



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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FOREIGN FIGHTERS: COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS ON SYRIA AND SPAIN

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Humanity has suffered a great deal from war. Yet it would be self-deceptive not to admit that at the very same time violent conflict has always exerted a certain fascination on people. The existential struggle for a perceived just cause has particularly served as a template for romanticist and adventurous imaginings, not least in modern times. To a certain extent, such imaginings might have played a role in my own mind when reading *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. For an adolescent German in the late 1970s, Ernest Hemingway's novel referred precisely to such a just cause in telling the story of the foreign war volunteers "fighting against fascism" in the Spanish Civil War. In my reading, the imagined solidarity with the International Brigades in Spain compensated for the narrative of insufficient resistance against German Nazism at home. Confronting fascism with military means was thus, indisputably, a morally justified form of war. Far from engagement in any kind of armed struggle, a young German politically socialized in the 1970s could experience Hemingway's book about the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) as a template that gave meaning to both reflections on German national history and his own engagement in the then- contemporary conflicts concerning, for instance, nuclear energy, social injustice, and global inequality. Moreover, and probably more importantly, Hemingway turned the Spanish Civil War into a "theater of individual experience," around the story of the central protagonist, Robert Jordan, inviting his reader to become part of a story with strongly existentialist and romanticist connotations (Sanders 1960: 134).

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In the years 1937 and 1938, Ernest Hemingway went to Spain four times to cover the war as a journalist (Josephs 1994: xv-xvi). He was one among thousands of Americans and Europeans who made their way as war volunteers to the battlefields of the civil war in Spain. The overwhelming majority of these foreign fighters joined either the republican or loyalist side. They enlisted among the International Brigades, whose ranks were filled by the systematic recruitment efforts of Comintern, the Communist International Organization founded in 1915. From their formation in late October 1936 until February 1937, the International Brigades were able to recruit about 25,000 foreign fighters (Richardson 1976: 11). This number increased to approximately 40,000 volunteers from fifty different countries in 1937. The foreign fighter contingent of Comintern exceeded by far the fewer than 1,500 foreigners who voluntarily joined the nationalist side of General Franco, whose troops mainly found international support through the official contingents sent by Germany, Italy, and Portugal (Jackson 2001: vi; Keen 2001).

In terms of numbers, national diversity, and speed of recruitment, the foreign fighter phenomenon of the 1930s seems to be a historical precursor of what we can witness today with respect to the influx of foreign war volunteers to Syria and Iraq. In September 2014, the US administration estimated that since early 2012, between 12,000 and 15,000 foreign fighters from approximately 80 different countries had been recruited to fight in the Syrian Civil War (Byman and Shapiro 2014, 9). Most of them had joined the ranks of radical Jihadist militias such as Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State (IS), the latter meanwhile controlling large areas of Syria and Iraq. Most disturbingly for Western governments, an increasing number of these foreign fighters were coming from Europe, Australia, and the United States. In winter 2013, the number of Western foreign fighters was estimated to have reached up to 1,700 individuals from Europe alone (Bakker, Paulussen, and Entenmann 2013: 2).

Despite all the profound differences in context and ideology, the cases of both Syria and Spain raise the central question of what drives young people to join a war which is not their own. To be sure, this essay will only give a preliminary answer to this question. Its purpose is rather modest. In making a small contribution to the ongoing debate about foreign fighters in contemporary wars, this essay aims to present some initial comparative reflections on the subject in order to open possibly fruitful avenues of future research. Although several authors mention the Spanish Civil War in their studies on the foreign fighter phenomenon in Muslim countries (cf.

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Hegghammer 2010/11 and Bakker, Paulussen, Entenmann 2013), these comparisons remain very much on the surface, often comprising not more than a sentence or two. With this observation in mind, I would like to appeal for engagement with a more diachronic comparison of contemporary Muslim foreign fighters. This kind of comparative research seems necessary in order to provide a balance against attempts to understand this phenomenon based purely on analyses of allegedly intrinsic cultural and religious traits of Islam. There is no doubt that Islamist ideologues can use Islamic traditions to underpin their confrontational worldviews and legitimize militant action. At the same time, other Muslims might invoke these traditions to justify democratic institutions and human rights. Religious traditions themselves do not generate specific forms of social action, rather it is contemporary actors who acquire these traditions and transform them into a means to justify certain kinds of ethics and social action. Comparing the profiles of foreign fighters in the civil wars of Syria and Spain, therefore, might open research strategies for understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon in a way that is more general less culturally loaded. Who are these people who search for meaning in war?

From the perspective of the so-called West, “a ‘foreign fighter’ is someone who leaves or tries to leave the West to fight somewhere else” (Hegghammer 2013: 1). With this definition, Thomas Hegghammer argues against the tendency in academic literature about Islamist militancy to confuse different types of militant actors. He distinguishes foreign fighters from international terrorists conducting “out-of-area violence against noncombatants,” from mercenaries, and from domestic militants committing violent acts at home (Hegghammer 2010/11: 58). During the war in Afghanistan, approximately 20,000 foreign fighters engaged in combat against Soviet troops; however, only very few of them were from Europe or the United States (Kohlmann and Alkhouri 2014: 1). This has changed with respect to the civil war in Syria. Still, the majority of foreign fighters are of a Middle Eastern background. . Yet the number of young Western Muslims traveling to Syria and Iraq has assumed unprecedented heights.

To be sure, currently we only have weak data on the numbers, motivations, origins, and activities of these foreign fighters. The Australian Security Intelligence Organization, for instance, estimated that in 2014 about 60 Australians were fighting in Syria and Iraq, of which 15 were killed on the battlefield. Based on the small number of those killed in battle, the typical Australian foreign fighter was under 30 years old, predominantly male and of Lebanese- or

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Turkish-Australian background, some had family while others were single men, and most of them had a record with Australian security authorities (Zammit 2014: 6). The general picture seems to confirm this profile of the Australian volunteers in terms of age, gender, and social background. Yet beyond these very broad patterns, it is difficult to generalize further with respect to the socio-economic status, political and religious attitudes, or educational background of Western foreign fighters (Stern and Berger 2015). In short, these young Muslims leaving the West to fight in the Middle East are a very mixed group of individuals with different backgrounds.

This vagueness in terms of profile applies equally to the motivations for foreign fighters leaving to fight. Generalizations are probably an even more elusive undertaking here. In a recent article in the Guardian, Pankaj Mishra suggested that this motivation was found in the “widespread frustration with a globalised western model that promised freedom and prosperity to all, but fails to deliver” (Mishra 2015). While this narrative might play a role in the complexities behind the motivation to fight, it fails to explain the fact that this frustration with liberal promises is shared by millions who – fortunately– do not compensate for it on the killing fields of what are for them, in principle, foreign civil wars. Moreover, this explanation fits well into the general critical narrative on neoliberalism, granting it a kind of validity without evidence.

In an interview with the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, Richard Barrett gave a more detailed, hesitant, and reflected account of the motivational background of foreign fighters in Syria. According to him, we can only discern some common themes among these volunteers, such as a disillusionment with politics, a lack of belonging, a desire for respect and recognition, and a search for religious spirituality. At the same time, these themes are often accompanied by a remarkable ignorance of Islam and the local conditions on the ground. Generally speaking, the motivation to go to war seems to vary starkly from individual to individual, and a number of not necessarily mutually shared grievances may play a role. Rather than discerning clear individual motivations, we can observe certain ideological Islamist templates at work in turning patterns of individual grievances that are complex and difficult to verify, into push factors (Barrett 2015).

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These admittedly very tentative findings show striking parallels with the profiles and motivations of foreign fighters who travelled to Spain almost 80 years ago. In his studies on the about 3,000 Americans who sailed across the Atlantic to fight with the International Brigades in Spain, Robert Rosenstone confronts us with a similar complex picture of the origin and motivational background of the volunteers in the “Abraham Lincoln Battalion” (Rosenstone 1967 and 1969). The majority of them were American males under the age of 30, came from an urban background, represented a broad variety of occupations, and, most interestingly, were often born abroad or were first-generation immigrants to the United States (1967: 329 and 331). The common themes of these American war volunteers were related to the political narratives of a certain minority radicalism that emerged in the historical context of both the Great Depression and the rise of Fascism in Europe. The typical American foreign fighter took his decision to leave for an unknown war in the atmosphere of a “world in crisis.” For a minority of Americans an unspecific amalgam of left-wing feelings, ideals, theories, and beliefs seemed to offer ways to a solution of this global crisis (Rosenstone 1969: Chapter two). In Spain, American and European brigadists were collectively “fighting against fascism,” but they did so with very different attitudes, motivations, and approaches (Richardson 1976: 9). Although it is a fact that international Communism and the Soviet Union were behind the organization of the Brigades, many of the volunteers did not have a doctrinal approach to communist ideology. In the American case, only very few foreign fighters had ever read Marxist literature and many of them had adopted their leftist attitudes more recently or even developed them only in the context of the Spanish Civil War (Rosenstone 1967: 337).

In conclusion, at least at a general level the foreign fighters in Syria seemingly share a number of traits with their predecessors in Spain: they are young, male, of mixed socio-economic status, and possess backgrounds that entail recent experiences of immigration.. The war volunteers in Syria and in Spain seem to represent a generation that has grown up in a certain atmosphere of crisis, whose alleged or real threats they apprehend with reference to broader, globally relevant ideologies. The theoretical and/or theological underpinnings of these ideologies are, however, to a large extent far from their comprehension. Furthermore, they travel to war zones about which they often know little about. How then, are these heterogeneous groups of young people recruited?

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In an excellent study on Muslim foreign fighters written before the “Arab Spring,” Thomas Hegghammer convincingly argued that there are two crucial components for a large-scale mobilization of foreign fighters. First of all, there is the need for an “ideology stressing solidarity within an imagined transnational community;” and, second, there must be a “strong cadre of transnationalist activists” who enjoy relative autonomy from states, while at the same time “having access to state-like resources and privileges” (Hegghammer 2010/11: 90). These opportunity structures are clearly visible in the cases of both Spain and Syria. With regard to the first point, we can discern a globally relevant dichotomy of ideologies mobilizing for action in both cases. In Spain and in Syria we observe confrontations that from all sides are narrated as a major struggle between good and evil, inviting people to “participate in a moment of history” (Barret 2015). The global battle against Fascism and the transnational Jihad for an Islamic Caliphate share this character of being staged by their protagonists as world historical moments. In spite of all their differences in values and worldviews, the International Brigades and the militias of the Islamic State provide organizational frameworks for participating in such an existential struggle; and the civil wars in Spain and Syria have offered the opportunity to convert political ideologies into the reality of the battlefield. From this perspective the transnationalist communist and Islamist ideologies provide templates that give meaning to a complex variety of individual grievances, personal circumstances, and national particularities, channeling them toward a common course of action. In being part of such an existential struggle, the foreign fighter turns an unknown war into a war of his own.

Looking at Hegghammer’s second component, transnational networks and strong states have been involved in the mobilization of foreign war recruits in Syria, just as they were in Spain. In Spain it was Comintern and the Soviet Union; in Syria the recent mobilization of foreign fighters has been facilitated by transnational Jihadist networks and influential Sunni states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. From an historical perspective, the role of Saudi Arabia was particularly instrumental in the development of the necessary opportunity structures for the rise of Muslim foreign fighters. Since the 1960s, the Saudi state has provided the institutional structures, resources, and ideological underpinnings for the emergence of a new pan-Islamic movement, making the Hijaz “a melting pot of international Islamists.” These pan-Islamic activists have created an “alarmist, self-victimizing, conspiratorial, and xenophobic” identity discourse of Muslim unity that they have been able to disseminate on a global scale

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(Hegghammer 2010/11: 81-83). For Dan Richardson the International Brigades in Spain always remained representative of a Comintern-controlled force whose military and organizational strength built on the experience of Red Army officers and Soviet advisers (Richardson 1982: 178). Here again, we can discern similarities between the two cases when looking at the role of previous Baath officers and Iraqi security personal in the military structure of IS.

This brief comparison of foreign fighter mobilization in Spain and Syria shows significant parallels regarding the pull factors, such as ideology, resources, transnational networks, indirect state support, and recruiting infrastructures. The emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon relies on a necessary support structure in terms of ideology, material and communication.. Without this support structure, it would be impossible for a phenomenon of this magnitude to exist.. What is more difficult, however, is defining the concrete push factors, meaning the individual reasons that make these young men go. Support structures facilitate the recruitment of foreign fighters, but they do not create recruits from thin air. While opportunity structures are necessary to explain the phenomenon, they are largely insufficient.. Why do groups of predominantly young men with very different historical, cultural, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds find it attractive to join foreign militias and fight their wars? Why are they prepared to take part and even die in a local war imagined as an existential struggle of humankind?

These questions finally bring me back to the existentialist and romanticist traits of Hemingway's novel and the more general fascination with collective violence in the name of a just cause. Robert Rosenstone emphasized that for most of the fighters of the Lincoln Battalion, the search for adventure in combination with the mutually reinforcing power of friendship played an important role in the decision to go (1967: 337). This certainly also applies to the current situation in Syria and is emphasized by the enticement strategies of the propaganda videos of the Islamic State. Whatever it actually means for the respective individual, many Western foreign fighters might have been motivated "to join the fight by a romantic desire to defend Islam and Muslims under threat" (Byman and Shapiro 2014:12). Yet there seems to be a certain attraction of war, not only for those who fight, but also for the spectator. In Spain, for instance, the nationalist side invited European tourists to visit the country in the midst of war. Thousands of Europeans participated in organized bus tours which presented human suffering as tourist

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spectacles and served the nationalist camp as a means of sacralizing both “the battle sites and the Nationalist soldiers who had conquered the land” (Holguín 2005: 1400).

In our attempts to fully comprehend the foreign fighter phenomenon, we should take these indications of a general fascination with war seriously. In dismissing war as a pathology of modernity, we too easily endorse uncritically peaceful narratives of modernization. Yet modernity and violence are not necessarily opposite poles. On the contrary, the relationship between war and modernity is ambiguous, and foreign fighters have been a recurring phenomenon in modern wars (Bakke 2014: 155). The ambiguity of the relationship between war and modernity was an inherent theme of Max Weber’s sociology, and his work might therefore be a good starting point for further developing our understanding of the cross-cultural appearance of the foreign fighter phenomenon. Defining the modern state and ultimately, politics, through the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force, Weber intimately linked war “as the consummated threat of violence among modern polities” to the sphere of politics. According to him, war not only creates “a pathos and a sentiment of community,” but also gives the warrior the unique experience of a consecrated meaning of death: “Death on the field of battle differs from death that is only man’s common lot” (1915: 335). There is no doubt that the combination of pathos with meaningful death resonates in the description of the attitude of foreign fighters given above.

Weber’s work seems even more important when it comes to the way in which contemporary Muslim foreign fighters respond to how their religion is framed. It is the one decisive difference between the foreign fighters in Spain and Syria - that the International Brigades represented utterly secular worldviews, albeit with a strong component of the expectation for salvation in this world. The Jihadist movements in the Muslim world, however, draw their ideologies strongly from Islamic religious traditions. They represent ideological frameworks in which religion and politics are fused. In giving a consecrated meaning to death, so Weber’s argument goes, war as the ultimate form of politics is competing with the concerns of religious salvation. In modern history he discerned a fierce competition between the brotherliness of religion and of the warrior. Weber argued that the social spheres of religion and politics are in direct competition concerning the assignment of meaning to death. From the position of the believer, this tension has been resolved between the extreme poles of a radical anti-political attitude to forms of “ethical

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barbarism,” in which God’s cause has been imposed on the world by brutal force (1915: 336). From a Weberian perspective, pacifism and jihadism might have the very same roots in diametrically opposed attempts to resolve this tension between religion and politics. One way to explain the attractiveness of contemporary jihadist organizations for a specific segment of young Muslims, therefore, might be that it provides temporary resolution of this tension by ideologically conjoining religion with politics.

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