

Foreign Fighters—Recent Trends

by Barak Mendelsohn

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Abstract: Beginning with a historical perspective on foreign fighters, this article then seeks to clarify ambiguities and biases that shape how we often analyze the foreign fighter phenomenon. The central focus is then on the evolving trends and activities of the movement. A new generation of fighters has emerged who are comfortable as terrorists, recruiters, trainers and media propagandist, among other specialties. The author concludes by assessing the significance of the problem today.

The phenomenon of foreign fighters, in which volunteers leave their homes and intervene in a clash taking place in a foreign location, is hardly new. Mercenary camps, often comprising warriors from different backgrounds, holding no particular allegiance to the authorities in their place of origin, have had a ubiquitous presence on the battlefield throughout human history.¹ Even after the state-based order was established, it was many years before armies were based on members of the national or ethnic community, thus reducing the need for using mercenaries (local or imported). Furthermore, not until the nineteenth century did the dominant European powers make a strong push to establish a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence by blocking the activities of violent nonstate transnational actors (for example, pirates).² Even today, such a monopoly is often only a theoretical construct, as states' actual hold in large areas of the globe is incomplete.³

While identified today with Muslims joining coreligionists in jihad all around the world, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not restricted to individuals sharing this particular religious identity. Foreign fighters have been

¹ P.W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 19–39.

² Janice Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³ Robert Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

involved in conflicts based on diverse religious identifications, ethnic identities, and ideologies. Indeed, the Spanish Civil War saw foreign fighters on both sides, with communists fighting against “fascism” and Catholics volunteering to fight “communism.”⁴ In the 1948 Israeli-Arab war, American Jews came to the Middle East to join the Israeli army, while members of the Muslim Brotherhood fought separately for (?) the Egyptian army.

One must also note that foreign fighters are hardly a prominent aspect of modern day warfare, as nations have preferred largely to rely on professional armies. In devising their security doctrines, states evaluate the threats and prepare appropriate capabilities. They seek maximum predictability to allow for planning in an already too uncertain environment; the primacy of security does not allow states to rely on chance. But to use foreign fighters as a meaningful ingredient of state power implies gambling on a country’s fate with a weak hand. Prior to the breakout of conflict, a state cannot be sure whether it will have sufficient numbers of foreign volunteers, with adequate and appropriate training to meet their current needs. Moreover, to use foreign fighters, a state must establish an infrastructure to identify, transfer and absorb the volunteers in its armed forces. Given the erratic and unpredictable nature of such a foreign element, it is only reasonable that states prefer to rely on known resources. The few that do not could ultimately find their choice to be costlier than expected.

More often, foreign fighters are found in asymmetric conflicts in which at least one side of the conflict is a non-state actor, usually a guerrilla force or another irregular outside group. When fighting is based on surprise attacks and small arms rather than large maneuvers and sophisticated weapons, the value of volunteers, even with little training and fighting experience, is exponentially greater. Even then, the foreign element tends to be more marginal, at least in numbers, than the local component. Indeed, the Afghan resistance to the Soviets during the 1980s, which gave rise to the foreign fighters’ phenomenon of our time, was exactly that: an Afghan resistance.⁵ The contribution of the foreign fighters was not particularly significant, their number miniscule in comparison to the local Afghans.⁶ Most of them served in supportive roles in humanitarian agencies, media offices, political organizations and hospitals.⁷ Only in the mid-1980s was there a noticeable increase in their participation, which reached its peak after the Soviets had withdrawn. Even then, it did not amount to more than a few thousand at any given time.⁸

⁴ David Malet, “Why Foreign Fighters?: Historical Perspectives and Solutions,” *Orbis*, Spring 2010, pp. 97–114.

⁵ Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

⁶ Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda’s Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 49.

⁷ Burke, *Al Qaeda*, p. 68.

⁸ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 201.

Thus, one may plausibly argue that the current surge of interest in the foreign fighters' phenomenon is exaggerated or at least somewhat surprising. From the perspective of their military contribution, such a claim is not unreasonable; but it misses the many ways in which foreign fighters can be important. The foreign fighters' phenomenon is about more than their contribution on their first battlefield; it encompasses a life cycle that starts when an individual begins to consider joining a fight in a country that is not his, continues through his involvement in conflict, and ends with his actions once he leaves that arena.⁹ One may be nothing more than a spectator in one fight, yet assume an important role in a later conflict; or go home and contribute to recruitment or propaganda that may shape other conflicts. Indeed, the current worries about foreign fighters seem to center around the threat of a "bleed out" as jihadi veterans, equipped with new knowledge of fighting, training, recruitment, media and technical skills in building bombs, take their skills elsewhere—potentially facilitating the initiation or escalation of terrorism in their home country or in other arenas, and enhancing the power of insurgencies and terrorist groups.

Arab jihadis had a minor impact on the war against the Soviets but Afghanistan's bleed out has exerted a remarkable impact on conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia, as well as on terrorism in the United States and Western Europe—most notably through the rise of a global jihadi movement. Under the leadership of Abdullah Azzam, a movement dedicated to defending Muslims wherever they are and without consideration of nationality became a reality. In later years, segments of this movement shifted their orientation from simply defending Arab lands "under occupation" to a more ambitious program calling for the establishment of a Caliphate governed by shari'ah law throughout the Muslim world and beyond. From an insignificant force during the 1980s emerged a challenge to the victor of the Cold War, motivated by a view of the United States as the spear of another Crusading campaign against Islam, vindication that its cause is just, and confidence that God is on its side, guaranteeing its inevitable triumph. Returnees from Afghanistan played important roles in the Algerian civil war, the uprising of jihadi groups in Egypt against the regime of Hosni Mubarak, the Chechen rebellion against Russia, and the Bosnian civil war. Arab-Afghans also established al Qaeda and stood behind the 9/11 attacks, as well as other bombings in numerous locations around the world, ultimately leading to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and military interventions in disparate locales from the Philippines to Somalia.¹⁰

⁹ Comments made by Stephanie Kaplan, during the "Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks" panel discussion from the FPRI's "The Foreign Fighter Problem" conference held at Washington, D.C., on September 27, 2010.

¹⁰ Barak Mendelsohn, *Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 37–62.

Thus, to assess the importance of foreign fighters, we must remember that their role is usually ambiguous and indirect. A fighter's importance is therefore rarely linear, extending beyond his contribution on any given battlefield. Moreover, significant as they may be, foreign volunteers' operational roles are often surpassed by the disproportionate importance of their political effects.

Equally importantly, the role of foreign fighters keeps evolving. Trends in the foreign fighters' phenomenon are inseparable from variables such as the technological environment, societal norms, political atmosphere, counter-insurgency and counterterrorism doctrines. An examination of the way in which the struggle between the global jihadi movement and the U.S.-led international community has evolved in recent years suggests that an important transformation in the role of foreign fighters has taken place.

Definitional Complexities

To assess recent trends in the foreign fighters' phenomenon, we must first clarify that the concept is still clouded by ambiguities and biases that affect any analysis. Notions about foreign fighters are shaped by our state-centric perspective. When we speak about "foreign," we refer to nationality: A volunteer is foreign if he holds the citizenship of a country external to the conflict. But this ontology often fails to correspond to the foreign fighter's sense of identity. A Pashtun volunteer from Pakistan is likely to feel greater identification with fellow Pashtuns across the border in Afghanistan than he would with a fellow Pakistani citizen from Punjab. Yet in our accounts, the Punjabi fighting with government forces in the tribal areas is considered local, while a Pakistani Taliban fighting alongside his co-ethnics in Afghanistan is a foreign fighter.

Moreover, we tend to treat "foreign" and "non-foreign" fighters as a dichotomy, ignoring the different levels of "foreignness." In some places, simply traveling to the next village makes one a foreigner. Different identity markers—province of origin, ethnic group, tribe, sub-clan or any other—can determine one's level of "foreignness." This is especially important to our understanding of why certain arenas are more likely to attract external volunteers and why some "foreigners" are more likely to join a fight away from their states, as well as locals' varying levels of receptiveness to external assistance. Scholars remind us that rather than one coherent group of foreign fighters, we often find diverse groups. In Somalia, we find members of the Somali diaspora from the "near abroad" (mostly from Kenya and Ethiopia), Somalis from the "far abroad" diaspora (for example, Sweden), and non-Somali Muslims. Each group shares some identity markers with the forces fighting in the country, but also differences that may sometimes be important determinants of how each group of foreign fighters is received by the locals

and what its impact on the arena will be. Pakistani Taliban are relatively easy to integrate into the forces of Afghan Taliban, while Arab volunteers sometimes have strong disagreements with the locals. Sometimes the level of “foreignness” can be greater than the commonalities, potentially rendering foreign volunteers a divisive factor rather than a force multiplier.

We should also acknowledge that our studies identify foreign fighters only as forces that do not belong to a national armed force. But for locals, the American forces in Iraq are more foreign than are the jihadi volunteers from Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Therefore where we see a threat of foreign fighters, the groups these fighters join may feel that they face a foreign fighters’ problem of their own, in the form of occupying foreign national militaries. This sense of threat could lead to the activation of kin forces located across the international border.

Usually the discussion of the significance of the foreign fighter problem also suffers from a tendency to bracket all foreign volunteers together. First, a distinction must be made between two manifestations of “foreign fighter”: a foreigner fighting in a local conflict that is not his own country’s war; and a foreign trained fighter, a local who goes to another area, receives training only, and comes back to carry out attacks elsewhere, normally in his own country.¹¹ John Walker Lindh, the American Taliban, fits in the first and more traditional category, while the plotter of the failed 2010- date attack in Times Square Faisal Shahzad, belongs in the second.

Although there is some overlap between the two categories—particularly when a veteran of jihad then uses the skill set he received to carry out a terrorist attack outside that arena—one may question the analytical usefulness of treating the two phenomena together. According to Marc Sageman, traditional “foreign fighters” do not end up engaged in terrorism in the West, whereas the foreign trained fighters do.¹² On the other hand, we may be witnessing a shift in the way in which foreign fighters participate in violent conflicts; we should benefit from examining the possibility that the traditional model for foreign fighters is losing ground to the new model. The fact that the expansion of jihad arenas in recent years now enables a youth to fight for his ideals without leaving his homeland, seems to strengthen this possibility. If such a transition is indeed taking place, it also implies a shift in the mode of analysis: whereas the traditional category focuses on the impact that fighters, usually engaged in guerrilla warfare, may have on a particular conflict, the second category views the destination of the prospective fighter primarily as a sanctuary, and his activities there as instrumental for receiving tools to violently promote political objectives elsewhere. One implication of this is that in cases of foreign trained fighters, there is a shift in the role of the foreign

¹¹ Comments made by Marc Sageman, during the date “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

¹² *Ibid.*

destination away from being the objective of the volunteer. In this model, the sanctuary no longer serves as the main source of indoctrination, the formation of comradeship, and a constituting experience.

A related issue, noted by Stephanie Kaplan, is that the foreign fighter “problem” is actually several problems that should be disaggregated for better understanding and for designing effective policies. Kaplan proposes that we divide the fighter’s “life cycle” into the pre-war mobilization phase, the war stage, and the post-war period.¹³ Studying the first phase could answer puzzles regarding the volunteers’ motivations. Foreign fighters largely appear to be ideologically generated, while their distribution across jihad arenas is random. Although ethnic ties have some predictive power with regard to where a volunteer ends up fighting, in many cases the destination reflects the accessibility of a particular place at a particular time, and the instructions of the volunteers’ contact people.¹⁴ This first phase may also include the facilitating factors that can turn a sympathizer into an actual foreign fighter.

Questions related to the second phase can include (but are not restricted to) how volunteers are absorbed in the conflict zone, their training, operational roles, and affiliation within the fighting apparatus. Another question concerns their impact on the war. The Sinjar records provide a unique view into some of these questions, particularly regarding how foreign fighters made their journey to Iraq, their roles once inside the country, and their significance as sources of funding for al Qaeda in Iraq.¹⁵

Finally, the third phase concerns what happens to these volunteers after they leave, particularly how the earlier phases shape the volunteers’ future trajectory.¹⁶ While some foreign fighters return home and reintegrate into society, many do not. Their experience is often a constitutive event that shapes who they are and what they do. Many find it hard to return to their daily lives. They seek the company of people like them, and in many places their reputation in their community is tied to their identity as fighters. In some cases, even when a former fighter tries to leave his past behind, his state continues to identify him as a threat, thus pushing him back to the underground life and into the arms of comrades who face the same problem. Some of these individuals go on to form the infrastructure for the next generation of foreign fighters.

Only a comprehensive account based on breaking down the foreign fighters’ experience will allow us to understand the phenomenon’s real

¹³Comments made by Stephanie Kaplan, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

¹⁴Comments made by Lorenzo Vidino, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

¹⁵Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout: Al-Qa’ida’s Road In and Out of Iraq* (West Point: Countering Terrorism Center, 2008).

¹⁶Comments made by Stephanie Kaplan, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

significance and to design measures to address the full scope of the problem and at multiple points.

Recent Trends

As in the past, we find that foreign fighters engage in numerous activities ranging from guerrilla fighting, planning and carrying out terrorist attacks, media and propaganda campaigns, training, and recruitment. However, given the evolving nature of the foreign fighters' phenomenon and the dynamics of the war on terrorism, recent trends inevitably show some evolution alongside considerable stability.

Fighting Forces, Field Commanders

Evidence suggests that foreign fighters often make excellent insurgents. But not all do. Many foreign fighters do not survive their first battlefield, suffer death, or are captured. Others may decide to participate in a foreign fight for only a limited time or in just one arena, and then retire. Thus, in a self-selecting process, only a relatively small group of experienced operatives ends up assuming leading positions in one of the active jihadi fronts. Their rise is a function not only of personal charisma or reputation (a particularly important factor for individuals fighting away from their homes and alongside local insurgents), but mostly of knowledge accumulated through experience, often via activity in a number of locations or prolonged service in one arena. Note that while this is uncommon, some foreign fighters with special talents, previous experience, or sufficient time in the field do reach command positions in their first stint. For example, Omar Hammami, also known as Abu Mansour al-Amriki, a young American man from Alabama who traveled to Somalia, now occupies an important position in al-Shabab.¹⁷

However, the value of foreign fighters for insurgencies, especially that of first-timers, appears to be in decline. Moreover, on average, the farther away a volunteer's country of origin, the less likely he is to be seen as an asset as a fighter. Most jihad arenas have access to plenty of potential recruits. In places awash with weapons (such as Somalia and Yemen), locals tend to be in a better state of readiness to fight than are most foreign fighters, some of whom need the most rudimentary training.¹⁸ Volunteers from Western countries are not only insignificant for the fighting effort; they may even become a liability. Instead of a force multiplier on the front, many need the equivalent of babysitting. A large segment has practically no military skills and no familiarity

¹⁷ Andrea Elliott, "The Jihadist Next Door," *New York Times Magazine*, January 27, 2010.

¹⁸ Comments made by Ken Menkhaus, during the "Somalia case study" panel discussion from the FPRI's "The Foreign Fighter Problem" conference held at Washington, D.C., on September 27, 2010.

with the terrain. In many cases, they have poor language skills, are unused to the harsh conditions, and tend to become ill.¹⁹

More useful are foreign fighters originating from the “near abroad,” the immediate neighboring states. Usually they share ethnic links (for example, Pakistani Pashtuns in Afghanistan, Kenyans from Somali origins in Somalia), have some fighting experience and familiarity with weaponry, and normally do not represent a risk to the social fabric as they share a high level of cultural understanding with their brethren across the border. Nevertheless, there is still no compelling evidence to suggest that even these fighters’ contributions on the battlefield are critical for battle outcomes. The reports on the impact of the Pakistani *madrassa* students who fought in Afghanistan leave open the question of their aptitude and whether they were needed because Afghan fighters were unavailable.

In recent years, it has also become evident that foreign fighters may actually hinder the jihadi effort. Already in the 1990s, the Arab contingency in Bosnia committed excesses that turned a highly effective military force into a political liability.²⁰ The adverse consequences of such excesses became even more apparent a decade later, as the actions of foreign jihadis in Iraq created a backlash from the Sunni populations (especially from the Sunni tribes) and gave impetus to the establishment of the Awakening Councils.²¹

An awareness also seems to be growing among al Qaeda’s senior leadership concerning the self-inflicted damage caused by over-zealous fighters with insufficient understanding of the local conditions. While al Qaeda often criticizes tribalism and encourages the dismantling of the existing social structure to make space for a true a-nationalistic, ethnicity-surmounting Islamic order, its experience has exposed the power of such entrenched identities.²² The Iraqization of the al Qaeda branch in Iraq, and the much more careful operation of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, underscore the importance that al Qaeda now assigns to understanding local conditions, taking advantage of local grievances, and utilizing local forces.²³

¹⁹ Christoph Scheuermann and Andreas Ulrich, “Disillusionment in Afghanistan the Fate of 11 Aspiring Jihadists from Germany,” *Der Spiegel*, October 18, 2010; Comments made by David Gartenstein-Ross, during the “Somalia case study” panel.

²⁰ Jeni Mitchell, “The Contradictory Effects of Ideology on Jihadist War-Fighting: The Bosnia Precedent,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31 (2008), pp. 808–828.

²¹ Andrew Philips, “How Al Qaeda Lost Iraq,” *Australian Journal of International Relations*, March 2009, pp. 64–84.

²² For example, see *Al-Qa’ida’s (mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

²³ Comments made by Brian O’Neill, during the “Yemen case study” panel discussion from the FPRI’s “The Foreign Fighter Problem” conference held at Washington, D.C., on September 28, 2010.

Terrorists and Planners of Terrorist Attacks

Foreign fighters may be more useful when it comes to terrorism. An important distinction needs to be made between “foot soldiers” and experienced foreign fighters. Foot soldiers often play a valuable role as cannon fodder, for example by becoming suicide bombers. In such a role, they do not need many skills but only the willingness to kill themselves in the midst of their target. Whereas prior to 9/11 the common foreign fighter received extensive training in combat and terrorism roles, in recent years an increasing number of foreign volunteers are deployed as human bombs. The experience in Iraq indicates that these are often one-time, one-event fighters. This development is not simply a reflection of the growing popularity of suicide bombings and the view of jihadi leaders that this is their most effective weapon,²⁴ but can also be attributed to the diminishing numbers of experienced mujahideen and the difficulties of properly training new volunteers to carry out other roles.

A subset of the foot soldiers group—holders of Western passports—can be particularly useful volunteers, but usually not as foreign fighters in the traditional meaning. They are regarded as more beneficial when used outside the arena, mostly for terrorist attacks in their home countries. These fighters are especially valued for their ability to travel and enter Western countries with relative ease. Moreover, in contrast to the group of Saudis that participated in 9/11 and had to live for months in the United States—often without knowledge of the language or culture—these volunteers are familiar with the language, the culture, and the area in general.

Experienced foreign fighters, on the other hand, represent a much smaller group that largely engages in planning and coordination. Due to increased security measures worldwide and the relentless American campaign to eliminate them, their numbers are dwindling. Unfortunately, the recent release of al Qaeda leaders from their detention in Iran infused the organization with highly skilled commanders—most importantly the Egyptian Saif al-Adl, who assumed his old position as al Qaeda’s military chief.²⁵ Moreover, in places like Pakistan there are numerous candidates to replace fallen al Qaeda field operatives. Thus, even as al Qaeda’s Egyptian bench gradually empties out, it can poach Pakistani groups for talent.²⁶

²⁴ See Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Knights under the Banner of the Prophet,” Serialized in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 2001.

²⁵ Yassin Musharbash, “Saif al-Adel Back in Waziristan: A Top Terrorist Returns to Al-Qaida Fold,” *Der Spiegel*, October 25, 2010.

²⁶ The prominent example for this is Ilyas al-Kashmiri. See Sami Yousafzai, Ron Moreau, Christopher Dickey, “The New Bin Laden,” *Newsweek*, October 23, 2010. www.newsweek.com/2010/10/23/is-ilyas-kashmiri-the-new-bin-laden.html.

Conveyers of Knowledge

Former foreign fighters are instrumental in training new fighters for guerrilla fighting as well as terrorism (especially bomb-making). Knowledge acquired on the battlefield in Iraq, particularly regarding improvised explosive devices (IEDs), was later used in such remote areas as Afghanistan and Somalia. Of course, such knowledge can travel online; but the numerous failed terrorist plots in the West reveal that the Internet is a poor substitute for real contact and careful on-site guidance. Under the pressure of American forces, al Qaeda and its affiliates can no longer run long training sessions, and as the case of the Times Square bomber indicates, even when they provide some on-site training it tends to be short and of questionable utility.²⁷

Note that the question of the importance of the “foreign” part in such enterprises is still unclear. On its face, any knowledge transmission across borders inherently involves the element of foreign fighters. Understood this way, the transfer of knowledge among various jihadi fronts (normally from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and later to Somalia, Algeria, and Yemen) proves the importance of foreign fighters. Nevertheless, it is not clear to what extent the size of the foreign fighters’ contingency is important for such a task. However, it appears that the greater the number of fighters, the greater the odds that some of them will excel and also survive to transmit the knowledge.

Recruiters

During the 1990s, former foreign fighters were crucial elements in the recruitment of the next generation of foreign fighters, serving as contacts for attracting disaffected youth, seeking purpose and excited by the recruiters’ stories of glory and comradery. Such recruiters were able to gain large numbers.²⁸ Although prior to 9/11 a presentation by a contact point to the jihadi movement was less critical than in the more security conscious post-9/11 environment, these recruiters still served an important purpose in feeding the pipeline, acting as facilitators, and helping to make the wishes of a volunteer to join the jihad a reality. But following 9/11, physical recruitment seems to be on the decline as states have started paying considerably greater attention to individuals with experience in jihadi battlefields and taken measures to prevent recruitment.

Jihadi groups have sought to adapt by moving online. However, recruitment online has some major deficiencies: the fear of infiltration by security services has made online recruiters and volunteers hesitant to put their

²⁷ Comments made by Marc Sageman, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

²⁸ Comments made by Clinton Watts, during the “Recent Trends in Foreign Fighter Source Countries and Transit Networks” panel.

trust in people they do not know.²⁹ Moreover, because volunteering to fight in foreign lands ultimately requires some physical contact, online recruitment could go only so far. While some individuals managed to join the jihad through connections created online, many others failed to do so. In some cases (for example, the Virginia five), online recruitment led volunteers to travel to Pakistan only to be rejected by the groups they sought to join, who feared they were plants by the security services.³⁰ The Sinjar records demonstrate that despite the difficulties, al Qaeda in Iraq still preferred to recruit through physical contact rather than online.³¹

Media Production

One aspect of clear growth is in the foreign volunteers' role in creating media products, from running production companies, releasing statements and videos, translating messages in English, and even appearing in videos appealing to Western Muslims or warning Western governments. In some ways, it resembles the early days of the jihad in Afghanistan, when the bulk of the Arab Afghans served in support roles and Abdallah Azzam established the magazine *al-Jihad*.³² While foreign fighters may still participate in insurgent and terrorist operations, the Western volunteers, many of them more technologically savvy and less capable as fighters than their local brothers-in-arms, are now being channeled to roles in which their qualifications could best be utilized. Thus Adam Gadahn, also known as Azzam al-Amriki, is a regular spokesman in al Qaeda's messages to the American audience, and may even be the new head of the organization's media committee. From Yemen, the imam Anwar al-Awlaki regularly releases sermons and messages calling for jihad against the United States, with particular appeals for Muslim Americans to attack targets in their country. The American Samir Khan edits *Inspire*, the English magazine produced by AQAP.³³ The late German Bekkay Harrach (alias Abu Talha al-Almani) and the American Abu Mansour al-Amriki are additional foreign media personalities.

Although the evolution in the roles and significance of foreign fighters is affected by diverse factors, no element has generated more debate than the impact of the Internet on the nature of the jihadi threat and its influence on the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Their experience was not unique. See Paul Cruickshank, "Enlisting Terror: Al-Qaeda's Recruitment Challenges," in *Al-Qaeda's Senior Leadership* (Jane's Strategic Advisory Services, November 2009), pp. 12–15.

³¹ Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, "Becoming a Foreign Fighter: A Second Look at the Sinjar Records," in Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts & Bleedout*, pp. 45–46.

³² Ahmad Muaffaq Zaidan, *The "Afghan Arabs": Media at Jihad* (Islamabad: The Pakistani Futuristic Foundation & Institute, 1999), pp. 36–49.

³³ Dina Temple-Raston, "American Editor Brings U.S. Savvy to Jihad," *NPR*, October 12, 2010; Dina Temple-Raston, "Two Americans Become Al-Qaida Media Strategists," *NPR*, October 14, 2010.

foreign fighters' problem. According to some, the Internet has become the instrument of choice (or necessity) for recruitment. Its role in recruitment begins early, as the Internet offers sympathizers a means of gaining information and access to propaganda tapes, potentially motivating them to get physically involved with the jihadi movement. Without the Internet, some potential recruits would probably not be aware of events outside their small universe and of the opportunities to get involved. While some of these enthusiasts will then seek real live connections that will enable them to volunteer and head to one of the battle arenas, others may find that technology allows them to contribute to the jihad without leaving their countries. Training widely available online could provide a jihadi sympathizer with instructions on how to prepare bombs in one's own kitchen, learn surveillance techniques and how to select a target. Moreover, they support the repeated calls on sympathizers to carry out jihad on their own by carrying out terrorist attacks at home.

Yet, the record suggests that despite its enormous potential to change the jihadi scene, the Internet has yet to fully realize its revolutionary potential. Online teaching is still not a reliable substitute for hands-on, prolonged training. Knowledge acquired online has not reached a level that would make travel to a sanctuary unnecessary. Similarly, online recruitment has yet to make real physical connection obsolete. Unfortunately, there is a clear silver lining for jihadis. As the Internet allows them to reach an increasingly larger audience, the potential for expanding jihadi activity has risen tremendously. When jihadi leaders find a way to tap into these potential resources, an already troubling threat will increase by bounds.

Are Foreign Fighters Still a Problem?

The evidence presented above demonstrates the evolving nature of the foreign fighter phenomenon as it is tied to development in the jihadi movement and its struggle with diverse enemies. There are some indications that while the international community still struggles with jihadi groups and homegrown, independently operating jihadi terrorists, foreign fighting has gone out of fashion somewhat.

Al Qaeda and its allies may still be welcoming newcomers to the jihad, but they have reservations about their ability to use them effectively in an arena away from their homes. Many European volunteers who have arrived in Pakistan seeking to join the fight have been frustrated to find that the local groups are suspicious of them, fearing they may have been sent by foreign intelligence services. Some have spent months closed in an apartment, unable to get training, let alone fight for the cause for which they had left their homes.³⁴ Since the collapse of the system through which volunteers were channeled to

³⁴ Paul Cruickshank, "Enlisting Terror," p. 12.

the training camps in Afghanistan, especially during the Taliban's rule, the diverse jihadi groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan arena have lost their ability to pre-screen volunteers. At the same time, the price for mistakes has risen sharply, with drones circling above Pakistan's tribal areas waiting for information to help identify al Qaeda operatives and ultimately kill them.

Fear on the part of al Qaeda and its allies is not groundless. Hammam Khalil Abu Mallal al-Balawi, known as Abu Dujana al-Khurasani, the Jordanian double agent who carried out a suicide bombing inside Base Chapman near Khost, killing seven CIA officers and a Jordanian handler, was sent by Jordanian intelligence to spy on al Qaeda under the cover of an enthusiastic foreign fighter. In his case, the cover was a very accurate representation of reality. But it is likely that in other cases, foreign volunteers are indeed infiltrators.

The older generation had significant battle experience, and its services were welcomed in any arena. Many of the icons of the jihadi movement, like the deceased Saudi Abdul Aziz Mukrin, were known for serving in various fronts. But the new crop of foreign fighters is often poorly trained and of limited worth to the organization. It is no wonder that in Iraq, foreign volunteers usually served as suicide bombers. Their commanders did not always have the capacity to absorb them into their ranks. Messages from both Afghanistan and Iraq suggested that al Qaeda may prefer its supporters to send financial contributions rather than join them on the front.

Moreover, jihadi leaders may discourage volunteers from joining far-away jihad arenas because they see these volunteers, especially those from Western countries, as more valuable for attacks in their home country. Indeed, a recent *Inspire* magazine published a clear call for supporters not to come to Yemen but to follow Fort Hood shooter Nidal al-Malik and take action in the United States. In one of the articles, an author explains that although group members will welcome a new volunteer, they will wonder why he decided against fighting the umma's enemies in his own country.³⁵ In line with this development, foreign volunteers who arrive in Pakistan with the hope of fighting U.S. and NATO forces (and successfully surpass the barriers to entry) receive some training in small camps along the border and are redirected back to the United States and Europe with assignments for attacks there. Faisal Shahzad and Najibullah Zazi are only two recent examples.

The decreasing value of foreign fighters may also be linked to the expansion of al Qaeda's organizational reach. In recent years, al Qaeda has been engaged in deepening its alliances and formal presence through mergers and establishment of new formal branches.³⁶ The consequent expansion of the

³⁵ Mukhtar Hassan, "What to Expect in Jihad," *Inspire*, no. 2 (2010), 24; Yahya Ibrahim, "Tips for Our Brothers in the United States of America," *Inspire*, no. 2 (2010), pp. 55–57.

³⁶ Barak Mendelsohn, "Expansion as Decline: Analysis of al Qaeda's Franchising Strategy," Unpublished manuscript.

battlegrounds, a conscious jihadi effort to open new fronts in order to exhaust U.S. nerves and resources, required more rational resource allocation. Instead of sending volunteers to fight away from home, often there is a struggle to be fought in one's home country. Yemeni youth bent on joining jihad would better avoid the difficult travel to Afghanistan and stay at home, join the APAQ, and fight in a familiar environment.

And yet it would be premature and highly risky to dismiss the importance of foreign fighters altogether. Their significance has never been simply a function of their numbers and clearly cannot be measured only in terms of the capabilities gained by introducing them into an arena. Their impact is often indirect and includes political, social and psychological elements that are not easily measurable. Policymakers will underestimate them at their own peril.

