




## Fighting Fire with Fire? An Assessment of the Potential Threats of Westerners Fighting against ISIS in Syria and Iraq

*Ateşe Ateşle Karşılık Vermek? Suriye ve Irak'ta IŞİD'e Karşı Savaşan Batılıların Oluşturduğu Potansiyel Tehditlere İlişkin Bir Değerlendirme*

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### Abstract

Since the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, tens of thousands of foreign fighters from different parts of the world have joined various armed groups in Syria and Iraq. 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. This study aims at assessing the potential threats that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may pose to international security and to their home countries. In line with this purpose, this study contributes to our recognition of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, conducts a threat assessment based on capabilities and intents of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and presents recommendations on how international organizations and Western governments should manage the issue of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

### Özet

2011 yılında Suriye İç Savaşı'nın başlamasından bu yana, dünyanın farklı bölgelerinden on binlerce yabancı savaşçı Suriye ve Irak'ta çeşitli silahlı gruplara katıldı. Üç ana yabancı savaşçı grubu vardır: Birincisi, Irak ve Şam İslam Devleti (IŞİD) gibi cihatçı gruplarla bağlantılı olan IŞİD yanlısı yabancı savaşçılar; ikincisi, Esed hükümetine bağlı rejim yanlısı Şii yabancı savaşçılar; ve son olarak, IŞİD ve diğer cihatçı gruplara karşı Kürt ve Hristiyan gruplarla birlikte savaşan IŞİD karşıtı Batılı yabancı savaşçılar. Bu çalışma, IŞİD karşıtı Batılı yabancı savaşçıların uluslararası güvenliğe ve kendi ülkelerine karşı oluşturabilecekleri potansiyel tehditleri değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaca uygun olarak, bu çalışma, IŞİD karşıtı Batılı yabancı savaşçıları tanımamıza katkıda bulunmakta, IŞİD karşıtı Batılı yabancı savaşçıların yetenek ve niyetlerine dayalı bir tehdit değerlendirmesi yapmakta ve uluslararası kuruluşların ve Batılı hükümetlerin IŞİD karşıtı Batılı yabancı savaşçılar konusunu nasıl yönetmeleri gerektiğine dair öneriler sunmaktadır.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon. There have been many historical examples of conflicts involving foreign fighters. Malet (2015b, p.5) claims that foreign fighters have taken part in nearly “100 civil wars since the late 18th century”. Malet (2015b, p.5) asserts with a cautious “estimate that there have been 100,000 foreign fighters worldwide over the past 250 years”.

There is no globally accepted definition for the term foreign fighter despite its widespread use. A foreign fighter, according to Hegghammer (2010: 57–58), 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”. Later, on the other hand, Hegghammer (2013, p.1) removed his former restrictions on joining insurgency and lacking kinship ties, consequently deeming returning diaspora members as foreign fighters. Malet (2015a, p.457) simply defines foreign fighters as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts”. People, according to Malet (2015a, p.457), 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.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) draws upon a new term of “Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF)” in its Resolution 2178 of the year 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, p.2)

Over the course of history, ideological background of foreign fighters “ranged from communism and left-wing activism, to Catholicism and ethno-nationalism” (Bakker and 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 jihadists to Syria and Iraq. Such that, the term foreign fighters have become a substitute for Sunni Muslims who enrolled jihadist groups including ISIS and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (Bakker and Singleton, 2016, p.23).

However, not all foreign fighters engaged in the conflict in Syria and Iraq are jihadists. Indeed, there are 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 (Barrett, 2014; Byman and Shapiro, 2014; Hegghammer, 2013; Obe and Silverman, 2014); secondly, pro-regime Shiite foreign fighters who are affiliated with the Assad government (Heistein and West, 2015); and finally, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who are from Europe, North America and Australia and fighting with the armed groups

such as the PKK, YPG, YPJ, the Peshmerga and the Christian militias against ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Jaklin, 2015; Koch, 2019; Orton, 2018c; Tuck, Silverman and Smalley, 2016).

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, p.4). As the Council of the European Union (2021, p.11) emphasized, “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”. Thus, the Council of the European Union (2021, p.12) underpins 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”.

In this context, main objective of this study is to assess how anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters pose a threat to international security and to their home countries. For this purpose, this research seeks to enhance understanding of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters in terms of their demographics, motives, recruitment, vetting processes and their role in the conflict. Considering the information obtained from the profile analysis, this research aims at conducting a threat assessment based on the capabilities and intents of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Furthermore, this study presents recommendations on how international organizations and Western governments should manage the issue of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters.

This research is a qualitative study based on analysis of written and visual sources about anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. In this setting, the first step was to analyze demographic profiles and motives of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, their social surrounding, and main armed groups for which they have fought. To these purposes, in-depth profile studies prepared by investigative journalists and interviews of reporters with anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters and their family members, relatives and friends have been analyzed. These analyses are further promoted by the information obtained from weblogs and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. In doing so, some Facebook groups created by anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who originate from the same country, as in the example of Spanish “Apoyo Voluntarios Españoles contra DAESH” (Support Spanish Volunteers against DAESH) were very useful.

Developing deeper insights into anti-ISIS foreign fighters, as Koch (2019, p.2) highlighted, contributes to apprehension of Western citizens' radicalization and de-radicalization courses. Thus, emphasis has been put on better understanding of how anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters radicalized and why they mobilized to Syria and Iraq. To this end, in addition to media articles and social media posts, official documents like government reports and criminal complaints have been utilized. Reports, prepared by international organizations and counter-terrorism research centers proved to be valuable sources. Unfortunately, state archives were unavailable due to the classification.

The second step was to assess possible threats that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may pose to their home countries and transnational security. As Schuurman, Bakker, Gill and Bouhana (2018, p.1192) expressed, “an actual threat does not occur unless that motivation [intent] is matched to at least a rudimentary level of capability”. In this context, Schuurman and Eijkman (2015, p.215) argued, a person's intentional or unintentional acts and words might reveal his or her intention and ability to carry out a terrorist attack. As Brynielsson et al. (2013, p.2) mentioned, if the “weak signals” meticulously analyzed, “the actual social media content can indicate that someone is planning a terror attack”. Thus, in the absence of any opportunity for on-the-ground research due to the insecurity in the region, in this study, the interviews with anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters as well as their shares and posts across social media platforms were carefully assessed to disclose their intention and capability of involvement in terrorist activities.

Brynielsson et al. (2013, pp.7-9) 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”. According to Meloy, Mohandie, Knoll and Hoffmann (2015, p.3), 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. In this regard, Schuurman and Eijkman (2015, pp.224-225) 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”.

In consideration of above discussion, 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 (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; 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 international security and their country of origin.

As Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez and Boucek (2010, p.26) 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...”. The third step, therefore, was to shape an international approach to counter the threat that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may pose. To this end, policy recommendations have been presented for international organizations and Western governments.

## **2. ANTI-ISIS WESTERN FOREIGN FIGHTERS**

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters are individuals who have traveled to Syrian-Iraqi battlefield from Western Europe, North America and Australia. They have fought with the armed groups such as the PKK, YPG, YPJ, the Peshmerga and the Christian militias against jihadist groups such as ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

### **2.1 Demographics**

Total number of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters has been unknown due to the lack of obtainable official figures. It was assessed in February 2017 that between 800 and 1,000 Westerners had joined the war against ISIS (Blake, 2017, p. 33). In addition to these Westerners, De Craemer (2017, p.14) predicted that “between 500 and 1,000 ethnic Kurds from the European diaspora alone have joined the conflict”. De Creamer (2017, p.9) accepted returning diaspora members as foreign fighters as long as they have citizenship of a country other than Syria and Iraq because of the difficulty in verifying their ethnic backgrounds and clarifying their level of relationship with their birth country.

Like pro-ISIS foreign fighters, there is no one single profile to describe anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Tuck et al. (2016, pp. I-IV) analyzed 300 anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. A vast majority (97%) of them were males. While nearly half of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were in 20s (48%), there were still individuals of different ages with the youngest being 14 years old and the oldest 67. There were both Christians and Muslims.

Jayakumar (2019, pp.10-13) introduced a database including 500 anti-ISIS foreign fighters of whom 22 were women. 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. A great majority of 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%) in the dataset, including 67 Americans, had previous military experience.

### **2.2 Motives**

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, p. 20).

Widespread media reveals showing the brutality of ISIS against minorities and hostages during its sweeping expansion in Syria and Iraq in summer of 2014 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 were, firstly, a recognized incompetency of the international community to react to the violence in Syria and Iraq (Jaklin, 2015, p.1), secondly, a moral obligation to defend

oppressed minority populations and lastly to defeat ISIS (Tuck et al., 2016, p.21). In this respect, Jeremy Woodard, a then 29-year-old U.S. Army veteran who served in Iraq and Afghanistan 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, p. 7).

Some devout Christian foreign fighters perceived their religion under threat in the region. Brett Felton, a then 28-year-old U.S. Army veteran, traveled to Iraq to join Dwekh Nawsha in August 2014. Felton said “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, p. 9).

According to Tuck et al. (2016, p.27), for many ex-military fighters, the idea of ‘finishing the job’ to make certain that their previous losses of military comrades in Afghanistan and Iraq were not futile has been a source of motivation. Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters with no prior military involvement, volunteered for a strong desire to experience combat and military camaraderie. 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 (Tuck et al., 2016, pp.24-29).

As the fight against ISIS lengthened, backgrounds of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have dramatically changed to include mostly far-left oriented individuals with anarchist, Marxist-Leninist or Stalinist motivations. “The initial waves of non-Kurdish western foreign fighters to join the YPG tended to be largely apolitical military veterans” (Orton, 2018c, p.161). Later in the conflict, however, one anti-ISIS Western fighter 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.” (Dearden, 2016, p. 21)

### **2.3 Affiliations**

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, p.20).

### **2.3.1 The PKK/PYD/YPG and YPJ**

The PKK decided to “create a Democratic Union Movement of Syria or Democratic Union Party” in 2002 (Soylu, 2016, p.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

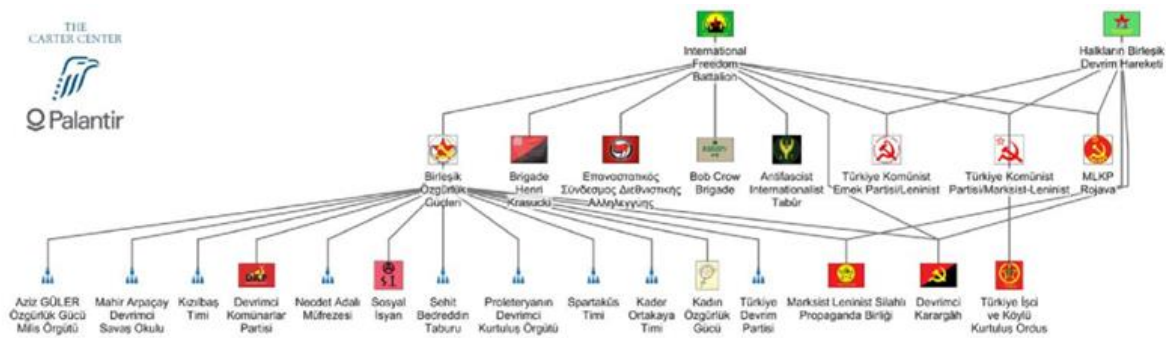
“I founded the PYD, as I did PJAK (the PKK's Iranian arm). We did not use the word ‘Kurdistan’ in the party's title since we did not want to provoke the Syrian regime. The PYD is connected to the PKK, and acts upon on PKK orders.” (Soylu, 2016, p.14)

In 2004, the PYD formed an armed wing under the name of the People’s Protection Units (YPG). During the Syrian War, with support of the U.S. and several other countries, the YPG has become the West’s primary ground force battling the ISIS (De Craemer, 2017, p.13). 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 and Parkinson, 2015, p.16). In 2012, the PYD, together with some other smaller political parties, declared “Democratic Self-Rule Administration” in “Rojava”, a word meaning “the west” in Kurdish (Ose, 2015, p.11-12). The YPG has founded the Women’s Protection Units, or YPJ, as a female only brigade in 2013.

The PKK, YPG and YPJ have received the most foreign fighters in Syria, only second to ISIS. The composition of the Western foreign fighters, however, has changed throughout the Syrian War. As Orton (2017, p.5) 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.” As such, Orton (2018b, p.29) noted in March 2018 that “the majority of non-Kurdish foreign fighters with the YPG/PKK are far-left ideologues”. The PKK, YPG and YPJ have also increased their recruitment activities in European countries. In November 2019, Germany's domestic intelligence agency (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz or shortly BfV) revealed that roughly 270 individuals had been recruited from Germany by the YPG/PKK (YPG/PKK Recruits 270 Terrorists from Germany, 2019, p.1).

### **2.3.2 Left-Wing**

In February 2017, the Carter Center released an overview of different leftist foreign units in Syria. As seen in Figure 1, 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 (The Carter Center, 2017, p.1). It is also important to notice in Figure 1 that some units have multiple affiliations.



**Figure 1:** Chart of foreign units in northern Syria (The Carter Center, 2017, p.1)

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. An umbrella organization, the IFB consists of several Turkish and Western leftist groups, Figure 2 (The Carter Center, 2017, p. 2).



**Figure 2:** Chart of IFB subunits in northern Syria (The Carter Center, 2017, p.2)

There are 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 (The Carter Center, 2017, p.2). 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 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.



### **2.3.3 The Peshmerga**

The Peshmerga, which means “one who confronts death” in Kurdish, is the military force of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq (Patin, 2015, p.15). The force is divided between two rival Kurdish political parties: The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP or the KDP Peshmerga) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK or the PUK Peshmerga). 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, 2015, p.13).

### **2.3.4 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 to resist against ISIS’s advance in north of Iraq in 2014 that caused displacement of tens of thousands of people (Cetti-Roberts, 2015, p.5). Both Dwekh Nawsha and the NPU are open to any Assyrian man, from the region or abroad, independent of the church or party affiliation (Henderson, 2014, p.7).

#### **2.3.4.1 Dwekh Nawsha**

Dwekh Nawsha, whose name translates as “self-sacrificers” in ancient Aramaic, was established in late 2014. Dwekh Nawsha mostly 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, p.35). 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, p.17) and the YPG’s leftist ideology as he called the YPG “a bunch of damn Reds” (Krohn, 2015, p.24).

#### **2.3.4.2 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, p.4). The Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) has been founded to safeguard uncaptured Assyrian towns and to reclaim their territory from ISIS. 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 (Nelson, 2015, p.4).

## **2.4 Recruitment and Vetting**

ISIS has generated a great variety of propaganda materiel in many languages and mastered the use of online social media to disseminate specifically prepared recruitment narratives (The Carter Center, 2015, p.12). 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 websites and social media pages for recruitment and vetting (Tuck et al., 2016, p.31).

### **2.4.1 The Lions of Rojava**

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. Many would-be recruits started by leaving a message showing their intent to join the YPG. 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 (Didziulis, 2016, p.7). Applicants who were assessed as fit for purpose were then directed to an encrypted messaging service. For some of the Westerners, the recruitment and vetting process was very quick. Firas Vancouver, a then 23-year-old Canadian, 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" (MailOnline, 2017, p.18).

### **2.4.2 International Peshmerga Volunteers**

Recruitment and vetting efforts of the Peshmerga have been carried out on a website called International Peshmerga Volunteers (IPV). 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" (International Peshmerga Volunteers, n.d., p.4).

## **2.5 Mobilization**

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters followed various paths to travel to Syria and Iraq. The primary destinations were Sulaymaniyah and Erbil in Iraq. Once on the ground, their contact on the other side of an encrypted messaging service gave an address to one of the safe houses (Didziulis, 2016, p.11). 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, p.37). As the last step, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were smuggled into Syria.

## **2.6 Training**

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters, upon arrival in Syria or Iraq, are admitted into a military and ideological training. Those Western foreign fighters of the YPG are subjected to a mandatory program for a month in a deserted oil facility dubbed as the “Academy”. Therein, new recruits are instructed basic battlefield tactics, use of locally available (mostly old Soviet) weapons, basic Kurdish, and socialist and feminist ideology of the YPG (De Craemer, 2017, pp.18-19).

On the Peshmerga side, Western volunteers undertake a two-week basic military training. The recruits learn using the AK-47, machine guns, shoulder-fired rocket launchers and sniper rifles. They learn basic command and strategies in Kurdish and perform unit level exercises and live fire practices (Hader and Forster, 2018, p.32).

For the training of the recruits of Dwekh Nawsha and the NPU, Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), a self-proclaimed private security company, played the major role. In December 2014, SOLI established a training camp near Mosul (Rodricks, 2015, p.10). In one-month-length training, a typical day starts with physical exercise and continues with “combat simulations” that include basic military tactics such as “military operations in urban terrain”, “mortar employment” and “communicating and coordinating targets” (McLaughlin, 2015, p.14).

## **2.7 Life in the Theater of War**

The military and ideological training phase has been used to decide a role in the battle zone for each recruit. New recruits with little military experience were less likely used in forward roles. Instead, they were mostly engaged in secondary tasks. Those 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 training. In their units, they attend in combat and provide specialist tactical, logistical or medical support. They also train local fighters and militias for guerrilla tactics.

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, p.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, p.8).

## **3. THREAT ASSESSMENT**

Like their pro-ISIS counterparts, anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters might go through a similar process of radicalization and turn to violence Koch (2019, p.5). Moreover, some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may stay committed to their unit’s violence-based cause after their return to their home countries. Therefore, there is a need to assess to what level anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters may pose

a threat to domestic and international security. To this end, capabilities and intentions of anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters ought to be analyzed (Schuurman et al., 2018, p.1192).

### 3.1 Capabilities

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters were already part of ideological movements before their mobilization to Syria or Iraq. When they joined an armed group in theater of war, their ideological indoctrination continued during initial training camp and then in their units. In the training camp of the YPG, for example, 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, p. 19).

Many Western left-wing radicals have regarded Syrian War as their “generation’s version of the Spanish Civil War” (Harp, 2018, p.3). Besides, they have been attracted by the YPG’s “Rojava Revolution”. 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 ... 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.” (It’s Going Down, 2017, p.3)

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have significantly increased their combative skills during their stay in the region. During the mandatory initial military training, all new recruits have been instructed in battlefield tactics, use of weapons and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). In their units, 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. They have also 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, p. 4). Steve Krsnik, a Canadian who fought as a sniper in the YPG, had 37 confirmed kills. According to other fighters in his unit, it was indeed more (Bell, 2016, p.16).

Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have gained huge popularity during their stay in the conflict zone. They have started to release statements and videos through their social media accounts from the very first day of their travel. As they attracted more public attention, they created more media products. They began to appear more often on TV and radio channels worldwide. They have constantly garnered online followers. One anti-ISIS Norwegian fighter, known as Mike Peshmerganor, has more than 75,000 followers on his Facebook page and 165,000 followers on Instagram (Peshmerganor, n.d.).

Anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have developed international networks during their service in Syria and Iraq. Through these networks, they have engaged in recruitment activities. The Lions of Rojava page, for example, was constructed by Jordan Matson, the first documented Western foreign fighter of the YPG. With Matson's efforts, more than 400 foreign fighters joined the YPG from western countries (Telesur, 2015, p.2). Not only anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters themselves, but also their supporters have created networks. In Spain, the Facebook page of Apoyo Voluntarios Españoles contra DAESH (Support Spanish Volunteers against DAESH) (<https://www.facebook.com/ApoyoVoluntariosEspa/>) has nearly 25,000 followers.

The capabilities that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters gained have come at a price. 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, 2019, p.12). 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. Kevin Howard, a 27-year-old U.S. veteran who fought alongside the YPG, took his own life in April 2019 (van Wilgenburg, 2019, p.1). Just before he shot himself, Howard shared a post on Facebook saying, "I don't know how to get back on this road" (Hennessy-Fiske, 2019, p.49).

### **3.2 Threats and Intentions**

There is a process in which individuals or groups gain capabilities, plan and make arrangements that are necessary to commit acts of terrorism. In this process, according to Schuurman and Eijkman (2015, p.1), they may openly express or inadvertently leave clues about their intent. 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.

#### **3.2.1 Far Right**

Far-right is an umbrella concept that encompasses a much broader spectrum of ideologies. 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" (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019, p.45).

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 (Meleagrou and Brun, 2013, p.7). 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, 2015, p.26).

According to Jason Blazakis, a professor at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Ukraine has offered the same “galvanizing effect” for white supremacists that Syria did for jihadists (Seldin, 2019, p.12). There are some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters who traveled to Ukraine either before or after their fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Benjamin Andreas Fisher, for example, joined the conflict between Ukrainian military and Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas region of Ukraine. After leaving Ukraine, Fisher joined the YPG in October 2014 (Shoutwiki, 2017, p.4). In March 2015, Fisher returned to Ukraine and signed a contract with Ukrainian Armed Forces and was given a Ukrainian military ID. 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 (Hromadske International, 2017, p.3).

### **3.2.2 Far Left**

According to Europol (2019: 9), “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”. Contemporary far-left extremists incorporate violent anarchists and anti-fascists, shortly “antifa”. The Syrian Civil War provided anarchists and anti-fascists with military training, weaponry and combat experience. They have also established new transnational networks through which they have recruited and mobilized many other like-minded individuals to the Syrian and Iraqi battlefield.

Pablo D. O. and Alvaro F. R., two Spanish self-defined “consistent Marxist-Leninists” (Arroyo, 2016, p.4) fought for six months in Syria against ISIS. Upon their return from Syria in July 2015, they were arrested and charged with 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 Interior Ministry of Spain noted that those arrested were providing the necessary infrastructure for other “comrades” to travel abroad and join the YPG, where they received training in use of weapons and explosives (Arroyo, 2016, p.2).

Many Greek anarchists have joined the Syrian War for training in guerrilla warfare and applying similar tactics back in Greece (Vice, 2017, p.1). In 2015, they have founded the Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity (RUIS) in northern Syria as a part of the IFB. Haukur Hilmarsson, a then 31-

year-old Icelandic anarchist, joined the RUIS in 2017. Hilmarsson was killed during an air strike while fighting against Turkish Armed Forces in Afrin in February 2018 (Iceland Review, 2018, p.1).

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 (AMW English, 2019, p.3). In December 2019, Revolutionary Solidarity Commando Haukur Hilmarsson, a splinter group of RUIS in Greece, accepted responsibility of 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, 2019, p. 4).

In April 2017, the IFB announced the formation of International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF). The IRPGF, as a part of the YPG, has defined its role as “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” (It’s Going Down, 2017, p.11). Members of the group declared that “IRPGF is not just a militant group for anarchists to join and fight against DAİŞ [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, p.2).

The Apoist Youth Initiative Europe (AGIA), the PKK-YPG's youth group in Germany, called its supporters in March 2018 to carry out “more radical and organized actions” (Pakistan Defence, 2018, p.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, p.2). Supporting the AGIA, Dean Parker, 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” (Orton, 2018a, p.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, p.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 (Fight4Afrin, 2018a, p.12). 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” (Fight4Afrin, 2018b, p.5).

French Police dismantled an ultra-left cell and took seven far-left activists aged between 30 and 36 under custody in December 2020. During searches in different French cities, weapons and many materials that could be used to make explosives were found. Five of those taken under custody were arrested. One of those arrested was Florian D. who was also presumed to be the leader of the cell (Fitzpatrick, 2020, pp.1-4).

Florian D., a 36-year-old French, 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 weapons, explosives and manufacturing bombs. The authorities became certain that Florian was seeking to recreate the conditions for guerrilla warfare. According to the police reports, Florian's intention was to kill police officers and soldiers. Investigators found in his truck all the ingredients necessary for homemade explosives (Atlantico, n.d., p.10).

Daniel Alan Baker, another highly prominent example, was removed from the U.S. Army with an “other-than-honorable” discharge in 2007. He joined the YPG in 2017 and received sniper training. (Wallace, 2021, pp.16-17). He returned to the U.S. in April 2019. According to a criminal complaint filed by a U.S. District Court,

“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)

In June 2020, Baker 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. Moreover, he was discontent with lack of violent opposition. He said “I told them, if they [protestors] really wanted a revolution, we needed to get AK's and start making bombs” (United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker, 2021, p.8).

At the beginning of 2021, Baker stepped up his social media efforts to recruit and train like-minded people. 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). Within the last days prior to his arrest, Baker 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, p.5).

When arrested in January 2021, there were found a loaded shotgun and handgun in Baker's apartment (Levenson, 2021, p.12). The judge assessed Baker as a possible threat because he had “repeatedly endorsed violent means to advance the political beliefs that he espouses” (Shammas and Vynck, 2021, p.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, p.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 (Levenson, 2021).



### 3.2.3 The PKK/PYD/YPG/YPJ

From legal perspective, according to Jaklin (2015, p.3), “the Christian/Assyrian militias and the Iraqi Peshmerga seem to incorporate lesser legal problems”. The YPG and the YPJ, on the other hand, with their close relation to the 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, p.3).

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. 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” (Middle East Monitor, 2018, p.9).

Exposed to the PKK propaganda 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 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, p. 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, p.2).

The above-presented assessment shows that anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have developed considerable capabilities and expertise during their stay in the conflict zone. They have received a military training upon their joining to armed groups in the region and then sharpened their combative skills in various fronts. They have 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 dramatically increased. In parallel to the rise in their military capabilities, they have gone through a process of ideological indoctrination. Most have established international links with other ideologically like-minded individuals. They have produced extreme ideological themes and content for propaganda and disseminated mostly on social media platforms.

The PKK and its offshoots in Syria and Iraq, such as the YPG and YPJ, have attracted 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. These violent far-left groups openly

declared a global war against other ideologies, governments and companies. They have incited their supporters across the globe to revolt against the state and wreak havoc. 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.

#### **4. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

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 concludes that 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 domestic and international security.

The threat posed by anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters requires development of a comprehensive counter-terrorism policy. In this policy, all relevant international organizations and countries ought to adopt a consistent approach towards anti-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. 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 increase information and intelligence sharing on anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters. Some anti-ISIS Western foreign fighters have a history of depression, psychological problems or stress disorders. 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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