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# THE GENERAL SITUATION AND TREND OF THE FOREIGNERS IN IS UNDER THE BACKGROUND OF THE SYRIA CRISIS

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*Abstract: "Islamic State" (IS) is a major obstacle to the Syrian peace process and a major threat to both regional and world peace. With the growing global impact of IS terrorist activities, more and more foreigners have responded to IS propaganda by joining, working for, and engaging in terrorist activities in the service of IS abroad. Foreigners in IS are citizens of countries outside of Syria and Iraq who leave their home countries to work for IS. This paper argues that foreigners in IS have provided strong support for the consolidation and expansion of IS terrorist activities through human resource intensive contributions. Reasons for defection from a home country to participate actively in IS have been identified as: an "identity crisis" in the home countries of highly educated and unemployed males, loosening policies for international exit and entry, and the deceptive propaganda of IS. Through an analysis of the foreigners in IS, this paper finds that extremism and terrorism can be reduced by innovation within current international institutions, optimization of existing national social systems, and by strengthening the legitimacy of religious involvement in the international system.*

At the start of the Syrian peace process in 2016, the United States and Russia compromised on the issue of Syria, which led to the cooperation of the two sides in the fight against the IS terrorist forces in Iraq and Syria. Since the emergence of IS in 2014, the organization has been in a state of gradual decline. Military strikes from the great powers the US and Russia, resulted in an increased concern from the international community and ultimately a greater coalition of force united against IS. Like other organizations, each step in the development of IS has been determined by the personal factors of its members, and the foreign personnel in IS play a vital role too. Foreign personnel have the ability to carry out terrorist activities in their own countries, or other countries, through the use of radical religious ideas specific to IS ideology and by utilizing the professional skills learned through the organization.<sup>1</sup> The ability

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1 Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iraq's Evolving Insurgency," Working Draft, Washington, D.C: Center for Stra-

to mobilize foreign personnel creates a more powerful IS. IS needs to recruit foreign personnel, who continue to join the so-called Jihad, to provide a steady stream of human resource support for IS and their global terrorist activities.

## I. Definition of Foreigners in IS and Their Recruitment

### (a) *Defining Foreigners in IS*

According to the definition formulated by David Malet, foreign fighters are “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts.”<sup>2</sup> This definition has three important implications: first, the foreigners have no citizenship in the unstable countries in question; second, those foreigners are not subordinate to the official military organization within the unstable country; third, those foreigners are not mercenaries.

As a terrorist organization that aspires to attain the status of a “state,” its name has always reflected this goal: initially termed the “Islamic State of Iraq,” the name was changed to the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” and finally to “Islamic State”. The aspirational “territory” of IS extends from Iraq to the al-Sharm region of the East coast of the Mediterranean region (also referred to as the Levant), and the organization seeks to establish “provinces” in many other countries and regions across Africa and Asia too. The final goal of IS is to establish control over a global territory. The fact that IS claims eventual sovereignty of the entire world makes the so-called “Foreigners of IS” a relatively dynamic concept. IS acquisition of “territory” has already expanded beyond the current national boundaries of sovereign states recognized by international society as well as overrun the established concept of nation-state recognized by international community. Many people with multiple citizenships recognized by the international community work for the IS and IS has granted them with an “Islamic State Passport” too. This makes the definition of ‘foreigners’ in IS unclear as the Islamic State itself, nor its passport is legally recognized by the international community.<sup>3</sup>

If we investigate the origins of IS, the organization was established in Jordan and the organization’s founder Abu Musab Zarqawi is Jordanian. This would technically make the IS “regime” established in cross-border areas of Syria and Iraq an “alien regime”. The IS base camps are mainly located in the

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tegic and International Studies, December 9, 2005, p.129.

2 David Samuel Malet, “Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts,” Ph.D. Dissertation, George Washington University, August 2009, p.9.

3 John Hall, “Anything to Declare? ISIS Launches Passport Holders for International Terrorist as Part of Its Campaign of ‘Psychological Warfare’,” *Daily Mail*, August 12, 2014.

border areas of Syria and Iraq, therefore citizens of countries or regions other than Syria and Iraq who work for IS can be considered as foreigners of IS.

*(b) The Reasons for the Recruitment of Foreigners by IS*

The preliminary goals of IS are to work towards “state-establishment”, expand the sphere of influence, and consolidate terrorist base camps. The terrorist activities of IS are different from that of other terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda’s chief, Osama Bin Laden, lived under the protection of the Taliban regime or Pakistan tribal elders, and carried out global terrorist activity by emphasizing covert tactics. IS has made use of high-profile methods that are designed to attract instant global attention. IS is trying to transform itself from an organization to an entity that resembles a state. Currently, no state or international organization recognizes IS as such. In addition to the terrorist activities that have made IS famous, IS has established administrative agencies in its control areas in Iraq and Syria, and has assumed the social service functions of a “state.” IS has tried to recruit people from all over the world who may potentially provide services that will help it to strengthen its international terrorist headquarters, compete with Al-Qaeda and other traditional terrorist organizations, and form a force of terrorism. The realization of IS goals is limited by its ideology: all hires must be Islamic extremists. IS requires a vast pool of talented professionals in order to maintain regime operation and social service functions. There is a shortage of IS professionals working in administrative, financial, medical, health, urban construction, and other related fields necessary for the consolidation and construction of terrorist base camps. Multilingual personnel proficient in networking technology are also required for external communication operations and global propaganda efforts. Specifically, IS needs more foreigners to be involved in the major areas of organization and propaganda. The early members of IS are mainly Jihad warriors armed only with extremist ideology, and they are ill-equipped to establish a state.

The second goal of IS is to support terrorist activities abroad. Foreigners provide strong support to IS and pose a major threat to the international community. After joining IS they have the option to either fight with local members in Syria and Iraq or use their foreign passports to return to their homelands to engage in terrorist activities. After acquiring skills to commit terrorist acts,<sup>4</sup> these foreign fighters establish new contacts with other extremists in their home countries and often build new networks to carry out

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4 “‘Islamic State’ Reportedly Training Terrorists to Enter Europe as Asylum Seekers,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 19, 2018.

terrorist activities.<sup>5</sup> Abdel Hamid Abaaoud, the designer of the Paris terrorist attack in December 2015, went to Syria for training, and was further radicalized after returning home. He then recruited assistants, established a terror network and conducted a major terrorist attack in Paris.<sup>6</sup> Foreigners of IS have shown a strong capacity for IS to conduct terrorist activities abroad. As former director of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation James Comey said, “Foreign fighters traveling to Syria or Iraq could, for example, gain battlefield experience and increased exposure to violent extremist elements that may lead to further radicalization to violence; they may use these skills and exposure to radical ideology to return to their countries of origin, including the United States, to conduct attacks on the Homeland.”<sup>7</sup>

## II. The Reasons Foreigners Join IS and Their Origins

### (a) *Impetus to Join IS*

We will discuss the three major contributing factors which lead foreigners to join IS, starting with the “identity crisis” experienced by the foreigners in their own countries. This situation is most apparent in first and second generation immigrants to the United States and Europe. These immigrants are often subject to alienation and marginalization in society and in joining IS they hope to obtain a sense of mission and belonging. One appeal to this desire for identification has been crystallized through the mission of helping the “Muslim Brothers” in the territory of Syria against the Assad regime.

Second, the copycat effect as a result of the rapid growth in the number of foreigners entering Syria. In 2011, the number of foreigners in Syria was equal to the total number of Muslim Jihad groups in other areas, namely Bosnia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan. In the first half of 2012, about 700-1,400 foreign fighters entered Syria<sup>8</sup>, subsequently the number of foreigners in Syria continued to grow faster than in other regions. By the end of 2013, the migration numbers had grown to include more than 11,000 people.<sup>9</sup> At present, entering Syria through Turkey is the best choice for foreigners entering the IS controlled

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5 Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol.107, No.1, 2013, pp.1-15.

6 Josh Halliday, Jonathan Bucks, “Abdelhamid Abaaoud: What We Know about the Paris Attacks ‘Mastermind’,” *Guardian*, 18 November, 2015.

7 House Homeland Security Committee Hearing, September 2014, <https://homeland.house.gov/hearing/hearing-worldwide-threats-homeland/>.

8 Aron Zelin, “Foreign Fighters Trickle into the Syrian Rebellion,” June 11, 2012, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/foreign-fighters-trickle-into-the-syrian-rebellion>.

9 Alex Spillius, “Number of Foreign Fighters in Syria Nearly Doubles,” *The Telegraph*. December 17, 2013.

region.<sup>10</sup> Syria can be described as an incubator for recruiting large numbers of foreigners who have little or no combat experience. On May 31, 2013, Yusuf al-Qaradawi<sup>11</sup> called for the Jihad in Syria. Western media speculated that this would lead more foreigners to participate in Jihad in Syria.<sup>12</sup>

Third, the wide use of internet-based communication technology has played a crucial role in recruitment of foreign nationals to IS. The wide use of communication technology and the convenience of air travel not only reduce the costs associated with transit and communication, but also facilitate the arrival of foreigners to Syria. The enhancement of the level of communication technology increases the power of IS social media activities, which IS actively makes use of to propagate its ideas and publish recruitment information. This provides more opportunities and possibilities for foreigners to join IS. The decreasing transportation costs for foreigners joining IS is appealing to those who have been made vulnerable by an “identity crisis” in their home country. Ultimately, foreigners choose to join IS, and then use the same means to recruit more foreigners to the extremist ideology.<sup>13</sup>

*(b) The Origins of the Foreigners of IS*

The areas controlled by IS are at war with Syrian government troops, Iraqi government troops, Kurdish armed forces, the United States, Russia, and other regional powers and ethnic forces. The complexity of the regional situation has created different approaches to the basic situation of foreigners in IS. Many institutions studying the phenomenon have gathered different data through separate investigations. According to data from the US civil information organization the Soufan Group,<sup>14</sup> about 30,000 people from 85 countries joined IS in December 2015. Most of the foreigners of IS are from Arab countries, but many of them are from western countries, such as EU member states, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In addition, there are thousands of foreigners from Russia, and hundreds from Indonesia and Tajikistan.<sup>15</sup> The recruitment of foreigners by IS has quickly become a global phenomenon.

10 “Destination Jihad: Why Syria and not Mali,” April 10, 2013, <https://icct.nl/publication/destination-jihad-why-syria-and-not-mali/>.

11 He is the chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, and he is very famous in the Islamic World.

12 Thomas Hegghammer, Aaron Y. Zelin, “How Syria’s Civil War Became a Holy Crusade,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 3, 2013.

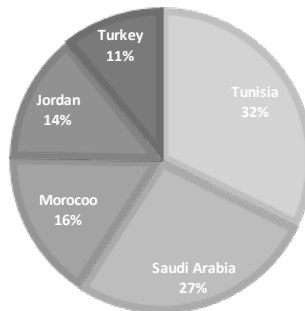
13 Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters,” *International Security*, Vol.35, No.3, Winter 2010-11, pp.53-94.

14 It is very important, “provides strategic security intelligence services to governments and multinational organizations”.

15 Efraim Benmelech, Esteban F. Klor, “What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?” The Hebrew

The Soufan Group authored two reports on this subject, one of them, titled “Foreign Fighters in Syria: A Threat at Home and Abroad” by Richard Barrett, was published in June 2014. This report analyzes the country of origin for foreigners of IS (Figure 1). The data was collected mainly from social media and community resources. However, since IS is likely to hide its actual membership figures, official data may be smaller than the actual number of recruits. As Barrett wrote, “It is often only when someone dies that his family learns that he went to Syria, either through a telephone call from a friend designated by the dead fighter for that purpose, or through a death notice published on a group’s website, Facebook page or Twitter feed.” Foreign nationals who join IS mainly come from five countries: Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan and Turkey. Figure 1 shows that among these countries, the majority IS foreigners are from Tunisia and Saudi Arabia.

**Figure 1**<sup>16</sup>  
FIVE SOURCES OF IS EXPATRIATES



Another report entitled “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq” was published in December 2015. Table 1 is a rank of the national classification of IS foreign personnel, according to the official data; Table 2 is a rank of the national classification of IS foreign personnel, according to the unofficial data. The report lists the official and unofficial number of citizens of 65 countries who joined the IS and went to Syria and Iraq to participate in Jihad, of which the official statistics have recorded 50 countries, and unofficial data have covered 15 countries.

University in Jerusalem and CEPR, April 2016.

16 Richard Barrett, “Foreign Fighters in Syria: A Threat at Home and Abroad,” April 10, 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>.

**Table 1:** Foreigners of IS by country (official figures)<sup>17</sup>

No.	Country	Official Count	Non-official Count	No.	Country	Official Count	Non-official Count
1	Tunisia	6000	7000	26	Spain	133	250
2	Saudi Arabia	2500	-	27	Canada	130	-
3	Russia	2400	-	28	Denmark	125	125
4	Turkey	2100	-	29	Australia	120	255
5	Jordan	2000	2500	30	Azerbaijan	104	216
6	France	1700	2500	31	Malaysia	100	-
7	Morocco	1200	1500	32	Philippines	100	-
8	Lebanon	900	-	33	Albania	90	150
9	Germany	760	-	34	Italy	87	-
10	U.K.	760	-	35	Norway	81	60
11	Indonesia	700	500	36	Finland	70	85
12	Egypt	600	1000	37	Pakistan	70	330
13	Belgium	470	470	38	Sudan	70	100
14	Tajikistan	386	-	39	Switzerland	57	-
15	Bosnia	330	217	40	Israel	50	-
16	Austria	300	233	41	Ireland	30	30
17	China	300	-	42	India	23	45
18	Kazakhstan	300	-	43	New Zealand	7	6
19	Sweden	300	300	44	Brazil	3	-
20	Kosovo	232	-	45	Madagascar	3	-
21	Dutch	220	210	46	Singapore	2	-
22	Maldives	200	60	47	Cambodia	1	-
23	Algeria	170	225	48	Moldova	1	-
24	US	150	250	49	Romania	1	-
25	Macedonia	146	100	50	South Africa	1	

17 The Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," December 2015, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate\\_FINAL3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL3.pdf).

**Table 2:** Foreigners of IS by country (Non-official figures)<sup>18</sup>

No.	Country	Non-official Data
1	Libya	600
2	Kyrgyzstan	500
3	Turkmenistan	360
4	Kuwait	70
5	Somalia	70
6	Serbia	60
7	Afghanistan	50
8	Georgia	50
9	Trinidad and Tobago	50
10	Montenegro	30
11	Argentina	23
12	UAE	15
13	Portugal	12
14	Qatar	10
15	Japan	9

### III. The Recruitment and Task Assignment of Foreigners of IS

#### *(a) The Classification and Recruitment Methods of Foreigners of IS*

Foreigners of IS can be divided into two types: fighters and non-fighters. According to Reuters data, ninety percent of IS fighters in Iraq are Iraqis, and seventy percent of IS fighters in Syria are Syrian. Throughout the IS network, thirty percent of the senior officials are military officers and police officers that were purged after the collapse of the Saddam regime. The number of foreign fighters is estimated to stand at approximately 40,000. A variety of media outlets, including The New York Times, report that the number of IS is in the tens of thousands but less than 200,000; and half of these are foreigners.<sup>19</sup> A report issued by the United Nations in September 2014, states that there were more than 15,000 foreign fighters from 80 countries serving IS. The US intelligence community estimates that as of February 2015, 20,000 foreign fighters were fighting for IS, 3,400 of which were from western countries.<sup>20</sup> In

<sup>18</sup> Based on data from Richard Barrett (2014) and The Soufan Group (2015).

<sup>19</sup> Mary Anne Weaver, "Her Majesty's Jihadists," *New York Times*, April 19, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Windrem, "ISIS by the Numbers: Foreign Fighter Total Keeps Growing," February 28, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/isis-numbers-foreign-fighter-total-keeps-growing->



September 2015, the FBI estimated that there were 30,000 foreign fighters serving IS. According to a report issued by the Institute for Economics and Peace, the number of IS foreign fighters from the main contributing countries stands at: Tunisia (5,000 ), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Russia (2,400), France (2,000), Morocco (1,500), Jordan (2,000), Turkey (1,400) Lebanon, (900), Germany (700), Libya (600), the UK (600), Indonesia (500), Uzbekistan (500), Pakistan (500), (figures for countries with numbers below 500 are excluded).<sup>21</sup> A report by the World Bank found that approximately 3,803 foreign fighters joined IS during 2013-2014. Of those foreign fighters at least 69% hold a high school degree, and a large portion of them went to college; only 15% of foreign fighters did not attend a high school, and less than 2% of the foreign fighters are illiterate. The average age of these foreign fighters is 20-35. Foreign fighters from Europe and Central Asia typically have the same level of education as citizens in their home country, while foreign fighters from West Asia, North Africa, South Asia and East Asia possess levels of education significantly higher than that of people in their home countries. The report concludes that poverty and low levels of education does not lead to terrorism. On the contrary, highly educated but unemployed males are more likely to seek enrollment in terrorist groups.<sup>22</sup>

Foreign non-fighters are difficult to identify within IS. Before armed training commences, newly arrived foreigners of IS are assigned to engage in water fetching, cleaning toilets, and other menial physical activities. These tasks often lead to dissatisfaction, and during the armed training stage, the lack of entertainment and prohibition of mobile phones leads many foreigners to quit. Due to these factors, it is difficult to estimate the number and identity of people within this group.

Another source of foreign non-fighters is women. IS ideology prohibits women from using weapons, instead, insisting that the role of women is to be a good wife for Jihad fighters. The all-female Al Khansa Brigade published a document entitled "Women of the IS: Study on Declaration and Cases,". This document advises women to live a "sedentary" life at home and to fulfill their "sacred duty as mothers." Only a few women are allowed to work as teachers, doctors, nurses, cooks, first aid medics, and tailors. According to data from the British Institute of Strategy and Dialogue, 550 women from western countries

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21 Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2015," November 2015, <http://economicandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>.

22 Aamna Mohdin, "ISIL's Foreign Fighters Are Surprisingly Well-educated, According to the World Bank," October 6, 2016, <http://qz.com/802276/the-foreign-fighters-of-isisislamic-state-are-surprisingly-well-educated-according-to-the-world-bank/>.

are serving IS in Syria and Iraq.<sup>23</sup> In total, foreign non-fighters account for a smaller proportion of IS foreigners and are not part of the main contingent of IS members.

According to the British scholar Peter Neumann, the number of IS foreigners in Syria engaged in Jihad has exceeded the total number of foreigners in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Somalia and Mali since 2003.<sup>24</sup> So, how did the foreigners of IS become a “global threat”? First, they have been trained<sup>25</sup> and undergo testing in order to become qualified terrorists; secondly, they construct terrorist networks<sup>26</sup> with a global scope, recruiting more like-minded people to plan terrorist activities together; third, they are schooled in extremist ideology,<sup>27</sup> and taught not only to hate foreign occupiers, but also to believe that there is a desperate war between the Muslim world and the West. Fourth, they return to their own countries, plan and implement terrorist activities, and spread extremist ideas, in the process widening the range and scope of recruitment activities.

International media exposure given to the terrorist acts and the extremist ideology of IS enhances its reputation. This exposure allows for IS to engage in passive recruitment. Those Muslims that already hold extremist ideology are the first to be passively recruited. Historically, these religious extremists participated in the occupation of Al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca in 1979, the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan and the subsequent civil war in Afghanistan, as well as the civil war in Iraq in the post-Sadam era, and the civil war in Syria that began with the “Arab Spring.”

The second stage of recruitment of foreign fighters to IS is active recruitment, during which IS experienced a “free ride” stage and an “internal development” stage. In the first stage, IS developed a base by joining Al Qaeda. Under the banner of Al Qaeda, IS vigorously established its power in Iraq. In the second period, IS promoted itself as an “established state”, a self-styled “Caliph” and as the incorporation of many branches of Al Qaeda.

IS used the internet—such as western social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—for recruitment. It published Dabiq and other electronic magazines, developed a Jihad game for the internet, as well as a

23 Carolyn Hoyle, Alexander Bradford, Ross Frenett, “Being Mulan? From Western Migrants to ISIS,” 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Western-Women-in-ISIS-Territory.pdf>.

24 Daniel Byman, “What Do the Paris Attacks Tell Us about Foreign Fighters?” *Washington Post*, November 16, 2015.

25 Howard Koplowitz, “ISIS Training Camps: Islamic State Group Opens Military Grounds in Deir Ez-Zor after Suffering Heavy Losses in Syria, Iraq,” *International Business Times*, August 4, 2015.

26 Rukmini Callimachi, “How A Secret Branch of ISIS Built A Global Network of Killers,” *New York Times*, August 4, 2016.

27 Cole Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State,” March 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>.

mobile phone application to attract young people from the western countries to join IS jihad. Through its propaganda magazine Dabiq, IS called for foreign fighters to jump on the “Caravan,” incited them to serve the Caliph and urged them to return to their home countries and engage in more terrorist attacks. The magazine also often publishes graphic language on carrying out attacks in the West.

Recruited foreigners have played a role in the expansion of IS. A large number of IS websites and videos are produced by foreigners, especially those from western countries. Their production value, proficient use of network, technology and multi-lingual approach have influenced many foreigners decision to join IS. T-shirts with the IS logo, souvenirs, and the warmth and battlefield friendship across countries depicted in propaganda films, have allowed many foreigners to greatly underestimate the tragic life and hardship that comes with the fight for IS in Syria and Iraq. Based on the IS interpretation of Islam, IS released a brochure detailing the sale of women and girls, which also has a great appeal to many foreigners with ulterior motives.

*(b) Task Assignment of Foreigners of IS*

With the exception of senior positions, such as non-combat municipal services, professional technology and network publicity, and logistics-related jobs, the vast majority of IS foreigners’ tasks can be divided into two groups: the first is to serve as “cannon fodder” by participating in armed confrontation against the enemies around IS base camps. The foreigners of IS are numerous and they often encounter bullying by Syrian and Iraqi local fighters and powerful Saudi fighters. As IS is relentless in the execution of foreign deserters who might jeopardize morale, occasionally foreign fighters are subject to mass execution by IS while trying to flee.

The second task assignment for foreigners is to act as a returning Jihadist. IS intentionally distorts interpretations of history, claiming that the prophet Mohamed migrated from Mecca to Medina where he eventually developed Islam. IS uses this narrative to encourage foreigners to go to Syria and Iraq to carry out the so-called “Hijrah Jihad”.<sup>28</sup> After IS terrorist training and brainwashing, foreigners from countries with a larger Muslim population are sent back to their home countries, with the aim of developing terrorist forces and achieve the re-flux of the “Jihad” in that country. There are two special kinds of violent terrorist acts that foreign fighters partake in. The first is committed by foreigners who did not personally go to the IS controlled areas of Syria and Iraq, but joined IS by other means. They carry out lone-wolf terrorist

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28 “Hijrah” means migration or emigration.

attacks, especially in European countries. The second task assignment regards those foreigners headed to Syria and Iraq through third countries in the way of “Hijrah Jihad.” These fighters often meet some trouble during their trips or are arrested by the police in the transit countries, and carry out violent terrorist attacks through the “local Jihad.” Many Southeast Asian countries have experienced this type of case issued by China’s Uighur “Hijrah Jihadist.”

#### IV. The Future of Foreigners of IS

IS controlled areas in Syria and Iraq are under continuous attack by the US, Russia, Syrian and Iraqi government troops. As a result, the IS controlled areas in Syria and Iraq have shrunk dramatically, and many strategic and oil producing areas have been recaptured by Syrian and Iraqi government forces or local armed forces. In terms of its effective strength in Syria and Iraq, IS has lost the advantages of high oil revenues and the number of fighters. Many foreign fighters of IS were killed by the US or Russia, as well as various armed factions within Syria and Iraq, and the fate of other foreigners is not promising either. At present, there are several options for them: the first is to stay in Syria and Iraq to fight, where it is difficult to escape the fate of being killed or captured. The second option is to pretend to be a Syrian refugee and sneak into Europe, where it is possible to carry out violent terrorist attacks with local extremists. IS purportedly has the ability to forge Syrian passports. Therefore, it might be possible for foreign fighters to legally enter Europe under the guise of Syrian citizenship.

The third option is to escape Syria through other illegal means. Since, the international community regards IS membership as illegal, many countries have banned IS members from entry, or even cancelled their citizenship. As a result, those foreigners of IS who do not want to continue fighting in Iraq and Syria, and whom are unable to enter Europe as Syrian refugees, can only flee to their home country or hide in other countries. The potential danger of “immediate local Jihad” should not be underestimated. Thomas Hegghammer estimates that about 1/9 of foreigners in Syria and Iraq are linked to terrorist organizations. This figure is mainly based on the experience of foreigners in Afghanistan, and the ratio in Syria may be higher than that.<sup>29</sup>

However, not all foreigners will eventually become terrorists. The factors for potentially dangerous foreigners to become a terrorist threat are often limited by the elements of IS foreigners of relevant countries, such as national security service capacities and the relative power decline of IS.

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29 Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Winter 2010/11, pp.53-94.

In Afghanistan in the 1980s, about 5% of foreign fighters died; Chechnya had a death rate of more than 90%, compared with nearly 20% in Syria.<sup>30</sup> Many foreigners stay and continue to engage in Jihad because they are not able to return to their own countries. Inability to return also means an inability to plan terrorist attacks in their own countries. For those foreign fighters who are able to return to their country, taking up arms to fight in places where Muslims are oppressed is 'more glorious' than planning terrorist activities in western countries. Some foreigners will not engage in terrorist attacks in their countries due to personal concerns. For example, Abdisalan Hussein Ali, a Somali American from Minnesota who died after he carried out a suicide terrorist attack against the African Union troops in Mogadishu in October 2011, told a friend that he could not attack the United States. "Why would I do that?" his friends recalled. It was because "my mom could be walking down the street."<sup>31</sup>

Efforts to safeguard national security in many countries have reduced the likelihood of the foreigners of IS engaging in terrorist activities. Before 9/11, both in the United States and abroad, "Jihad" as the banner of terrorism received little attention, but after the 9/11 incident the situation rapidly reversed. In fact, Snowden's reveal of the Guantanamo detention event and the US-Iran UAV event have together raised questions and debates about whether the US government is itself too radical on the security issue. But the US government indeed has put forth a lot of effort in the maintenance of national security so that the IS terrorist attacks now mainly focus on Europe and the Middle East.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, IS is surrounded by enemies, which will eventually lead to the scattering of its forces. In 2004, when IS called itself an al Qaeda branch in Iraq, this organization focused on its fighting against the Iraqi government, then further captured territory in Syria. Although IS has planned and organized terrorist attacks in Lebanon, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, their targets are still concentrated in Syria and Iraq. Since 2016, IS has suffered major setbacks in Iraq and Syria, and has begun to target the United States, Russia and the European powers. It is hitting out in all directions. In recent years, international terrorist attacks, especially attacks in Sinai and Paris, all point to IS, which also signals that the focus of IS is changing.

30 Daniel Byman, "What Do the Paris Attacks Tell us about Foreign Fighters?" *Washington Post*, November 16, 2015.

31 Daniel Byman, "What Do the Paris Attacks Tel us about Foreign Fighters?" *Washington Post*, November 16, 2015.

32 Robin Simcox, "European Islamist Plots and Attacks since 2014—and How the US Can Help Prevent Them," August 1, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/european-islamist-plots-and-attacks-2014-and-how-the-us-can-help-prevent-them>.

In fact, the diversity and understandable propaganda means IS are just one half of a coin; whether foreigners are willing to accept the idea is the other half. Many foreigners in IS are not Muslims, especially those foreigners from the West. In addition to religious fundamentalism, bloodlust, and camaraderie many foreigners in IS seek out anti-establishment positions as a way to rebel against the institutional injustices in their home countries. The establishment of a state by terrorist organizations like IS, the UK leaving the EU, the election of President Trump in the United States, and various other global events are all parts of an antiestablishment movement sweeping the globe. The fate of these IS foreigners is closely related to the improvement of current international institutions, optimization of social systems, and enhancements in international legitimacy of religion in the international system. Only after a revolutionary change in the above fields, will we reduce the growth of extremism and terrorism so as to provide an opportunity to eliminate international terrorism. Thus, the phenomenon of internationalization and the network of terrorism represented by foreigners of IS can be reduced. Regarding IS, we cannot be too optimistic. As a powerful and often invisible force, extremism and terrorism will continue to provide great power as a spiritual driver for IS and the many foreigners that support it.