

# The Return of European Foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the history of foreign fighters in the Soviet Afghan War, Bosnia, and both Chechen conflicts. It then looks at the lasting impact of foreign fighters who fought in those regions. The paper concludes with a discussion on the future implications for Europe whose citizens have fought as foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria and who now may possibly decide to return home as the wars subside and whether it is possible to draw out any lessons learned from previous experiences from the Soviet Afghan, Bosnian, and both Chechnian Wars.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Foreign terrorist fighters, FTF, Hybrid warfare

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## Introduction

There are many security issues which Europe must account for in this modern age. Some of these issues consist of Russian hybrid warfare, the migration crisis from the Middle East and North Africa, as well as terrorism. Terrorism has posed a significant threat, and the situation could potentially deteriorate with recent events. “The most impending threat that all intelligence agencies in Europe view as troublesome” Tigner argues, “is the return of foreign fighters from combat in Syria and Iraq”<sup>246</sup>. This is

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<sup>246</sup> James Blake Brook Tigner, “Islamic State Returnees Pose Threat to Europe.” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, March 22, 2017. Accessed July 14, 2019, <https://0-janes-ihs-com.lib.utep.edu/Janes/Display/jir12322-jir-2017>.

a legitimate threat given how many Europeans traveled abroad to fight for the Islamic State (ISIS).

There has been a staggering number of foreigners who decided to go and fight for ISIS in the Middle East. These foreigners have come from all over the world to fight for the caliphate. Tigner estimates, “30,000 foreign fighters went to go fight for ISIS, and about 5,000 of these fighters were from Europe”<sup>247</sup>. ISIS successfully recruited many foreign fighters via social media platforms. According to one study, “Sophisticated propaganda portrayed a glamorous life in the caliphate, depicted a heroic fight against the enemy, and captured the imaginations of vulnerable individuals worldwide”<sup>248</sup>. Not only was ISIS’ method of recruitment appealing, but the use of social media platforms helped them in other ways too. Some of the methods included, “Encrypted communications, the ease of connectivity, and instant global reach provided a large base of support”<sup>249</sup>. Compared to past conflicts, the Islamic State’s utilization of social media platforms to recruit globally was unprecedented.

Some European countries have been more heavily affected by the advanced recruiting style that ISIS had implemented. The countries that contributed the most foreign fighters to the Islamic State’s cause include Kosovo, Bosnia, and Belgium. The Kosovo Center for Security Studies reports “at 125 recruits per one million people, Kosovo’s rate was higher than second-placed Bosnia (85) and third-placed Belgium (42)”<sup>250</sup>. The demographic of those recruited by ISIS are young men, who practice Islam and are typically of Middle Eastern descent. However, women between the ages of 16 and 24 are also being recruited. Women are primarily recruited for supporting roles, professional positions, enforcing Sharia law, and serving as recruiters

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Maria Galperin Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson, and Zack Fellman. “Case Studies in History.” Foreign Fighters in History. Accessed July 15, 2019. <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history/case-studies.html>.

<sup>249</sup> Maria Galperin Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson, and Zack Fellman. “What We Learned.” Foreign Fighters in History. Accessed July 14, 2019. <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history/what-we-learned.html>.

<sup>250</sup> “Radicalized Kosovans Lured to Iraq and Syria.” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, July 16, 2015. Accessed July 14, 2019. <https://0-janes-ihs-com.lib.utep.edu/Janes/Display/jir11981-jir-2015>.

within the Caliphate, whereas males generally serve in combat roles. One review notes, “Once these people are recruited, they must make their way to Syria”<sup>251</sup>.

There is one common theme among Europeans traveling to fight for ISIS, the vast majority go through Turkey. Pantucci adds, “In most cases, individuals travel to Turkey and from there cross the porous border into Syria, where they connect with Islamist groups on the ground”<sup>252</sup>. There are two forms of transportation that most European foreign fighters use to enter Syria: vehicle, plane, or both. “Sometimes foreign fighters used aid convoys from Europe in order to enter Syria”<sup>253</sup>. As for traveling by airplane, they travel under false pretenses to Turkey and, from there, head to their final destinations in Syria or Iraq. This experience is similar to those observed during the Soviet-Afghan war, Bosnia, and Chechnya.

## History of foreign fighters in past conflicts

### Soviet-Afghan War

The Soviet-Afghan War, the Bosnian, and Chechen conflicts share common characteristics of foreigners coming to fight for an insurgency. The Soviet-Afghan war was waged from 1979–1989; it was fought between the Soviet Union and the tribal Mujahideen. Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman discuss how the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan “to defend its communist proxy government in Kabul from a growing insurgency”<sup>254</sup>. The Mujahideen were able to defeat the USSR with the support of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. They also relied heavily on the influx of foreign fighters who came to help the Mujahideen against the Red Army. However, Donnelly,

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Raffaello Pantucci. “Foreign Fighters – Battle-hardened Europeans Return from Syria.” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, January 10, 2014. Accessed July 15, 2019. <https://0-janes-ihs-com.lib.utep.edu/Janes/Display/jir11691-jir-2014>.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman, “Case Studies in History.” 2019. Foreign Fighters in History. Accessed July 15, 2019. <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history/case-studies.html>.

Sanderson, and Fellman acknowledge, “There is no consensus as to how many people traveled to Afghanistan, but estimates range from 10,000 to 35,000”<sup>255</sup>. Foreign fighters came from all over the world to help the Mujahideen with its struggle. Osama Bin Laden was one of the foreign fighters who answered the Mujahideen’s call. As Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman note, “He gained experience and developed connections during his time in Afghanistan, which helped him form and lead a new organization: Al-Qaeda”<sup>256</sup>. This conflict marked the first time that an insurgency used the media to garner support and attract foreign fighters to its cause. It also paved the way for other conflicts which foreign fighters participated in.

## Bosnian Conflict

The conflict in Bosnia serves as another example of foreigners coming to fight for an insurgency. The Bosnian war lasted from 1992–1995, initially triggered after Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence in March 1992. However, Bosnian Serbs rejected separation from Serbia, and with the backing and support of the Serbian military, they fought against the Bosnian Muslims. In this conflict, Bosnian Muslims were persecuted and atrocities were committed against them. “The overt religious nature of the war, atrocities committed against civilians, and the timing of hostilities” argues Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman, “made the conflict attractive for the former mujahedeen coming from Afghanistan”<sup>257</sup> Just like in the Soviet-Afghan war, foreign fighters felt compelled to defend Muslims against persecution. One report estimates, “1,000 to 2,000 foreign fighters contributed to the fight in Bosnia”<sup>258</sup>. The foreign fighters consisted of veterans from the Soviet-Afghan war and recruits with no prior experience. The conflict concluded when the United States intervened and with a ceasefire in 1995. For a third example, this paper now turns to the First Chechen War, which shared a lot of similarities with the Soviet-Afghan War and the war in Bosnia.

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

## Chechen Conflicts

The First Chechen war lasted from 1994–1996; the conflict was between the Russian Federation and Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman recount how, “Chechnya refused to sign an understanding regarding its relationship with Russia, the head of the All-National Congress of the Chechen people, Dzhokhar Dudayev, unilaterally declared the independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria”<sup>259</sup>. The Russian Federation was unhappy with the declaration that Dzhokhar Dudayev had made. In response, Russia attempted, but failed, to overthrow Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev<sup>260</sup>. Dudayev eventually won the presidential elections of Chechnya in 1991. As an effort to restore order in the breakaway republic, former Russian President Yeltsin in 1994, sent in the Russian military<sup>261</sup>. The Chechens were unable to fight the Russians using conventional warfare, so they resorted to guerilla tactics. Chechnya ultimately achieved a Pyrrhic victory, and Russia was embarrassed by this loss. In Chechnya, “jihad through the media” was created and used as an effective recruitment tool. The man credited with the creation of this was Samir Salih Abdallah al Suwaylim, also known as Emir Khattab. In Donnelly, Sanderson and Fellman’s analysis, they share how, “Khattab required all operations to be filmed and distributed, pioneering a critical form of jihadi media and propaganda”<sup>262</sup>. Even though the propaganda influenced terrorist organizations, and inspired many to answer the call of jihad, many foreign fighters were unable to enter Chechnya. Due to the challenges of traveling to Chechnya, there were only between 200–300 foreign fighters that participated in the First Chechen War”<sup>263</sup>. Less than five years later, another war broke out between the Russian Federation and the Chechen republic of Ichkeria.

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<sup>259</sup> Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman, “Case Studies in History.” 2019. Accessed July 16, 2019. <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history/case-studies.html>.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> “Twelfth Anniversary of Start of First Chechen War Noted.” Jamestown. December 14, 2006. Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/twelfth-anniversary-of-start-of-first-chechen-war-noted/>.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

The Second Chechen War happened under very suspicious circumstances. At the time, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was running for president while Chechnya was still suffering from the devastating effects from the First Chechen War. Russia promised Chechnya aid, but never fulfilled its promise. The government under President Boris Yeltsin was losing popularity while tensions within the region were starting to flare once more. The turmoil that Chechnya was experiencing was used to Russia's advantage. It is widely believed, although there is no conclusive evidence, that the Federal Security Service, under Putin's command, began a campaign of bombing Russian apartment complexes to justify returning to hostilities within Chechnya<sup>264</sup>. The Second Chechen War waged from 1999–2009. Like the first conflict, there were a few foreign fighters present, although they were less effective. At the onset of the Second Chechen war, it is estimated that there were roughly 700 foreign fighters, but later diminished Russia made advances"<sup>265</sup>. The active combat phase between the Russian military and insurgent Chechen forces lasted for only a matter of months. The National government delegated responsibility for resolving the insurgency to Chechen officials. Ultimate victory was achieved by the Russian Federation, as a pro-Russian government rose to power in Chechnya and major instances of terrorism ceased by 2009. Although these conflicts ended more or less the same, each conflict affected and intensified the next.

## The effects of foreign fighters from past conflicts

### Afghanistan

Once the Soviet-Afghan War concluded, the foreign fighters took different paths – some returned to their country of origins to demobilize or join local causes<sup>266</sup>, while others chose to follow the key facilitator of foreign

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<sup>264</sup> <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalAppendicesPullout011018.pdf> [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/060716\\_Satter\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/060716_Satter_Testimony.pdf)

<sup>265</sup> Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman, "Case Studies in History." 2019.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

fighters Abdullah Azzam in the Soviet-Afghan War<sup>267</sup>. One key foreign fighter who joined the Soviet-Afghan War was Osama Bin Laden. Bin Laden and Azzam created a new terrorist organization post conflict, Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda would be responsible for attacks against the United States: The World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the East African Embassy Bombings, and the USS Cole bombing. The attack which proved the most effective and gained them notoriety was the coordinated attacks on September 11, 2001. In the opinion of this author, the only way Al-Qaeda was able to execute such an attack like 9/11, was due to the experience they received in the Soviet-Afghan War.

## Bosnia

The Bosnian conflict also experienced the same influx of foreign fighters coming from all over the world, many of which came from international terrorist organizations. Some of them were veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War, while others were fresh recruits. According to one report, "Terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda used the ethnically-motivated violence in the 1990s as pretext to establish terrorist roots in the country, train its Afghan-based fighters, and lure new recruits"<sup>268</sup>. Although they attempted to defend the Muslims in Bosnia from genocide, the negative impact of the foreign fighters in the conflict has outweighed the positive. The most serious consequence observed has been a lasting impact on Bosnia itself, radicalizing Muslims and offering their narrow perception of Sharia Law to educate the youth. Until now, this has only been the case in northern Bosnia, but it may threaten to spread as a large portion of these Bosnian Muslims are leaving to join ISIS. The radicalization of Muslims in Bosnia can be ascribed to the foreign fighter's presence. As one report notes, "Many foreign fighters stayed after the conflict in Bosnia, they established roots and radicalized some local Bosnians to extremism"<sup>269</sup>. Not only did local

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Press Release – July 11, 2019, 2019 Press Release – July 9, and 2019 Press Release – July 8. "Bosnia & Herzegovina: Extremism & Counter-Extremism." Counter Extremism Project. December 29, 2017. Accessed July 19, 2019. <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/bosnia-herzegovina>.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

Bosnians become radicalized, but many organizations were established in Bosnia to finance terrorism. For example, “Several Al-Qaeda fronts opened in Bosnia, posing as humanitarian NGOs and charities”<sup>270</sup>. Years after the war in Bosnia, Al-Qaeda continues to garner support, while other Bosnians go to Iraq and Syria to fight for the Islamic State.

## Chechnya

The Chechen conflicts were not really affected by the foreign fighters’ combat capabilities. First, there were few foreign fighters who traveled to Chechnya to make any difference. Nevertheless, they transformed the use of media in terrorist organizations and successfully promoted extremism in Chechnya. As one report found, “Emir Khattab revolutionized media and modern insurgency, laying the ground for what is now the norm in Iraq and Afghanistan”<sup>271</sup>. Khattab used propaganda films in order to gain support and for recruitment. Chechnya is also one of the countries which currently enforces Sharia law and has issues of human rights violations. Another problem Chechnya faces, is exporting Chechen citizens to conflicts where radical Islamic elements are involved; these citizens usually end up fighting for terrorist organizations, as demonstrated with the Second Chechen War.

One terrorist attack which would be the equivalent of 9/11 for the Russian Federation was the Beslan Massacre. The Beslan Massacre is the most devastating terrorist attack in the history of the Russian Federation. As Britannica states:

A hostage situation happened at a school in Beslan, Russia and 1,200 hostages were taken. An explosion occurred when the terrorists believed they were being attacked by Russian forces. This incident resulted in the deaths of 334 hostages, Russia was forced to revamp their counterterrorism measures<sup>272</sup>.

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Moore, Cerwyn, and Paul Tumelty. “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment.” *Networked Insurgencies and Foreign Fighters in Eurasia*, 2018, 31–52. doi: 10.4324/9781315099583-3.

<sup>272</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. “Beslan School Attack.” Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed July 22, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Beslan-school-attack>.



After reviewing these past conflicts, maybe there is something Europe can expect from foreign fighters returning to Europe, after having fought in Iraq and Syria.

## Analysis of European Foreign fighters Return

There are three main actions which will more than likely transpire once combat comes to a conclusion in Iraq and Syria. European Foreign fighters will either stay in Iraq or Syria, return back to their home country, or move on to the next conflict in which Muslims are being victimized. When it comes to European foreign fighters who chose to stay in the Middle East; they will either stay because of their own free will or due the fear of facing prosecution back in their home country. The worst-case scenario is that some will continue their extremist ways and end up joining another terrorist organization in the Middle East, furthering the trend of international terrorism. However, as Tigner warns, “The second outcome, which European Security services dread the most, are those European Foreign fighters returning back to Europe”<sup>273</sup>.

There remain various possibilities if the European Foreign fighters return to their country of origin. Comparable to the foreign fighters of the Soviet-Afghan war, many will go back to Europe and demobilize. A Brookings Institution report on foreign fighters in 2014 found that most foreign fighters returning from the Iraq conflict posed less of a threat than originally anticipated. Many who joined the Islamic State were motivated by a host of specific reasons and were unlikely to pose a domestic threat; and many were initially humanitarians opposing Assad<sup>274</sup>. If there is any positive indicator from all these past conflicts, it is that the majority of foreign fighters will return to Europe without the intention of carrying out a terrorist attack. However, the ones the European Security Services are cautious of, are the ones with the intent to carry on their jihad against Western society within the boundaries of Europe.

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<sup>273</sup> Tigner, “Islamic State Returnees Pose Threat to Europe.” 2017.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

European Security Services should expect at least two threats from those foreign fighters returning with the intention of carrying on their jihad. The first threat will be fighters returning with the aim of radicalizing or recruiting other people in their home country<sup>275</sup>. The next threat will be individuals returning back to Europe who intend on carrying out terrorist attacks on European soil. The biggest threat which European officials might foresee as a problem is the radicalization and/or recruitment of prisoners. David Ibsen, executive director of the Counter Extremism Project, stated this, "If all the returning foreign fighters face a prison sentence, we are likely to see an increase in radicalization in prisons and the cycle will continue"<sup>276</sup>. Experiences have shown not all people who returned have been arrested, but this may change in the future. The European Union plans on enacting directive 2017/541, that will criminalize travel within or beyond the EU for the purposes of joining or supporting a terrorist organization<sup>277</sup>. The possibility of prisoners becoming radicalized is a potential security issue which may arise in the future. Not only does Europe have to worry about prisoners becoming radicalized, but also regular civilians as well. The main threat which returning foreign fighters present is the likelihood of an attack.

Europe should expect attacks from the returning foreign fighters, with and without combat experience. However, there is a certain kind of foreign fighter returning which European Security Services should be most concerned about. These are the fighters who will be dispatched back to Europe, by terrorist organizations, with the orders and intent on carrying out attacks within Europe<sup>278</sup>. These foreign fighters are at the greatest risk of conducting terrorist attacks on European soil. While Europe should be greatly concerned about those returning with combat experience, a majority of them will not come back. Most were either be killed in combat in

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<sup>275</sup> "Disillusioned, Traumatized, or Radicalized: The Journey of Foreign Fighters Returning Home." Georgetown Security Studies Review. May 14, 2018. Accessed July 24, 2019. <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2018/05/14/disillusioned-traumatized-or-radicalized-the-journey-of-foreign-fighters-returning-home/>.

<sup>276</sup> Brooks Tigner. "Europe Struggles to Deter Islamist Prison Radicalization." *Jane's Intelligence*, March 20, 2018. Accessed July 24, 2019. IHS Markit.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Tigner, "Islamic State Returnees Pose Threat to Europe." 2017.

Iraq and/or Syria, possibly choose to live in the Middle East, or will chose to fight in the next conflict involving Muslims. While the numbers do not seem to require an over emphasis on defeating this threat, the risk still remains. The final threat is that these experienced fighters will move on to another part of the world and carry out violent jihad there. As for those European Foreign fighters looking to join the next conflict, the regions that seem the ripest are the Middle East and Southeast Asia. European officials should maintain vigilance to ensure that Islamic terrorism in the Middle East does not return to Europe.

European Security services maybe overanalyzing the fact that European Foreign fighters are returning back to Europe. There is a legitimate threat of possible attacks being carried out by those who return, but the threat is minimal. If past experiences have indicated anything, it is that most European Foreign fighters will come back and demobilize. And if anything were to happen, Europe has made the necessary preparations to effectively contest this kind of threat. If there are threats which Europe needs to continue to improve on, it is the threat of hybrid warfare and international terrorism.

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