communist Reconstruction (Reconstrucción Comunista), an outlawed Spanish Marxist-Leninist political party which has strong ties with the MLKP in Turkey; and the International Antifascist Battalion (Antifascist Internationalist Tabur or ANTIFA) are made up of Western foreign fighters from a multitude of countries. Some other fairly small local groups are the socialist Bob Crow Brigade (BCB), named after a well-known British trade unionist; the Henri Krasucki Brigade, a similar French group emulating the BCB, and the International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), a militant group formed by international anarchist fighters. In July 2017, a new unit of Western foreign fighters from the LGBTQ community who call themselves The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army, or TQILA, joined the IFB (Orton, 2017d).

2.3.5 – Promoters

Some private organizations have decided to support war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Among all, two U.S.-based nonprofit groups, Sons of Liberty International (SOLI) and Humanitarian Defense Abroad (HDA) have edged ahead. Founded by Western veterans and funded by overseas groups, mainly from the U.S., SOLI and HDA have championed the interests of oppressed peoples in Syria and Iraq. SOLI and HDA have not only delivered combat training but also organized crowdfunding campaigns to help locals obtain the equipment, medical supplies, and infrastructure needed to oppose ISIS.

Pavol Kosnac, an independent scholar based in Bratislava/Slovakia, studies on "Combat charities." Kosnac (2017) defines "Combat charities" as the "entities that seek to provide

military and political assistance to weaker armed groups or minorities resisting the military onslaught of others" (p. 1). Kosnac (2017), analyzing the military and political effects of "Combat charities" mentioned that

> Both SOLI and HDA also teach commanders and leaders of the groups with which they cooperate how to communicate with Western media. They assist them in promoting their narratives and attracting Western attention. Significantly, both combat charities taught and assisted the armed groups they mentor in how to engage officials in the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government. (p. 2)

2.3.5.1 – Sons of Liberty International (SOLI)

Sons of Liberty International, or SOLI, a self-proclaimed private security contracting company, has been founded by Matthew VanDyke. VanDyke, as his website defines, is an American award-winning filmmaker, freelance journalist, mercenary, self-described freedom fighter, International Security analyst, media commentator, public speaker, blogger, and writer (VanDyke, n.d.). In March 2011, VanDyke joined the fight in Libya along with the rebels who were trying to overthrow the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Later, in late 2011, regime forces held him as a prisoner of war for more than five months. He managed to escape during a prison riot and returned to combat (McLaughlin, 2015). VanDyke explained that his Libya adventure facilitated him gaining insight into complex character of the fight against ISIS (Hawramy & Jalabi, 2015). As such, in summer of 2014, when ISIS began attacking Assyrian Christians in Iraq, VanDyke offered help to train a militia to defend their territory against ISIS (McLaughlin, 2015).

VanDyke explained the reason lying behind the foundation of SOLI as "the international system has failed communities around the world in recent years, and there needs to be an organization capable of rapid on-the-ground action to step in and help when the international community fails to do so" (Rodricks, 2015, para. 10). While describing the role of SOLI, he said "… Sons of Liberty International, provides free military consulting and training to populations facing threats from terrorists, insurgent groups and oppressive regimes" (Rodricks, 2015, para. 9). On a broader perspective, SOLI, according to its website,

- provides military strategic, media, and other consulting to oppressed or threatened communities,

- helps equip and sustain oppressed and threatened communities by providing not only training, but also non-lethal tools and supplies for local forces to be successful,
- provides periodic humanitarian aid, like food and clothing, and sponsors charity events for holidays like Christmas and Easter. (*Services we offer*, n.d.)

VanDyke hired former U.S. military professionals as trainers. In this regard, he said

> A lot of guys did important stuff overseas and came home and got stuck in menial jobs, which can be really hard. We offer them kind of a dream job, a chance to do what they are trained to do without all the red tape and PowerPoints. (Philipps & Brennan, 2015, para. 9)

Despite the allegations proposed by VanDyke and the veterans that they do not participate in battle, there are still some legal consequences of their service. A U.S. government authorization, for example, has to be obtained in order to provide a military training to foreign nationals. VanDyke, however, appears not to be paying heed to such legal concerns. He said "generally, the attitude of the United States seems to be as long as you shoot in the right direction they don't care" (Narciso, 2015, para. 16).

2.3.5.2 – Humanitarian Defense Abroad (HDA)

Humanitarian Defense Abroad (HDA) is a non-profit security organization run by Lu Lobello, a U.S. Navy veteran (Leventhal, 2015). HDA, in its homepage, defines its mission as

> We intervene in human rights crises, seeking to provide one of the single greatest human need virtually ignored by all other humanitarian relief organizations: security.
>
> In order to accomplish this, we examine the genocides and human rights crises that are going on around the world and work to create and foster partnerships with friendly local national allies. Our volunteers to link up with our partners on the ground to augment their security, surveillance, civil affairs, and offensive capabilities in order to secure a favorable outcome that upholds the life, value, and agency of those afflicted. (*Our Mission,* n.d.)

On the contrary of SOLI's providing battle training to regional communities, HDA "rather focuses on facilitating the embedding of specialized volunteers from abroad - whether with military background or without - into Kurdish units in need of particular skillsets" (Kosnac, 2017, p. 2). From this perspective, HDA defines itself as

> A veteran-centric organization, largely comprised of individuals who have served in modern campaigns in the Global War on Terror and have the training and acumen for the task. HDA gives vets the chance to serve again in the most uniquely dynamic capacity that uses their specialties and experiences gained in the military. (*Our Mission,* n.d.)

2.4 – Recruitment and Vetting

Over the long historical course of foreign fighting, transnational violent armed groups employed various strategies to recruit tens of thousands of foreigners to fight in wars. These groups, according to Malet (2010), commonly tried "to recruit foreign fighters by framing distant civil conflicts as threatening a transnational identity group with which the recruit is closely affiliated" (pp. 99–100). To this end, vulnerable individuals have been encouraged to join a conflict and fight to defend their perceived identity.

As for the Syrian Civil War, the recruiters of both mainstream groups, namely ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham on one side and Kurdish, Assyrian and Christian groups on the other, consistently emphasized the necessity of participation of target audiences for the reason that their common group was under an existential threat. Aiming to increase their human resources, both groups have extensively utilized social and personal networks as well as media to develop "a collective sense of identity, pride and persecution, and in doing so create a moral obligation to fight" (Tuck et al., 2016, p. 31). Having said that, the tactics and methods that both groups used for recruiting and vetting outsiders relied on "the level of sophistication and maturity the group has achieved in cyberspace" (Hader & Forster, 2018, para. 8).

ISIS tailored its recruitment efforts in order to target specific audiences, such as western youth, the female or specialists like doctors and engineers, to attract set of needed skills. It has generated a great variety of propaganda materiel in many languages. ISIS has also mastered the use of online social media posts and publications to disseminate specifically prepared recruitment narratives (*Overview of Daesh's Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine*, 2015). The quality of the videos was professional with smooth transitions, carefully chosen images and special effects designed to deliver the core message (*The ISIS Propaganda Machine*, n.d.).

Unlike ISIS, those groups fighting against ISIS have produced far less propaganda and recruitment material and in less professionalized, less proactive and less violent manner. Lacking well-funded and professionalized media centers, these anti-ISIS groups have mostly

relied on separate websites and social media pages in recruitment and vetting of Western foreign fighters. The first contact between anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and armed groups in Syria and Iraq has mainly been established through social media. Besides, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have used the social media platforms in establishing networks, raising funds and facilitating their travels (Tuck et al., 2016). While the primary social media platforms used by anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have been Facebook and Instagram, some profiles, pages and content are also present on numerous other platforms, including Twitter, Youtube, Reddit and Liveleaks (Tuck et al., 2016).

The widespread use of social media has not only allowed anti-ISIS armed groups to reach prospective individuals, but also helped them vet new recruits. Besides Facebook and Twitter, some other services like Skype and Kik Messenger have also been used to authenticate the identity and learn the skillset of recruits. By way of developing trust, indoctrination and isolation from previous community with the help of social media means, anti-ISIS armed groups systematically recruited those who served their needs, thus, improved their organizational effectiveness. (Hader & Forster, 2018).

Some of the main websites and social media pages, that anti-ISIS armed groups in Syria and Iraq have used for recruitment and vetting, are discussed below.

2.4.1 – The Lions of Rojava

The great majority of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq to battle ISIS have joined the YPG. The most common way to join the YPG has been through their online foreign recruitment arms: The Lions of Rojava Facebook page and the YPG International website. While the Lions of Rojova served as the main port of recruitment until the end of 2016, the YPG International website has taken over this role since then.

The first banner of the Lions of Rojava Facebook page was a Photoshop image of foreign fighters holding guns next to a giant lion in front of a smoke of ruined towns. The page's initially declared mission was to convince prospective fighters to join the YPG "to send terrorists to hell and save humanity" (Paraszczuk, 2014, para. 6). Later, in harmony with the shift in recruitment strategy of the YPG, the page has changed the description to: "It's time Supprt [sic] #Rojava_Revolution, Fight for an emerging model of Equality, Freedom, Democracy and Social Justice in Syria and the middle east! [sic]" (*The Lions of Rojava*, n.d.).

Many would-be recruits started by leaving a message on the Lions of Rojava page showing their intent to join the YPG. Many posted personal details as well. Due to the limited capability

of the group running the page, only few of the applicants were responded. Those who were replied received an online questionnaire, asking about their political and religious views, motives for joining, basic knowledge of Syrian War, and the YPG's ideology (Ganesan, 2016). Applicants who were assessed as fit for purpose were then directed to an encrypted messaging service.

For some of the Westerners, the recruitment process was very quick and simple, while some others were put on hold for months or never replied. Clay Lawton, a then 26-year-old American, received an invitation to join the YPG only a day after his first messaging the page (Percy, 2015). Firas Vancouver, a then 23-year-old correctional officer working in a high-security prison in Canada, said "it was probably less than a month from when I sent the first email that I was on a plane to start my journey" (*Fight IS, Start 'Revolution': Why Foreigners Join Syria Kurds*, 2017, para. 18). Kyle Causey (2017), on the other hand, sent a message to the page on March 2017 saying

> iv [sic] asked since 2014 how to join sending messages after message, and no reply by anyone id [sic] love to come over there and help but its [sic] hard when no one will message you about it and it kills my hopes and dreams so honestly [sic] im [sic] starting to think this is all just a hox [sic] a scam that its [sic] just a joke! because [sic] me and my friends wants [sic] to come help we really do but how can we help what we are starting to think is not real?

Lions of Rojava were also used by the YPG to request support from the western audience for getting rid of its terrorist status. The page offered to potential YPG fighters a final piece of advice:

> The fight against ISIS is a noble one and the Kurds need our help without a doubt. … express your solidarity with the Kurdish people and write letters to Government demanding that they drop the PKK from the terrorist list ... (Paraszczuk, 2014, para. 26)

Lions of Rojava has a website, YPG International, which declares itself to be the "official YPG page for international fighters" (*About YPG International*, n.d.). YPG International provides information about Rojava and the YPG. The website also publishes YPG and YPJ related photos, news stories and obituaries. Potential recruits are requested to get in contact with the page via encrypted e-mail.

2.4.2 – International Peshmerga Volunteers

The Peshmerga, similar to the YPG, have utilized social media aimed at attracting attention to their cause and recruiting foreigners since early 2014. Thanks to their Internet-based recruitment process, the Peshmerga have recruited hundreds of Western foreign fighters. Patrick Maxwell, one of the first U.S. Army veterans to join, for example, got in touch with a Peshmerga officer via Facebook and offered his service. Maxwell said, "it was surprisingly easy, I just booked a commercial airline ticket and told my clients I was going backpacking in Asia" (Philipps & Brennan, 2015, para. 20). As he reached Sulaymaniyah, the same Peshmerga officer was waiting for Maxwell at the airport.

Social media groups, often run by English-speaking foreign fighters, paved the way to more sophisticated recruitment websites and application programs. A great many of foreign fighters who joined the Peshmerga have been easy to reach on social media since the very beginning of their tour. By and large, they have run Facebook pages keeping their contact information public. Kevin Williamson, an American in his early twenties with U.S. Army experience, said "when somebody posts, 'Hey, how do I get over [to Iraq or Syria]?' I'd basically contact them, I would vet them and make sure they are who they say they are and pass them to the proper channels" (Hawramy & Jalabi, 2015, para. 15).

Among the growing number of social media requests from applicants to become Western foreign fighters, the Peshmerga observed that many of candidates do not have appropriate qualifications (Hader & Forster, 2018). The Peshmerga, thus, developed several recruitment websites to inform, vet, and evaluate foreign fighters. Each website took the name of the application program that it included.

The first website and the application program were both known as the Foreigner Registration, Assessment, Management and Extraction (FRAME). Each applicant was requested to fill in an online form providing basic personal information such as name and surname, date and place of birth, social security and/or passport number, service experience in military, and criminal record as well as medical, allergic or psychological conditions (Hader & Forster, 2018). The FRAME website described its role as

> to assess the candidate for their experience and skill set. Manage the candidate once they arrive in Kurdistan and ensure the candidate is placed in a proper military unit where their particular skill set is needed. We also manage the extraction of the candidate from their unit when their service is complete and

ensure they make their appropriate flight home. (van Wilgenburg, 2015, para. 25)

The FRAME was replaced by a more complex website called the Legion. The Legion provided applicants with a list of requirements including items such as effective communication in English, former military experience, a basic military fitness level, at least 12 weeks of commitment (with a 4-week probationary period), and $200 a month for personal upkeep/spending. The site, furthermore, offered "a very basic list of kit" (Patin, 2015, p. 34) that is helpful for daily life in combat environment. The Legion application website outlined the joining process,

> When you come to Kurdistan our team will pick you up at the airport. You will be met by fellow Americans/Brits. You will be securely transported to the barracks. You will spend a minimum of a week with us to shake off the jet lag, train at the range, finish your processing, assign you your weapon and ammunition, and ensure your family at home has all necessary emergency contact information to us. Lastly, during this process we will be evaluating your skill set you provided, mental state, and leadership ability. (*Kurds Are Openly Recruiting*, 2015, para. 9)

Both the FRAME and the Legion websites and their social media pages are now defunct. Recruitment efforts of the Peshmerga are currently being carried out on a website called International Peshmerga Volunteers (IPV). Established in 2014, IPV is run by the Kurdistan Regional Governments Ministry of Health and Ministry of Peshmerga. Their mission, announced in the IPV website, is

> to provide a complete solution for volunteers wishing to work in the region, we guide people through a process from the initial stages of vetting to becoming a fully fledged member of the International Peshmerga Volunteers team and deploying to provide training and mentoring services. (*What We Do*, n.d., para. 1)

IPV webpage declares to have "provided a safe route of passage for 80+ International Volunteers, integrated foreign volunteers into Peshmerga units and provide constant manpower in the area" (*What We Do*, n.d., para. 4). Would-be recruits are asked for a minimum of 3-month deployment, paying their own travel expenses and at least $200 a month for personnel spending. Despite claims of the IPV that they are only providing training but not actually joining the fight, some videos circulating on social media have shown otherwise (Tuck et al., 2016, p. 35).

2.4.3 – The Veterans for the Protection of Christians against ISIS

Christian militias in Syria and Iraq as well as the Westerners who joined these groups gradually became adept at using social media to recruit other foreign fighters. Brett Felton, for instance, the first foreign fighter to join Dwekh Nawsha, also acting as a recruiter, brought in five Westerners with military or contracting experience in his first week (Krohn, 2015). Tim Locks, a then 38-year-old former construction worker, explained that he joined Dwekh Nawsha after speaking to Felton. Locks declared that it was Felton's candid and friendly manner that allured him initially and then the honest and inflexible recruitment procedure of the group (Wyke, 2015).

Veterans Against ISIS was a non-profit organization made up of the U.S. military veterans who intended to combat ISIS in order to safeguard local Christian people in Syria and Iraq. Sean Rowe, also a former U.S. Army soldier, founded Veterans Against ISIS in February 2015 (Kraychik, 2015). He said, "I was gripped with a passion to go, so I threw up a website so I could find other people who would go with me, because I didn't want to go by myself" (Hawramy & Jalabi, 2015, para. 19). Rowe also launched a website, GoFundMe, to raise funds and recruit other veterans. Rowe, eventually, was able to recruit more than two dozen of American veterans, most had served in Iraq or Afghanistan.

2.5 – Mobilization

Pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters used a variety of routes combining air, ground and sea lines to join the fight in Syria and Iraq. Most of these fighters, especially those traveling from the U.S., Canada and European countries, preferred the air route. "Broken flying", consisting of several consecutive flights on different airlines, was the most preferred method to disguise the end destination at the initial security check. Thanks to the Schengen Agreement that enables crossing borders within the EU without a security check, many EU passport holders took their first flight from outside their home country. As an additional measure to avoid suspicion, a great number of pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters bought a two-way ticket (Masi, 2015).

Those pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters, not able to take the air route due to being on a no-fly list or lacking appropriate documentation, suffered a long journey from the ground or seaway. While the most common ground route was through the Balkans to Bulgaria or Greece then entering Turkey, the sea route involved leaving from Greece and Cyprus and passing Eastern Mediterranean by boats, by ferry or hiding among the cargo of ships passing to reach

the ports of Turkey. Upon their arrival in Turkey, the ISIS online recruiters connected pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters with local contacts who drove them to the border and smuggled into Syria or Iraq where they were picked up by ISIS fighters (Masi, 2015). Anecdotal evidence suggested that the group that a pro-ISIS Western foreign fighter joined was randomly determined by his or her arrival date and time or in some cases representative of whichever group appears in the safe-houses first (Obe & Silverman, 2014).

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, on the other hand, could make more factual travel plans than pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Thanks to longstanding connection with their virtual foreign recruiters, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were more knowledgeable about how to act and which group to join well before they reach the region (Tuck et al., 2016). Keeping the advice of their recruiters, some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters did not tell the truth to their families about their joining the fight in Syria or Iraq. Ryan Lock, a British chef in his 20 and without previous military experience, for example, lied about going to Turkey for a holiday before he traveled to Syria (Blake, 2017a). Ashley Johnston, as another example, told his family that he was doing humanitarian work in the Middle East. Amanda Johnston, his mother, noted that she only learned the truth when she was informed about her son's death. She added that "if I had known he was going over there I would have done everything I could to stop him from going" (Loveluck, 2015, para. 7).

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters followed various paths to travel to Syria and Iraq. Traveling directly to Turkey or Iraq by plane, though paying for their own flight, was the most favorite method. While many of them traveled through Turkey, others flied via Europe or the Gulf. There were some examples, however, traveled to different destinations in Europe to mislead the law enforcement and intelligence communities before they head to Iraq (Keck & Graham-Harrison, 2016). While traveling to the region, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were not allowed to carry any weapons. Nonetheless, they could have some tactical equipment like armor protection and military field rations with them (De Craemer, 2017).

The primary destinations to join up with an anti-ISIS armed group were Sulaymaniyah and Erbil both of which were under control of Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). During the border controls, the KRG issued a free temporary visa, which was later replaced by a residency visa. Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were routinely given firearm licenses by the group they joined (De Craemer, 2017).

Once on the ground, their contact on the other side of an encrypted messaging service provided anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters with a phone number for further instructions. When reached, the person on the phone gave an address to one of the safe houses where they spend

the night, sometimes with other newcomers (Didziulis, 2016). Belden, an anti-ISIS American foreign fighter, recalled how everything was organized when he arrived in Sulaymaniyah to join the YPG. He said "if you're a white twenty something taking a cab from the airport by yourself, the cab drivers just know" (Harp, 2017, para. 37).

As the last step to join the group or unit, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were taken to specific sites in Iraq for military and ideological training or smuggled into northern Syria. If it was one of the armed units operating in northern Syria, specifically the YPG or YPJ, that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters would join, crossing the border was kind of a special operation. Since the KRG closed the border between Iraq and Syria to foreigners going to or coming back from Syria, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters had to cross the border "probably in the dead of night, across a small river, and then walking eight hours or more" (Didziulis, 2016, para. 15).

2.6 – Training

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, upon their arrivals in Syria or Iraq, are admitted into a military and ideological training, the sophistication of which depends on the hosting armed group. Those Western foreign fighters of the YPG, for example, are subjected to a mandatory training program for a month in a deserted oil facility dubbed as the "Academy". Therein, new recruits are instructed basic battlefield tactics, the use of locally available (mostly old Soviet) weapons, basic Kurdish, and socialist and feminist ideology of the YPG (De Craemer, 2017).

Jordan MacTaggart, a then 21-year-old American fighter, had his first travel to Syria in April 2015. MacTaggart flew to Iraq where he was placed to a safe house by the YPG and then taken to a two-week mountain camp which run by the PKK. After leaving the PKK camp, MacTaggart and some other anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were smuggled to Syria by crossing the Tigris River with a boat. Once in Syria, the group were taken to the YPG Academy.

Seth Harp, a journalist with a military background, traveled to Iraq and then made himself smuggled to Syria to report on the Western leftists fighting against ISIS. Harp (2017) explained

> All volunteers arriving in Rojava attend a month-long training course at a place called the Academy, an oil facility with four concrete buildings, running water, intermittent electricity, a laundry line and a potato patch. … In the barracks, they slept five to a room on floor mats, their rucksacks and rifles stacked in the corners. At dawn they went for a run in uniform, carrying Kalashnikovs. The rest of the day, recruits attended classes in weapons training, anarcho-feminist ideology and rudimentary Kurmanji. (para. 16)

An anti-ISIS Western foreign fighter, recalling his own experience in the Academy of the YPG, told

> The YPG academy has a lot of ideological, political, and historical education. It also included philosophy and its own Jineology classes (sociology of women). It's really like a [sic] academy. One's education there can be short or long, it depends. I was in the academy for a month and a half. The military academy is pretty basic. There are a lot of daily life routines, with an emphasis on how to stay in a team and work together, such as self-discipline and cleaning weapons. There are also academies for specialist military skills like sabotage and sniping. (*Experiences in Rojava: Interview with an Anarchist YPG Volunteer*, 2017, para. 14)

On the Peshmerga side, Western volunteers undertake a two-week basic military training. Being placed in a camp with the others, who share similar languages, the recruits learn using the AK-47, machine guns, shoulder-fired rocket launchers and sniper rifles. During the training, Western foreign fighters become accustomed to the terrain, learn basic command and strategies in Kurdish and perform unit level exercises and live fire practices (Hader & Forster, 2018).

The International Peshmerga Volunteers (IPV) website, managed by the KRG Ministry of Peshmerga, provides some details about their training for anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters:

> At the moment our program works over a 5 day period from Sunday – Thursday on Friday we usually return to one of the cities where a hotel is arranged, wash clothing, get good food and relax before starting the new week again on Sunday. Each week we train roughly 30 soldiers who are broken down into smaller groups of 10.
>
> Day 1 and 2: Classroom based.
>
> Day 3 and 4: Cover practical drills of treatment, patrolling, extraction under fire and reaction to effective enemy fire.
>
> Day 5: Course testing day, course photos and course graduation. (*Deployment Information*, n.d., para. 2).

As for the training of the recruits of the Assyrian militias, namely Dwekh Nawsha and the NPU, SOLI played the major role. In December 2014, SOLI established a camp near Mosul to train the NPU (Rodricks, 2015). In one-month-length training, a typical day started with physical exercise and continued with "combat simulations" which include basic military tactics such as "room clearing," "military operations in urban terrain," "mortar employment" and "communicating and coordinating targets" (McLaughlin, 2015, para. 14).

Not all anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters did reflect positive thoughts about the military training they had upon their arrival in Syria or Iraq. Andrew Woodhead, a then 44-year-old truck driver, returned to Canada after getting injured in a landmine explosion in Syria. Woodhead expressed his disappointment with the YPG for not preparing foreign fighters with appropriate training and basic fighting technics. Instead, according to Woodhead, the main aim of the training given by the YPG was to brainwash foreign fighters in Kurdish nationalist beliefs (Bell, 2017).

Catherine, mother of Ryan Lock who took his own life not to be captured by ISIS fighters in December 2016, expressed she had no respect for the YPG. She spoke

> If it wasn't for them [YPG] my son wouldn't be dead. They got him across the border into Syria. They are taking young people and putting them in combat situations with very little training and, surprise, surprise, parents are losing their children. (Morris, 2017, para. 7)

2.7 – Life in the Theater of War

Instructors of the anti-ISIS armed groups used the military and educational training phase to decide a role in the battle zone for each recruit. While some Western foreign fighters were immediately sent to the frontline, others were kept away despite their desire to fight. New recruits with little military experience were less likely used in forward roles. Instead, they were mostly engaged in secondary tasks. A Canadian retired teacher, for example, was steered to teaching English to Kurdish YPG members after showing his incompetence to load a weapon (Spencer, 2015). Dean Parker, a then 49-year-old grandfather who joined the YPG, returned home after 10 weeks without firing a single shot. Parker, therefore, recommended those "wannabe" volunteers to refrain from joining Kurdish groups. Parker suggested to "those who want to come to fight: Stay home. Stay safe. Care for your families. Those thinking they are going to be in those movie YouTube firefights, it ain't gonna happen" (Parhlo, 2015, para. 7).

Henry Tuck, from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, mentioned that most of the time groups fighting against ISIS preferred keeping anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters away from the battlefield taking into account the unfavorable publicity that would arise in case of their death (Dearden, 2016b). As one disillusioned anti-ISIS American fighter who left the YPG noted

> We were never really engaged in combat. We were never really taken to an area that could be considered the frontline. We were treated very poorly. We were

> kept in very poor conditions, and the only time we were put in good accommodations was in preparation for interviews for media that were coming through. (Wolf, 2015, para. 3)

Jaklin (2015), explaining the reasons why armed groups fighting against ISIS resisted sending Western foreign fighters to the frontline, reminded the likelihood of their becoming valuable targets for terrorist and criminal organizations. According to Jaklin, ISIS placed huge bounties on the heads of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters while criminal groups try to kidnap the Westerners for ransom. In this respect, Ben, a then 30-year-old British veteran who had had two deployments to Iraq, mentioned that "as a Westerner, the moment you step off the plane there is a $150,000 bounty on your head. That's dead. Alive is a lot more" (Blake, 2017b, para. 7).

New recruits with a robust prior military practice or a set of skills, on the other hand, were immediately assigned to one of the fighting units after their training. In their units, major roles that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters played were to attend in combat or to provide specialist tactical, logistical or medical support. They were also training local fighters and militias for guerrilla tactics such as urban warfare and bomb manufacturing.

Western women joining the YPG or YPJ, in opposition to their counterparts in ISIS, were able to participate in combat, although the levels of action they experienced were relatively limited (Tuck et al., 2016). Kimberley Taylor, for example, a then 28-year-old British citizen who left her study at a university to be able to join the fight against ISIS, was assigned to the combat media team of the YPJ, taking, editing, and publishing photos of the battle (Blake, 2017c) after taking training in Kurdish language and the PKK ideology (*Fight IS, Start 'Revolution': Why Foreigners Join Syria Kurds*, 2017).

Before being assigned to a unit, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were provided with a rifle, military clothes and a flak vest that can take four magazines with 30 bullets each and two grenades. Generally, equipment was sorely lacking. Therefore, most fighters arranged their own weapons and armor. Only a very few lucky fighters could carry a small bag containing emergency medical supplies such as plasters and tourniquets (Townsend & Ochagavia, 2017). In this respect, Hanna Bohman, a then 46-year-old Canadian fighting ISIS alongside the YPJ, mentioned that many foreign fighters, male and female, have died from curable injuries or wounds due to lack of medical assistance (Dinshaw, 2016).

A 25-year-old British, nom de guerre Gary Oak, who was fighting with the Bob Crow Brigade described a typical day on the frontline

> Each Tabur [battalion] is split into Takim [team] of ten, and your day-to-day life is with your Takim. We each have a guard duty of an hour throughout the night, then we all get up at 5.30 and do exercise in front of whichever building we are living in – at the moment it's a house, before that we were in a school. A different person is responsible for cooking each day. After breakfast, some head off for training, meetings or missions, and about half stay to be on guard throughout the day. Most people sleep in the hottest part of the day having used the morning for work. In the evening we have a team meeting called a Tekmil where we practice criticism and self-criticism, and our commander lets us know what will be happening for us next. (Costello, 2016, para. 13)

MacTaggart, a then 21-year-old American fighter of the YPG, portrayed the battlefield conditions as "… just dirt and rocks. It's nothing, there's nothing out there. I would call it a desert but it's not sandy, just dirty. It just feels of nothing. The one thing that grows out there is weeds. It's all hell" (McNulty, 2015, para. 61). Dean Parker, another Western foreign fighter of the YPG, said "life on the front is anything but fun. Its [sic] cold, rainy, muddy, no heat, no hot water, your [sic] gonna [sic] get sick a lot, mice, crappy food, protein and vitamin deficiency" (Parhlo, 2015, para. 8). The food is mostly taken from the poor residents of nearby villages. Thus, a meal consists of flat pita bread, tomatoes, onions, potatoes or eggplants. Losing excessive amounts of weight due to malnutrition is very common among anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters (Harp, 2018). Hanna Bohman, for example, after losing 30 pounds in six months, was forced by the YPJ to return to Canada to take back some of the weight she'd lost (O'Malley, 2017).

Kimberley Taylor, a then 28-year-old British with no military experience before joining the all-female YPJ, said

> Life on the frontline begins at 5am with a breakfast of tinned chicken, a curiously colourless substance with the texture of tripe. Occasionally tins of sardines show up, but there is always an inexplicably generous supply of Dairylea cheese triangles. Cigarettes are another constant. Everyone smokes. Showers are a luxury. Weeks without washing is normal. Dysentery is common, stomach gripes routine. Toilets are a hole in the desert, loo paper a thing of memory. (Townsend & Ochagavia, 2017, para. 43)

The YPG gave a nom-de-guerre in Kurdish to each one of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Ryan Lock, for example, was named as Berxwedan Givara (Resistance Guevara),

Sjoerd Heeger as Baran Sason while Dean Evans took the nickname of Givara Rojava (Guevara of the West) (Blake, 2018a).

All anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were asked to make a "martyr's video", a short statement of intent, in case they were killed. Oliver Hall, a then 24-year-old British, declared in his video that "I came here of my own free will, knowing all the risks and consequences that can follow. While being here, I've received language training, political history and background. Greetings to all my family and friends if unfortunately, you are reading this" (Blake, 2017d, para. 18). Having had no military experience before, Hall was fighting with the YPG for only three months when he was killed while clearing booby traps in the recently liberated city of Raqqa in November 2017 (Farmer, 2017).

Those anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who were killed in action, were announced as "martyrs", their photos were displayed on billboards, and their videos uploaded and distributed through social media. Based upon their families' decision, their deaths were either sent back to his country or buried after a ceremony (De Craemer, 2017).

Chapter 3 – Threat Assessment

Foreign fighters have taken part in various conflicts throughout history and played notable roles. Foreign fighters of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1980s, for example, became heavily involved in the Bosnian War of the 1990s, the Algerian Civil War from 1992 to 1998, and the Chechen Wars between 1994 and 2000 (Mendelsohn, 2011). More important than their roles in conflicts, foreign fighters have led to emergence of new transnational terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaida, founded in 1988 by Osama Bin Laden, being the most prominent example. Security officials in Western countries, however, generally paid little attention to foreign fighters returning from the Soviet-Afghan War during the 1980s and 1990s. For the U.S., the al-Qaida attacks of 11 September 2001, known as 9/11, have materialized the threat, consequently, culminating in declaration of War on Terror and invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

As Renard et al., (2018) argued, nearly a decade after the U.S., in a similar way, Europe, paid a horrendous toll due to disregarding foreign fighters returning from the Syrian War. Early returnees of pro-ISIS foreign fighters in 2012 and 2013 were not thoroughly investigated since their intentions were not properly evaluated (Byman & Shapiro, 2014). Based on this misjudge, they were believed to pose a low-level threat. But then again, a period of violence caused by ISIS-linked returnees, which started in May 2014 with an attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels and followed by the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016, have drastically changed the European approach to returning pro-ISIS foreign fighters. As the awareness about potential threat that returnees might pose increased among European countries, the criminal code considering terrorist crimes has been enlarged and, accordingly, returnees have been systematically prosecuted.

Although the number of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters is small, and the number determined to take the fight to the West may be even smaller, there are still legitimate concerns. Firstly, if some Western foreign fighters from one violent armed group have produced terror, some of their counterparts in other groups can definitely do the same. As Koch (2019) explained, like pro-ISIS foreign fighters, ideologically motivated anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may go through a similar process of radicalization and turn to violence under the influence of their worldview. Definitely, this does not automatically mean that all anti-ISIS will become terrorists. Yet, some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters already have common features with previous terrorists. Comparing general characteristics of some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters to the findings of psychologist John Horgan would reveal this fact. According to

Horgan (as cited in DeAngelis, 2009), people who are more open to terrorist recruitment and radicalization tend to:

- Feel angry, alienated, or disenfranchised.
- Believe that their current political involvement does not give them the power to effect real change.
- Identify with perceived victims of the social injustice they are fighting.
- Feel the need to take action rather than just talking about the problem.
- Believe that engaging in violence against the state is not immoral.
- Have friends or family sympathetic to the cause.
- Believe that joining a movement offers social and psychological rewards such as adventure, camaraderie and a heightened sense of identity. (para. 7)

Secondly, some of the armed groups that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have joined, be they far-right or far-left, have espoused and openly declared a global war against some other ideologies, governments and companies. Being once a member of one of these groups, some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, upon their return to their home countries, may stay committed to their unit's terror-based cause. Hegghammer (2013) defines this process as "enlistment" that "refers to a trajectory in which the foreign fighter is drawn into domestic fighting by a calculating second party" (p. 10). Hegghammer explains how a foreign fighter would act in this process:

> His own initial intention was to join a foreign insurgency, but he finds himself in a training camp operated by a group with plans to attack in the West. The recruit may or may not be aware of the group's international ambitions when joining. Over time he develops a sense of loyalty to the leadership and makes friends with fellow trainees. At some point he is asked about his general willingness to serve the organization by participating in an operation, the details of which may or may not be known to him. Peer pressure, a sense of loyalty, and/or a lack of exit options make him accept. (p. 10)

Some far-right extremist groups in Ukraine, for example, have indoctrinated foreign fighters in the same way Al-Qaeda and ISIS have done with jihadists (Hume, 2019). In this respect, a number of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who also fought in the Ukrainan War in ranks of far-right violent extremist groups raise an issue of concern. The Soufan Center sounds this warning:

> Just as Afghanistan served as a sanctuary for jihadist organizations like Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in the 1980s, so too are

> parts of Ukraine becoming a safe haven for an array of right-wing violent extremist groups to congregate, train, and radicalize. And just like the path of jihadist groups, the goal of many of these members is to return to their countries of origin (or third-party countries) to wreak havoc and use acts of violence as a means to recruit new members to their cause. Unlike jihadis who are attempting to strike Western targets, though, radicalized white supremacists have the added advantage of being able to blend in seamlessly in the West… (*IntelBrief: The Transnational Network*, 2019, para. 4)

Lastly, returning anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may resume their ideological war in their home countries and lead to a rise in global sociopolitical polarization. As Ali Soufan, a former FBI agent and head of the Soufan Group, observed that far-right extremism has the earmarks of what is already experienced with jihadism (Johnson, 2019, para. 1). Far-right extremists and violent jihadists radicalize in nearly similar ways and "feed the fears and hatreds of one another" (Anderson, 2019, para. 3). "Just as Salafi-Jihadists provoked the extreme right, so too has the extreme right provoked the extreme left. Additionally, Salafi-Jihadists also provoked the extreme left" (Koch, 2019, p. 7). This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that jihadists also provoke the extreme left. There is, thus, every reason to assume that this three-sided reinforcing cycle will lead to more attacks from each side. In this spiral of violence, it is highly likely that some battle-hardened anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters use their experience and connections to continue their struggle in their home or third-party countries.

The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to assess if and to what level anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may pose a threat to domestic and international security. To this end, in the first place, the capabilities of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters will be analyzed, in the second place, the possible threats that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may pose, and their intentions, either self-declared or disclosed by law enforcement agencies, regarding each one of these threats will be assessed.

3.1 – Capabilities

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, despite the vast variety in their backgrounds, can be broken down into some sub-groups in different sizes. Former soldiers, primarily from the U.S. and British Armed Forces, establish the largest group. Some of these veterans had had trouble reintegrating to civic life after military service and suffered from depression or PTSD. Ideologically motivated individuals formed the second largest group of anti-ISIS Western

foreign fighters. While some of the ex-soldiers had a far-right political agenda, the great majority of ideologues were far-leftists including anarchists, communists, revolutionists, socialists, Marxists, Libertarians and anti-fascists. Other relatively smaller groups within anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are the seekers, who are in search of aggression, adventure, adrenaline, fame or purpose of life as well as the criminals, some with a truly illegal history. Though these three groups are distinct, there are still some overlaps between them. That is to say, it is possible to come across some anarchist veterans who are seeking for aggression.

Magnitude of the abovementioned groups in the overall composition of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were different in particular periods of the Syrian war. Veterans and Westerners living an ordinary life with no prior military experience were among the forerunners in the first years of the conflict. Seeing horrid videos on TV, they were motivated to defend local populations and stop the atrocities perpetrated by ISIS. Such that, they regarded their participation in the conflict as a religious or humanitarian duty. In the following years of the Syrian war, on the other hand, ideologues have become the dominant group.

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were already part of ideological movements, actively participating in marches, protests, occupations and blockades, before their mobilization to Syria or Iraq. Indeed, it was in these circles that they first heard about ongoing Syrian war and consequently adopted the cause of an organization whether it is far-right counter jihadist, far-left revolutionist or pro-Kurdish. When they joined an armed group in theater of war, their ideological indoctrination continued during initial training camp and then in their units. As an example, during the military and ideological training camp of the YPG that last for a month, newly recruited westerners “read books on guerrilla tactics by Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, and Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp” together with the PKK texts (Bauer, 2019).

Many Western left-wing radicals have regarded Syrian War as their “generation’s version of the Spanish Civil War” (Harp, 2018, para. 3). Besides, they have been attracted by the YPG’s alleged “Rojava Revolution”. Motivated to be part of a new revolutionary entity in the Middle East that purportedly promotes democratic confederalism, decentralized governance, women’s empowerment and ecology, scores of leftists flocked to the region. For instance, Alina Sanchez, a then 25-year-old anarchist from Argentine, joined the PKK in Iraq in 2011 while still amid medical school. (Erbetta, 2019). Seeing her ardent devotion to its cause, the PKK decided to send Sanchez back to Latin America to spread its message and ideology. Therein, Sanchez represented the PKK in the peace talks between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), an internationally recognized Marxist-Leninist terrorist group with which the PKK has had a longstanding relationship, and the Colombian government. Sanchez returned to Syria

to join the YPJ in February 2015. She died in a car accident in Afrin in March 2018 while fighting against Turkish Armed Forces (Cartier, 2018).

For some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, joining the revolution in Syria have also provided favorable circumstances to increase their militant skills. In this regard, some members of the International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF) said

> We decided to come to Rojava to defend the ongoing social revolution unfolding here and in the broader region. We wanted to support the revolution not only with words and with solidarity events but with our physical presence and our lives… Additionally, we wanted to learn as much as we could about tactics and practices from the various militant Apoist and communist parties as well as create a space for anarchist militants in the revolution. (*Building Anarchist Forces*, 2017, para. 3)

As mentioned before, many pro-ISIS foreign fighters have embraced jihadist ideology only after they got together with hardened fighters in battle zone (Zelin, 2013a). Likewise, some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who did not join the fight due to their political convictions, have adopted the ideological cause of their unit during their stay in the region. Hevi Sores, for example, a British revolutionary fighter of the YPG who only uses a moniker, said

> I didn't come to Kurdistan with the mindset of a revolutionary. In fact I never would have imagined myself as a revolutionary before I left. I came here expecting to dabble around the edges of a revolution, applying my material skills where they're needed for a year before returning home to my privileged life. I knew this attitude would be challenged but I didn't realise it would be challenged so much, for what I have witnessed here is not some experiment in democracy or temporarily occupied space, but the most important democratic upheaval in modern history. When you find yourself part of something so important, something that tens of thousands of people have shed their blood for, it is impossible to stand on the sidelines as an observer. (*Hêvî Şoreş*, 2019)

Robert Renas Amos, an Israeli citizen who fought for the YPG in 2015, tried to use Islamic issues to support his unit's cause. In January 2018, Amos shared a hadith from Prophet Muhammad in his Facebook page that says "before the end of the world, you shall fight Turks; whose eyes are small and noses flattened and who have ugly reddish faces like hammered shields" (*Amos*, 2018). Then, he asked all his Muslim friends if "all Muslims have to believe this." In a comment following this share Amos explained that by doing so he was "only wandering if the polemics of Islam can be useful for the Kurdish struggle."

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have adopted their unit's cause at all costs. Turkish authorities arrested a Frenchwoman at the Istanbul airport in September 2016. Having fought in the ranks of the YPJ in Syria, she was accused of planning a suicide attack in Istanbul on behalf of the PKK (*Turkey: A French Woman Arrested & Accused*, 2016). Some others, on the other hand, have embraced their units cause even though not fully comprehending. A British fighter of the YPG said "I didn't and still don't fully understand their [YPG's] whole cause, I liked the general things they aspire to: women's liberation, multiculturalism, secularism, local democracy" (*Interview with an AFN Activist Fighting in* Syria, 2016, para. 5).

As expressed by Rodger Shanahan, an expert of Middle East security issues at the Lowy Institute in Australia, when westerners join one of the armed groups in Syria or Iraq, they not only become hostage to the group's political agenda, but also to its military demands. Thus, they deploy with their units wherever and whenever required (Shanahan, 2017). In this regard, some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, who initially traveled to the region to fight against ISIS, stayed after the defeat of ISIS and moved with their units to other battle zones to defend YPG-held areas against the Turkish Armed Forces' operations in northern Syria.

Thinking that the outgrowth of ISIS threatened the existence of the Kurdish people in Syria and Iraq, an increasing number of individuals from the Kurdish diaspora in West have mobilized to the region to support their brethren. In this period, some websites inspired by Christian Fundamentalism assisted a holy war or "reverse jihad" against ISIS (Jayakumar, 2014). Johan Cosar, a then 32-year-old Swiss-born former army officer with Syrian Christian origin, traveled to northeastern Syria to work as a journalist in 2012. When he saw the advance of ISIS on Christian communities, he took up arms and joined the Syriac militia. During his two years in Syria, thanks to the military skills he had acquired in the Swiss army, Cosar advised the militia, helped set up the Syriac Military Council, and recruited and trained hundreds of westerners. In the Syriac Military Council, also known as MSF, Cosar became a commander of more than 500 men (Foulkes, 2019). Moreover, alongside the MSF, which is allied with the YPG, he participated in battles in other cities of Syria, like Raqqa (van Wilgenburg, 2019a).

The great majority of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, except those who have been considered as militarily useless and assigned to unimportant jobs such as cooking, have significantly increased their combative skills during their stay in the region. Together with the ideological indoctrination, their military training has started in the initial training camps. During the mandatory basic military training, two-week for the Peshmerga and month-long for the PKK, YPG, Dwekh Nawsha and Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU), all new recruits have been instructed in battlefield tactics, use of weapons and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

They have performed unit level exercises and live fire practices as well. Those who joined Dwekh Nawsha and the NPU have taken their military training from ex-soldiers who were hired by Sons of Liberty International (SOLI) specifically for instructional purposes.

Upon completion of the initial military training, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have been assigned to their units. Therein, they have gained more proficiency in terms of weaponry, urban tactics and use of guerrilla warfare. They have improved their leadership abilities and their efficiency in carrying out attacks, either independently or under direction. In some cases, they have had a chance to work in close coordination with troops of the coalition forces. In addition to continuously reporting suitable targets for air attacks via smartphone app devised by the UK and the U.S. Special Forces (Nicol, 2017), they coordinated air-strike requests directly with the coalition forces (Harp, 2018).

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have become familiarized with terrible scenes of inhumanity, many different forms of violence and even war crimes during their stay in combat zones. They have become more battle-hardened, brutalized and prone to violence. Steve Kerr, a former British soldier who spent two years fighting for the YPG in Syria, said “I’ve shot at a lot of people. How many I’ve killed, I don’t know” (Ridley, 2017, para. 4). Steve Krsnik, a Canadian veteran of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, fought as a sniper in an international unit called the 223 which was a part of the YPG. Krsnik, had 37 confirmed kills. According to other fighters in his unit, it was indeed more (Bell, 2016). A 44-year-old Spanish anti-ISIS foreign fighter who calls himself with his Kurdish name of Arges Artiaga, has had three tours in northern Syria with the YPG. Upon his return to Spain after his first tour between February and the end of June 2015, he was charged with the murder of 28 jihadists. The case was finally dismissed by the Spanish National Court. On the other hand, once in his third tour, Artiaga said “don't ask me how many Daesh jihadis my unit has struck down. Among those killed by rifles and those killed by American bombs thanks to the coordinates provided by my group, they could accuse us of a real massacre” (Barber, 2017, para. 3).

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, especially veterans, have become instrumental in training and advising not only new recruits but also to local fighters in their units. Karim Franceschi, a then 28-year-old militant leftist from Italy, joined the YPG in October 2014. After two years of service, the YPG allowed Franceschi to form a separate unit of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Being assigned as the commander, Franceschi named his platoon-sized unit as the Antifa International Tabur. Having learned Kurdish, Franceschi was also authorized to attend the council of the YPG and liaise with high level executives. In following five months, Franceschi recruited and trained new members. Eventually, Franceschi built “a mixed platoon

of ideological and ex-soldiers" (Harp, 2018, para. 22). Kevin Benton, a then 25-year-old Scotsman who served as a British infantry in Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, taught the platoon appropriate military tactics such as "moving down a street with 360-degree security, approaching a compound from a distance and clearing a room by 'cutting the cake' around a corner, sweeping every angle" (Harp, 2018, para. 21). The Antifa International Tabur took part in many combat operations.

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have kept a low profile from the very beginning of their journey to Syria or Iraq. Refraining from the social media and refusing to be interviewed, they have tried not to leave any trace of their involvement. Others, on the other hand, have started to release statements and videos through their social media accounts and also through other online platforms from the very first day of their travel. As they have attracted more public attention, they have created more media products and writings for publications. They began to appear more often on TV and radio channels worldwide. They have constantly garnered online followers. Such that, many anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have reached huge social media followings and hero status among their supporters. Macer Gifford (n.d.), for example, has had more than 30,000 followers on Facebook. One anti-ISIS Norwegian fighter, who introduces himself as Mike Peshmerganor, has had more than 78,000 followers on his Facebook page and 169,000 followers on Instagram (Peshmerganor, n.d.).

The number of documentary films about anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and the armed groups that they have joined in Syria and Iraq have remarkably raised as well. All these films have been widely advertised and praised in the mainstream western media providing a valuable opportunity for anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters for propaganda. For example, three anti-ISIS fighters of the YPG, Joshua Bell, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, Karim Franceschi, an Italian communist, and Rafael Kardari, a Swedish bodyguard with a Kurdish origin, were main characters of a film named "Our War." The film was made up of interviews with the three men and their personal footage from the front lines in Syria. At its premiere at the Venice Film Festival in September 2016, all three fighters in YPG uniforms and many other supporters waving signs and flags in favor of the YPG came together on the red carpet (*Our War Premiere 73rd Venice Film Festival*, n.d.).

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have written several books about their experiences in Syria and Iraq. In 2016, both Karim Franceschi and Rafael Kardari published their autobiographies named "Il Combattente" (The Fighter) and "My Life at Stakes" respectively. Among the books written by other anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, "Fighting Isis" of Tim Locks, "Fighting Evil: The British City Broker who went to War Against ISIS" and "Fighting

Evil: The Ordinary Man Who Went to War Against ISIS" of Macer Gifford are only a few to mention.

Not all anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters returned to their home countries after their term in Syria or Iraq. Some have sought new conflicts. For many of these fighters, Ukraine was the most convenient option. Damien Rodriguez, an American citizen, fought alongside the YPG between 2015 and 2018. After leaving the YPG, Rodriguez joined a Ukrainian militia (Rodriguez, n.d.). Kevin Benton and Josh Wilmeth who had previously fought with the YPG, have fought alongside Ukrainian forces against the Russian-backed separatists in Donbass as well (Harp, 2018).

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, who could not return to their home countries due to legal reasons, have traveled to other countries. Robin Zane, a German citizen who fought as a sniper in the YPG, left Syria when the war against ISIS slowed down (Terrorfightingrobin, n.d.). He, then, went to Medellin, Colombia, and gave gun training and organized tactical military training programs. Later, he passed to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Having become aware of an arrest warrant for himself in Germany, Robin hid from authorities in a slum area of Rio de Janerio (*YPG'ye Katılan Almanların İkilemi* [The Dilemma of Germans Joining the YPG], 2019).

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters those who returned home have become regular spokesmen of the units and the cause for which they fought in Syria or Iraq. They have regularly released messages and given talks to their native audience through all available media means. They have attended events and rallies. Macer Gifford, for instance, fought against ISIS for three years in lines of the YPG and the MSF. Returning to the UK, he has become "a human rights campaigner" and begun working for a group named the "Friends of Rojava" (Gifford, n.d.). He has participated many meetings and given interviews and speeches in numerous Western countries for "beating the drum of Rojava in every corner of the globe!" (Gifford, 2019b, para. 1). Sometimes he requested all his "comrades" to write to their congress person or parliamentarian to educate them to reach a "political solidarity" for the SDF, in general, and the YPG, in particular (Gifford, 2019a).

Networking has been an important capability that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have developed before, during and after their service in Syria and Iraq. Before traveling to conflict zone, they have established links with other like-minded individuals and Western foreign fighters who had already been in the region. Some were able to raise funds to finance their travel expenses with the help of these networks. Some far-right networks in the West recruited volunteers and managed their "crusade" against ISIS (Cantarero, 2016b). After making their

decision to join the fight, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have become part of a transnational network which was capable of arranging their journey, reception, being located in a safe house and then smuggled to the location of the armed group.

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have continued to build formal and informal networks during their stay in the Syrian-Iraqi battlefield. Through these networks, they have intensively engaged in recruitment activities for their units. Since all the armed groups in Syria and Iraq have recruited foreign fighters mostly through social networks, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters from various parts of the world have been crucial assets for communication with the new recruits. Several posts on social media regarding their stories of victory and comradery have attracted large numbers of would-be fighters.

The Lions of Rojava page, for example, was constructed on Facebook by Jordan Matson. Having been discharged from the U.S. Army for having PTSD, Matson became the first documented Western foreign fighter to join the YPG in October 2014. Soon after his participation in combats, Matson got wounded in his foot because of a mortar attack by ISIS. His story drew attention to the fight against ISIS, thus, prospective fighters from across the world began to contact him through social media hoping to follow his example. Matson, while recovering in a hospital, initiated a recruitment campaign on Facebook named "Lions of Rojova" (Hader and Forster, 2018). With the efforts of Matson, over 400 foreign fighters joined the YPG from western countries until June 2015 (*400 Foreign Fighters Join Syria's YPG,* 2015).

As another example, Danielle Ellis, a then 29-year-old Oxford graduate from the UK, had initially tried to get in contact with the YPG to become a foreign fighter. Not getting a reply from the YPG, she traveled to northern Syria in December 2018 to support the revolution as a non-combatant (Hall, 2019). In November 2019, Ellis shared a video on her Twitter account which she had prepared together with a guy called Rok from Catalonia. The video was related to anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters that they had met during their time in Syria. The aim of the video was to start a global mobilization to bring more foreigners to northern Syria. In her post, Ellis directed prospective foreign fighters to contact @CommuneInt to join the revolution as a civil volunteer or @HeyvaKurd to use their medical skills (Ellis, 2019). Later in her Twitter page, she said "there's been a huge influx of intl [international] volunteers since we released this video and structures like the @CommuneInt & @HeyvaKurd are still dealing with a big backlog of requests" (Ellis, 2020, para. 1).

Through social media, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have been in contact with managers or personnel of private security firms as well as local Kurdish people or groups sided

with foreign fighters (De Craemer, 2017). In one case, Andre Hebert, a French YPG fighter, shared in his Facebook page a post from another French citizen, Joan Frances, who was trying to set up a working group to organize a boycott campaign against Turkish companies. Joan's intention was to establish a team of people with knowledge of Turkish banks and their customers in Europe, as well as travel agencies and European companies importing Turkish products (Hebert, 2019). In another case showing social media cooperation between Western foreign fighters of different wars, Chris Garett, a British veteran who had fought in the far-right Azov battalion against separatists in eastern Ukraine (Allen, 2015), helped Jeremiah Woods, a U.S. veteran, who was raising money by crowdfunding before joining the Kurdish militia in Syria or Iraq to fight against ISIS (Garrett, 2018).

In addition to anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters themselves, their supporters have created spin-off groups as well. Furthermore, these groups have built transnational networks with other similar groups around the world. Rojava Solidarity Worldwide, founded in March 2018, has been "a [Facebook] page maintained by internationalist antifascists and anarchists who support the Rojava Revolution in Northern Syria" (*Rojava Solidarity Worldwide*, n.d.). Nearly 8.800 people are following this page. In Spain, the Facebook page of Apoyo Voluntarios Españoles contra DAESH (Support Spanish Volunteers against DAESH) (n.d.) has nearly 25,000 followers. In France, a Facebook group called "Collectif des Combattantes et Combattants Francophones du Rojava" (the Collective of French-Speaking Combatants of Rojava) (n.d.) have had more than 10,000 followers. Upon French government's decision to pull out its forces from northern Syria, the group issued a press release in October 2019. Addressing to the active and retired French soldiers, anti-ISIS French fighters of the YPG requested French soldiers not be subjected to the cowardly decisions of their Military Staff and the French government. They encouraged the French soldiers to talk around themselves, educate their comrades and their officers to make France stand on the side of the YPG and continue the fight in Syria (Collectif des Combattantes et Combattants Francophones du Rojava – CCFR [Collective of French-Speaking Combatants of Rojava], 2019).

The capabilities that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have gained by means of foreign fighting have come at a price. Spending long periods in a conflict zone has left significant traumas on many anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. As Joe Akerman, an anti-ISIS British fighter of the YPG, explained "… no one came back from there [Syria and Iraq] without mental scars" (van Wilgenburg, 2019b, para. 12). A considerable number of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, mostly veterans, had already been suffering from PTSD before traveling to the war zone (De Craemer, 2017). Some had suicidal tendencies. Indeed, joining a war was an escape

from their problems regarding reintegration into civilian life. They left their job. Some sold their belongings or fundraised money for their travel.

Many anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have had trouble transitioning back to civilian life upon their return. They have started to experience some form of psychological turmoil or PTSD. Steve Kerr, for example, served in British army from 1978 to 1984. After leaving the military, he became addicted to drugs and estranged from his family. He stole money from a bank and was jailed for nine months. Kerr, at 56, left his job as a warehouse manager to join the YPG in Syria in 2015 (Ridley, 2017). Since then he had three tours with the YPG. In a post in his Facebook page, Kerr (2019) said "Depression, anxiety and PTSD are very real. I would like five of my friends to post this (not share) so I know who I can talk to if I ever need to" (para. 1).

Committing suicide has become a common issue among anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Kevin Howard, a 27-year-old U.S. Marine and French Foreign Legion veteran who fought alongside the YPG and the MSF against ISIS, took his own life in April 2019 while struggling with PTSD since his return to the U.S. (van Wilgenburg, 2019b). Just before he shot himself in the head, Howard shared posts on Facebook with his pseudonym, Hawro Christian. He posted several pictures from his time in Syria and a quote from another anti-ISIS Western foreign fighter who had previously been killed: "I don't know how to get back on this road" (Hennessy-Fiske, 2019, para. 49).

3.2 – Threats and Intents

Whether anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters pose a threat or not cannot be measured only in terms of their capabilities. There is a process in which individuals or groups gain the capabilities that are necessary to commit acts of terrorism. Similarly, planning and preparatory activities for terrorist attacks require an extra period as well. In this timeframe, individuals or groups who are making arrangements for an attack may openly express or inadvertently leave clues about their intent (Schuurman, 2015). Therefore, behavioral and verbal expressions of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and the armed groups with which they are affiliated are likely to function as indicators of their current or future involvement in terrorist acts (Schuurman & Eijkman, 2015).

Main threats that are associated with anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are discussed below under the headlines of far-right (Koch, 2019), far-left (Orton, 2018e), the PKK and its offshoots

in Syria and Iraq (Tuck et al., 2016; Maxwell, 2017; Orton, 2018e) as well as crime (Tuck et al., 2016).

3.2.1 – Far Right

Far-right is an umbrella concept that encompasses a much broader spectrum of ideologies (*Far-Right Extremism: A Practical Introduction*, 2019). Far-right "is centred on one or more of the following elements: Strident nationalism (usually racial or exclusivist in some fashion), fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-immigration, chauvinism, nativism, and xenophobia" (*Global Terrorism Index 2019 Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, 2019, p. 45). According to European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2019, far-right extremism, also referred to as extreme right-wing or racially and ethnically motivated terrorism, aspires to "change the entire political, social and economic system on an extremist right-wing model" (Europol, 2019, p. 79). Additionally,

> A core concept in right-wing extremism is supremacism or the idea that a certain group of people sharing a common element (nation, race, culture, etc.) is superior to all other people. Seeing themselves in a supreme position, the particular group considers it is their natural right to rule over the rest of the population. (Europol, 2019, p. 79)

As stated by Jones (2019), a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "right-wing terrorism refers to the use or threat of violence by sub-national or non-state entities whose goals may include racial, ethnic, or religious supremacy; opposition to government authority; and putting an end to practices like abortion" (para. 7). Right-wing terrorists try to create a climate of fear and animosity by acts of violence against people or property of minority communities.

In the West, concerns about the threat posed by far-right extremism have seen a significant rise over the past few years. In 2017, Julian King, the then EU Security Commissioner, "warned of the 'growing menace' of violent right-wing extremism as a possible backlash against the ongoing attacks by jihadists" (Tempest, 2017, para. 1). King said that "no EU member state was safe from the threat" (para. 3). In England and Wales, for example, the number of religious hate crimes increased by 40 percent, hitting a record high, between April 2017 to March 2018 (Dearden, 2018). By the same token, Neil Basu, the then head of British counterterror police, announced in September 2019 that right-wing extremism had been presenting "the fastest growing terror threat to the UK" (Dearden, 2019b, para. 1).

According to the Global Terrorism Index 2019, the number of attacks perpetrated by right-wing terror groups has increased 320 percent in a period of five years between 2013 and 2018 (*Global Terrorism Index 2019 Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, 2019). Moreover, most of these attacks were carried out in Western states. In February 2020, Christopher Wray, the FBI director, said that racially and ethnically motivated extremists in the U.S. "were the primary source of ideologically motivated lethal incidents and violence in 2018 and 2019, and have been considered the most lethal of all domestic extremists since 2001" (Farivar, 2020, para. 11). Wray added that the U.S. has "elevated racially motivated violent extremism as a national priority on a par with Islamic State" (Farivar, 2020, para. 8). The German domestic intelligence service (Bundesamt Für Verfassungsschutz - BfV) estimated in March 2020 that Germany was home to 32,000 far-right extremists, 13,000 of whom were considered to be violent.

One particularly worrying trend is that the loosely organized and decentralized web of far-right movements and political parties, thanks to extensive use of the Internet for network building, has evolved into a coordinated transnational body (Meleagrou & Brun, 2013). Far-right extremists have intercommunicated via encrypted messaging services to plan and execute terrorist attacks and posted far-right extremist content on social media to encourage the others. The terrorist attacks in Oslo, Norway in July 2011; Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019; El Paso, United States in August 2019 as well as Halle in October 2019 and Hanau in February 2020 in Germany cannot be viewed in isolation, but all linked through online right-wing networks (The United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 2020). As Thomas Joscelyn from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies argued "individuals responsible for attacks everywhere from New Zealand to El Paso were sort of feeding off of each other and trying to one-up each other and trying to kill more people in the name of their twisted ideology" (Johnson, 2019, para. 17).

In recent years, an anti-Islamic form of right-wing extremism, the "Counter-Jihad Movement", has emerged to defend the Western values against perceived enemies and infiltrators, namely Islam, Muslim immigrants and those who advocate of both. Right-wing extremists have started to prey on the perception of a threat stemmed from Islamization of Western society and loss of national identity. It has become a common belief among far-right extremists that, if Islamization process is not immediately stopped, the West will unavoidably face a civil war between Muslims and local Western populations. Coupled with a conspiracy of a pan-Islamic war against the Christian way of life, right-wing terrorists have seen themselves in a perpetual battle with the forces of evil. Thus, Muslims and asylum seekers as well as governments and policymakers have become usual targets (Meleagrou, & Brun, 2013).

James, a then 46-year-old Scottish man who uses only his first name for the sake of anonymity, had served in the British Army for seven years before joining Dwekh Nawsha in Iraq in 2015. Being a supporter of Britain First, a British extreme right ultra-nationalist party, James believed in that "Britain in a few years will be a Muslim country, a complete Muslim country" (Neuhof, 2015b, para. 26). Similarly, a French fighter of the YPG, was anxious about the growth of Islam in the West and thinking that Islam would eventually dominate French society (*Interview with an AFN Activist Fighting in Syria,* 2016).

Since the onset of the Syrian war, some rightwing extremists in the West have campaigned for fighting against ISIS and its sympathizers at home and abroad. They have established Facebook pages and organized meetings that advocate a crusade against ISIS (La Falange, 2016). Some militant far-right extremist Westerners have responded to this call and traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight against ISIS. Among them is Juan Manuel Soria, an active militant of the far right and the ideological leader of the Anti-System Front (FAS), an armed neo-Nazi gang operating in Valencia Region of Spain. Soria presents himself as "Simon de Monfort", taking the name of a Catholic crusader who lived in the 13th century. In 2005, Soria was detained in Operation Panzer that disbanded the FAS which had been committing robberies and assaults as well as selling all kinds of weapons including military ones stolen from the Spanish army. The FAS had also been carrying out hunts against immigrants and members of the left-wing. That same year, Soria was convicted of extorting a priest from Valencia with videos of sexual content. Soria and his accomplice demanded money from the priest in exchange for not disseminating the images (Pitarch, 2016). Both were sentenced to almost two years in prison. In 2008, Soria became a candidate for the extreme right-wing National Alliance party for the Valencia constituency. Having been acquitted by the Valencia Court for illegal association and possession of weapons, Soria contacted the Paris branch of Dwekh Nawsha in August of 2015. He joined the Peshmerga in Iraq in January 2016 and shortly afterward to Dwekh Nawsha to pursue his "Catholic crusade" against ISIS (Cantarero, 2016a).

Strangely enough, despite his violent and criminal far-right background, during his stay on the Syrian-Iraqi battlefield, Soria has turned into an enthusiastic supporter of the left-wing ideologies, such as apoism or libertarian confederalism. Moreover, he has ended up in command of international anarchists and communists of the PKK. He has become the first Spaniard to lead a military unit of Yazidis, that is Sinjar Resistance Units or YBS, founded by the PKK (Barber, 2018).

In last years, together with the "Counter-Jihad Movement", a racially driven form of far-right terrorism has also caused concerns. In late October 2019, Christopher Wray, FBI director,

expressed his concern about "racially motivated violent extremists who are inspired by what they see overseas" (Frazin, 2019, para. 7). He said "we are starting to see racially motivated violent extremists connecting with like-minded individuals overseas online, certainly, and in some instances we have seen some folks travel overseas to train" (Frazin, 2019, para. 3).

As mentioned earlier, one particularly worrying country empowering racially motivated far-right extremism has been Ukraine. According to Jason Blazakis, a professor of practice at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Ukraine has offered the same "galvanizing effect" for white extremists that Syria did for jihadists. "That's, in some ways, not too different than what you saw with ISIS" Blazakis said (Seldin, 2019, para. 8). Drawing attention to far-right foreign fighters of Ukrainan War, Mollie Saltskog, an intelligence analyst at the Soufan Group, said

> We're very concerned. You have individuals who are battle-hardened, probably more radicalized than before they left. You have a global network of violent white supremacists now who can easily keep in touch on different platforms and go back home, spread that propaganda, conduct training — or move on to the next fight. (Hume, 2019, para. 13).

There are some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters traveled to Ukraine either before or after their fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Sjoerd Heeger, a then 22-year-old Dutch national who had worked as a trashman and a call center worker, joined the Right Sector, an extreme right wing ultra-nationalist militia containing neo-Nazi elements, to fight against pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine in 2017. There he took combat and first aid training (Losh, 2017). Subsequently, Heeger traveled to Syria and joined the YPG. Heeger, nom-de-guerre Baran Sason, was killed by a car bomb while fighting against ISIS in Deir Ez zour in February 2018 (Richardson, 2018).

Benjamin Andreas Fisher enlisted in Austrian army in 2009 at the age of 17. He served for four years and, during this timeframe, he took part in a peacekeeping mission in Kosovo. The Austrian army terminated his contract in 2013. Afterwards, Fisher worked in low-paid jobs. He tried to join the French Foreign Legion, but to no avail. Fisher joined the conflict between Ukrainian military and Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Therein, he fought in the Azov Battalion, then the Donbass Battalion, but mostly together with the Right Sector. After leaving Ukraine, Fisher traveled to Syria to fight against ISIS and joined the YPG in October 2014. There he took nom-de-guerre "Sam Fisher" (*Dossier on Benjamin Fischer,* 2017).

In March 2015, Fisher returned to Ukraine and stayed there until December 2016. Again, he participated in the fight against pro-Russian militants in Donbas as a member of the Right Sector. Later, Fisher signed a contract with the Ukrainian Armed Forces and was given a Ukrainian military ID. He served in the 11th battalion of the 59th Brigade of the Ukrainian army and fought at Donetsk airport. He was even officially awarded with two medals by the Ukrainian military for fighting in the battle zone. In April 2017, while Fisher was trying to travel to Ukraine via Poland for his third tour, guards arrested him at a border checkpoint on charges of committing war crimes in the Ukraine conflict. Fisher was accused of killing separatist civilians who had already surrendered around Donetsk airport in 2014-2015 (*Austrian Suspected of War Crimes in Ukraine,* 2017).

The Azov Battalion with which some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters fought in Ukraine is an ultra-nationalist paramilitary organization. Thanks to its "Western Outreach Office", the Azov Battalion has recruited many right-wing violent white supremacists from all over the world. It has produced and disseminated ISIS-style propaganda videos (Hume, 2019). "It has also established youth camps, sporting recreation centers, lecture halls, and far-right education programs, including some that teach children as young as 9 years old military tactics and far-right ideology" (*IntelBrief: The Transnational Network*, 2019, para. 2).

The Azov Battalion has built transnational links with far-right extremist individuals, groups and organizations. Possible links, for example, have even emerged between the Azov Battalion and Brenton Tarrant, who killed 51 Muslim worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019. Tarrant, though not confirmed by authorities, implied in his manifesto that he had visited Ukraine (Green, 2020). Similarly, members of the Rise Above Movement (RAM) from the U.S. have frequently visited the Azov Battalion. In one case, several RAM members who had taken training with the Azov Battalion in Ukraine later had clashes with counterdemonstrators at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, the U.S., in August 2017 (*IntelBrief: The Transnational Network*, 2019).

Another far-right extremist group in Ukraine that has enlisted anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters is the Right Sector. Unlike the Azov Battalion which were formally merged into the Ukrainian National Guard, the Right Sector functions out of Ukrainian authorities' official control. Describing itself as a national liberation movement, the Right Sector completely rejects the current order and pursues revolutionary objectives. Artyom Skoropadskiy, press spokesman of the Right Sector party, said "we are not democrats. We participate in elections only because they are a step to revolution. We want to change the whole system. New people, new order, new rules in the state system of Ukraine" (Weir, 2019, para. 13). He also added "our

organization is designed to take power. If circumstances warrant, that could happen by nondemocratic methods. Believe me, we are very capable of acting in extreme situations" (Weir, 2019, para. 15).

In 2016, Neumann drew attention to "the danger posed to European societies by the prospect that jihadists and Far Right radicals will drive each other to further extremes" (p. 185). He added "jihadist terrorism is bad, but the political polarization that could result a confrontation between extremist Muslims and extremists on the Far Right would be even more serious strategic threat" (p. 185). In this regard, a British anti-fascist fighter of the YPG said

> As much as the far-right are too stupid to realise it, they play right in to the hands of the fascist Islamists. When such people [far-right extremists] carry out terrorist attacks in Europe there is not a clear political demand such as self-determination or withdrawal of troops or interests. What they are aiming to achieve is terror in the literal sense; to create chaos and confusion against and within the Islamic communities of these countries and create a general backlash and anti-Islamic feeling in all non-Muslims. In such a way, society becomes more and more polarised as both groups grow further apart, distrust each other more and more and become more hostile towards each over. (*Interview with an AFN Activist Fighting in Syria,* 2016, para. 28)

3.2.2 – Far Left

There is a triangular relationship among jihadist, right-wing and left-wing extremism. In the same way that the surge of jihadist violence has provoked global right-wing extremism, subsequently jihadists and right-wing extremists have collectively triggered left-wing extremism. Even more ominously, when one side increased the level of violence, the extremists on the other two sides started to recruit more new members and acquired more powerful weapons (Clifford, 2017).

Contemporary far-left extremists incorporate violent anarchists and anti-fascists, shortly "antifa" (Koch, 2018). In recent years, both anarchists and antifa have become increasingly aggressive and militant. An American senior law enforcement official observed in 2017 that "these antifa guys were showing up with weapons, shields and bike helmets and just beating the shit out of people. … They're using Molotov cocktails, they're starting fires, they're throwing bombs and smashing windows" (Meyer, 2017, para. 7). In 2019, the Europol reported

that anarchists posed "a threat to the public order of several EU Member States" (p. 58). According to Europol (2019), anarchists have

> formed unstructured groups operating in and around specific urban areas; participated in rallies and protests during which they attempted violent acts; collected funds for imprisoned like-minded people; and occasionally carried out attacks using IIDs [Improvised Incendiary Devices]. (p. 58)

According to Europol (2019), "left-wing terrorist groups seek to replace the entire political, social and economic system of a state by introducing a communist or socialist structure and a classless society" (p. 79). Modern left-wing terrorists, thus, aim at complete destruction of the state and its financial, judicial, military and law enforcement bodies. They also confront with right-wing parties, groups, and individuals. Arson attacks against property is left-wing terrorists' common mode of violence (Koch, 2018). They mostly utilize simple Improvised Incendiary Devices (IIDs) or Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) filled with flammable liquids and explosive materials respectively (p. 4).

There has been a flock of left-wing extremists, be they anarchists or anti-fascists, from the West to Syria and Iraq. The Syrian War provided them with the opportunity to gain military training, learn how to operate weapons and build up combat experience. They have also added new transnational networks between varied leftist groups to already existing ones (Orton, 2017b). Along these networks, they have recruited and mobilized many other like-minded individuals to the Syrian and Iraqi battlefield.

Like other left-wing extremists, many anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters tend to see both jihadists and right-wing counter-jihadists as fascists and thus themselves as anti-fascists (Koch, 2019). A British fighter of the YPG said

> They [ISIS and the far-right] both believe in many of the same things, such as subservient gender roles, capital punishment, an intolerance to homosexuality, that some cultures are superior to others, societal purity and that all must live under the one dominant value system. (*Interview with an AFN Activist Fighting in Syria,* 2016, para. 29)

For left-wing extremists, Syrian War is only one of the fronts of world revolution and ISIS is only one of the enemies. Some left-wing extremists fighting in lines of the YPG have considered the U.S. and its capitalist system as the "real enemy" (Özkizilcik, 2017, para. 1). Heval Sores, a British fighter of the IRPGF using a nom de guerre, said

> … It is important to acknowledge the fact that without coalition air support the YPJ/YPG would not have had the same success. But they [the YPJ/YPG] learned

> their lessons from the past. … they have since learned how to use the political interests of the different players to their advantage. And they know what the interests of the US are and that in the long term they are the enemy. We as militant anarchists need to learn from this and do the same thing. (Maxwell, 2017, paras. 34–35)

Pablo D. O. and Alvaro F. R., two Spanish self-defined "consistent Marxist-Leninists" (Arroyo, 2016, para. 4) who fought for six months in Syria against ISIS, have been arrested upon their return from Syria in July 2015. They have been charged with a crime of integration into a terrorist organization, that is the PKK. As a continuation of the judicial investigation, in January 2016, the Spanish National Police organized an operation to a structure allegedly linked to the PKK. The police arrested nine people. While eight of those arrested were of Spanish nationality, belonging to the Marxist-Leninist Communist Reconstruction Party, the other one was a Turkish national acting as a direct link with the PKK. During the search at the Communist Reconstruction Party headquarters, the police found weapons and material for production of explosives. The secretary-general of the party was also accused of involvement in sending fighters to Syrian War. The Interior Ministry of Spain noted that those arrested were part of an armed structure of the terrorist organization. They were in charge of the integration of prospective members in their organization. To this purpose, they provided the necessary infrastructure for other "comrades" to travel abroad and join the YPG, where they received training in the use of weapons and explosives (Arroyo, 2016).

The International Antifascist Battalion (Antifascist Internationalist Tabur or ANTIFA) is an armed group of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters from a multitude of countries. The group came under media attention following its participation in demonstrations in Charlottesville in the U.S. in August 2017. The ANTIFA activists attacked white nationalist supremacists during the "Unite the Right" rally (Hatahet et al., 2019). In May 2020, when the protests after the death of an unarmed black man, George Floyd, by a police officer turned into widespread violence, looting and confrontations with the police, the U.S. discussed designating the ANTIFA as a terrorist organization for their role in inciting violence at protests.

Members of the socialist Bob Crow Brigade (BCB), a part of the International Freedom Battalion (IFB) which consisted of around 40 anti-ISIS British, Irish and Canadian fighters, said in 2016 that they would continue fighting to "defend the first revolution of the 21st Century" (Dearden, 2016b, para. 1) against all enemies. A member of the BCB said

> Some of us are dyed-in-the-wool Marxists, some more libertarian, but differences like that melt away here - revolutions have a tendency to do that.

> We're inspired by the Rojava revolution and have stepped straight from the workplace canteen to the armed struggle. We are not ex-soldiers or militaria obsessives, that's not what motivates us - we're Reds. That's our side - the side that turned the tide on Isis and is carrying out a progressive proto-socialist renaissance. Our enemies are anyone that attacks it. (Dearden, 2016b, para. 21)

Many Greek anarchists, as the intelligence obtained by Greek security services revealed, have joined the Syrian War with an intention of training in guerrilla warfare and applying similar tactics at home (*Greek Anarchists Are Helping Kurdish Forces Fight ISIS*, 2017). Later in 2015, they have founded the Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity (RUIS) in northern Syria as a part of the IFB. In a photograph serviced by a Greek newspaper, armed and masked Greek fighters in combat fatigues with rifles were standing next to a wall tagged with a message in Greek that said, "from Rojava to Athens, the liberated lands of the struggle. You will spill blood to take them. Solidarity to the occupations" (*Greek Anarchists Fighting ISIS in Kurdish Areas in Syria*, 2017, para. 2).

Haukur Hilmarsson, a then 31-year-old Icelandic anarchist, joined the ranks of the RUIS in Syria in 2017. Haukur was killed during an air strike while fighting against Turkish Armed Forces in Afrin on 24 February 2018 (*Haukur Hilmarsson's Death Confirmed*, 2018). Upon Hilmarsson death, the RUIS called for violent acts against Turkish economic, political and military assets in Greece. In March 2019, about 50 left wing extremists attacked the police guarding the Turkish consulate in the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki (*Attacks Against Police Station and Turkish Consulate in Greece,* 2019). In June 2019, some unidentified arsonists set two cars belonging to Turkish nationals, one of whom is a diplomat, on fire in Thessaloniki (Arson Attack, 2019). In another example in December 2019, Revolutionary Solidarity Commando Haukur Hilmarsson, a splinter group of RUIS in Greece, accepted responsibility setting a car owned by a Turkish diplomat ablaze in Thessaloniki. The group declared that this terrorist action was "another sign of practical solidarity with the call from the fighters" of the RUIS (anarchistsworldwide, 2019b, para. 4).

In April 2017, the IFB announced the formation of the first anarchist armed group in Syria: International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF). The IRPGF has defined its role as to safeguard the revolution in northern Syria and to spread anarchism. The group has also intended "to create a training base in the region explicitly for anarchists to come, train, and prepare for the revolution both here [in Syria] and on their home fronts" (*Building Anarchist Forces*, 2017, para. 11). In this context, members of the group declared that "IRPGF is not just a militant group for anarchists to join and fight against DAÎŞ [ISIS], but it is also a group that

is creating infrastructure that will enable anarchists to join and learn how to advance the anarchist struggle once they return home" (Enough14, 2017, para. 2). An IRPGF member said

> There are a number of reasons behind the formation of the IRPGF, the most important ones being the lack of an anarchist presence in Rojava, and our need for an anarchist territory where anarchists can escape the state, and train in guerrilla and conventional warfare in order to apply what they've learned in their homeland. (*Greek Anarchists Are Helping Kurdish Forces Fight ISIS*, 2017, para. 7)

The IRPGF, since its foundation, has published messages of support and solidarity with like-minded individuals and groups abroad. Revolutionary anarchists around the world have been asked to build an alternative to their governments (*Building Anarchist Forces*, 2017, para. 31). Furthermore, the IRPGF suggested all anarchists to "develop decentralized defense militias that can go to war with the State and its lackeys (cops, boneheads, etc.)" (*Building Anarchist Forces*, 2017, para. 29). In August 2017, the group announced in a statement on the social media that "our forces are not short term units but are preparing to stay in the region [Syria and Iraq] and be deployed abroad in support of social revolutions wherever they occur which is part of internationalist revolutionary solidarity" (*Not One Step Back*, 2017, p. 6)

The IRPGF, as a part of the YPG, has openly declared many times that they have been getting prepared for an ultimate war with Turkey to unite some parts of Syria and Turkey into a confederal entity. Thus, "until that war is over, IRPGF and the international Freedom Battalion are actively encouraging international volunteers to join them" (Maxwell, 2017, para. 14). In November 2019, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters of the IFB announced:

> Our blood mixed with the blood of this land's people. As the fighters of the International Freedom Battalion, we promise that we will liberate every inch of the land we fight, and we will carry the flag of revolution to Turkey and to every part of the earth's soil that we came from. (Enternasyonalist Özgürlük Taburu, 2019)

In February 2018, a group of left-wing Westerners who had already been fighting in ranks of the YPG, YPJ, SDF and some other Turkish extreme left groups have founded the Antifascist Forces in Afrin (AFFA) (Orton, 2018a). The AFFA is also known as the Martyr Michael Israel Brigade that refers to an anti-ISIS Western foreign fighter killed while fighting for the PKK in Syria. The AFFA, suffering heavy losses owing to Turkish military operations, requested "determined international revolutionaries" to join their struggle. The group also called upon prevalent reactions against Turkish institutions across the globe (Orton, 2018a). Many extreme

left-wing groups have responded this call and perpetrated terrorist attacks on Turkish companies operating in the West (*Athens, Greece: Incendiary Attack*, 2018).

The Apoist Youth Initiative Europe (AGIA), the PKK-YPG's youth group in Germany, announced in March 2018 that "if no one wants to listen to us, we will put every single city of Europe to ashes. No matter how and no matter what is burning on this day, Europe must understand that we will not let Afrin fall" (*Germany: Apoist Youth Initiative,* 2018, para. 3). The AGIA also called its supporters to carry out "more radical and organized actions" (*Germany: Apoist Youth Initiative,* 2018, para. 2) in Europe on "Turkish institutions, business, individuals and European banks and offices of major German political parties, German courts and police stations" (Solmaz, 2018, para. 2). Dean Parker, as cited in Orton (2018b), is an American fighter of the YPG, called on the group's supporters to attack Turkish diplomatic representatives around the world tweeting "Burn them all down! The time for peaceful protests are over" (para. 1). Almost simultaneously with the AGIA, the YPG International released a statement saying, "the game is now on and the battleground is the entire world now" (Enough14, 2018, para. 5).

A group of radical leftists who named themselves as "Fight4Afrin", in a statement in March 2018, openly vowed all the leftists to start a "militant campaign" to carry out brutal attacks across Europe (Call, 2018). In a category called "Targets" (n.d.) on their webpage, noblogs.org, the group listed companies from the European weapon industry and major banks as well as addresses of the Turkish institutions and diplomatic representations in major European countries. The group later announced that 136 attacks in 14 different countries were carried out against "government parties, centers of fascist propaganda, arms companies and their financial partners, police, army and other NATO structures" (*Breaking the Silence – Organize the Resistance*, 2018, para. 5). Moreover,

> Of these [136 attacks], 93 were found in Germany, 8 in Greece, 8 in Italy, 8 in France, 4 in Austria, 3 in Switzerland, 3 in Belgium, 2 in Sweden and 2 in the Netherlands, and a single action in Slovakia, in Serbia, Canada, the United Kingdom and Denmark. (Fight4Afrin Evaluation, 2018, para. 5)

In March 2018, radical leftists and the youth wings of the PKK, PYD and YPG attacked some defense companies in Italy and Germany, "ambushed" German and Greek police with stones and firebombs and burned vehicles of German military. In Germany, they also attacked to a headquarters of Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Celle and an office of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Hamburg (Solmaz, 2018). In April 2018, the AFFA, announced Turkey, France and "their official representations, their economic support and their political

support, [as well as] those who work and collaborate with them" as their "priority targets" (Orton, 2018d, para. 15).

In January 2019, anarchists and militants of the YPG/J Defense Group-London (YDG-L), responding a call by the International Commune, carried out terrorist attacks against some British companies providing military support to Turkey (*Actions in Response*, 2019). In that same month, a group of Danish anarchists who joined the YPG to defend the revolution declared that they "consider all actions against the Turkish military legitimate" (*Danish Anti-Fascists*, 2019, para. 2). The Autonomous groups - cell "Soledad Casilda Hernáez Vargas" executed a chain of arsonist assaults in Berlin, Germany, against vehicles belonging to some companies providing military material to Turkey in March 2019 (*Attacks in Solidarity*, 2019).

Following a Turkish military operation in northern Syria in October 2019, some internationalist campaigns such as #Riseup4Rojava, #WomenDefendRojava and #DefendRojava argued in various public statements that "the international policies against Rojava – be it the direct war policy of Turkey, the indirect support by the USA, Russia and the EU or the ignorance of international organizations like the UN – show that there is an international coalition against the revolution in Rojava" (anarchistsworldwide, 2019a, para. 4). Therefore, they called for international days of action and encouraged their supporters "to carry [their] anger to the streets and public squares" (anarchistsworldwide, 2019a, paras. 6–7).

French Police dismantled an ultra-left cell and took seven far-left activists aged between 30 and 36 under custody in December 2020. During the searches in related operations in different French cities, a large number of materials that could be used to make explosives were found along with weapons (Fitzpatrick, 2020). As a result of the investigation, five of those taken under custody were arrested due to the suspicion of committing attack against the security forces or the military. One of those arrested was Florian D. who is also presumed to be the leader of the cell (T.B., 2020).

Florian, a 36-year-old man originally from central France, had spent nearly 10 months fighting alongside the YPG in Syria. After his return to France in January 2018, Florian had trained his contacts in handling of weapons and explosives, as well as in manufacturing bombs. According to the police reports, Florian's intention was to kill police officers and soldiers. For him, "those who dissociate themselves from this goal are cowards" (Atlantico, n.d., para. 4). The authorities became certain that Florian was seeking to recreate the conditions for guerrilla warfare. Florian was claimed to be in preparation of setting police vehicles on fire at night. Investigators found in his truck all the ingredients necessary for composition of a homemade explosive (Atlantico, n.d.).

Daniel Alan Baker is another highly prominent example. Baker enlisted in the U.S. Army at the age of 18 and served for nearly 20 months before being removed with an “other-than-honorable” discharge in 2007 due to going absent without leave before his unit’s deployment to Iraq. For nearly a decade following his dismissal from the Army, Baker lived homeless. During this time, with the influence of the writers he read, Baker abandoned the conservative thoughts he was raised and developed an anarchist perspective. In 2017, he joined the YPG (Shammas & Vynck, 2021).

In his social media posts, Baker claimed that he had received sniper training in the YPG. In later conversations with an FBI special agent, Baker admitted that he had trained other YPG members in military and defense tactics at the YPG International Academy (Wallace, 2021). It is also mentioned in a criminal complaint filed by the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Florida that

> Multiple overseas sources reported that BAKER stated he intended to return to the United States with the intention to lure Turkish pilots training on United States military bases off the installation, after which he would kill or mutilate them in furtherance of helping the YPG fight the Turkish government. (*United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker*, 2021, p. 4)

Baker returned to the U.S. in April 2019 after fighting in ranks of the YPG for approximately two years. In June 2020, he joined the Capitol Hill Organized Protests in Seattle after the killing of George Floyd by a policeman. During these protests, Baker argued that the revolutionary ideas that had drawn him into the ranks of the YPG in Syria should be applied to today's civil rights movement as well. Moreover, he was discontent that there was no violent opposition. He said “I told them, if they [protestors] really wanted a revolution, we needed to get AK’s and start making bombs. No one listed to me” (*The Fall of CHOP Oct 13*, n.d.).

While trying to find money to pay for an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) course, in November 2020, Baker posted on Facebook

> I swear on god yall if I can't raise this money I will start robbing the rich and pedophiles too. This is my last fundraiser before I commit to organized crime. I've gotten do[sic] much toxic resistance and so little help from asking nicely that I've come to the conclusion that it doesn't work. So, if this doesn't work, I'm not asking any more[sic] and I'm done being nice. I will pay for this one way or another and I'm willing to do ANYTHNG to ANYONE so I don't end up homeless and hungry again. Help keep me honest or watch me compromise my

integrity and character to survive. (*United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker*, 2021, pp. 5-6)

Prior to his arrest by the FBI in January 2021, Baker stepped up his social media efforts to recruit and train like-minded people who shared extremely violent anti-government and anti-authority beliefs (Wallace, 2021). He "has used social media as a way to promote, circulate, encourage and educate followers on how to incapacitate law enforcement officers while at a protest" (*United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker*, 2021, pp. 4-5). Baker, identifying himself as a "hardcore leftist", posted numerous violent threats on social media against American citizens and allies that he claimed to be of fascist ideology. He even encouraged the murder of the U.S. officers (*United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker*, 2021). It is possible to hear the "anarchist-type monologues" in the background of his YouTube videos and to see the Antifa flags and various weapons in the pictures he published on social media (Wallace, 2021). His social media posts again showed that within the last 1-2 days prior to his capture, he struggled to expand his arsenal with supplementary weapons, such as an AK-47 and a pistol. (*United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker*, 2021).

When Baker was arrested in January 2021, there were found a loaded shotgun and handgun in his apartment (Levenson, 2021). Baker has been accused of violating the felony of "transmit in interstate or foreign commerce any communication containing any threat to kidnap any person or any threat to injure the person of another" (*United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker*, 2021). The judge assessed Baker as a possible threat because he has "repeatedly endorsed violent means to advance the political beliefs that he espouses" (Shammas & Vynck, 2021, para. 17). According to the prosecutors, Baker's communications were 'true threats' when "foreign and domestic military training, his experience with firearms and explosives, and his social media posts that threatened violence and calls to war against those of different ideologies" were taken into account (Levenson, 2021, para. 10). In May 2021, a federal jury found Baker guilty of inciting violence against right-wing protestors during the events at the Florida Capitol in January 2021.

3.2.3 – The PKK/PYD/YPG/YPJ

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (The Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan or PKK) has waged a terror campaign against Turkey for almost four decades that led to killing of nearly 40,000 people ("Turkish Soldier Killed in Eastern Turkey", 2020). In this time frame, the PKK has deliberately adopted a puzzling transnational structure (Orton, 2016) and changed its name several times to

give an “outward impression of political and democratic re-orientation” but indeed to escape from “the stigma of being a terrorist organization” (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2016, p. 28). The PKK named itself as the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) in 2002, the Kurdistan People's Congress or KONGRA-GEL in late 2003, the Kurdistan Confederation of Communities (Koma Komelên Kurdistan-KKK) in March 2005 and the Kurdish Communities Union (Koma Civakên Kurdistan-KCK) in April 2007 (Soylu, 2016).

The KCK has been an overarching global organization through which the PKK controls the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK) in Iraq and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran (Kekevi, 2015). Even “terrorists themselves acknowledge no difference between the PKK, PYD, YPG, YPJ, or PJAK” (Soner et al., 2017, p. 5). One YPG militant, nom de guerre Zind Ruken, articulated that “it’s all PKK but different branches. Sometimes I’m a PKK, sometimes I’m a PJAK, sometimes I’m a YPG. It doesn’t really matter. They are all members of the PKK” (Bradley & Parkinson, 2015, p. 20). The PYD bylaws affirmed that “Abdullah Öcalan is the leader of the PYD, the KCK, the people of Kurdistan, Kongra-Gel and the Kurdish community in Rojava” (Acun & Keskin, 2017, p. 8).

From legal perspective, according to Jaklin (2015), “the Christian/Assyrian militias and the Iraqi Peshmerga seem to incorporate lesser legal problems” (p. 3). The YPG and the YPJ, on the other hand, with their close relation to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) create a legitimacy problem since the PKK has been declared as a terrorist organization by many countries and international institutions such as Australia, Canada, the European Union (EU), Japan, the NATO, Turkey, the U.S., and the UK (Jaklin, 2015). The EU “put the PKK, along with its other names of KADEK and KONGRA-GEL onto the ‘List of Terrorist Organizations’ in 2004” (Keskin, 2008, p. 61). On November 14, 2003, U.S Department of State has declared that

> Through its recent actions, the Kurdistan Workers Party/Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (PKK/KADEK) appears to be making an effort to evade responsibility for its terrorist acts by changing its name. The PKK/KADEK, under any alias, is a terrorist organization, and no name change or press release can alter that fact. (Ereli, 2003, para. 1)

Self and Ferris (2016) have explored the relationship between the YPG and the PKK in their research which utilized over 2500 reports of terrorist deaths. They have concluded that the YPG has been a part and a parcel of the PKK, rather than being an offshoot or an affiliate. Self and Ferris, furthermore, defined the connection between the PKK and its affiliates as “one of

strategic and operational unity albeit with some level of tactical level autonomy" (p. 10). They explained that

> Like a Shell game, the PKK leadership in Kandil shifts personnel between its affiliates and fronts, attempting to obscure the true nature of the organisation and circumvent international terrorist labels. In this sense, the PKK has no true affiliates, but rather three fronts and three names corresponding to those fronts, consisting of the same personalities, leadership, ideology, and history of terrorism. (Self & Ferris, 2016, p. 10)

Territorial expansion and subsequent administration of the PKK and the PYD have come with serious accusations of a sustained pattern of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Both Human Rights Watch (*Iraqi Kurdistan: Arabs Displaced, Cordoned off, Detained*, 2015) and Amnesty International, the two most respected human rights organizations, have condemned armed groups in both Northern Iraq and Northern Syria, namely the KRG and its Peshmerga fighters, the PKK, PYD, YPG and YPJ, for a long list of deeds including repression of the opposition, arbitrary arrests, unsolved disappearances, extrajudicial assassinations, ethnic displacement of Arabs and Turkmen, use of child soldiers, destruction of entire Arab villages and more (Gabon, 2020). Moreover, the Berlin-based independent European Kurdish Research Center's Internet portal KurdWatch has revealed a report on human rights violations, perpetrated by the PYD and the YPG against Arabs and Turkmen in Tall Abyad. The report has accused the PYD and the YPG of forcibly displacing the Arabic and Turkmen populations, looting and destroying their villages and oppressing opponent political groups by arbitrary arrests, abductions and torturing in detention (*Ethnic Cleansing in Tall Abyad? Characteristics of YPG and PYD Rule in the Areas Captured from the IS*, 2016).

Amnesty International, an independent London-based non-governmental organization focused on human rights, has published two reports in 2015 uncovering the abuses of the PYD-led Autonomous Administration security forces, namely the YPG and Asayish - local police force- in Northern Syria. In its first report published in September 2015, Amnesty International has documented the arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and unfair trials of detainees. Having interviewed 10 prisoners in two different prisons run by the Autonomous Administration, Amnesty International revealed that

> Some had been arbitrarily detained for periods of up to a year without charge or trial. Those who did face trials said they suffered from lengthy pre-trial detention and that proceedings were blatantly unfair. They were denied basic rights including the right to defend themselves, to see the evidence against

them, and access to a lawyer and their family. (*Syria: Arbitrary Detentions*, 2015, para. 3)

In its October 2015 report, Amnesty International has catalogued many crimes committed by the YPG and Asayish in the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration. These crimes included intentional damage to personal property, the compulsory dislocation of non-military residents or in some cases whole villages, *('We had Nowhere Else to go'*, 2015) as well as the seizure and destruction of property. Using satellite imagery and video footage to corroborate the claims, Amnesty International showed forced evictions of Arabs and Turkmens and the destruction of their homes and property. Only in the Arab village of Husseiniya, for example, the YPG displaced the villagers and demolished 93,8 percent of the houses. One resident said

> They [the YPG] said, 'Stay in your homes. We won't bother you. We have come to liberate you [from ISIS]. We just want the names of the people that are wanted.' But then they wouldn't even let us take our clothes out of the house… They pulled us out of our homes and began burning them… Then they brought the bulldozers and they began demolishing the homes. *('We had Nowhere Else to go'*, 2015, p. 12)

As another example, a resident of the Asaylem village explained

> On the fourth day of Ramadan around 25-30 YPG soldiers came to our village and asked us to leave for our own security. We were able to take some of our belongings. At the time, the nearest IS base to our village was 17 km away. The YPG were wearing camouflage military uniforms and their flag was hanging from their cars. They told us that we could come back in three days so we decided to wait in the fields 3 km away from the village. I had a clear view of the village. We stayed for 12 days in the fields because they wouldn't allow us to come back for the same reason as before. After that, the clashes started with IS. IS entered the village but the fighting only lasted for one day. We were hearing the gunshots. IS retreated. One of us went to ask them if we can go back but they said no… One day after the clashes ended I saw one bulldozer with the yellow [YPG] flag arriving in Asaylem and demolishing the houses… Only three of the homes in the village were not demolished. We don't know why. My home was demolished... [A commander from the YPG] insisted on us leaving… We left to Turkey because we had nowhere else to go… We did not

> ask PYD for housing and they never offered. *('We had Nowhere Else to go'*, 2015, p. 13)

A resident of the village Raneen said "they [the YPG] told us we had to leave or they would tell the US coalition that we were terrorists and their planes would hit us and our families. We left so we would be safe from their snipers and the planes" *('We had Nowhere Else to go'*, 2015, p. 16). Residents were not only deliberately displaced but also prevented by the YPG and Asayish from returning to their villages. Thus, Amnesty International concluded "these instances of forced displacement constitute war crimes" *('We had Nowhere Else to go'*, 2015, p. 32).

Bassma Mohamed al-Bilal, a teacher and mother of three young children who was living with her family in Tel Diyab, explained how a local YPG member forced her to join the YPG and how they set her home on fire when she refused

> Every day they were coming and going… [Then in the beginning of February] they called and said tomorrow they would come to burn the house… They started pouring fuel in my in-laws house. My mother-in-law was there refusing to leave and they just poured it around her… They found my father-in-law and began hitting him on his hands… I said, 'Even if you burn my house I will get a tent and pitch it. This is in my place. I will stay in my place.' But they said the problem was not with the house but with the people in the house … They were taking things from the house, the window frames, the doors, the water pump, all the stuff from the house… For 13 years you build a life and they leave you with nothing. *('We had Nowhere Else to go'*, 2015, p. 26).

The PKK, PYD, YPG and YPJ have regularly recruited child soldiers to their ranks and used them in the armed combat clearly violating the international law since 2014 (*Under Kurdish Rule*, 2014). Though some minors have voluntarily joined these groups, many children, including girls as young as twelve, have been forced to enlist and held without parental consent. Hanan Farhan Hajj Yunis, for example, at 15, fled from the YPG in April 2014. Afterwards, YPG held Hanan's mother for several hours. After releasing her mother, the YPG, this time, abducted Hanan's father and brother to compel Hanan to return (*Forcible Recruitments*, 2015).

As a more recent example, Avin Saroxan, a 12-year old Kurdish girl, was kidnapped by the PYD while standing outside her school in Darbassiye in Syria in 2018. When Avin's parents inquired about their daughter, the PKK had first claimed to have no information of the event, but later accepted that she had been sent to a political training course for a month.

Avin's uncle expressed that "those militias recently kidnapped several young girls from Darbassiye, all aged between 13 and 14 years-old, handed them weapons, and threw them into the frontline battles in Deir ez-Zor province" (Abdulkareem, 2018, para. 5). A documentary about the YPJ, "Her War: Women vs. ISIS" (2015), included interviews with girls aged 16.

Families, whose children were held by the PKK, PYD, YPG and YPJ for combat, organized demonstrations most of which have been forcefully dispersed by the Asayish, the security service of the PYD. Moreover, those families who tried to bring back their children have been violently treated. In one case, the father of sixteen-year-old Dilbar Ahmad Hajji said "when we demanded her return from the Asayiş, my wife was beaten, called an honorless traitor, and then thrown out" (*Forcible Recruitments*, 2015, p. 12). In another incident, a Kurdish father, Faisal Mustafa, set himself on fire at the headquarters of the Asayish in protest after his previous attempts to take back his daughter who held by the YPJ (*Kobani'de Protesto: Kendini Ateşe Verdi!* [Protest in Kobane: He set Himself on Fire!], 2015).

In March 2017, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Iraq condemned the PKK and the PYD for launching a crackdown on "all political parties and organizations" in northern Syria (*KDP Condemns Suppression of Opposition in Rojava,* 2017, para. 1). The KDP said the PYD has "prohibited any kind of political activities and without excuses they storm their shelters, loot, and burn them down" (*KDP Condemns Suppression of Opposition in Rojava,* 2017, para. 3). The KDP stated that

> Deeply concerned, we are hearing of rows created at the hands of the PKK offshoot in western Kurdistan as it behaves in a dictatorship way and has imposed itself through the use of weapons and intimidation and has put all the political parties and organizations under a terror and political ideology, running after their members and supporters and filling its prisons with Kurdish activists. (*KDP Condemns Suppression of Opposition in Rojava,* 2017, para. 2)

The PKK can also be viewed as a terrorist group using the façade of political motivations to hide its criminal nature. Haut (1998) mentions the PKK among "the most active and dangerous" (p. 3) terrorist groups that feed on criminal activities. Haut (1998) urges that although the PKK "always denies and puts forward its 'revolutionary' nature as an absolutory excuse" (p. 3) for its crimes,

> Considering its members, its subsidiary organizations and the companies it controls, the PKK gathers all the necessary components for this statement: murders, extortion, illegal immigration, children trafficking, all types of

> influence on the Kurdish Diaspora, drug trafficking and money laundering. (p. 3)

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have witnessed some of the crimes perpetrated by the PKK, PYD, YPG and YPJ. A 35-year-old German fighter of the YPG, for example, said "I can't confirm systematic displacement, some [civilians] are returning to their villages. But if you tell them [YPG] it's an Arab village they'll trash the place" (Barbarani, 2015, para. 21). In one case, the same German fighter, who declined to be named, recalled that they were told by the YPG not to help civilians after an explosion in a town named Abu Hamam (Barbarani, 2015).

Many, if not all, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have been completely aware of the relation between the PKK and its affiliates in Syria. Harry, a British former currency trader generally known under his Kurdish nom-de-guerre Macer Gifford, spent three years fighting for the YPG and the Syriac Military Council, a Christian Syriac military group within the umbrella of the SDF. Gifford said "the links are that people who were formerly members of the PKK left the mountain, they've taken off their PKK uniforms and put on the YPG uniforms. That is almost certainly true" (*Ex-YPG Fighter*, 2018, para. 9). Another example, Steve Krsnik, a Canadian YPG fighter with prior military experience, was fully conscious of YPG's links to the PKK. When asked about why he had joined the YPG though, Krsnik replied: "The choice was easy. Only hard choice was how do I go about the whole PKK affiliation and other parties that have questionable ties and how that would effect my return" (Makuch, 2015, para. 8).

Exposed to PKK propaganda for several months or years during their stay on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, some foreigners, who had initially mobilized for fighting against ISIS, have changed their commitment for a war against the Turkish state. When Turkish Armed Forces launched an offensive, codenamed Operation Olive Branch, in northern Syria in January 2018, some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters turned their weapons on Turkey. In a video posted on social media by the YPG, a group of six anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were seen holding their weapons and declaring their intention to fight against Turkey. "We are all ready to go and fight in Afrin" said the spokesman. "We have been training for a significant amount of time in tactics that work against any force. We are prepared and have been supplied by the YPG to fight against Turkish terrorists" (Ibrahim, 2018, para. 7) he added. Huang Lei, a 24-year-old British national, who was leading the six-man squad of foreign fighters informed that about 25 people from the West were fighting with the YPG against Turkey (Mezzofiore et al., 2018).

International Center for Terrorism and Security Studies (UTGAM) in Turkey released a report in March 2017 that demonstrates how the PKK has embodied the PYD and the YPG and

established links with extreme left-wing terrorist groups like the MLKP and the DHKP-C, which is also in the "terrorist group" list of the U.S. (Soner et al., 2017). Many anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, particularly far-right Christian crusaders, were shocked to realize that indeed they had joined far-left groups. Alan Duncan, for example, a former British soldier, left the YPG for similar reasons. He also named many other foreign fighters who were planning to leave the YPG to join a more "holy-war-friendly" group (Weinstein, 2015, para. 8).

3.2.4 – Crime

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have involved in criminal acts before, during or after their stay on combat zone. A Western fighter of the Peshmerga, for example, later revealed that

> We [anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters] managed to do some good, but the negativity outweighs the good. Sure, we did our offensives and fired a few rounds and rockets in Daesh`s general direction, but we also managed to fuck things over so goddamn bad. Google some articles like 'western peshmerga fighter criminal/convicted/deported/charged with' and you will get the idea. (Oldwornout, 2016, para. 8)

Ashley Dyball, once an international junior bench press champion, attempted to enlist in the Australian Army but failed a physical test in 2010. Dyball, also known as Mitchell Scott, traveled to Syria in May 2015 to fight for the YPG. Though he knew that he was breaking the law, he decided to go anyway. In the conflict zone, he took part in a sabotage team whose task was to remove mines and booby traps. Nicknamed "Sweetie Boy" in the YPG (White, 2017, para. 20), Dyball confirmed his involvement in active combat against ISIS (Oaten, 2016).

While travelling through Europe during a break from the battlefield, Dyball was detained in Germany, charged as a terrorist and deported to Australia in December 2015. His family criticized Australia's foreign fighter laws and wanted the Government to grant an amnesty claiming that their son was a "hero in everyone's books" (Field, 2015, para. 1). Back home in Australia, Dyball was investigated by the Australian Federal Police and then released without charge though his passport was confiscated (White, 2017). However, in 2017, Dyball was one of two men who were arrested and charged with Samuel Thompson's murder and interfering with his corpse. Mr. Thompson, then a 22-year-old childcare worker, was killed after being seriously assaulted in Brisbane, Australia (*Samuel Thompson: Remains Exhumed*, 2017).

3.3 – The Result of Threat Assessment

The above-presented analysis on the profiles of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters shows that among the many subgroups of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, former soldiers, seekers and ideologues stand out. Though each one of these subgroups has joined the fight in varying degrees, they all have developed a considerable level of capabilities and expertise during their stay in the conflict zone. In parallel to the increase in their military capabilities owing to training in related centers and armed groups, they have gone through a process of ideological indoctrination. Even some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who had traveled to Syria for adrenaline, adventure or boredom, that is seekers, have become radicalized in due course and grown more interested in extremist ideologies. Most have established international links with other politically like-minded individuals. Some far-left extremist anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have founded their own armed groups in Syria and Iraq. Some of these armed groups and their far-left extremist anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have decided to carry their capabilities and expertise back to their countries to commit or participate in terrorist acts.

As mentioned earlier in this study, those anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who have 1) joined armed groups in Syria and Iraq that adopted extremely violent political views, 2) gained capabilities to perpetrate violent acts, 3) actively shared their radical views on traditional or social media platforms and 4) instigated other people to inflict harm on some targets are assessed as a potential threat to their country of origin and international security. In accordance with this threat analysis criteria, this study suggests that, firstly, a great majority of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, be they veterans, seekers or ideologues, who fought in the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq have acquired capabilities that they can use to conduct acts of terrorism; secondly, the battle-hardened anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who couple extremist left ideologies with violence and the armed groups for which extremist far-left anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have fought are of serious threat to the domestic and international security.

Primarily, almost all anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have received a military training, even at the most basic level. “Just as jihadists have used conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, the Balkans, Iraq, and Syria to swap tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs)” (Soufan, 2019, p. 7) so too have anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters used Syria and Iraq to sharpen their combative skills. Many had already possessed a strong military background. Additionally, they have actively engaged in combat and become familiarized with the use of guerrilla warfare, urban tactics, firearms and explosives. Their technical, tactical, and strategic knowledge along

with their leadership abilities have ultimately culminated in improved military effectiveness. As the time spent in the theatre of war increased, so did their military capabilities.

Furthermore, during their stay on the battlefield, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters' familiarity with violence has dramatically increased. As Basra and Neumann (2016) noted, "for someone who is familiar with violence and has become desensitised to its use, the 'jump' to committing an act of terrorism may be smaller, and the process of mobilisation, therefore, quicker and less difficult" (p. 33). Thus, for some returning anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters there exists a risk of becoming "a danger to themselves or society" (Obe & Silverman, 2014, p. 37). Giving harm to themselves or committing suicide, at the worst case, are most likely for those veterans who are struggling to reintegrate to civilian life after military service and suffering from depression or PTSD.

Secondly, in recent years, rising hostilities and extremist violence among jihadists, far-right and far-left ideologues have become a tangible source of security risk to the West. During formation of this threat, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and the armed groups that they have fought for have played an important role. Initially, a substantial upsurge in the number of violent jihadist acts perpetrated by returning pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters has created a favorable environment for an uplift in far-right terrorism. Many religiously, racially or ethnically motivated right-wing extremists have traveled to Syria and Iraq seemingly to fight against ISIS but indeed to forge international links and gain combat experience. Some of these right-wing anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters also traveled to eastern Ukraine either before or after Syria and Iraq. They have received ideological indoctrination and training in irregular warfare from the PKK and its offshoots, the Peshmerga and the Christian militias in Syria and Iraq as well as the Azov Battalion and the Right Sector in Ukraine.

In an identical manner that acts of jihadists had incited right-wing extremism, both jihadists and right-wing extremists have cooperatively prompted left-wing extremism. In this context, two modern representatives of far-left extremism, namely the violent anarchists and anti-fascists, have gradually become more violent against jihadists and right-wing counter-jihadists. Violence begets more violence. Particularly the left- and right-wing extremists have started to recruit great numbers of fresh members and acquire more powerful weapons. In a spiral of violence, as a former U.S. police officer articulated, "both the racists and a segment of violent antifa counter-protestors are amped for battle in an escalating arms race, where police departments are outmaneuvered, resulting in increasingly violent dangerous confrontations" (Meyer, 2017, para. 14).

In addition to their contribution in the rise of three-sided extremism, left-wing extremist armed groups that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have been affiliated with, in Syria and Iraq or abroad, pose a blatant threat for international security. The Syrian Civil War has attracted scores of far-left extremists from around the world. Even after the final strongholds of ISIS were captured in Syria in March 2019 and ISIS was declared to be defeated, Westerners have kept traveling to northeastern Syria to join the so-called "Rojava Revolution." They have undergone a significant process of ideological indoctrination, the impact being bigger when their stay in the warzone was lengthy. Building extremist connections and networks, they have interacted extensively with the international far-left community. They have produced extreme leftist themes and content for propaganda and disseminated mostly on social media platforms. They have incited like-minded individuals across the globe to revolt against the state, wreak havoc and commit acts of terrorism.

Many of foreign fighters volunteered for the PKK, YPG and YPJ tend to already hold leftist ideological tendencies: some were anarchists, while the others were Marxist-Leninists or Stalinists. In this sense, in 2015, the German government responded to formal information request by Left Party members of parliament about ongoing operations against the PKK. In its reply, as Martin (2019) noted, the government announced that "anti-ISIS fighters are fewer in quantity than Syrian jihadist fighters, but similar in quality" (Germany section, para. 4). Put differently, although pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters "may fight for different reasons," both "pose a similar threat to German nationals when they return" since they received combat training "outside the authorized frame of the German military" (Germany section, para. 5).

Among all the armed groups that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters joined, the PKK and its Syrian and Iraqi parts, namely the YPG and YPJ, draw special attention. As Self and Ferris (2016) explained, all these armed groups have taken advantage of the conflict in Syria and Iraq to increase their strength and expand their regional and global role. In the meantime, however, they have also pursued a more sinister agenda. Some human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, showed that the PKK, YPG and YPJ have become a symbol of brutality, authoritarianism, human rights violations and war crimes in the area they control in northern Syria and Iraq. They have carried out systematic and widespread expulsions of tens of thousands of Arabs and even more Kurds from the region (*Ethnic Cleansing in Tall Abyad? Characteristics of YPG and PYD Rule in the Areas Captured from the IS*, 2016). They have destroyed villages *('We had Nowhere Else to go'*, 2015). Moreover, they have arrested, tortured and expelled Kurds affiliated with other rival political parties and

Arabs who oppose the Assad regime (*Syria: Arbitrary Detentions*, 2015). The PKK, PYD, YPG and YPJ have regularly recruited children into their ranks (*Forcible Recruitments*, 2015). Many anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have witnessed human rights abuses of their units. What is worse, some Western fighters of the YPG and the YPJ were fully aware that they have indeed joined the PKK, a proscribed terrorist organization (*Ex-YPG Fighter*, 2018).

The PKK, after reinforcing its presence in Syria with establishing new offshoots such as PYD, YPG and YPJ, began to attract the Communists, Socialists and Anarchists from around the globe to participate in the fight against ISIS. These far-left anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have organized themselves in distinct armed groups under the auspices of the PKK, YPG and other Turkey-based terrorist groups. Put differently, most of these fighters, although they ultimately follow the orders of the PKK and YPG, organized into their own groups and brigades "such as Spanish Communist Reconstruction, Greek Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity, British and Irish Bob Crow Bridge, French Henri Krasucki Bridge, and finally, Italian Antifascist Internationalist Tabor" (Soner et al., 2017, p. 25).

Furthermore, some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have brought their far-left extremist ideologies back to their own countries and turned to acts of violence in a way that would serve the realization of both political and ideological cause of the group that they belong to. As far as is known, the most feared scenario, that is, an act of terrorism conducted by anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who returned from the conflict zone has not yet materialized. However, there has recently been an increase in the number of thwarted terrorist acts planned by trained and networked anti-ISIS Western fighters. Moreover, as observed in examples of Daniel Alan Baker (*United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker*, 2021) and Florian D. (Fitzpatrick, 2020), the seriousness of the preparations for terror attacks is escalating. Thus, this study assesses that far-left extremist individuals and armed groups of anti-ISIS fighters who evidently hold capability and intention for terror are a threat to their countries of origin and international security.

Chapter 4 – Policy Development

As analysis heretofore has demonstrated, not only pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters but also their anti-ISIS counterparts may pose a threat for their home countries and international security. In dealing with this threat, international organizations and a large number of countries, both individually and collectively, have formulated policies including different kinds of measures. They have also developed programs to reintegrate foreign fighters back into society.

At one end of the policy spectrum is general acceptance in which governments do not disrupt their private citizen's joining armed groups in a foreign country. For these governments, traveling to foreign lands to involve in armed clashes is not an offence. Thus, returning foreign fighters are not handled with extra care but are treated as an ordinary part of radicalized citizens. However, even for those governments, any support to terrorist organizations is inadmissible. At the opposite end of the policy spectrum is an entire banning of any contribution to a foreign armed group which is not officially recognized by that respective government. These governments have taken a firm and resolute stance, explicitly condemned participation in conflicts abroad and committed to judicial prosecution of foreign fighters (Council of Europe, 2017).

A great majority of governments, indeed, have practiced some forms of realpolitik and prosecuted foreign fighters only when they were fighting alongside groups contrary to their country's interests and allegiances (De Craemer, 2017). In this context, David Cameron, the then British prime minister, put forward a "fundamental difference" between battling for ISIS and the Kurds because the latter had done "very good work opposing the extremists" (*Iraq Crisis*, 2014, para. 2). From this perspective, the Peshmerga and the Assyrian militias, namely Dwekh Nawsha and the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU), have constituted lesser legal problems. The YPG and YPJ in Syria, however, for being parts of an internationally designated terrorist organization, the PKK, have created a particularly important legitimacy problem (Jaklin, 2015). Moreover, as seen in previous chapter of this dissertation, the YPG by itself has been consistently accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity by respected human rights organizations.

Thus, due to the absence of clearly articulated policy guidelines in relation to anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, this chapter aims initially to review current policies of international organizations and Western countries, though non-exhaustive, and consequently to present policy recommendations.

4.1 – Current Policies of International Organizations and Western Countries

In the past few years, an increasing number of terrorist attacks committed by foreign fighters has obligated international organizations and countries around the globe to establish coherent responses to the threat that foreign fighters posed. In this context, international organizations and Western countries have increasingly toughened their counterterrorism strategies already in place. They have, moreover, developed a wide range of new policies and introduced various measures.

To tackle with the threat posed by foreign fighters, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has adopted successive resolutions. There are important points in these resolutions that Member States must conform. Resolution 2170 of August 2014, for example, demanded "all foreign terrorist fighters associated with ISIL and other terrorist groups withdraw immediately" (p. 4) and held States responsible for taking "national measures to suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters" (p. 4) through effectively controlling their borders and cooperatively sharing information with other States and competent authorities. Resolution 2178 of September 2014, additionally, obliged all States to establish serious criminal offences regarding the travel, recruitment, and financing of foreign fighters.

Having regard to UNSC Resolution 2178 (2014), the EU and many other Western states have criminalized their citizens' traveling or attempting to travel abroad to enlist in a terrorist group or an organization. Concurrently, other terrorism related activities, such as incitement to terrorism, recruitment for terrorist activities, providing or receiving terrorist training and funding, organizing or facilitating other persons' traveling abroad for the purpose of terrorism, have also been criminalized (*Additional Protocol*, 2015).

UNSC Resolution 2396 of December 2017 required States to establish Advance Passenger Information (API) systems in order to detect travel of foreign fighters and to create "watch lists or databases" of known or suspected persons. Resolution 2396 demanded States to assess and investigate returning foreign fighters for any potential involvement in criminal or terrorist activities and to take appropriate action according to their evidence-based risk assessments. Resolution 2396 also recognized the role of women and children as victims, supporters, facilitators or perpetrators of terrorist acts and requested Member States to develop "tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies" that pay attention to "gender and age sensitivities" (p. 10).

That said, despite all these efforts, an abundant variety of country-specific "political, cultural, and legal elements" (Saltman & Smith, 2015, p. 59) have prevented formation of a

distinct policy on foreign fighters across the West as a whole. On the contrary, countries have often learned by doing and shaped various policies that are appropriate for their unique contexts. In general, however, these policies have usually combined administrative, criminal law and reintegrative measures.

4.1.1 – Administrative Measures

Western countries have developed a multitude of administrative measures to diminish the terrorist threat and prevent terrorist acts by restricting foreign fighters' traveling in and out of Syrian-Iraqi battlefields. These measures include, but are not limited to, travel ban, re-entry denial, relocation away from specific geographical areas, refusal to issue identity cards, invalidation or confiscation of passport, house arrest, electronic surveillance, suspension of social benefits, deprivation of civil rights and citizenship revocation. Indeed, like criminal law measures, administrative measures are also repressive, but, to the contrary, not in a sense of punishment. As a matter of fact, Western states mainly use administrative measures before or during the completion of a judicial prosecution and when they cannot apply criminal law measures (Council of Europe, 2017).

France is one of the largest providers of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, with an estimated 2,000 French nationals, and a home to nearly 9,000 radicalized individuals (Phippen, 2016). Since 2015, France has experienced a series of deadly terrorist attacks perpetrated by returning and stay-at-home pro-ISIS fighters. The Charlie Hebdo and kosher supermarket attacks in January 2015, Paris attacks in November 2015, the Bastille Day attack in Nice in July 2016 and the Christmas market shooting in Strasbourg in December 2018 are only a few to mention. These attacks led to killing of more than 240 people in France. In the aftermath of 2015 attacks, France has hastily put in place some radical counterterrorism measures against foreign fighters. The French government established and repeatedly extended a national state of emergency. In May 2016, the French Parliament approved a law allowing enforcement agencies to place foreign fighters coming back from terrorist battlegrounds in house detention up to a period of one month. The law also enabled the government to restrict public protests, close websites and disperse groups that risk public safety (Breeden, 2016). In October 2017, a new anti-terrorism law allowed police to raid private property without judicial review and to set up checkpoints at will (Rubin & Peltier, 2017).

Likewise, after ISIS's declaration of a caliphate in Syria in June 2014, the British government has taken new measures to interrupt movement of sympathizers and returning pro-

ISIS Western foreign fighters (Watt & Travis, 2014). As per a measure, dubbed as the Temporary Exclusion Order (TEO), pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters could only turn back to their home countries if they accept escort or close supervision of the police until prosecution (*Powers to Stop British Jihadists*, 2014, para. 8). Following the terror attack in Manchester in May 2017, British authorities, for the first time, prohibited British citizens suspected of going overseas for terrorism from returning to the UK without contacting law enforcement authorities (Syal, 2017).

Australia, like Belgium and the Netherlands, has used cessation of social welfare benefits as a measure against foreign fighters. Under this measure, foreign fighters have been removed from municipal registries that result in losing their social benefits or allowances. In November 2014, Australian Parliament passed the Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Foreign Fighters) Act 2014 "to respond to the threat posed by Australians engaging in, and returning from, conflicts in foreign states by: providing additional powers for security agencies; strengthening border security measures; cancelling welfare payments for persons involved in terrorism" (Summary section, para. 1).

The Australian Parliament has passed the Counter-Terrorism (Temporary Exclusion Orders) Act 2019, or shortly the TEO Bill, in July 2019. The Bill has empowered the Minister of Home Affairs to temporarily prevent an Australian citizen - aged 14 years or older - from entering Australia for a specified period of up to two years if the person is suspected of supporting, or having fought with, a terrorist organization abroad. Besides, the Minister of Home Affairs has been entitled to issue a return permit under which a person could be obliged to return his/her passport or to admit a strict supervision of security authorities. The Australian government estimated in July 2019 that 40 of 230 Australian foreign fighters, who had traveled to Syria and Iraq since 2012, had already returned while about 80 were still in the region (Tantau, 2019).

The Netherlands has also exerted extensive efforts to prevent its citizens from traveling to Syria and Iraq. As of March 2018, an estimated 300 Dutch citizens had traveled to Syria and Iraq to become foreign fighters. Of those, nearly 60 had been killed, approximately 50 had returned and about 160 were still fighting in Syria and Iraq. To prevent Dutch citizens from becoming foreign fighters or from returning to the Netherlands, in 2017, the Netherlands enacted tougher legislation enabling revocation of Dutch Citizenship who join a terrorist organization abroad. The law has restricted the freedom of movement of an individual through an obligation of periodic reports to the police and prohibition of leaving the country. (Zeldin, 2017).

In addition to the Netherlands, many other Western countries have opposed the return of their foreign fighters. In Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland and the UK, foreign fighters with dual citizenship have seen their nationality stripped when they were identified as a threat for their states. In the UK, for example, although making someone stateless by deprivation of his or her only citizenship is prohibited by the global rule, the then home secretary, Sajid Javid, decided to deprive 19-year-old Shamima Begum of her British nationality in February 2019 (*IS Schoolgirl Shamima Begum*, 2019). Javid said "my message is clear. If you have supported terrorist organisations abroad I will not hesitate to prevent your return" (Reality Check, 2019, para. 2). Begum, then at 15, fled the UK with her two school friends to join ISIS in Syria in February 2015. Almost four years later, she declared her request to return home to Britain. The Home Secretary of the UK, contrarily, argued that Begum was a Bangladeshi citizen because her mother was thought to be Bangladeshi. Bangladesh's ministry of foreign affairs, on the other hand, later said that Begum could not enter Bangladesh for not being a Bangladeshi citizen (*Shamima Begum Will not be Allowed Here, Bangladesh Says,* 2019). Subsequently, however, the British Court of Appeal granted permission for Begum's return to the UK since she had been denied a fair hearing.

Denmark, in March 2015, amended its Passport Act and the Act on Aliens which "allow for the imposition of travel bans, seizing passports and refusing to issue passports to people in situations where there are reasons to believe that they will travel to armed conflicts" (*Police Seize Passport From 'Foreign Fighter'*, 2015, para. 5). Denmark approved a new National Action Plan named as Preventing and Countering Extremism and Radicalisation (2016). The plan, inter alia, assumed an uncompromising stance against foreign fighters and underpinned the necessity of protecting teenagers from the radicalizing impact of returning foreign fighters. The plan, furthermore, brought stricter legal measures and enabled the Danish Defence Intelligence Service's reaching more information about Danish extremists abroad, especially Danish foreign fighters. Denmark, furthermore, has insistently blocked the return of ISIS fighters' children from Syria and Iraq (Preventing and countering extremism and radicalisation: National Action Plan, 2016).

Some countries, like Italy, Luxembourg and Sweden, allowed the return of their foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and repatriated them. Canada, on the other hand, has followed a more passive approach and decided not to actively repatriate its foreign fighters but also not to resist if they return by themselves (Gurski, 2019). Despite ISIS's territorial decline in recent years, the Canadian government has neither experienced nor expected any increase in the number of CETs returning from Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, being aware that "should Canadian extremist

travellers return home, their experiences abroad and network of like-minded individuals could pose a security threat" (*2018 Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada*, 2018, Canadian extremist travellers section, para. 4), Canada's policy in managing CETs has been designated as "to bring them to justice" (Ministerial foreword section, para. 4) using all means available. Therefore, when there was enough evidence to be charged, a CET was prosecuted. Otherwise, law enforcement agencies utilized some tools such as

> using a terrorism peace bond to seek to have the court place conditions on the individual (including electronic monitoring); active physical surveillance; using the Secure Air Travel Act to prevent further travel; additional border screening; and/or cancelling, refusing or revoking passports. In certain circumstances, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) may also employ threat reduction measures to reduce the threat posed by a returnee. (*2018 Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada*, 2018, Managing Canadian extremist travellers section, para. 2)

4.1.2 – Criminal Law Measures

The legal framework of the foreign fighter phenomenon is a complex, variable and often unclear area. Important differences in criminal law measures exist from country to country. But there are still some common patterns (De Craemer, 2017). In most of the Western states, the most prevalent crime with regard to foreign fighters have been illegal participation in activities of a terrorist armed group in Syria and Iraq. Other preparatory and ancillary crimes, in this vein, have included, but not limited to, preparing for terrorist acts, traveling for the purpose of terrorism, providing and receiving training for terrorism, recruitment for terrorism, instructing to commit a terrorist offence, providing financial or material assistance to terrorism, and possession of articles for terrorist purposes.

War crimes, in addition to terrorism related offences, have been recently utilized by a number of Western countries to accuse returning foreign fighters. In most of the cases, these accusations have been brought along with terrorism charges. The war crimes, for which foreign fighters have been charged, include, inter alia, outrages upon personal dignity, child recruitment into an armed group, killing of a protected person under international humanitarian law and pillage. In some countries like Finland and Sweden, where membership in a terrorist organization is not a criminal offence, foreign fighters have been prosecuted for war crimes (Eurojust, 2020).

In the course of ISIS' rapid and dramatic territorial expansion and committing atrocities against the local population in Syria and Iraq, most of the Western countries had a hands-off approach concerning anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in general and foreign fighters of the YPG and YGJ in particular. Some countries explicitly refrained from legal prosecution of their anti-ISIS fighters as long as they undertook no hostile act against their countries or supported a terror organization, such as the PKK. In some cases, even when sufficient legal evidence was found, public prosecutors did not bring a lawsuit because they did not consider prosecution of anti-ISIS fighters in interests of their citizens (De Craemer, 2017).

Spokesman for the Norwegian Police Security Service said in 2014 that their "focus as a security service will be more on groups like IS and not people going to defend areas against the IS" (Olsen, 2014, para. 6). Correspondingly, spokesperson for the Dutch Justice Ministry expressed that "Dutch Kurds are not being blocked from joining the peshmerga and would not be prosecuted on return unless they committed war crimes" (Olsen, 2014, para. 12). He added that who joined the PKK would be committing a crime, however, he refrained from openly declaring that they would be prosecuted. Spokesman of the Swedish Security Service ventured even to say that "people who fight for the PKK aren't automatically guilty of a crime and would be prosecuted in Sweden only if they violated the laws of war or used banned weapons" (Olsen, 2014, para. 15). The U.S. government doesn't endorse foreign fighting against ISIS, but also doesn't forbid it (Leventhal, 2015).

Maurer (2015) adeptly demonstrates that "the U.S. government only cares what direction you're shooting at and who you are shooting at. As long as you're shooting in the right direction, at bad guys, they don't really care" (para. 3). Macer Gifford, then a 28-year-old former London currency trader who joined the YPG in 2015, explained the perspective of the British government and his own position that

> British law is very confused. If you go and fight against a foreign state, you could be breaking British law. Obviously you could also be tried for criminal acts if you commit any atrocities. But at the end of the day, what I did was that I joined a People's Protection Unit [the YPG] … and I fought against international terrorists, the Islamic State.
>
> The British government saw me as perhaps a thorn in their side, but a loophole had been found – and at the end of the day it's up to the prosecution service. Is it in the interests of the British people to prosecute this person? They must have convinced themselves that there was no way that they could do that. (Quinn, 2016, paras. 6-7)

In some countries, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters of the YPG and YPJ have not been touched. In France, for example, the Senate granted fighters of the YPG and YPJ certain privileges by saying "the French having joined the 'units for the protection of the people' (YPG, i.e. the Kurdish forces) are not systematically prosecuted, with regard to the cooperation offered by the YPG to the French armed forces" (Senat, 2018, p. 149). For both the U.S. and France, the PKK/PYD/YPG and YPJ - under the name of SDF – have been the closest allies in Syria. While the UK and Germany refrain from officially meeting with the representatives of the PYD and YPG, French president Emmanuel Macron publicly received an SDF delegation at the Elysee Palace in Paris in March 2018 (Ozcan, 2018).

The government in the Netherlands has disregarded restrictions for three members of a Dutch motorbike gang, No Surrender, who fought against ISIS along with Kurdish groups in northern Iraq in 2014. On that point, Wim de Bruin, public prosecutor spokesman, said "joining a foreign armed force was previously punishable, now it's no longer forbidden. You just can't join a fight against the Netherlands" (*Netherlands Says OK*, 2014, para. 2). He also said that Dutch citizens would be liable to prosecution if they engaged in criminal acts such as abuse or rape. In any case, Dutch citizens could not fight alongside the PKK since it was labeled as a terrorist organization.

A 47-year-old former soldier from the Netherlands, who was not actually identified but named as Jitse Akse by Dutch media, joined the YPG in Syria in early 2015. Akse was arrested after returning to the Netherlands in January 2016 because of his claims that he had personally killed multiple ISIS fighters in Syria. However, the case against him was dropped because of "insufficient evidence to show that A [Akse] was personally involved in committing homicide or attempted homicide" (Agence France-Presse, 2016a, para. 7). According to public prosecutors, "the content of A's [Akse's] claims are difficult to prove and are not supported by any other evidence. Also, an on-the-ground investigation is impossible given the current climate" (Agence France-Presse, 2016a, para. 8).

Jac Holmes, then a 22-year-old British IT worker with no prior military experience, had left the UK to join the YPG in January 2015. Police stopped and questioned him before he boarded the plane. Though Holmes declared his intent to travel to Syria and join the conflict, he was not prevented (*'Bone-Tired' UK Volunteers Home After Fighting IS*, 2015). In his first attempt to travel to Syria via Iraq, Holmes was deported by police from Erbil Airport in Iraq. He recalled "they just said we're not going to let you in, we're going to send you back to England. So they forced me to pay for a flight home. They said I'd go to jail otherwise" (*I got*

Shot, 2015, para. 18). He succeeded joining the YPG a week later when he tried again via Sulaymaniyah (Yildiz, 2015).

In his first tour in Syria he was shot in the arm. After his recovery in a hospital, Holmes returned to the frontlines. In June 2015, Holmes revealed his intention to go back to the UK saying "so I'm going to go and relax in northern Iraq for a bit, then probably go back to England for a little while, and then potentially come back out to northern Iraq and see [what's going on]" (*I got Shot*, 2015, para. 8). On his return to UK with a flight from Cairo, after five months of service in the YPG, police detained Holmes at Heathrow Airport for three hours. Officials had taken his phone and other items and then questioned him. Eventually, the police let him go (*Briton Fighting with Kurds Against Islamic State Defends Actions*, 2015). Holmes had had two more tours in Syria in following years. In his third tour, Holmes commanded a YPG sniper unit which consisted four anti-ISIS foreign fighters from Spain, the U.S. and Germany. Holmes died in October 2017 while clearing mines in Raqqa (Vardy, 2017).

Some countries, such as Australia and Switzerland, on the contrary, have felt strong concern about foreign fighting since the early years of the Syrian War. Based on the fact that foreign fighters were intensely exposed to extremist ideology and gained combat experience, no matter which side they fought in Syria and Iraq (Huang, 2016), these countries have been absolutely prohibitive to all cohorts of foreign fighters and criminalized participation in foreign military activities abroad. Thus, in addition to pro-ISIS foreign fighters, Australian and Swiss laws have been applied to anti-ISIS foreign fighters of Kurdish and Christian armed groups. Ashley Johnston, for example, a twenty-eight-year-old former Australian Army Reserve member, was the first foreign casualty from the YPG. He died in February 2015 while fighting ISIS in Iraq. Following Johnston's death, an Australian Defense spokesperson said that "current and former members of the Australian Defence Force, like all Australian citizens, are subject to Australian law under which it is an offence to participate in military activities in a foreign country" (Lucy et al., 2015, para. 20). Johnston would have faced a 20-year prison sentence if he had returned to Australia, due to the fact that under the Foreign Incursions Act, all Australians fighting for either the YPG or ISIS have been regarded as terrorists (Aston, 2015).

Switzerland, as well, has clearly forbidden engagement in foreign conflicts without authorization of the government. The Swiss Military Penal Code has required "any Swiss who enlists in foreign military service without the authorisation of the cabinet will be punished with a fine or a prison sentence of up to three years" (*Swiss Citizen Arrested for Fighting Islamic State*, 2015, para. 8). As such, Johan Cosar, a former Swiss army officer who spent two years with Syriac Military Council battling against ISIS in northeastern Syria, was arrested and

prosecuted upon his return to Switzerland in March 2015. Cosar was later found guilty of violating Switzerland's neutrality and security via becoming a member of an overseas military and given a three-month suspended sentence and a fine of 500 Swiss francs (Foulkes, 2019).

Terrorist attacks that took place in Brussels in 2014 and 2016 as well as in Paris in 2015 have been shocking tragedies for Western countries. Only the November 2015 Paris attacks killed 130 people and wounded 494 (*2015 Paris Terror Attacks Fast Facts*, 2019). The fact that the perpetrators of these acts included returnees who had spent time fighting in Syria and Iraq has catalyzed efforts to revise or develop a broad range of judicial measures for prosecution of crimes and terrorism related offences. In this process, some countries continued using their national criminal justice systems. They have routinely monitored, investigated and, where appropriate, prosecuted all their suspected or known foreign fighters regardless of age and gender. Some other countries approached the issue on a case-by-case basis. In several other states, there has been a shift over time in their initial practice. These states, as well, have instituted policies to investigate and prosecute their foreign fighters more systematically (Scherrer et al., 2018). Perhaps more importantly, some countries have begun to characterize the YPG as a terrorist organization and prosecute returning anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters Blake, 2018b).

Countries, such as Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Serbia, the UK and the U.S., have tightened their laws to prevent domestic terrorist activity. These countries have also empowered their intelligence and security services. Belgium, having the highest per capita number of pro-ISIS foreign fighters, for example, has revised its penal legislation to enlarge the definition of terrorist offence. In article 140 of the Belgian Penal Code which was introduced in 2015, Belgium has criminalized traveling abroad to join a terrorist group and funding a terrorist organization. Article 140 has determined “prison sentences from 5 to 10 years and fines up to five thousand euros for anyone who participates in the activities of a terrorist group” (Council of Europe, 2017, p. 17). Article 140 has also criminalized public incitement to commit a terrorist offence, recruitment for terrorism, and providing or receiving of training for terrorism.

Germany, succeeding the ISIS attacks in Paris in 2015, has enacted a new sturdier anti-terrorism law criminalizing travel outside Germany to receive terrorist training, expanding current laws against terrorism financing and bringing restrictions on identity cards and passports of foreign fighters (Gesley, 2015). As of March 2020, more than 1,060 German foreign fighters are believed to travel to Syria and Iraq. Around a quarter of the people who have traveled are female. Around a third of these foreign fighters who left Germany have

returned while more than 250 are thought to be killed in Syria or Iraq (Bundesamt Für Verfassungsschutz, 2019). German authorities have applied to international humanitarian law to prosecute returnees when terrorism offences cannot be identified (Raudszus, 2020).

In Germany, however, there has been a noticeable distinction in practice between returning pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. In October 2018, answering a parliamentary questionnaire submitted by Left party politicians, German security authorities said that 249 anti-ISIS foreign fighters had left the country to fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. According to the security authorities, 124 of them had returned to Germany. While 32 of returnees were investigated by the federal police, for 27 of those 32, authorities were looking into links with terrorist organizations. Moreover, two of the individuals under investigation were considered threats to public safety (Shelton, 2018). Eventually, however, all the investigations were closed for lack of evidence. The Federal Ministry of Justice declared in late 2019 that "according to the current practice of the Federal Prosecutor's Office, the investigation proceedings are generally terminated" (Felden & von Hein, 2020, para. 8). Thus, none of those 32 investigated anti-ISIS German foreign fighters were indicted. Furthermore, none of them were classified as a threat. In the meantime, quite contrarily, 53 of 122 known returning pro-ISIS German fighters were officially designated as dangerous to public safety (Felden & von Hein, 2020).

From Denmark, according to a threat assessment report prepared by the Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) which comprises staff from various counterterrorism authorities, at least 159 people have traveled to Syria or Iraq to fight alongside extremist groups since 2012 (*Assessment of the Terror Threat to Denmark*, 2020). In December of 2015, the Danish parliament has amended the Treason Article that allowed authorities to sentence Danish foreign fighters to ten years' imprisonment and even to life imprisonment in case of specific aggravating circumstances (Wittendorp et al., 2017).

Joanna Palani sets an example showing that legal provisions of Denmark have also been enforced against anti-ISIS foreign fighters. Palani, a Danish citizen of Kurdish origin then at 22, left college and traveled to Syria to join the fight in November 2014. After fighting for almost a year in lines of first the YPG and then the Peshmerga, she turned back to Denmark. Three days after return, Danish authorities confiscated her passport, imposed a 12-month travel ban and informed her that she could face six years in jail if she was to attempt to leave the country (Whyte, 2016). Subsequently, in June 2016, Palani violated the travel ban and Danish passport law. She fled to Ukraine, Finland and Russia to take combat training and then she secretly returned to Syria (Billing, 2017). This time she joined the YPJ and fought as a sniper until October of the same year. Upon her return, Danish authorities arrested and sentenced

Palani to nine months in prison (Margaritoff, 2019). Likewise, Tommy Mørck, a then 40-year-old Danish citizen who fought for the YPG in Syria between November 2016 and March 2017, was put in jail for six months in June 2018 for traveling to a conflict zone without the authorities' permission (van Wilgenburg, 2018).

In February 2015, Italy has introduced a new legislation, known as Decree Law 7, making it illegal to join a conflict in a foreign territory to support a terrorist organization. The decree has also criminalized supplementary activities like recruitment, financial support and social media activities. Based on the type of the violation, sentences range from three to ten years in prison (Scimia, 2015). In France, between 2014 and 2018, while 1,600 foreign fighters were placed under criminal investigation, over 200 were prosecuted for participating in a group formed for the purpose of preparing an act of terrorism (Weill, 2018). "Under the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, travelling abroad for the purpose of terrorism or an attempt to make such a trip does not constitute a separate crime" (President of Russia, 2019, para 3). Russia, however, declared that "these actions would be considered as preparations for a crime of terrorism or an attempt to commit such a crime and, as such, would entail criminal liability" (President of Russia, 2019, para 3).

Most interesting of all, perhaps, "prior to 2016, there was no law in place regulating the legality of travel in support of terrorism in Sweden" (*Western State Policies Regarding Returning Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, 2020, p. 25) despite having more than 300 citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq. Such that, Sweden has made it "illegal to travel abroad with the intention to commit acts of terrorism" only in April 2016 (Hakim, 2016, para. 32).

Some countries have targeted recruiters and those who finance terrorist acts. In Belgium, in May 2015, three women were sentenced to between 20 and 30 months in prison due to helping ISIS recruits' travel and providing financial support to some organizations that radicalize young girls ("Belgium Convicts 7 Women for Supporting ISIS", 2015). In December 2015, a Dutch court sentenced nine members of "a criminal and terror organization" (*Dutch Court Convicts Nine for Terror Offences*, 2015, para. 8) accused of recruiting young people to fight with ISIS and other groups in Syria and Iraq. In 2019, Serbia has expanded the criminal offence of terrorist financing by adding direct and indirect fundraising or funds collection to support terrorist acts. In Netherlands in that same year, seven persons have been sentenced up to nine months in prison for financing foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Daniel Newey, then 27, had joined the YPG in 2017. On his return to Britain in March 2018, the police questioned, and then began to monitor him but did not take proceedings. Daniel

travelled to Syria for a second time after Turkey initiated the Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 against the YPG and other YPG-led groups (Dearden, 2020). Daniel's father Paul Newey, aged 49, and Daniel's then 19-year-old brother Sam Newey were both charged with terror offences. While Paul Newey was arrested under suspicion of funding and supporting terrorism, Sam Newey was arrested for assisting his brother to prepare for acts of terrorism (*UK Charges Father*, 2019).

Daniel Burke, a 32-year-old ex-British soldier, fought in ranks of the YPG for nearly eight months in Syria and Iraq. When he came back to the UK in June 2018, security officials questioned and then released him without any other action. In December 2019, however, Burke was arrested for being associated with the YPG and the PKK. Burke was also charged with preparing for terrorist acts and financing terrorism. While the first charge was related to organizing transport of Daniel Newey to Iraq from Spain, the second pertained to making similar arrangements for himself to rejoin the YPG. The third charge was regard to Burke's afford money and equipment assistance to his previous friends in the YPG (Tanno, 2019).

Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands tried their foreign fighters in their absence. In Belgium, in May 2015, four women were sentenced to five years imprisonment for taking part in protection of settlements in Syria ("Belgium Convicts 7 Women for Supporting ISIS", 2015, para. 3) on behalf of ISIS. At court hearing, four women were believed to be in Syria. In early 2017, the Netherlands announced an official policy of adjudicating all foreign fighters who had traveled to Syria or Iraq with criminal intent. Under the auspices of the Public Prosecution Service, any Dutch citizens returning from the region would be investigated and face criminal charges. For those foreign fighters who were still in the combat zone, trials have been initiated with defendants in absentia (*Prosecute Dutch Jihadists*, 2017).

The U.S. has adopted a case-by-case approach to returning foreign fighters. Each foreign fighter returning from Syria and Iraq is investigated to find out if he or she has any purpose of planning a terrorist act. Those who are assessed to have such an intent are prosecuted. For those who do not intend to conduct an attack, an appropriate response is shaped (Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2018). To give an example, three returning foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq to the U.S. in 2014 confronted different responses. One was arrested but later released for lack of evidence showing his participation in terrorist acts; the second one traveled back to Syria and exploded himself there; and the third one was released free despite pleading guilty to providing material support to a terrorist group (*Western State Policies Regarding Returning Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, 2020).

Only a few dozen of nearly three hundred U.S. citizen who attempted to join ISIS were arrested before leaving the country. In this regard, the Justice Department spokesman said the U.S. “is committed to taking responsibility for its citizens who attempt to travel or did travel to support isis” (Wright, 2019, para. 4). He also added that the Justice Department has taken legal action for more than 100 persons who attempted to join ISIS (Wright, 2019). As of December 2019, the U.S. have repatriated 23 citizens from Syria and Iraq including eight adults and 15 children. The U.S. Department of Justice have accused six of these adults with several terrorism-related offences (U.S. Department of State, 2020). However, the U.S. has never prosecuted even a single anti-ISIS Western foreign fighter (Lamothe, 2019).

Some other countries, such as Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, the Netherlands and the UK, have also adopted a provisional, case-by-case approach. These countries have applied individual monitoring procedures for foreign fighters to clarify their threat level. Returning foreign fighters are screened by counterterrorism agencies to determine if they have committed any crime. In Belgium, for example, a personal risk assessment for all returnees has been completed with support of the police and intelligence services in order to determine if detention is necessary. Those believed to be a threat have been presented to an investigating judge (Reality Check, 2019).

In the UK, despite warnings of the Foreign Office against travel to the Syria and Iraq, there has not been a blanket governmental restriction on mobilization of foreign fighters. Anyone who travels to Syria is accepted to be posing “a very serious national security risk to the UK” (Home Office in the media, 2019, para. 3) and, therefore, necessitates a case-by-case risk assessment. The police investigate each foreign fighter returning to the UK to determine if he or she has committed any criminal offence in Syria or Iraq. Whether a foreign fighter has violated the law depends on the person's own acts on the battlefield. All returnees suspected of committing a crime are prosecuted. The British Terrorism Act enables prosecution of foreign fighters with harsh sentences. Some charges such as “preparation for terrorism”, “training for terrorism” and “making or possessing explosives for terrorist purposes” carry a life sentence. Other terrorism offences like “membership of a proscribed organisation”, and “inviting or expressing support for a proscribed organisation” carry a ten-year maximum sentence (Home Office in the media, 2019, paras. 10-12).

In January 2015, an 18-year-old British girl of Kurdish descent from London, Shilan Ozcelik, was arrested for attempting to join the YPJ in Syria. Ozcelik was charged with a terrorist offence under the 2006 Terrorism Act (Bowcott, 2015). Based on a letter in which she

told her family that she had joined the PKK, Ozcelik received 21 months prison sentence (*Kurdish Girl Gets Jail for Trying to Join Anti-ISIS Fight*, 2015).

James Matthews, a then 40-year-old former British soldier, had three tours with the YPG. When he returned to the UK in February 2016, he was arrested and formally charged with terrorism offences making him the first Briton to be prosecuted. He was accused of traveling to "a place or places in Iraq and Syria where instruction or training was provided for purposes connected to the commission or preparation of terrorism" (Farmer & Ensor, 2018, para. 14). After two years on bail, the case was dropped in July 2018 (Dearden, 2019a).

Josh Walker, a then 25-year-old university student, fought ISIS alongside the YPG and acted as a Kurdish interpreter for U.S. Special Forces in Syria in 2016. Upon his coming back to the UK, he was arrested by counter-terrorism officers on the thought that he was preparing for terrorist acts. The police found a copy of The Anarchist Cookbook in his bedsit in Aberystwyth University. He was accused of possessing materials which could be useful for committing an act of terrorism. But later in October 2017, all charges were dropped (Rosen, 2019).

Aidan James had been repetitively rejected by British armed forces due to his mental deficiencies. James, then at 27, traveled to Iraq in August 2017 and had two months training with the PKK in Iraq before crossing Syria to fight alongside the YPG. On his return to the UK in February 2018, the police arrested James and charged him with three counts of terrorism: attending a camp in Iraq where PKK fighters were training, fighting with the YPG in Syria and getting prepared for acts of terrorism. James was found guilty of the PKK camp charge. Before leaving the UK for Iraq in April 2017, James was warned by officials of the Prevent counter-extremism program that he could face investigation for his possible crimes. In this respect, the judge at the Old Bailey in London said

> Attendance for any purpose at a camp where weapons training for terrorist purposes is provided is an offence, and there is no defence of reasonable excuse. The policy of the law is to keep people who are subject to the criminal law of the UK away from such places altogether. (Dearden, 2019c, para. 16)

Aidan James was acquitted of not only the main terrorism offence - getting prepared for acts of terrorism - and also fighting alongside the YPG in Syria. According to the judge, fighting against ISIS with the YPG "was not terrorism at all" because the YPG was "supporting the policy of the UK and other allies by fighting Isis" (Dearden, 2019c, paras. 14–15) and was also supported by the Royal Air Force. Eventually, in November 2019, James was jailed for one year due to terror offence and three years for keeping cocaine to sell. According to a medical

report revealed by the judge, James was suffering from trauma and drug dependence disorders (Dearden, 2019c).

Joe Robinson, a 23-year-old former British soldier who had served in Afghanistan in 2012, joined the fight against ISIS alongside the YPG in Syria in summer 2015. When he returned the UK five months later, he was arrested for terrorism-related activities but later no accusations were made. Subsequently, in July 2017, Robinson was detained by Turkish authorities while on holiday with his girlfriend and her mother in Turkey (Sengupta, 2017). He was convicted of terror offences, that is being a member of a terrorist organization. While facing a seven-and-a half-year jail term, Robinson skipped bail and secretly returned to the UK in 2018 (Vardy, 2018).

4.1.3 – Reintegrative Measures

In addition to administrative and criminal law measures, a range of reintegrative measures, varying in nature and in scope, are taken with respect to foreign fighters traveling to and from Syria and Iraq. These measures involve programs that are specifically designed to prevent radicalization and traveling of potential foreign fighters. Such programs also aim to enhance rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters into society. Moreover, some international organizations and Western countries have developed initiatives to prevent the proliferation of extremist and hateful content on social media.

In a number of countries, including Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, specific call centers have been founded to join worried parents, relatives and peers of a foreign fighter to special counsellors that can provide support in legal, psychological, educational, personal and religious issues. Germany, for example, has launched a counseling hotline in 2011 for individuals that wished to exit extremist groups, including those traveling to Syria and other combat zones. Hayat - meaning “life” in Turkish and Arabic - consists of experts who can be reached via a helpline. The experts act as a bridge in all directions and connect individuals to parents, children, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, schoolteachers, imams, police, or others (*HAYAT-Germany*, n.d.). Hayat, indeed, has helped dissuasion of dozens of people from joining the fight in Syria over recent years (Vallance, 2014).

Social media firms, such as Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other internet companies, have faced increasing pressure from various governments and international organizations to prevent proliferation of extremist content, like hate speech and propaganda of terrorist groups and organizations (Gibbs, 2017). While some countries recommended social

media companies to adopt a more proactive approach and publicly report their efforts, some others called for fines for companies that fail to monitor and remove extremist content from their platforms. The UK has developed its own artificial intelligence programs for tackling the spread of extremist propaganda online and offered these programs to other less extensively used platforms, such as Vimeo, Telegraph and pCloud, that have recently obtained an increase in terrorist use for propaganda (Greenfield, 2018). In April 2017, a study of the UK Parliament's Home Affairs Select Committee showed continued failure of social media companies to take out extremist material even after being reported (Bowcott, 2017). As a result of criticisms, in 2017, Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have cooperatively established the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) to tackle terrorist activity on their platforms (Levin, 2017).

In December 2015, German government together with Google, Facebook, and Twitter jointly declared that social media companies thenceforth would remove hate speech and incitement to violence in 24 hours of notice. Nevertheless, there has been no significant progress. Thus, in October 2017, Germany put the Network Enforcement Law (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz or NetzDG) into effect which has enabled Germany to punish social media firms up to 50 million euros if they persistently fail to meet requirements (Tworek, 2017). A similar law that was passed in Australia in 2019 threatened to fine social media companies ranging up to 10 percent of their yearly revenues and their managers as much as three years of imprisonment if the platforms fail to "expeditiously" remove "abhorrent violent material" (Cave, 2019, para. 8).

Some Western countries have developed rehabilitation and reintegration programs that are applicable to foreign fighters. While some programs focus on disengagement through behavioral change resulting in desistance from violence, some others target deradicalization by way of ideological or psychological transformation. There are also programs that purport to combine the two approaches (Scherrer et al., 2018). The main idea lying behind the establishment of these programs has been to oppose the understanding that there is nothing else to do for foreign fighters but to continue fighting. Thus, though differing across countries, these programs have mostly aimed at re-establishment of societal relations and building of an alternative network through focusing on the communities from which foreign fighters emerged. Besides, suitable returnees have been provided with housing assistance, occupational training, and employment (Braw, 2014).

Among all, the Danish Aarhus program is especially renowned. While Danish authorities screen and assess returning foreign fighters, those who are determined to have committed

crimes and pose a threat to the society are directed to legal authorities. The others deemed to be safe, on the other hand, are offered to participate in an "exit program for radicalized citizens" (Higgins, 2014, para. 13). Since early 2014, in the city of Aarhus in Denmark, the Police and Aarhus Municipality have launched an innovative deradicalization and rehabilitation program for foreign fighters. Indeed, the program has been developed after it was discovered that 31 Aarhus-dweller left for fighting in Syria before 2012 (Braw, 2014). The program aims at supporting individuals' deradicalization process who are at risk of extremist indoctrination. Moreover, as part of the program, returning foreign fighters are provided with medical and psychological treatment for war traumas as well as assistance in education, employment, and with restoring their social relations. The program, indeed, has been so successful that the number of foreign fighters leaving Aarhus for Syria declined from 31 in 2013 to only one in 2014. The program has later become a country-wide government practice, known as the Aarhus Model, and followed by other Scandinavian countries along with the Netherlands (Higgins, 2014).

As a response to 9/11, the UK developed a comprehensive counter-terrorism program, known as CONTEST, in early 2003. The CONTEST was, and still is, based on a framework of four P: "Pursue, Prevent, Protect and Prepare" (*Whitehall Releases 2003 Counter Terrorism Strategy*, 2016, Para. 3). In 2004, the UK designed Project Griffin to increase capabilities of executives and safety personnel of massive organizations to cope with security and counter-terrorism challenges (*One Million UK Workers to get Terror Response Training*, 2016). In February 2015, the UK government has issued the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 which has given life to a new de-radicalization program, known as Channel program or shortly Channel. The aim of the Channel is to provide "support at an early stage to people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism" (HM Government, 2015, p. 15). In April 2016, in the wake of the November 2015 Paris and March 2016 Brussels terrorist attacks, Project Griffin was expanded to train one million people to respond a possible ISIS-inspired terrorist attack (*One Million UK Workers to get Terror Response Training*, 2016). In the aftermath of terrorist attacks in London and Manchester in 2017, the UK government "updated and strengthened" the CONTEST strategy in June 2018. The revised version of the strategy views "Islamist terrorism", ISIS and Al-Qaida in particular, as the chief security threat to the country. The strategy also recognizes the extreme right-wing terrorism as a growing threat (HM Government, 2018).

In September 2016, France has opened the first of 12 planned "Centers for Prevention, Integration and Citizenship" in a small town near Paris with an intent to prevent further

radicalization and mobilization of individuals to Syria and Iraq (Phippen, 2016). In June 2017, the federal government has founded the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence to prevent the radicalization of Canadian young people (Harris, 2017). With the 2018 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada (2018), the government has determined the main terrorist threat as the "individuals or groups who are inspired by violent ideologies and terrorist groups, such as Daesh or al-Qaida" (Executive summary section, para. 1). The government has also revealed its concerns about "those who harbour right-wing extremist views" (Executive summary section, para. 1). Accordingly, Canada's National Terrorism Threat Level has been kept at medium, as set in early October 2014, which means "extremist groups and individuals located in Canada and abroad, have both the intent and capability to carry out an act of terrorism in Canada" (pp. 5–6).

4.2 – Policy Recommendations

As previous section has shown, some Western countries, such as Australia and Switzerland, were early to realize the threat that their anti-ISIS foreign fighters presented. These countries, thus, have adopted a blanket approach to prohibit the flow and return of both pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. This straightforward approach has provided "clarity and consistency" and treated "all citizens equally" (Tuck et al., 2016, p. 46).

Several other Western countries which had initially adopted more lenient approaches have later tightened their national law as a response to growing number of terror attacks conducted by pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters. In this process, some of these countries have recently expanded their legislation in a way to criminalize acts of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters as well. Countries like Belgium, Germany and the UK have brought stricter preventive and punitive measures and prosecuted terror related offences of their anti-ISIS foreign fighters. Some other Western countries, on the other hand, have insistently maintained their hands-off stance. For example, the "U.S. officials warn American citizens that they are subject to prosecution if they become enemy combatants abroad. But no U.S. citizen has been charged with a crime for joining the YPG" (Lamothe, 2019, para. 9). Under these circumstances, American anti-ISIS foreign fighters "have long considered the lack of prosecution to be tacit acceptance, if not approval, of their actions" (Lamothe, 2019, para. 10).

As should now be evident, there is a need to forge a strong and lasting policy to deal with anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Such a policy will provide benefits to not only governments

but also anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters themselves and other parties of the conflict (De Craemer, 2017, p. 67).

In shaping a common and comprehensive policy concerning anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, the first recommended step would be to recall all foreign fighters currently in Syria and Iraq, as the British government did in May 2019. Sajid Javid, the then home secretary of the UK, warned "British citizens in northern Syria to leave within 28 days or face a ten-year prison sentence if they try to return to the UK" (Kentish, 2019, para. 1). Subsequently, law enforcement measures and prosecutions should be applied to all foreign armed groups and foreign fighters joining all sides of the conflict. For a more nuanced understanding, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are to be treated the way pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters are treated.

Concurrently, joining a foreign armed group, irrespective of its position, intentions or allegiances, should be entirely prohibited. All Westerners thinking of joining an armed group abroad should know that they will be prosecuted either before traveling, while in the region or upon their return. To this end, international organizations and "all governments should be explicit in their communications around anti-ISIS foreign fighters" (Tuck et al., 2016, p. 53). All current and potential foreign fighters should be completely aware of the possible results of their decision, that is "what options they have in this next stage of their lives, and how they are treated upon return" (Holmer, 2015, para. 2). It will also be easier for law enforcement authorities in the West to prosecute a foreign fighter, such that, only proving their presence in a conflict zone or joining an armed group will be enough, instead of finding evidence of their crime commitment (Tuck et al., 2016).

Extremist organizations and armed groups, especially the YPG and the YPJ for being parts of the PKK, should be designated as terrorist organizations (Orton, 2017b). It is important to point out that, despite rhetoric claiming otherwise, both the YPG in Syria (*Syria: US Ally's Razing of Villages*, 2015) and the Peshmerga in Iraq (*Northern Iraq: Satellite Images*, 2016) have been accused of committing war crimes including forced displacements and home demolitions in towns and villages won back from ISIS. The PKK, YPG and YPJ should be prevented from building "additional political constituencies and leverage within the West" (Orton, 2017b, p. 131). In addition to membership of a violent armed group, providing material or financial support and wearing the clothes and patches as well as publishing images of the group should also be criminalized. This also applies to the crowdfunding activities.

These efforts will require a joint understanding and robust coordination as well as a close collaboration between and across a wide range of national and international law enforcement and intelligence organizations. All the relevant actors involved should have the specialized

capabilities and appropriate tools for dealing with anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. International exchange of timely intelligence and information on individuals at risk should be assured.

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and violent extremist groups with which they are affiliated in Syria and Iraq exploit the Internet, social media and encrypted messaging applications to be in touch with supporters, spread propaganda, recruit individuals to their cause and coordinate and carry out operations. Social media platforms, therefore, must be part of the policy. In recent years, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other companies have made progress against pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters. These companies, however, have a different standard for anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. YouTube and Facebook, for example, still host a large amount of PKK/YPG and YPJ content on their platforms. "Governments must continue to exert pressure on social media companies and search engines to lead coordinated and timely drives to remove extremist content online" (Obe & Silverman, 2014, p. 50).

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have long benefited from the unregulated nature of social media, with attention focusing specifically on pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Domestic and international connections of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters should be observed to disclose their networks and support structures. Political and social activism of returning anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters ought to be monitored. Since their messages "increasingly resonate among socially marginalized young people who are prone to use violence and are searching for an identity as well as status" (*Militant Islamist Radicalisation*, 2016, p. 1) radicalization and recruitment efforts of anti-ISIS Western fighters should be prevented. This should also include restraining heroic portrayal of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

Western countries should forge comprehensive de-radicalization policies that are able to focus on pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters all together. While optimizing the existing initiatives to prevent extremism and radicalization, "governments should consider the possible support that may be required for returning anti-ISIS fighters" (Tuck et al., 2016, p. 54). Given the high proportion among overall anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and taking heed to mental and psychological problems like PTSD, a special emphasis should be put on reintegration of ex-soldiers into the civil society. "Veterans, too, should be discouraged from joining the conflict. Those still wishing to make an impact outside of the armed forces using their specific skill sets should be pointed towards organizations working within more well-defined legal frameworks" (De Craemer, 2017, p. 67).

As Tuck et al. (2016) mentioned, “there may also be a need for additional advice and safeguarding and support mechanisms for the families and parents of anti-ISIS foreign fighters either before or after their departure, or following their return” (p. 4). To this purpose, governments should establish national telephone helplines. This will also help authorities to prevent radicalization and mobilization of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

Conclusion

Three dominant cohorts of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are pro-ISIS foreign fighters who are associated with the Sunni jihadist groups, pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters who are affiliated with the Assad government, and anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who are fighting alongside the Kurdish and Christian groups against ISIS. There are four main types of threat stemming from foreign fighters: firstly, the mobilization of thousands of foreign fighters to the theatre of conflict in Syria and Iraq; secondly, the foreign fighters' returning to their countries of origin; thirdly, the lone wolfs and remotely controlled stay-at-home fighters carrying out attacks at their home countries and, finally, the ideological polarization of the society.

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are individuals who have traveled to Syrian-Iraqi battlefield and joined or assisted various armed groups. It is estimated that about 800-1000 Westerners from Europe, North America and Australia, have traveled to Syria or Iraq to fight against ISIS. A vast majority of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are originated form the U.S., the UK, Germany and France. Despite the great diversity in their profiles, most of these foreign fighters are young males in their twenties. Military veterans account for almost two thirds of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

There are many different sources of motivation for anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters to join the fight in Syria and Iraq. The brutality that ISIS exerted in the region under its control and a displeasure with lack of an effective international response to stop ISIS's ferocity led some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters to develop a sense of obligation to defend persecuted local populations. Furthermore, some devoted Christian foreign fighters, like their Muslim counterparts, perceived their religion at threat in the region. Ex-military fighters from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were motivated by an ambition to finish their unaccomplished mission and ensure their previous loses of comrades were not in vain. Among these military veterans, having trouble adapting to civilian life after service and missing military camaraderie were also common motives. Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters with no prior military involvement, volunteered for a strong desire to fight and experience combat. Some other personal factors, common for both veteran and non-veteran fighters, were a search for personal fulfilment and adventure mainly originating from a feeling of boredom and loneliness.

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, after completing the vetting process that is run by virtual recruiters, travel to the combat zone. Flying to Iraq and then being smuggled to Syria is the most used method. Upon joining one of the armed groups, the recruits are taken into a military and ideological training. During this training, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters attend

in classes regarding ideology, politics, history and philosophy and learn basic Kurdish. They are trained in combat tactics including sabotage and sniping as well as use of weapons and explosives. The recruits also execute unit-level exercises and live fire practices. Upon completion of the military and ideological training phase, those new recruits who have little prior military experience were generally kept away from the frontline and assigned to insignificant tasks. On the contrary, those anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who have a strong military background or a set of specialized combat-related skills were directly sent to one of the units in the combat zone. In their units, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters either took part in actual combat missions or involved in training of other fighters.

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, similar to their pro-ISIS counterparts, have remarkably increased their ability to build transnational networks since the onset of the Syrian War. They have created a network of fighters, especially through online platforms. Thanks to global connections that they have built, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have recruited new Westerners and transmitted their expertise to them. Upon return home, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have become inspirational examples and attracted new fighters to the ideology and the cause of their units.

The anti-ISIS armed groups widely and proficiently utilized social media sites and multimedia platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to reach interested individuals across the globe for recruitment and vetting. Most of the time, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters played the major role in developing recruitment pages. Moreover, many anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters kept themselves reachable for other Westerners who were in search of joining the fight and receiving training. Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were also responsible for creating media products in different languages and releasing statements and videos to influence Western audiences including governments.

Although the number of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters is small, and the number determined to take the fight to the West may be even smaller, there are still legitimate concerns. Military capabilities of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have substantially developed during their stay in Syria and Iraq. They have learned urban warfare technics and improved their proficiency in using arms and explosives. Moreover, as a result of the ideological indoctrination that started in initial military training centers and continued in combat zone, their commitment to the political aims of the armed groups they fought with increased significantly. Especially far-left extremist anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have established new extremist groups. Some extreme left anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters used the skills they gained in the conflict zone to organize terrorist acts in their own countries.

In this study, anti-ISIS western foreign fighters who gain military skills by fighting with violent armed groups in Syria and Iraq, share their radical views through media means, and provoke other people to attack various targets are evaluated as a threat. In this context, in the light of the information obtained as a result of the examination of the written and visual press publications, far-left extremist anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and the armed groups that they are affiliated with are assessed to be a threat to their countries of origin and international security because they have the capability and revealed intent to conduct violent acts.

The increasing number of recent terrorist attacks in the West has led international organizations and countries to develop policies to tackle the threat posed by foreign fighters. Thereby, Western countries have shaped a variety of counter policies though uniquely different from country to country. Three major types of measures, however, can be identified in Western countries' formulation of their foreign fighter policies. These are the administrative, criminal law and reintegrative measures.

Western countries, through administrative measures, have tried to prevent their citizens' leaving the country to join violent armed groups and taking part in terrorist acts when they return. Travel restrictions, therefore, have been the most common administrative measure. Other administrative measures include, but not limited to, re-entry denial, relocation away from specific geographical areas, refusal to issue identity cards, invalidation or confiscation of passport, house arrest, electronic surveillance, suspension of social benefits, deprivation of civil rights and citizenship revocation. Law enforcement agencies have been given more intrusive powers like raiding private property without judicial review.

While a few countries kept on utilizing their existing laws to deal with foreign fighters, most countries have toughened their criminal law measures and adopted more aggressive prosecution practices after the threat posed by foreign fighters materialized. The scope of the terrorist offences has been broadened in a sense to criminalize not only participation in acts of terrorism, but also membership of a terrorist organization, attempting or facilitating travel to join a terror group, recruitment and providing or receiving of training for terrorist purposes as well as providing material and financial support to terrorist groups. War crimes, as well, have been employed as evidence for prosecution of foreign fighters.

Many countries have developed programs, as per reintegrative measures, that aim to prevent radicalization and outgoing of potential foreign fighters along with rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters. Among these programs the Aarhus model in Denmark, the Channel in the UK are only a few to mention. In some countries, telephone

hotlines have been established via which foreign fighters or their parents, relatives and peers could reach to special counsellors that are able to provide support in various issues.

In addressing the threat posed by anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, many countries, however, have mostly refrained from taking a clear stance. These countries have prosecuted anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters only when they fight for groups that have conflicting interests and alliances. While some countries have never touched anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters of the YPG and YPJ, some others have recently begun to prosecute them in a similar way to pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters. That some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have not been treated like their pro-ISIS counterparts, despite posing a similar threat, requires development of a comprehensive policy.

In this policy, all relevant international organizations and countries, thus, ought to adopt a consistent approach towards anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and treat them in the same fashion as they treat pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters. All the measures taken for the prevention, prosecution and reintegration of pro-ISIS Western foreign fighters should be implemented in the same way for anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. In this context, traveling and participation in armed groups in Syria and Iraq and all other supportive acts such as recruitment, training, financing, provision of material support and propaganda should be banned.

The YPG, YPJ and their extremist far-left sub-groups should be designated as terrorist organizations. Steps should be taken to stop glorifying anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. The massive online presence and widespread use of social media by anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters should be countered to eliminate their propaganda of armed groups. More focus should be given towards monitoring actions of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters to find out their support networks and prevent their radical political activities. Western countries should also increase information and intelligence sharing on anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters had had a history of depression, psychological problems or stress disorders that motivated them to join the fight in Syria and Iraq. Upon their return, some of them have continued to struggle from conflict-induced trauma sometimes ending with committing suicide. Last, but not least, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, especially the military veterans, and their family members should be supported for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

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