

STRANGE COMRADES:

NON-JIHADIST FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN IRAQ & SYRIA

Beleidsrapport

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1. List of abbreviations

AMO	American Mesopotamian Organization
BÖG	<i>Birleşik Özgürlük Güçleri</i> (United Freedom Forces)
IFB	International Freedom Battalion
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRPGF	International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
NJFF	Non-Jihadist Foreign Fighter
KDP/PDK	<i>Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê</i> (Kurdistan Democratic Party)
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
MFS	<i>Mawtbo Fulhoyo Suryoyo</i> (Syriac Military Council)
MLKP	<i>Marksist-Leninist Komünist Partisi</i> (Marxist–Leninist Communist Party)
NPU	Nineveh Plain Protection Units
PAK	<i>Parti Azadi Kurdistan</i> (Kurdistan Freedom Party)
PKK	<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê</i> (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	<i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</i> (Democratic Union Party)
RPG	Rocket-propelled grenade
RUIS	Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
FSA	Free Syrian Army
IS	Islamic State
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SOLI	Sons of Liberty International
TKP/ML	Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist–Leninist
TKEP/L	Communist Labour Party of Turkey/Leninist
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units)
YPJ	Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units)

2. Introduction

In August of 2016, Ryan Lock arrived in Syria. “I’m on my way to Rojava”, he wrote in a Facebook post. “I lied about going to Turkey [on a holiday]. I’m sorry I didn’t tell anyone. I love all of you and I will be back in six months” (Blake, 2017). The Brit from West Sussex was a chef in his father’s hog roast firm, having catered a wedding just a day before leaving for the Middle East. Lock, who had no military experience whatsoever, was joining the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) to fight the so-called Islamic State in Syria.

Four months later, on December 21st, Lock participated in an offensive near Ja’bar, a village near the de facto capital of IS – ar-Raqqah. Together with several Kurds of his unit, Lock was caught in an intense fire exchange with IS militants. When losses in his unit began adding up and IS fighters began encircling Lock and the remaining survivors, he rested his chin upon the barrel of his assault rifle and pulled the trigger. Ryan Lock was twenty years old when he took his own life, in order to avoid capture and being turned into a tool of propaganda by IS. Using his *nom de guerre* Berxwedan Givara, Lock became a *sehîd*¹ in the Kurdish community. His funeral was attended by dozens of grief-stricken Kurds.



Figure 1. YPG flags are flown as British Kurds throw roses onto the hearse carrying Ryan Lock’s body.

¹ Martyr.

Some months earlier, in a field somewhere in northern Syria, a moustached man carrying an assault rifle approached a camera. Looking into the lens, he identifies himself as Michael Israel, *nom de guerre* Robîn Agirî: “I come from the United States. I arrived in Rojava in the beginning of August and I’m here to defend the People’s Revolution of Rojava and fight against the enemies of the struggle here” (SDF, 2016). Like Lock, the 27-year-old Israel volunteered with the YPG. In mid-August, he fought alongside the Kurds, reconquering the city of Manbij from Islamic State. Some months later, Israel and Anton Leschek, a German from Bielefeld, joined the YPG in taking Arima, a small village some twenty kilometres northeast of al-Bab, then held by IS. During the dead-of-night operation, Turkish jets flew overhead, bombarding the Kurdish positions. Preoccupied with securing the front lines against IS, the Kurds had not taken adequate precautions against airstrikes. Michael Israel died, along with Leschek and some ten Kurdish fighters. Another Brit, Dean Carl Evans, was taking cover behind a wall when he was struck by an IS bullet. A female YPJ fighter came over to help him, but as “she was tending to his wound, an RPG rocket [sic] hit the wall and killed them both” (Slawson, 2016).

Lock, Israel, Leschek, Evans: these men are just some of the foreign fighters who have lost their lives fighting the Islamic State – actors in a global phenomenon of non-jihadi foreign fighters that has seen people from a plethora of countries join the Syrian Civil War. They have been named armed activists, transnational volunteers, transnational militants and martyrs, reverse jihadists, vigilantes, but also war tourists and mentally unstable adventure-seekers, the latter by their combatant colleagues (Matson, 2015). These foreign fighters belong to an under-researched group that has given the already complex conflict in Syria yet another elusive facet, their activities obscured by the absolute majority of foreign fighters who join jihadist organisations.

Indeed; since its unfolding, the foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria has been a fertile field of study. Media, government and justice officials were all deeply intrigued by well-off youths from Western countries who travelled thousands of kilometres to join extremist organisations. In light of their illegal actions and a perceived risk of terrorism upon return, academic research into the phenomenon was kickstarted and has barely slowed down since. However, these publications have in common that they treat the term ‘foreign fighter’ as equivalent to ‘jihadist’. In popular opinion, too, the term has become a catch-all concept for Muslims joining Salafist groups such as Islamic State. Even the unfolding legal framework regarding foreign fighters by the United Nation’s Security Council “exclusively [addresses] the case of foreign fighters travelling to aid ISIS and other designated foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) operating in Syria, such as Jabhat al-Nusra [...] epitomiz[ing] assumptions we’ve made about the good, the bad, and the ugly in

Syria” (Richemond-Barak & Barber, 2016).

This paper sets out to study another important contingent of foreign fighters, the locus still being the conflict in Iraq and Syria, but the subject now covering the presence of *non-jihadist* foreign fighters. Though academic coverage has remained scarce, the press has directed its attention towards the phenomenon, doubtlessly attracted by histrionic tales of adventure and resistance. Different media have jumped at the opportunity to tell the story of cavalier veterans who, having a hard time adjusting to civilian life, risk life and limb combatting Muslim extremists amid the inhospitable sands of the Levant. Articles entitled “Ex-British soldier [...] hunting down ISIS militants in Iraq with his own Western army” (Armstrong, 2016) or “Danish student ‘who killed 100 ISIS militants has \$1 million bounty on her head’” (Robson, 2017) are commonplace and can count on enthusiastic comment sections – but nevertheless do not accurately reflect the realities of foreign fighters embedded in Kurdish forces. Film director Daniel Espinosa has even teamed up with star actor Jake Gyllenhaal and his production company to create a film telling “the real-life story of a group of US radicals, volunteers and outcasts who have teamed up with Kurdish militia the People’s Protection Units to fight Isis in Syria” (Mumford, 2017). Despite the wealth of information produced by short documentaries and interviews, the press’ at times Manichean representation of a complex dynamic has often reduced reality to a battle between freedom fighters and IS terrorists. Maria Fantappie, a senior Iraq analyst at the International Crisis Group, has described the rise of “foreign fighters joining Kurds or other armed groups” as a clear indication of “the extent to which the rise of IS and the western governments’ response to it has forged the general perceptions that an epic struggle is ongoing between the forces of good and evil, modernity and backwardness [...] But beside far distant perceptions, on the battlefield this remains a conflict over resources, land and legitimacy, in which each side involved is equally eager to win the most and lose the least” (Hawramy & Jalabi, 2015). While the scope of the phenomenon is too small to speak of a “global jihadi and counter-jihadi battle” as one academic did (Oaten & La Canna, 2015), the Kurds’ success in attracting foreign fighters is important to analyse, not in the least because they have been described as “the most consequential non-state actor in Syria, alongside al-Qaeda [...] they will have a huge say over the future of Syria” (Stein, 2017).

Additionally, coverage of the conflict has barely mentioned the ethnic Kurds who have returned to Iraq or Syria to join the conflict, or the self-proclaimed vanguard of leftist revolutionaries who see their participation as the contemporary equivalent of the International Brigades during the Spanish civil war, and who deem Kurdish Rojava the beginning of a communist or anarchist revolution. Still, the intricacies of these developments can provide us

with a deeper understanding of the Syrian civil conflict as a whole.

Though many governments consider the risks of returning anti-jihadists quasi non-existent and opt for focusing their resources on jihadist fighters, there are serious political and social ramifications to this choice, which will be discussed further in this paper. To be sure, the number of anti-jihadist foreign fighters is much smaller than the droves of Western youths who have joined extremist militias such as IS, and the differences are profound and plentiful – but there are parallels to be drawn as well. Considering the fact that returning jihadists prompted extensive political response from their home governments, a better understanding of the ‘other foreign fighters’ is no luxury.



Figure 2. A group of fighters poses for a photograph. They belong to a Polish unit dubbed the Grupa Zadaniowa “Gniew Eufratu” (Task Force “Wrath of the Euphrates”).

3. Non-jihadist foreign fighters: a theoretical basis

As mentioned earlier, academic literature on the subject of anti-jihadist volunteers is scarce. However, a first theoretical basis for the exploration of the subject can be found by way of foreign fighters in general – a phenomenon that has existed for centuries. Because of the remarkable number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, much interest has been re-directed to the subject in recent years, with David Malet's (2013) book, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflicts*, attaining the status of a standard. Comparing historical case studies, Malet offers a rather complete overview of the history of foreign fighters. Though he succeeds in avoiding the contemporary focus on Islamic foreign fighters, the work was released too early for what could be a very interesting addition on non-jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq today. Instead, its value lies in the general theoretical framework that Malet provides – a framework that was long overdue.

Malet explains that the lack of proper terminology and definition concerns the foreign fighter concept as a whole, the term 'foreign fighter' being used "because it is widely employed in popular media reports, primarily concerning jihadis, and generates greater recognition of the concept it describes than do alternative jargon-laden terms (e.g. transnational insurgent)" (Malet, 2009: 107). Similarly, because there is no agreed upon term for those who fight against IS, the terminology has varied from article to article. Anti-IS fighters are called everything from 'transnational volunteers' to 'anti-Daesh freedom fighters'.

Returning to the lack of definitory clarity surrounding the term 'foreign fighter', we now establish a logic to be used throughout this paper. According to Malet's own definition, foreign fighters are "noncitizens of conflict States who join insurgencies during civil conflicts" (Malet, 2013: 9), clarifying that they are not driven by financial motives (ibidem: 39). Though this definition is clear and concise, it lacks some detail in the context of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts. Oktay Bingöl delivers a more detailed definition in his analysis of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria (cf. infra), which is the one that will be used here:

"Foreign fighters are individuals; who are not citizens of one of the conflicting parties, and who participate in one of the parties to fight, resort to violent acts, give or receive training for this purpose, and to provide support by other means; and act with individual, ethnic, religious and ideological purposes as well as variable interactions of material and

organizational interests and in most cases, under the implicit and in exceptional cases explicit control and direction of the States”

(Bingöl, 2016: 5)

This definition is particularly useful because of the unique aspects of non-jihadist foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria – some of whom provide combat training to local militias without (explicitly) resorting to violence themselves, for example. The implicit support of the state is also an important facet of Bingöl’s definition, but will be clarified later.

Importantly, academics like Hegghammer (2010: 58) have stated that a definition of foreign fighters should exclude returning diaspora members, because “ethnic or kinship links to insurgents presumably facilitate mobilization considerably.” While not disputing the veracity of his motivation for doing so, such a distinction is not made here, for several reasons. Firstly, the ethnic background of the fighters is difficult to verify in this context, so for reasons of evidentiary difficulty they would show up in the data regardless. Second, even when certain that a foreign fighter is in fact a ‘returning’ diaspora member (i.e. an ethnic Kurd), the relationship with the birth country can vary from intense to non-existent. For example, one foreign fighter who was born in Iraq but whose parents fled to Norway when he was only a couple of years old, states that he had never gone back to the Middle East, that he had no connections to the local Kurds whatsoever, spoke no Kurdish dialect, and consequently fought under a Norwegian flag. Moreover, he was a veteran of the Norwegian military. To be clear, fighters with a known Kurdish background are only considered ‘foreign fighters’ if they hold citizenship of a country other than Iraq or Syria. This extension of the definition, however, strongly complicates a case study: as we will see, the Kurds in Iraq and Syria have succeeded in attracting thousands of ethnic Kurds from neighbouring countries and the diaspora, notably Turkey.

With a settled definition of the term ‘foreign fighter’, the clarification now turns towards ‘non-jihadist’. The terms ‘jihadist’ and ‘salafi jihadist’ have often been described as “generic”, describing “any transnational violent Islamist” (Hegghammer 2010: 58.). However, because this dissertation does not expand on ‘jihadists’, this kind of container term is useful. Indeed, while the term may be problematic in the analysis of jihadists themselves, its catch-all properties are particularly convenient when it is used to *exclude* a diverse array of armed transnational Islamist volunteers. Therefore, the term used in this thesis to describe transnational volunteers who join armed but non-jihadist organizations in Iraq and Syria are labelled *non-jihadist foreign fighters* (NJFF’s).

Barring the *non-jihadist* aspect, the foreign fighter concept explored by Malet has seen some further academic interest. *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond* (Guttry et al., 2016) presents a collection of valuable contributions by experts in international law, history and politics, with a focus on the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Guttry segments the book into an interdisciplinary part, which discusses i.a. the social media use and military impact of foreign jihadist fighters, and a part on the legal implications of fighting in a foreign conflict. The book's last chapter includes policy recommendations at the level of both national and supranational governments. While Guttry et al. offer important insights, the focus here is – once again – solely directed towards Islamist foreign fighters, and IS-combatants in specific. Though other types of foreign fighters are dwarfed numerically, this criticism can be repeated for most scientific literature on the subject at hand.

Clifford Bob's book, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism*, researches why some conflicts succeed in attracting more support from international NGO's than others, and what strategies local groups may use to achieve success (Bob, 2005). While it does not offer case studies of Syria or Iraq, several of its insights can be projected onto the fabric of Kurdish activism, which has seen the support for their cause in the international community soar in recent years. Thus, the book offers a great jumping-off point for those wishing to investigate the success of the Kurdish community in achieving activist support and even their recruitment of foreign fighters².

These general analyses of foreign fighters almost axiomatically describe jihadist case studies – Malet's work being a rare exception. While this field of study has been exceptionally fertile in the last five years, publications zeroing in on key aspects of foreign fighters can all be criticized on the same criterion. Studies ranging from push and pull factors (Weggemans et al., 2014; Coolsaet 2016) to so-called radicalization and deradicalization (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; King & Taylor, 2011; Kruglanski et al., 2014), martyrdom (Hafez, 2007), government policy (Bakker et al., 2013), risks of terrorism upon return (Byman & Shapiro 2014; see also Byman 2015), social media (Klausen, 2014; Chatfield et al., 2015), recruitment tactics (Weimann, 2016): none of them consider the non-jihadist foreign fighter.

However, though detailed analyses have not yet tackled the non-jihadist foreign fighter, some general sources now exist. The Austria Institute for Europe and Security Policy (AIES) published a concise article in July of 2015, describing the phenomenon in a few pages. Using the term 'Western Volunteer Fighters' (WVF), the publication discusses the presence of many US and

² In fact, one might use Bob's insights and compare them to known IS strategies too, for another interesting case study.

UK veterans (Jaklin, 2015), as well as the social media recruitment process and the route most foreign fighters use to get to their destination. Importantly, it touches upon the legal grey area wherein the fighters operate and notes the problematic realities of inter-volunteer tensions and disappointment (cf. *infra*).

In 2016, Oktay Bingöl provided an excellent overview of the general foreign fighter influx into the conflict, from a Turkish vantage point. Remarkably, Bingöl includes all kinds of foreign fighters, including anti-jihadist volunteers. His insight into Turkish sources is valuable, clarifying the stream of Turkish Kurds into the YPG and PKK since the beginning of the conflict. Bingöl also provides a good estimate of the different foreign fighters joining different factions in the conflict – though his numbers make clear that even generous estimates of Western foreign fighters are dwarfed by the number of foreign fighters from neighbouring countries and the broader region. The crux of his article is ‘Turkey’s Problem’, consisting of the country’s role as a home- and return base for fighters, as well as a zone of transition for traveling fighters.

Insight into the Christian militias, some among them with foreign fighters in their ranks, is found in Marina Eleftheriadou’s (2015) publication. Aiming to go “beyond the neutrality/passivity debate”, Eleftheriadou intends to show how the three biggest Christian militias have played an innovative role during the conflict. Though her work is mostly interesting because it provides an overview of the different militias’ ideologies and backgrounds, she also mentions the presence of a minority of Western volunteers.

Further publications were mostly brief and exploratory. The *Carter Center* released an overview of different volunteer brigades fighting with Kurdish troops, focusing on the communist, anti-fascist and anarchist elements within the volunteers (“Foreign Volunteers”, 2017). Shashi Jayakumar (2016) shortly discussed the ‘curious case of Wang Yandongyi’, a Singaporean citizen who was arrested in March of 2016 for attempting to join the YPG. Earlier, Jayakumar had also written a lapidary piece on the rumours surrounding members of motorcycle clubs going to fight IS in Syria³, under the banner of a ‘reverse jihad’.

However, the two top research papers looking into anti-IS volunteers came from Bellingcat⁴ on the one hand, and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) on the other. Bellingcat, a research network specialized in open source research on social media, conducted an investigation solely on the basis on information available via social media profiles. *The Other Foreign Fighters* is an analysis of 108 volunteers serving as a sample to learn more about their age,

³ Since then, it seems the reports were overblown.

⁴ Sometimes stylized as *bellçngcat*.

profession, home state, and so on. In addition, the research also proposes some reasons as to why the volunteers left for Syria and Iraq. The drawback here is that the sample of 108 only contains American volunteers, leaving a large part of the true volunteer population untouched.

The research by the ISD offers a fitting extension to Bellingcat's work. Henry Tuck, Tanya Silverman and Candace Smalley (2016) offer the first robust research into anti-jihadist foreign fighters. Using the data of 300 individuals fighting against IS in Syria and Iraq, the ISD's investigation still reports mainly on the American volunteers, but this focus is mostly explained by the fact that many of the volunteers in Syria and Iraq seem to be, in fact, United States citizens – instead of an a priori methodologic decision as is the case with the Bellingcat paper. The ISD investigation offers detailed insights into the profiles of the fighters in their data set, but their analysis of the legal framework, which they at times regard as “clear-cut” (Tuck, Silverman & Smalley, 2016: 46) is problematic (cf. *infra*). Moreover, the ISD report fails to situate the phenomenon of foreign fighters within the larger frame of Kurdish politics and factionalism.

Though the Bellingcat and ISD research papers finally give the topic some of the attention it requires, there is plenty of room for further analysis. The two papers set the tone for data-driven research based on openly available information via social media, which presents the best chance of drawing useful conclusions – though the methodology has its flaws (cf. *infra*). The aspects mentioned before need further clarification, but there is also room for improvement in the area of social media, the presence of foreign fighters from countries outside the Anglosphere, and the historical evolution of non-jihadist militants pouring into the conflict. These are the areas that this dissertation searches to elaborate on.

4. Historical timeline

In June of 2012, the influx of foreign fighters into the Syrian conflict took flight. What began as a “small but steady stream” (Zelin, 2012) quickly grew to a sizable flow of foreign, but paid, fighters. This first wave consisted mostly of veterans from neighbouring countries such as Iraq, Libya, Palestine, and Jordan, with most of the fighters joining the rebel forces. As the ranks of the Assad government also started growing with foreign fighters and support of proxy militias such as Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), reports of Western-born Islamists fighting in the conflict started to surface (“British-born jihadists fighting Assad in Syria”, 2012), as well as information on the presence of mercenaries from Europe (Tomas, 2012). However, these hired forces were paid⁵, and are thus not considered foreign fighters under the definition established earlier. Meanwhile, different Kurdish militias had succeeded in attracting numbers of voluntary foreign fighters. The web of Kurdish factions is complex, but most foreign fighters join one of two main armed forces.

In Syria, there are the People’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* or YPG). The YPG is the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which was established as one of several Kurdish parties in the Syrian parliament. It operates from Rojava⁶ and consists mostly of ethnic Kurds. Within the YPG, several sub-militias operate, such as the International Volunteer Brigade and the Syriac Military Council (MFS). During the Syrian civil war, and with the support of the United States and several other countries, the YPG became one of the predominant forces battling the Islamic State in Syria, though it was already formed in 2004.

To the East, the Iraqi Peshmerga⁷ (lit. “one who confronts death”) are responsible for the security of Iraqi Kurdistan. Control over the soldiers, who have sworn allegiance to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) under leadership of Masoud Barzani, is split between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, sometimes called PUK Peshmerga) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP, often referred to as the KDP Peshmerga). The Iran-based PAK Peshmerga is also active in the region. The Peshmerga, too, have played a crucial role fighting IS in Iraq, and have received support and training from the Joint Task Force under the US-led coalition against IS.

⁵ In 2015, for example, IS fighters were paid \$400–\$600 (Humud et al., 2015: 13), though their salaries have dropped more than half since then (Nicks, 2016). The salaries of the FSA are paid for by wealthy Gulf Arab states, among other streams of revenue (“Opposition says Syrian rebel fighters to get salaries”, 2012).

⁶ Rojava is the de facto autonomous region in northern Syria, also known as Syrian Kurdistan.

⁷ There are also about 5,000 Syrian Peshmerga fighters. These are often called the Rojava Peshmerga, and they are linked to Syria’s Kurdish National Council (KNC), the PYD’s main opposition in Rojava, who are affiliated with Masoud Barzani’s KDP.

Importantly, the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds fighting with the YPG and the Peshmerga should not be considered foreign fighters, but Kurds from other countries with large Kurdish populations should. The largest number comes from diaspora countries with both a large Kurdish community and direct access to the conflict. Nevertheless, one Spanish fighter stated that “both in my opinion and in real-life structures, the Turkish volunteers (who are, I believe, largely in their own units) are not considered “Western” or “International” [fighters]” (Antonopoulos, 2016, my translation). This view is corroborated by the fact that official YPG outlets do not add killed militants from Turkey, for example, to their ‘fallen international martyrs’ lists (“Our Martyrs”, 2017).

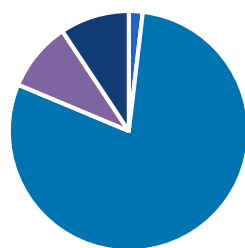
Turkey, which is home to some 15 million Kurds (“World Factbook”, 2017), has had many ethnic Kurds cross the border to join Kurdish organizations and combat the Islamic State. According to a 2015 Turkish intelligence report, 8500 Kurdish Turks have joined the YPG, with an estimated 690 Turkish citizens wounded and more than 170 slain (Kizilkoyun, 2015). In addition, between 3000 and 4000 Turkish PKK militants were mobilized into Syria (Bingöl, 2016: 10). However, PKK militants are most likely paid (Selvi, 2017).

From Iran, which has a population of about eight million ethnic Kurds according to the CIA (“World Factbook”, 2017), “hundreds of Iranian Kurds” (Jedinia, 2016) have joined the conflict, with many of these Iranian Kurds hailing from the city of Mahabad. Despite Iran’s involvement in Syria, supporting the Syrian government both officially and through its proxy Hezbollah forces, Tehran seems to have no problems with Iranian Kurds taking up arms against IS. Nonetheless, some Kurdish militias have violently clashed with Iran’s IRGC near Iranian Kurdistan.

From smaller diaspora communities, ethnic Kurds have also flocked to Syria and Iraq. Numbers are not obtainable, but a rare estimate from Swedish newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* stated that at least 25 Swedish Kurds had left the country to join a Kurdish militia (Håkansson, 2014). In 2014, deputy chairman of the Kurdish community in Germany, Mehmet Tanriverdi, knew of “dozens” of Kurds from Europe who have joined the Peshmerga (Olsen & Ritter, 2014). By 2017, the German Ministry of the Interior knew of a whopping 204 Kurds from Germany who had left to fight IS with Syrian Kurdish militias – with 69 of them having German passports⁸ (“Irak und Syrien”, 2017). This number does not include those fighting with the Iraqi Peshmerga. Thus, although no official estimates exist, it is quite possible that between 500 and 1,000 ethnic Kurds from the European diaspora alone have joined the conflict.

⁸ The others are mostly Turkish nationals.

Estimates are difficult, because ethnic Kurds are difficult to track in comparison to non-Kurdish volunteers who are outsiders to the Kurdish community. Often, they are not recruited online but through local communities, have networks in place in Kurdistan, and are deeply embedded within the Kurdish troops. An article by *Der Spiegel* chronicled the existence of specially trained recruiters engaging potential PKK activists in Germany, who then receive ideological training in Belgium or the Netherlands and military training near the Turkish border (Diehl & Schmid, 2014). At least 50 German Kurds have made the trip in 2014, but real numbers are likely to be much higher, since the PKK operates “largely out of view of German investigators, with their fighters able to leave the country unnoticed, only returning for rest and relaxation” (ibid.). The PKK already “recognized the importance of the Kurdish diaspora and sent members to Germany to recruit supporters for their cause” in the 90’s⁹ (Baser, 2013: 5) – not without merit, since security officials estimate that PKK has some 13,000 followers in Germany alone (Diehl & Schmid, 2014). Secret service officials have stated that PKK militants are harder to track than jihadist fighters who post on social media: looking for PKK activists is akin to “groping around in the dark” (ibid.). Though the PKK’s prudence is largely explained by their designation as a terrorist organization in many countries, their recruitment methods may give an idea of how YPG and Peshmerga operate within diaspora communities too – though no evidence pointing towards such activities exists. Evidence does suggest that Assyrian¹⁰ militias recruit within European Assyrian diaspora (cf. infra). In contrast with these obscured networks, non-Kurdish foreign fighters have to resort to social media, contacting Kurdish militants directly or through recruitment pages (cf. infra), facilitating online research into their activities.



- Iranian Kurds
- Turkish Kurds
- Other diaspora Kurds
- Non-Kurdish NJFF

Figure 3. A pie chart using upper estimates shows the distribution of NJFF's. It is clear that Turkish volunteers are by far the largest group. Estimates used for Iranian Kurds: ±200, Turkish Kurds: ±8,500, other diaspora Kurds and non-Kurdish NJFF: both ±1000.

⁹ Baher makes no distinction between political supporters and militants here.

¹⁰ Religious nomenclature such as Chaldo-Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean are also used to describe Assyrians.

The first ‘Western’ armed volunteers came some two years later: Brian W. is said to have been present in Rojava since June 2014 (Percy, 2015). Jordan Matson, one of the most known Western foreign volunteers with the YPG, made a Facebook post confirming his presence in Syria on September 5th, 2014. However, it took until the beginning of October that media started reporting on three Americans (including Matson) that had joined Kurdish forces in Syria, fighting in the Jazaa area (Pandey, 2014). BBC reported on a “tiny handful of American ex-servicemen who have made their way halfway round the world to join the battle against IS” (Muir, 2014). One of them told reporters he joined the YPG to combat those who “kill innocent people daily. [Islamic State] rape women and children and sell them into slavery. Killing an Isis member, to me that's doing a good deed to the world. All of them need to get wiped out” (ibid.). This sort of motivation drove most of the first Western volunteers to Syria, and most of them were veterans from the United States and the United Kingdom. It was only later that the eclecticism of the international volunteers began to grow, with fighters representing almost every nuance of the political spectrum.

The reporting on the early volunteers, with many online and offline communities praising the foreign fighters, most probably caused many other volunteers to leave for Syria. It is not unlikely that they were strengthened in their resolve by the Siege of Kobanî in September of 2014, which triggered gruesome reports of torture, mutilation and rape in Kobanî in the worldwide media (Mezzofiore, 2014; James, 2014), as well as the fate of the Yezidi people near Shingal. By then, almost two thousand Western jihadists had joined Islamist militias in Syria and Iraq (Contorno, 2014), sending governments scrambling for an effective response.

Somewhere mid-November of the same year, Joanna Palani joined Kurdish fighters in Kobanî. Palani, a 20-year-old Danish woman of Kurdish descent, dropped out of college to join the conflict and is often seen as the first Western female foreign fighter¹¹ (Kronberg, 2014). Several months later, the first Western volunteer fighting IS was killed. Australian veteran Ashley K. Johnston, *nom de guerre* heval¹² Bagok Serhat, was shot near Tel Hamis when his vehicle was ambushed by IS combatants on February 23rd, 2015. Johnston was 28 years old and had told his family he was doing humanitarian work in the region. Two weeks later, the first female death among Western volunteers fighting IS occurred. Ivana Hoffmann, a 19-year-old German embedded in the YPG by way of the MKLP¹³, was shot by IS combatants near Tel Tamir, Syria.

¹¹ However, reports indicate that Ivana Hoffman was fighting with the MLKP for over six months when she was killed in March 2015 (Osborne, 2015), which would make her an earlier foreign female combatant fighting IS.

¹² The term *heval*, meaning ‘comrade’, ‘friend’ or ‘companion on a long journey’ is widely used among Kurdish political parties and organizations.

¹³ Cf. *infra*.

The deaths of Western foreign fighters did not deter those aspiring to join the conflict – in fact, their numbers steadily climbed. News reports of Johnston’s death mentioned the presence of “dozens” of foreign fighters joining the YPG in Kurdistan (Loveluck, 2015). This growth in the number of foreign fighters was undoubtedly facilitated by the emergence of online recruiting networks.

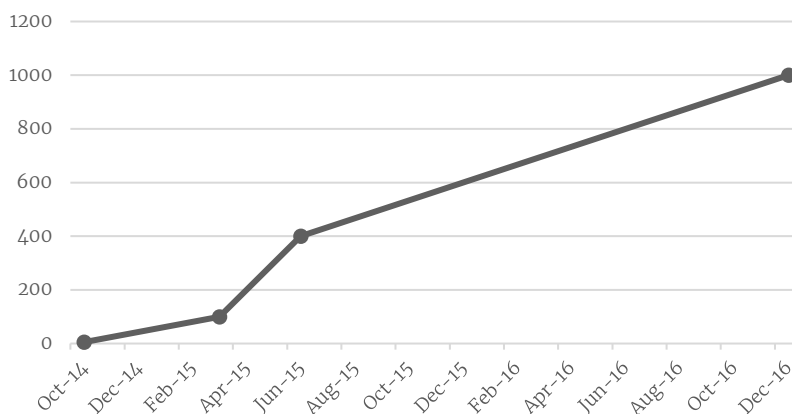


Figure 4. Influx of foreign fighters into the conflict based upon growing estimates¹⁴. These numbers do not represent active fighters but rather the overall number of NJFF’s that has been active in Kurdistan at least once. It seems the actual number of active foreign fighters at any given time hovers between 50 and 100.

Indeed, the first foreign fighters, such as Matson, figured out a way to contact the YPG directly. Matson recalls he was “Googling the Syrian civil war looking for a military force fighting ISIS that wasn’t a terrorist organization. I found the YPG on Facebook and [...] contacted them” (Cousins, 2014). Additionally, the first foreign fighters joining the Peshmerga in Iraq say they contacted individual Peshmerga fighters on Facebook – many of them having their contact information public (Hawramy & Jalabi, 2015).

In order to facilitate the influx of new fighters from the US and elsewhere, Matson constructed the *Lions of Rojava*¹⁵ page on Facebook in October of 2014, during his recovery from a grenade injury. The Facebook page was explicitly aimed at the recruitment of foreign volunteers, convincing readers to “Join YPG / YPJ The Lions Of Rojava Unit and send isis terrorist to Hell and save Humanity” (Lions of Rojava, 2016)¹⁶. Other posts included hashtags such as

¹⁴ Muir, 2014; MacAskill, 2015; “400 Foreign Fighters Join Syria’s YPG”, 2015; “Why an ordinary man went to fight Islamic State”, 2016.

¹⁵ Before the Lions of Rojava, foreign fighters in the YPG purportedly called themselves the ‘Chappies’.

¹⁶ The description has since changed to “It’s time Supprt #Rojava_Revolution, Fight for an emerging model of Equality, Freedom, Democracy and Social Justice in Syria and the middle east!” (Lions of Rojava, 2017).

#JoinLionsOfRojava or reaffirmed that “the Lions of Rojava is the official recruitment instrument of the YPG” (Lions of Rojava 2015). Thus, the *Lions of Rojava* Facebook page was an unambiguous recruiting mechanism, created specifically for that purpose by one of the first Western fighters in YPG ranks, Jordan Matson. Klausen (2015: 20) also finds that recruitment is a key function of *jihadist* social media.

Similar pages were put online, some more official than others. There was, for example, the *Kurdish Peshmerga Foreigner Registration, Assessment, Management and Extraction* (FRAME) programme, of which both the website and the Facebook group are now offline. These recruitment pages were often run by English-speaking volunteers, who vetted aspiring combatants and brought those who adhered to standards in contact with Kurdish officials. Many of the pages, including *Lions of Rojava*, *Rojava Plan*, and *FRAME*, are now defunct. The YPG now runs a webpage where aspiring fighters can contact them via GnuPG encrypted e-mail.

Since the initial armed volunteers travelled to Syria, the process of joining the conflict has not changed much. Aspiring fighters contact one of the groups via Facebook or mail who are still in contact with local militias in Syria or Iraq, though the practice seems to be shifting to closed groups acting with recruiters as well. What follows is a short vetting process, probably carried out by English-speaking aides. Priority is given to volunteers with military or otherwise useful experience. Underage volunteers, or those with criminal records, are withheld from the process¹⁷. It seems local Kurds have become more captious of foreign fighters after the scandals of infighting and fraud by volunteers (cf. infra).

If accepted, volunteers can leave for Iraq or Syria, depending on what organization they are joining. Most volunteers fly to Erbil or Sulaymaniyah from Frankfurt (via Lufthansa) or Istanbul (via Turkish Airlines), paying for their own flight. They do not take any weapons with them, though some may bring tactical equipment such as plate carriers, telescopic sights, or military rations. Border controls in Kurdistan issue a free temporary visa, which is to be replaced by a residency visa after two weeks. Ordinarily, volunteers are assisted with visa and firearm licenses by the group they join. Others travel to Turkey and cross the border there, aided by professional local smugglers, though most borders have become harder to cross in recent months.

Those joining the YPG are known to be brought to a safehouse or ‘welcome house’ where they spend the night, sometimes with other new volunteers. Subsequently, aspiring YPG combatants are subjected to a month-long training program in an abandoned oil facility nicknamed The Academy. There, volunteers are instructed basic combat, the use of locally

¹⁷ However, several of the volunteers were revealed to have criminal backgrounds, and one fighter was revealed to be a 14-year-old from Norway (cf. infra).

available (mostly old Soviet) weapons, basic Kurmanji¹⁸, and some familiarization with Kurdish factionalism and ideology. At night, the volunteers sleep on floor mats in rudimentary barracks. One veteran volunteer from the US said the YPG's training was "a joke [...] for people of a military background" (Kraut and Tea, 2016). Volunteers may be turned away if they fail to please their instructors. After training, volunteers are assigned to a *tabur*, and assigned tasks and duties within it, mostly consisting of cooking, cleaning, standing guard and weapons maintenance. Active combat participation is, for most of the foreign volunteers, a very rare occurrence, and engagement with IS mostly consists of mortar attacks and long-distance exchange of gunfire. Volunteers are expected to stay with the YPG for at least one 'tour', which consists of six months, but some return home earlier. Most volunteers refrain from more than one or two tours; a very small minority plan to stay in Kurdistan indefinitely.

Aside from non-jihadists who join Kurdish organisations, there are also fighters who have joined other armed forces. An analysis of the many proxy soldiers in Syria and Iraq would mean digging deeper into the geopolitics and proxy strategies of the Syrian conflict, an undertaking well beyond the scope of this paper. However, there are some non-jihadists who have joined the conflict voluntarily, and thus should be considered non-jihadist foreign fighters, in spite of the fact that they are the absolute minority of the NJFF population as a whole. Analysis of these fighters is difficult, because joining non-Kurdish groups often cannot count on governmental tacit compliance.

There are no foreign volunteers known to have joined the Syrian Arab Army in support of Bashar al-Assad, though the Syrian government can count on the support of small groups of far-right nationalists in Europe¹⁹. In 2014, video footage emerged of two former Los Angeles gang members displaying a bizarre infusion of US gang culture into the Syrian civil war: the two were displaying gang signs and tattoos, boasting they were fighting in the "Middle East, homie, in Syria, still gangbangin'". Going by the nicknames of Wino and Creeper, it seems they were fighting for a Hezbollah militia after deportation from the United States. One of the two was killed in Syria; the other now lives in Armenia. However, they are part of a number of foreign volunteers who have signed up with foreign brigades in Syria, such as the IRGC. The IRGC, which operates much like the French Foreign Legion, awards both salary and citizenship to its foreign fighters. Therefore, foreign volunteers signing up with the IRGC, the Basij²⁰, Hezbollah, and so on, are state troops working as a subsidiary of national armed forces, and are thus not foreign fighters

¹⁸ Local Kurdish dialect.

¹⁹ For more information on far-right support for Assad, see De Craemer (2015).

²⁰ Iran's hard-line conservative volunteer militia, which was incorporated into the IRGC in 1981.

in the sense used throughout this dissertation.

Facing the SAA, there only appears to be a very small number of NJFF's who have joined the Free Syrian Army, and the line between non-jihadist and jihadist fighter becomes very unclear here. According to a report by IHS Jane, nearly half of the rebel fighters are either jihadists or hard-line Islamists (Farmer, 2013), but because of the extremely heterogenous nature of the FSA, allegiances and motivations are hard to keep track of. A Dutch man was prosecuted upon return because his story was not very clear as to which group he had joined in Syria – the FSA, as he claimed himself, or Jabhat al-Nusra²¹ (Rosman, 2016). A Chinese national called Wang B. allegedly travelled from Libya to Syria to join a brigade that later became part of the Islamic State, crossing the line from rebel to jihadist, if his brigade was not already possible to describe as such. New Zealand sculptor Chen W., born in China, also joined the FSA to topple the Syrian government: “I went there because I believe in freedom”, he said: “I believe we should help people under dictatorship, whether they are in China or Syria” (“China Says”, 2015).



Figure 5. Chen W. poses for a photograph with members of an unidentified FSA battalion in Syria, 2012.

One Greek fighter said he knew of foreign volunteers in the FSA, but only in battalions or brigades with an Islamist ideology – explicitly not secular (Antonopoulos, 2016). The fact that the FSA is unpopular with foreign fighters is most probably explained by the fact that their engagements also target the Assad government, while foreign fighters are mostly looking for combat engagement with the Islamic State.

²¹ Now renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

5. Case study

5.1 Data collection: building a foreign fighter database

The case study portion of this thesis consists of the collection and analysis of data regarding non-jihadist foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. Over a period of six months, information was collected on the fighters. Names were listed in a central database, with known aliases and *noms de guerre* put into a second column. Further details on nationality²², age²³, sex, and organization were also added. An extra column was included to reflect important background information, such as being ex-military or part of the Kurdish diaspora. A final column lists whether the fighter lost his life²⁴.

The full amount of data was gathered only from publicly available online sources, initially comprised of collecting news articles describing the influx of foreign fighters and adding the mentioned names to the spreadsheet. These initial articles provided the basis for further exploration online. Google was used to explore a set of search terms in different combinations, starting in English. Search terms consisted mostly of combinations of *volunteers, Syria, Iraq, PKK, PUK, Peshmerga, armed, activists, foreign fighters, against ISIS, anti-Daesh, anti-ISIS, fighting with Kurds, died, killed*, et cetera. The results of the search led to more articles and more names being added to the database. When search results stopped delivering valuable information, the search query was repeated in another language. Search queries were also modified through endonyms: *American* and *British volunteers* were used as terms in the English query while the German searches were variants on *Deutsche kämpfen gegen IS* and so on. This method ensured that articles on the many American volunteers would not obscure those on other nationalities. Because the resulting articles specify the information on the fighters, exact translations of the search terms are unnecessary, greatly expanding the scope of the search by using freely available online translation services²⁵. This methodology enabled the research to be conducted not only in English, Dutch, French and German²⁶, but also in Italian, Romanian, Spanish, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Czech, and so on – avoiding the Anglo-American focus of previous research

²² In case of double nationalities, the country of residence before traveling to Syria or Iraq is used.

²³ The ages that were used in the data collection can refer to the age of the fighter at the time of deployment, at the time of his or her presence in the Middle East, or to the current age. This broad use is necessitated because of the inadequate information regarding the timing of many of the fighters' deployment. This means that the ages contain an error margin of around 3 years.

²⁴ Valuable information for those killed in action is also provided by the YPG itself: deceased 'martyrs' are added to an online obituary, complete with full name and *nom de guerre*, date, and country of birth.

²⁵ In this case, Google Translate. After using the translation service to find the search terms in a specific language, the resulting articles were also translated to English, each time with satisfactory results.

²⁶ The languages the author understands.

publications. This open-source methodology also tackles other problems. Field research would be prohibitively expensive in order to guarantee enough safety and would take a long time. Even foregoing the fact that the absolute majority of fighters has already returned home, the remaining fighters are scattered across both Syria and Iraq.

The second round of research makes use of the so-called snowball sampling method. After scouring the web for foreign fighter information with targeted searches, the data was supplemented with data originating from a snowball method on social media. Names in the database were checked for an account on Facebook. Many of the more vocal fighters had other fighters, or local Kurdish fighters, commenting and liking their pictures. Many also had their friend list publicly available. The snowball method quickly made clear that many of the fighters are wary of interviews, which resulted in a considerable number of new names, even though many were omitted because of insufficient evidence. In general, a name was only added in the case that there were both written references to active participation in Syria or Iraq and photographic evidence of such participation. New names were also entered into Google, completing the cycle and occasionally resulting in news articles that were not found in the first round of research.

Even so, finding the actual fighters proved difficult because of the many non-fighters in the friend lists, further muddied up by the fact that many supporters repost NJFF pictures or put deceased NJFF's photographs up as a 'martyr' profile picture. Others are military personnel and firearms enthusiasts, or even just airsoft players in full regalia. In these cases, several clues can aid identification: official military patches, terrain, type of weaponry²⁷, support of Western and Kurdish co-combatants²⁸, messages of caution²⁹ from family and friends, and so on³⁰. Photographs were also reverse image searched to see if they had previously been used by others.

This methodology made it possible to collect more than 350 names in the database while avoiding duplication and providing the data with a certain extent of credibility. However, the clandestine, opaque nature of the activity makes for several flaws in the methodology. One such flaw is that many fighters move below the radar of internet research, avoiding both traditional and social media³¹. One fighter made an anonymized post on Reddit (cf. *infra*) a year after his

²⁷ The weapons market in Kurdistan and Syria is quite expensive, virtually prohibitively so for buying high-end Western weaponry. Most foreign fighters use Soviet or Asian variants of the AK-47.

²⁸ Analysing social media accounts, informal international networks became clear. Foreign fighters in the YPG and other militias are not only connected with other fighters, but also with private security contractors, local Kurds and Kurdish supporters, and supporters of foreign fighters. Many of them are also members of multiple Kurdish activist groups on Facebook.

²⁹ E.g. "Please be safe over there". Other examples include encouragement of combat or displays of pride.

³⁰ Even then, some fighters present a dubious case. One German fighter, who posted pictures of himself brandishing battle fatigues and an assault rifle, states he was only a tourist in the area making a photograph with the locals.

³¹ Even so, fighters using social media had sometimes completely anonymized their profiles.

experiences in Kurdistan, stating he had “kept [his] mouth shut for a year, and I am happy with that. No photos, no bragging, back to civilian life for me. And I am pretty happy I did just that” (Oldwornout, 2016). The poster chose an anonymous account since his “country still ha[s] a fair amount of Daesh supporterts [sic] and trash walking freely around [...I do not want] my actions to affect my family and friends who are unable to defend themselves here back home” (ibid.). Other than targeted retaliation by IS to either themselves or loved ones, NJFF’s may also choose anonymity for reasons of government interference or prosecution, or just to hide their activities from their families.

Aside from the incomplete nature of the data, it is also in a constant state of flux. Because foreign fighters are constantly either entering the conflict or leaving it, or returning every couple of months for a new ‘tour’, most of the foreign fighters in the database have already returned to their home countries. Thus, the database is not a representation of foreign fighters active at any given time, but rather of those who have been active at least once. Fighters sometimes also change from one armed group to another for different reasons, and can even wear different patches at the same time, hindering clear analysis. These irregularities also affect source material: internet pages and social media accounts are often deleted – either by the owner or by the host website (cf. infra). To circumvent this, important pages were cached and cached copies of websites were used in case of deletion.

In order to verify some of the numbers³², information requests were sent to some twenty various governments, but went largely unanswered.

³² As well as asking for the legality of fighting against IS and whether governments follow-up on foreign fighters.

5.2 Data analysis and results

The central list of fighters consists of the collected data of 366 volunteers: 350 men and 16 women. Of these 366 fighters, 226 are known by their full name, implying the data consists heavily of fighters that could easily be identified. With a total of 39 different nationalities, it is safe to say that non-jihadist fighters come from all over the world: all continents are represented, excepting Africa and Antarctica. The total list of countries, in alphabetical order, includes Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, ROK, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

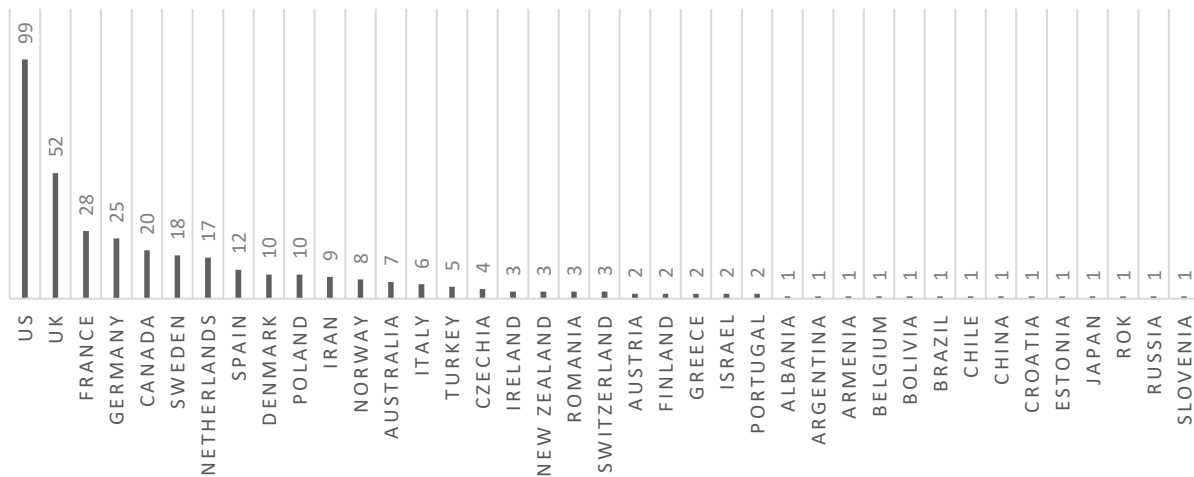


Figure 6. Non-jihadist fighters by nationality.

It is clear that the United States takes the lead, even though this research tried to steer away from US volunteers: just shy of one hundred NJFF's (27%) is American. The United Kingdom and France complete the top three, with NJFF's mostly consisting of non-ethnic Kurds. From Germany and Sweden, Kurdish diaspora add to the database, but it is very likely that actual numbers are much higher: consider the estimate mentioned earlier of 204 German Kurds. Thus, numbers seem to get less reliable in large Kurdish diaspora countries because those fighters are harder to detect through social media (cf. supra). The Turkish NJFF's are heavily underrepresented in the database, seeing as they are in fact the largest group of volunteer fighters in Syria and Iraq, bar

none. This can be explained by the fact that Turkish participation is estimated so highly that news articles about any one Turkish fighter in particular are rare.

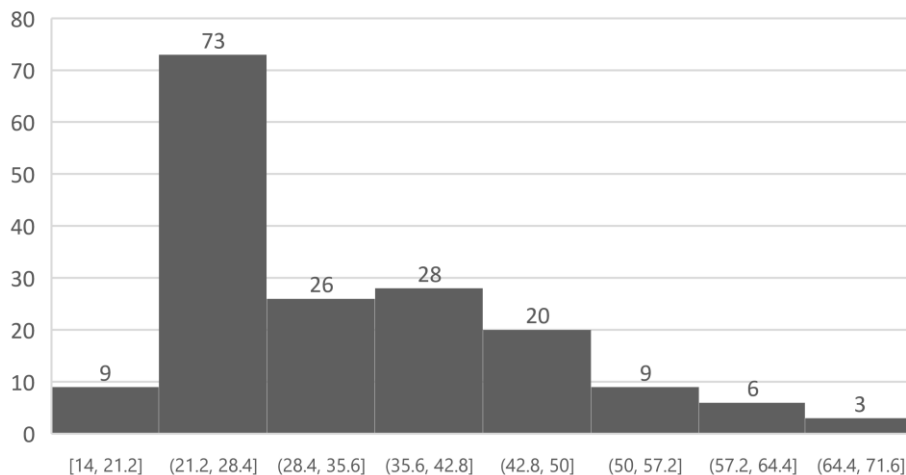


Figure 7. Age of the volunteers based on known data of 174 fighters. The average age is 35 years.

Ages of fighters range from 14 to 68, with an average of 35. However, the graph shows that most fighters are in their twenties, and the average is influenced by the presence of several older fighters. The 14-year-old is a Norwegian boy who was brought to Iraq by his father (“14-year-old Norwegian found fighting in Iraq”, 2015), the 68-year-old was a German Kurd who volunteered with the Peshmerga’s engineering team in defusing IS booby traps, but he was killed defusing an explosive device in northern Mosul. The oldest Western volunteer is a Canadian former logger and fisherman of 67.

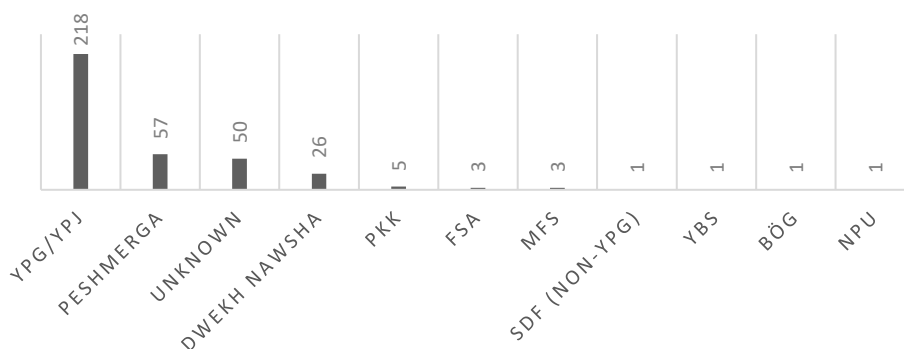
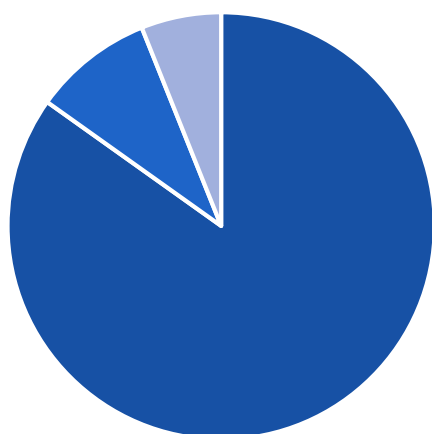


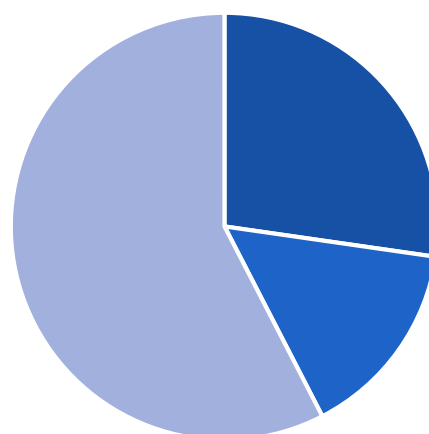
Figure 8. Distribution of NJFF's according to different armed actors in the conflict. Dwekh Nawsha is categorized as a separate entity from the Peshmerga because it operates semi-autonomously.

The majority of NJFF’s in the dataset joins the YPG/YPJ³³: 59.6%, indicating that the YPG/YPJ stays the easiest group to join for most volunteers – keeping in mind that ethnic Kurds, who are underrepresented in the database, mostly join the Peshmerga. Groups such as the NPU, BÖG, and the YBS are also represented, but remain marginal. The one occurrence of a fighter with the SDF but not the YPG is a Greek citizen who volunteered with the Northern Sun Battalion, a former FSA rebel group that became part of the SDF in October 2015. The MFS, an Assyrian Christian militia, counts three members in the database, but an estimate suggests that the group has up to ten foreign fighters from Switzerland alone³⁴ (“Des Suisses combattent”, 2014). Five volunteers in the dataset have joined the PKK: an Irishman, a Spaniard, an Italian Kurd and two German Kurds. The fact that most Western fighters join the YPG is reflected in the casualty data.



■ YPG ■ Peshmerga ■ Unknown

Figure 10. Deaths of NJFF's within different armed groups.



■ Diaspora ■ Veterans ■ Other

Figure 9. Backgrounds of deceased NJFF's.

Out of 366 fighters, 33 have died. Figure 9 shows that the YPG suffered the most losses, with 28 fighters killed in action. Three Peshmerga fighters were killed, as well as two foreign fighters with no data regarding their armed group. However, the three killed Peshmerga all had Kurdish backgrounds and possible dual citizenship (two Dutch Kurds and one German Kurd). This may reflect the lesser number of non-Kurdish NJFF’s in the Peshmerga, or it could suggest that the Peshmerga might indeed be reluctant to send foreign volunteers into frontline combat. However,

³³ Fighters fighting in units within the YPG such as the IFB are counted as members of the YPG/YPJ.

³⁴ It was also co-founded by a Swiss citizen, Johan Cosar (cf. infra).

because the YPG reports the deaths of non-Kurdish foreign fighters well (for a large part because of their martyrization), the data regarding slain YPG fighters might be more easily found than that regarding the Peshmerga's losses. The chart in figure 10 shows the backgrounds of the NJFF's that were killed in action: 9 have Kurdish backgrounds, 5 were veterans, while the majority (19) were neither veterans nor ethnic Kurds.

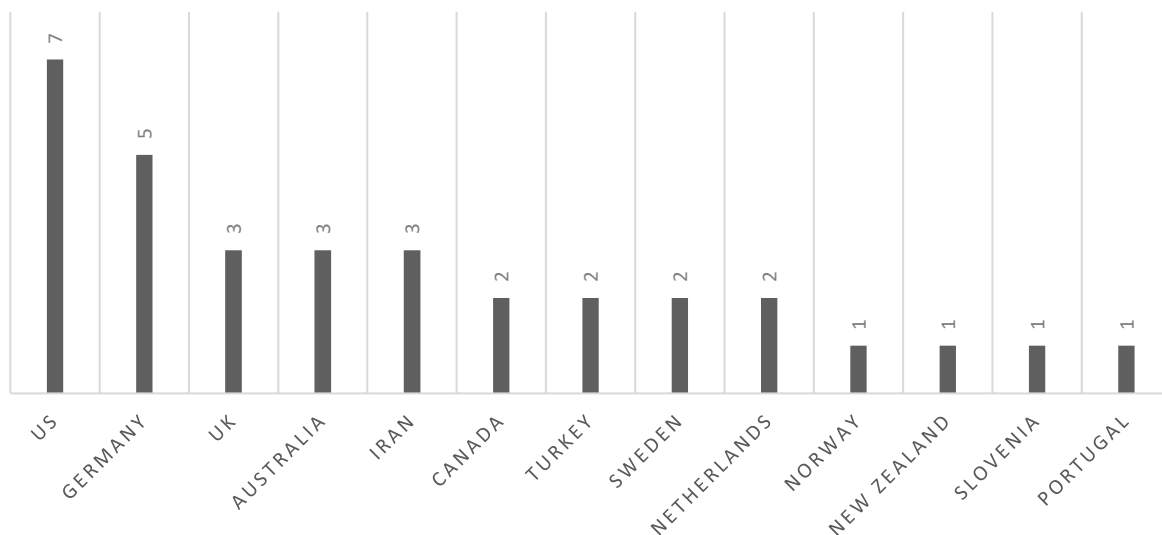


Figure 11. Deaths of NJFF's, by nationality.

In line with the US having the most fighters present, they have also seen the most casualties, followed by Germany and the UK. The rest of the casualties are, as expected, quite evenly spread.

5.3 Profiles and groups of foreign fighters

“Reading about all the things that had happened, the women being raped, children being sold, passed around like – not even animals, like nothing. Innocent men and women killed. The murder, the brutality of ISIS and no-one else, no-one else stepping in to do anything about it, just letting it happen” (Oaten, 2015)

"ISIS has been killing innocent people. Raping women, children, selling the children into slavery, run everybody from their homes... [I] kept putting my daughter in that situation and my own family [...] Someone needed to come over here, show a bit of hope to the people that other people in [other] countries do care and want to get involved fighting against these people" (Muir, 2014)

“I care about the children. I want to help the children and I want to punish. I want to be involved in the damnation of [the Islamic State]. I want to be involved in punishing what they've done. It can't go unpunished. And we can't say someone else will do it. It's important to me that I get my opportunity to do... not that I... I don't hunt animals. I am not a fighter. I am an undersized man. But there is something of rage inside of me with what is happening to the children. And that's why I am here” (Metzger, 2015)

Through case studies, Malet demonstrates that results “from across widely different historical cases indicate that insurgencies [attract] foreign fighters by framing distant civil conflicts as threatening a transnational identity group with which the recruit is closely affiliated” (Malet, 2009: 100). For non-jihadist foreign fighters, that transnational identity group could perhaps be characterised very broadly as ‘non-extremists’, and regarding the threat, a female fighter said “[fighting IS] isn't just [the Kurds'] fight, this is the world's fight [...] If we don't fight them there, then they're going to be at our borders – and they almost already are at our borders” (Hartman, 2015). The quote resonates with a thought by Malet, who describes an ironic instance where U.S. forces during the Iraq war told that they fought insurgents “over there so we don't have to fight them at home” while “their opponents offered precisely the same argument” (Malet, 2013: 4). In line with Malet's theory, excerpts like the ones above are echoed by most of the foreign fighters that were encountered online: sentiments of anger and impotence, often crystallized by the brutal propaganda videos publicised by IS.

Underneath such overarching and commonly shared sentiments lie a myriad of different sub-reasons for trekking to the Middle East, but the sentiment of a perceived common threat is a motif that, more than greed or fanaticism, mobilizes foreign fighters “across highly varied conflicts in time and space” (Malet, 2013: 214). The largest part of NJFF’s do not have explicit ideological, political or religious motivations – they claim only wanting to fight IS: “[I]et’s be clear [...] I’m here to fight for common decency and humanity, I didn’t come here to fight for the Kurds or for Kurdistan. I came here to fight for people. Some people who happen to be Kurds, Arabs, Turks, and Assyrians happen to espouse an ideology I am willing to die for” (Stevenson, 2016)³⁵. A number of fighters even switched militias because they were not familiar with the leftist ideology of the YPG, joining the Christian Dwekh Nawsha later³⁶. However, just as is there is no single profile possible to describe jihadist fighters, there is no singular foreign fighter outline. Consider this excerpt on jihadist foreign fighters:

“From ignorant novices who view the trips as a rite of passage, die-hard militants looking for combat and martyrdom, and individuals who go for humanitarian reasons but get drawn into conflict, individuals become foreign fighters for a range of reasons: boredom; intergenerational tensions; the search for greater meaning in life; perceived adventure; attempts to impress the local community or the opposite sex; a desire for increased credibility; to belong or gain peer acceptance; revenge; or misguided conflict experience expectations”

(Briggs & Silverman, 2014: 13)

It is possible to project these various push and pull factors onto volunteers fighting with the Kurds: examples of the exact same motivations can easily be found among statements by anti-jihadist combatants. On the rite of passage, for example, one American fighter told that “[s]ome people take a year off before they go to college, other people just do this [...] I'd like to spend time here and learn more about the culture, the people, the history of this land and then go home”

³⁵ Over the course of their stay, they may of course develop sympathy or antipathy for the Kurds and their ideology, or antagonistic feelings toward the Turkish and Barzani governments.

³⁶ Since then, the YPG has begun vetting and giving new volunteers a crash course in YPG ideology in order to exclude adventure-seekers unfamiliar with local politics. In a strikingly comparable case, Malet describes the case of US citizens joining the Communist Party during the 30’s. Many of them “had neither a solid understanding of Marxist theory nor the desire to establish a fully communist state, but were interested in obtaining social justice for the poor and minorities [...] This resulted in so many initial volunteers in autumn 1936 that the U.S. organizing committee quickly shifted its focus from finding recruits to screening out political undesirables, with the goal of “excluding mere adventurers who lacked a political understanding of the anti-fascist struggle” (Malet, 2009: 103).

(Kalin, 2016). A Danish fighter, embodying the martyrdom element, said that he felt “helpless” and added that he was “ready to die for the Kurdish cause” (Olsen & Ritter, 2014). An American volunteer said the “only way to try to explain [being in Syria], is that I heard God's call” (Wyke & MacFarlan, 2015). Others claim to have come for humanitarian reasons (specifically, medical aid) but at the same time claim that “superior firepower is the best preventative medicine in the battlefield” (Higginbottom, 2016). Some have transitioned in the opposite direction: from fighter to humanitarian aid volunteer (Khan, 2017). There are reports of volunteers applying out of boredom (Marshall, 2016) and looking for adventure: “there was [...] a chance to have a story that no one else could beat, I guess, and [to] have an adventure while I'm doing it [...] As a private citizen, I'm going to have an adventure essentially, and that's my own business” (Bofetta & Phillips, 2015). Some of the fighters have even fought in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict before coming to Syria. In the case of at least three fighters, there is evidence pointing toward voluntary³⁷ and armed participation in the Donbass, on both sides of the conflict. Regarding fighters motivated by a quest for peer acceptance, one fighter adeptly writes:

“We live in a time of social media, and a constantly ongoing popularity contest here in the west, and the members of my unit fell into the same ways. Photos were taken and uploaded onto facebook every minute, and the likes came pouring in. People that had been useless nobodies back in their country, suddenly found themselves admired, both on social media, but also when civilian locals would come up to you and pat your back and thank you in broken English”
(Oldwornout, 2016)

Indeed, the reasons for joining the conflict are as heterogeneous as the fighters themselves. There are veterans, a school teacher, an actor, fitness instructor, and even one of the co-inventors of Bitcoin, a digital cryptocurrency. Fighters’ political convictions cover every point along the political spectrum – from revolutionaries and communists to neo-Nazi’s. Still, there are some generalizations to be made.

A large part of the foreign fighters are ex-members of the military. They are mostly veterans from the United States and British armed forces, but also include a small number of ex-French Foreign Legion soldiers. Their dominant presence among the NJFF’s is explained by two factors. On the one hand, there is a large demand: veterans are experienced, disciplined and they

³⁷ Possibly paid.

are acquainted with the realities of warfare. Moreover, they are prized for their advice and know-how. On the other, there is a steady supply: veterans feel they can make a difference by putting their professional skillset into practice, and they feel more qualified than civilians: “[y]ou meet a lot of people who think this is going to be the gaming experience – [like] *Call of Duty*. They think because they understand how to pull the trigger on a console they know how to do it in real life [...] If you want to do fighting in other countries, do fighting for your own country first” (Matharu, 2015).

Veterans as a group often report having similar motivations for joining the conflict. They may look for a chance at combat after being denied deployment, or they may miss the action from a previous deployment to the region: “[b]eing back here [in Iraq] is like... being back home. It's something most veterans miss” (“Meet Two Americans Who Joined the Fight Against ISIS”, 2015). Others feel like their work was in vain if IS were to take over Iraq: “my friends and I, when I was in the United States Marine Corps, fought really hard for the safety and security of Iraq, and when I saw ISIS was taking back control, I wanted to come and help the Iraqi people and the Kurdish people and I saw that the YPG was actively fighting against ISIS and so I decided to come help them (Nuce, 2015). Adrian Bonenberg, an Afghanistan veteran³⁸, has stated that

“the possibility of fighting overseas against a clearly identifiable foe like [IS] holds a strong appeal for military veterans who have often experienced a sense of alienation and ‘fantasy’ about how the world works [...] For many people who served in Iraq and Afghanistan as infantrymen, their skill set was fighting and infantry [...] Then they came back [to the US] and they were qualified for very few jobs [...] For those people, who felt alienated from society and didn’t have sufficient social networks there to help them back in, to reintegrate them into the civilian world, there must be – and I know because I’ve felt it myself – a powerful draw to go and use those skills that you’ve accumulated and those experiences you had overseas and the acclaim you got when you were fighting the enemy”

(Hawramy & Jalabi, 2015)

One special aspect of veteran activity in the region are the organizations that do not enter into combat directly but instead train local volunteers. Matthew VanDyke³⁹, founder of Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), says his organization recruits American veterans who travel to Iraq to train

³⁸ To be clear, not a foreign fighter in the conflict.

³⁹ For more information on Matthew VanDyke, SOLI, and the AMO, please refer to McLaughlin (2015).

local militias, comprised out of Christian Assyrian forces: “[w]e're not sending foreigners over to fight wars for other people - we're sending people over who can help the local population fight wars for themselves” (“Matthew Vandyke”, 2016). A budding local militia that received training by SOLI and another non-profit called the American Mesopotamian Organization (AMO) later became the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), but cooperation between the organizations has halted since. The NPU now actively recruits from the Assyrian diaspora (“Join the NPU”, 2016): president of the European Syriac Union Lahdu Obil has stated that the Assyrian people “have organized themselves to defend themselves with the help of European young people from Switzerland, Germany and Sweden as well” (Biloslavo, 2014)⁴⁰. Even though VanDyke and the veterans who train the militia did not engage in combat themselves, the legal implications are harsher than for those who fight on the front lines, at least under US law. David Ellison, an expert in arms trafficking law, says SOLI’s training program “sounds very bad [...] the penalties for providing military training to foreigners without State Department approval can be harsh, including millions of dollars in fines and possible criminal prosecution” (McLaughlin, 2015). The founder of the AMO is convinced his organization is legally sound, because they only provide “basic security procedures and community policing techniques”; not military training (ibidem). Moreover, despite only training local volunteers, VanDyke can be seen as a foreign fighter according to many definitions, including but not limited to the ones used by Bingöl (cf. supra) and Europol⁴¹.

⁴⁰ The recruitment of Assyrian diaspora warrants more research, but information and data are difficult to obtain. An attempt to contact the European Syriac Union went unanswered.

⁴¹ According to the definition of the EUROPOL, foreign fighters are “individuals motivated by religion, who leave their country of origin in order to **train**, fight or perform extremist activities in war zones” (Bingöl, 2016: xx, my emphasis).

“There is a revolution taking place [in Rojava], and I want to participate [... A revolutionary is] one who fights against oppression, offering solidarity with the people who defend themselves from the violence of the imperialist states and dictatorships [...] When they gave me the Kalashnikov I had a bad feeling. But war is war. [...] I am a convinced anti-militarist and I never thought to find myself with a gun in my hand, but [IS] is not defeated by the words: there's a revolution to defend. [...] I like the ideals of Rojava, so I said, you have to do something to defend them. I do not like war, but this is a people's war. I liken it to those in the thirties who went to Spain to fight against fascism” (Tonacci, 2016, my translation)



Figure 12. Upper half: members of the IFB pose on top of a building in Kurdistan. Bottom left: a YPG member displays an Antifa patch on his upper right sleeve. Bottom right: Ivana Hoffman, a German MLKP member, was killed during clashes in the Tal Tamr region, Hasakah province, Syria.

We have established that most foreign fighters' motivations appear apolitical, driven mostly by a desire to combat IS. But a significant portion of fighters is politically outspoken about the politics and ideologies clashing in the Syrian and Iraqi conflict. "Politically speaking", one fighter says, "[fighters] come from all the nuances of the extreme left including Trotskyism, Stalinism, IWW type and insurgent neutral, "apolitical" leftist, right-to-center-right, conservative or religiously enthusiastic Christian working class. Because there is a wide mix of personalities in Rojava, international volunteers are not a unified body and there is sometimes hostility, scorn and mistrust between them" (Traavik, 2016). However, among politically motivated fighters, the absolute majority is leftist, and these volunteers are predominantly found with the YPG and leftist brigades working with the YPG, precisely because of its explicit leftist ideology.

The largest and most outspokenly leftist group of foreign fighters within the YPG is the International Freedom Battalion. The IFB, explicitly modelled after the International Brigades fighting in the Spanish Civil War, was established in Rojava in June of 2015 as an umbrella *tabur*, consisting of several leftist foreign volunteer organizations working within the YPG. Members are mostly Marxist-Leninist communists, but Hoxhaists, Maoists and anarchist revolutionaries have also joined the battalion. The Turkish Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP), which is affiliated with the PKK and has allegedly been involved in the Syrian Civil War from 2012 on, was instrumental in the founding of the IFB. Ivana Hoffman, the first female foreign fighter to die within 'YPG' ranks, was a member of the MLKP.

The United Freedom Forces (Turkish: Birleşik Özgürlük Güçleri, BÖG) are the largest organization within the IFB, being a joint organization of several different revolutionary socialist groups. The BÖG was intended as an umbrella organization itself, but became part of the IFB because the MLKP refused to join the BÖG. Other groups within the IFB are the Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity (RUIS), an anarchist-communist organization from Greece, the International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), an international collective of anarchist fighters, and the *Reconstrucción Comunista*, a banned Spanish political party with strong links to the MLKP. Small, ad-hoc groups that were created locally are the Bob Crow Brigade⁴², a minor militia of young British and Irish fighters consisting of socialists, communists and anarchists, and the Henri Krasucki Brigade, a similar French group. Finally, there are some other Turkish groups, such as the armed wings of the TKP/ML and the TKEP/L, and *Devrimci Karargâh*. A full member count for the IFB is difficult to determine, but the amount of European and

⁴² The 'brigade' is named after late British trade union leader Bob Crow. Despite its name, it probably counts about 10 men.

American foreign fighters seems limited⁴³. Regarding its roots in the International Brigades, anthropologist and anarchist activist David Graeber said that “there are a thousand differences between what happened in Spain in 1936 and what is happening in Rojava [...] today. But some of the similarities are [...] striking, and [...] distressing” (Graeber, 2014). The member count surely is one of the many differences: the IFB is far from reaching the numbers of the Brigades it was modelled after, which produced an estimated 35,000 to 50,000 fighters during the conflict (Malet, 2009: 102)⁴⁴. Moreover, the European brigades within the IFB are made up out of mostly untrained leftists with no military experience and who rarely participate in combat, according to witnesses⁴⁵ (Donnerbauer, 2017), but whose social media presence has resonated strongly with European leftist groups.

A second ideologically driven group are the foreign fighters embedded in Christian militias. The Dwekh Nawsha (Syriac: lit. "one who sacrifices") is a brigade operating out of Dohuk in Northern Iraq, and incorporates most of the volunteers who did not join Kurdish groups. It was founded by the Assyrian Patriotic Party in June of 2014 in response to the advance of IS in Nineveh. Since the Assyrian population is mostly Christian, the organization became a haven for foreign fighters who identify themselves as Christian or oppose the YPG's politics and ideology. In 2015, the Dwekh Nawsha had circa eight foreigners (Percy, 2015), mostly defected from the YPG. One American foreign fighter joined the Dwekh Nawsha after learning the YPG were, in his words, “a bunch of damn Reds” (Eleftheriadou, 2015: 17). Though the organization cooperates with Peshmerga forces, they do not receive funds nor material from the Iraqi government or the KRG. Instead, they are predominantly financed by crowdfunding through Assyrian diaspora and Christian faith groups worldwide. The Christian background of the Dwekh Nawsha has also encouraged many members and supporters to present themselves as modern-day crusaders, participating in a ‘holy war’, with social media networks and profiles of individuals connected to the organization often riddled with depictions of knights and crusader symbolism (cf. *infra*). Several groups have been established on Facebook, with the French Dwekh Nawsha group⁴⁶ being one of the most popular, with more than 5,000 members. The banner on the page reads that it consists of a “group of French Christians ready to combat [IS]” (“Dwekh Nawsha France”, 2017).

⁴³ 50 to 100 Western volunteers seems a generous estimate.

⁴⁴ Though only about 18,000 were in Spain at any given time (*ibid.*)

⁴⁵ Western IFB fighters have uploaded footage to YouTube of them firing assault rifles, but whether foreign fighters actively participate in frontline combat is inherently difficult to know.

⁴⁶ Dwekh Nawsha France et Beaufort.



Figure 13. A French fighter manning a machine gun displays two patches on his upper right sleeve; the upper patch shows his membership of the Assyrian French Légion (AFL) and the bottom patch is the insignia of the Dwekh Nawsha.

Keeping track of the different militias with active foreign fighters is no small task, and the three groups mentioned here are just some examples. New militias and splinter groups are formed constantly, and many of them are small and work within existing structures such as the YPG or Peshmerga. It is possible these groups operate independently, but many are umbrella terms for supporters of a certain ideology or groups of veterans who still fight within a larger militia, sometimes even in different *taburs*. Others groups solely denominate Western online support groups without fighters on location, claim to be in contact with Kurdish authorities for recruitment purposes, or tread the line between humanitarian NGO and volunteer militia. A full overview of all these groups would lengthen this thesis considerably, but organizations accepting volunteer NJFF's include: the Syriac Military Council (MFS), Veterans Against ISIS, International Peshmerga Volunteers (IPV), Daesh Hunting Club, Peshmerga International Detachment (IDET), Brothers of Kurdistan, Rojava Plan, the International Volunteer Force (IVFOR), the Martyr Bagok

Unit ('223'), Yekineyen Bijiski Taktiki (YBT)⁴⁷, the Grupa Zadaniowa "Gniew Eufratu", the Liberty Lions, Assyrian French Légion (AFL), the Anti-Fascist International Tabur, the Scandinavian Peshmerga Unit and more still. Many of these groups have since become defunct, or are minor splinter units.

6. Non-jihadist foreign fighters on social media

In order to gain a better grasp on the motivations and personalities of those joining the conflict, an analysis of their social media can be of help. Different social media and their role in Middle Eastern political developments and conflicts have been studied extensively, and they have been described as hugely impactful during the Arab Spring, for example, but also as a venue where members of terrorist organizations can recruit new members and spread propaganda (Klausen 2015, Gates & Podder 2015). Once again, the focal point of research has been the social media of *jihadist* foreign fighters.

To be clear, statements presented through NJFF social media are difficult to fact-check, both because of lack of proper resources on the ground and the obfuscating properties of *noms de guerre*. Additionally, one cannot underestimate the propaganda war that is being waged on social media – from both sides of the conflict (“Syrians wage frenzied propaganda war on social media”, 2012) – and it helps to indicate the prudence with which researchers need to collect their data. Each fighter has an own agenda, even when claiming to seek objectivity:

“One of my goals with this page is to give you guys an insight in what's going on down here. I know from personal experience that the mainstream media don't always give the correct picture when reporting from this conflict, either because of their lack of presence, wich⁴⁸ makes them rely on sources down here who might have their own agenda, or because the stories aren't interesting enough, so they make up their own. This goes for the kurdish media as well. Just the other day, they reported on the news that 20 Islamic State fighters had been killed at the Teleskuf-front, where I'm at, during fighting, wich was a

⁴⁷ The YBT ('Tactical Medical Unit') is a group foreign fighters who, in their own words, form “an amalgamation of an infantry unit and a mobile field hospital facility. However, our medics will actively engage the enemy rather than wait for injuries” (Higginbottom, 2016).

⁴⁸ All excerpts from foreign fighter social media accounts are transcribed as found in the source text ('sic').

complete lie. Anyway, for personal- and operational security, there might be information and incidents I can't tell you about, or I might have to change a few details, but I hope you guys will look at this page as a source for (mostly) unbiased news about the situation around Mosul.”

As genuine as Peshmerganor's (2016) post may seem, NJFF posters are well aware of their actions on social media. Jordan Matson (cf. *infra*) commented in a Reddit post, for example, that he will “do what [he] can to help media wise while [he is] not on the front line. There are several aspects to warfare. Hearts and minds” (Matson 2015).

Foreign fighters, Kurdish diaspora, and other pro-Kurdish entities have not limited themselves to any one social media website. For NJFF's, Facebook and Instagram are popular, but other social media websites such as Reddit⁴⁹, YouTube and Liveleaks are also home to those wanting to further the Kurdish cause and to connect pro-Kurdish activists and would-be fighters.

6.1 Instagram

Instagram offers a picture uploading service, which may be accompanied by a descriptive text. While private profiles are an option, public profiles can be viewed by anyone, and most NJFF's opt to publish publicly. Here, a small case study into three Scandinavian NJFF's going by the names of *Peshmergaswe*, *Peshmerganor*, *Nordveg* and *Scandipesh* is presented. Not only do all of them have a profile, but they also link to each other and comment on each other's posts. This interconnection is a direct result of the new unit that some of the Scandinavian NJFF's put together on the ground in Kurdistan⁵⁰. In order to analyse the content of the Instagram posts, the profiles of the Scandinavian Peshmerga members were viewed and each post was grouped into several distinct categories that emerged as the research went on. Once the content was bundled into categories, several recurring themes became visible, one of the major ones being the daily life at the front, for example. Though Instagram is mostly known as a predominantly visual medium, with photographs baring the gist of the message, most NJFF's accompany their photos with lengthy descriptions or political arguments. In what follows, these caption texts are presented as examples of the most common topics for NJFF's on social media.

⁴⁹ Reddit is an American social news aggregation and discussion website. It contains several subfora where NJFF's post, including */r/syriancivilwar* and */r/Kurdistan*.

⁵⁰ The so-called 'Scandinavian Peshmerga', operating under PAK commander Hossein Yazdanpanah.



Figure 14. Left: foreign members of the Peshmerga pose for a photograph, PAK patches visible on their upper sleeves. Right: one of the Scandinavian foreign fighters, kneeling on the left photograph, now has a YPG patch.

Reading some of the excerpts, one cannot help but to reflect on the similarities with many of the war diaries that were published after the Great War and other conflicts, such as George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*⁵¹. In a way, the social media of contemporary fighters (in any which conflict and on any which side) are the logical continuation of the practice, and some have experimented with the historic continuum. In honour of the Great War centenary, for example, several WWI-soldiers were commemorated by having their diary entries converted to 21st-century social media posts⁵², offering a unique insight into their experiences on the basis of daily *tweets*. The topics combatants describe both then and now are immensely diverse, and range from the trivial and humorous to the morbid and gruesome. Consider this excerpt:

⁵¹ In his 1938 book, Orwell presents a personal account of his experiences and observations in the Spanish Civil War.

⁵² An example of this creative interpretation is a Twitter account by the grandchildren of Private Mostyn Williams, soldier in the Welsh Regiment during WWI.

“Went to the frontline today for a while. But as most of the time, today nothing happened. [It has b]een quiet lately. Mostly, the days consists of visits to other groups and talking with them about what has been going on lately. [I’m making] new friends every day [...] Our "chef" made us some tasty soup of sheep today.”

Though this excerpt came from Instagram (Scandipesh 2016), it could just as easily have been situated in the muddy trenches of Flanders, one hundred years ago. “I like to focus on everyday-life stuff as well”, Scandipesh writes. “War aint just shooting and killing. Its throwing eggs and waterbottles at each other and playing blackjack with "cards" made out of the insides of a cigarette pack, you get the point” (Scandipesh 2016). In line with the realities of warfare, actual combat is but a small part of the content the fighters post online.

Light-hearted “lifestyle” posts include photographs of food and cooking, coffee and tea, *Wild Tiger* energy drink, cigarettes, volleyball, grooming, a paragon of animals (mostly kittens and puppies), watching movies or playing board games, and humorous macro images referencing the so-called Islamic State. Interestingly, Klausen (2014:5) reports the same kind of posts on the Twitter accounts from Islamic State members.

Another favourite subject for many of the fighters is their ‘loadout’, an informal term for a personal collection of equipment, clothing, weapons and ammunition. Posts featuring a newly camouflaged assault rifle or plate carrier routinely receive much praise and comments. The NJFF’s also do not shy away from going into weapons technical discussions. On a post explaining that he received four cans of soda complimentary with the purchase of what seems like a Soviet RGD-5 grenade, Nordveg replies to a follower asking how much he paid for the explosive device (50 USD). Scandipesh even actively asks his followers for advice regarding the purchase of a handgun:

“A question to all you hand-gun addicts out there, i want to buy a handgun. But Glock is out of the question as i dont have the money for it. What are good options ? Take into concideration i am IN Kurdistan and can not get hands on all brands. I need some advice on that :) thanks in advance :)”

(Scandipesh 2016)

In a second post, he asks his followers whether he should use an M16 assault rifle or a Heckler & Koch G3 battle rifle. Another question regards the origin of a tank used by a Peshmerga unit

visited by Scandipesh (according to the reactions, an old Soviet T-55). In one of Peshmerganor's posts, he asks his followers for their help to identify a spent artillery shell:

"We're beeing targeted by a weapon system we haven't encountered at this front before and it have inflicted some serious damage. Several wounded. Given it's straight trajectory, I'm guessing it's a tank. Can anyone identify this projectile and what weapon system it's delivered from?" (Peshmerganor 2016).

Since many of the fighters seem motivated by a desire to act in the face of terrorism linked to Islamic State (cf. supra), it is no surprise that their social media has mentioned many of the attacks. If anything, it looks like the developments strengthened their resolve. Some foreign fighters even explicitly state their desire to put to death one IS combatant for every victim of specific terror attacks. Peshmergaswe, for example, posted a captioned photograph stating exactly that. A dead jihadi fighter, wearing a plate carrier upon which Peshergaswe has placed a Swedish flag patch, has his face blurred, a roll of sterile gauze laying in the pool of blood emanating from the corpse. "For Orlando!", captions Peshmergaswe: "We dedicate this for you too Orland. First kill, second or third? It doesn't really matter we don't really count the kills". A similar photograph in another post is captioned "For Orlando! 2 down 47 to go!". After the Nice attack, Peshmergaswe's post featured a photograph of the corpse of another IS-combatant, captioned "We promised you, for Nice! We repay evil with evil" (Peshmergaswe 2016). Contrasting heavily with trivial posts reflecting daily life, these posts reflect sentiments of violence and revenge, insult IS combatants, and sometimes contain a rather Hollywoodian braggadocio:

*"To all you goat-fucking shitheads out there: you're already bagged and tagged, you just dont know it yet. I am your worst nightmare. Yours sincerely, @Scandipesh
#peshmerga #fuckisis #scandipesh"*
(Scandipesh 2016)



Figure 15. @Peshmerganor poses with a captured IS-combatant. The caption reads: “Me and my new friend from the Islamic State [...] We arrested three guys in total and took them to an abandoned house for questioning. They got treated pretty decent, except for the guy in the photo... he had an attitude that some of the guys had to beat out of him.”

Other posts attempt to describe the harsh realities of conflict in a more neutral manner:

“[A] car only 700 meters away from my at the time current position got blown up by an IED and the [Kurdish] guys inside it instantly were martyred and i saw it all. This makes you put things in a perspective. The next time it could be me”

(Scandipesh 2016)

“A group of refugees came towards our position from a distance when Daesh opened fire on them. They immediately panicked and spread out in all directions, and as soon as they spread out one of them stepped on an IED which instantly killed some of them, including children. The rest got shot down, all But one who survived the actual impact of the IED. Our combat medic and some guys rushed out to see to them. What met them was sad”

(Scandipesh 2016)

Another favourite topic for the NJFF's on Instagram is politics, which can take on many forms. Many commenters ask about a perceived lack of unity between the different Kurdish factions (cf. infra) and why the fighters joined the PAK and not another party's Peshmerga.

"for me it's important to say that which political party that controls the unit i stay With is'nt important⁵³. In my eyes, the Peshmerga are all one. We fight against the evil Daesh. I came here to fight Daesh, not to fight different political fractions. Whatever political issues there is between the different parties that controll the Peshmerga is a issue that they can take care of between themselves and is something that i dont get involved in."
Peshmerganor 2016

However, that does not at all mean the fighters do not get involved in the politics of the conflict. Many photographs are accompanied by at times lengthy posts clarifying the fighters' thoughts behind recent political developments, such as the coalition air support, changes in territory and troop movements, the Kurdish Trench⁵⁴, the failed Turkish coup attempt, etc. Turkey and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is a favoured target for angry diatribes, the Kurdish Rojava project is often lauded, and the designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization is criticized and condemned. The inaction of Western governments is also heavily scrutinized.

"I note that John Kerry recently Stated PKK as a terrorist organization and i quote "plain and simple". The U.S speak With two tongues and are hypocrits. It does make me wonder, when at the same time he came With his statement labeling the PKK as a "plain and simple" terrorist organization, U.S ground forces cooperated With and used a PKK base and observation post to coordinate air-attacks. How do i know This? Because i was there! They several times have given air support for the PKK in my area and they have directly defended PKK positions. So practically the U.S are happily directly supporting an organization they at the exact same time define as a brutal terrorist organization. I and many with me demand a stop in Nato-backed Turkish massacres on Kurdish civilians in Bakur as well as removal of PKK from all so-called "list of terrorist organizations" and

⁵³ This sentiment is in line with the story of fighters like Jesper Söder, who seems to have migrated from the YPG to the Peshmerga.

⁵⁴ The Kurdish Trench refers to a trench more than 1,000 kilometres in length that is the first line of defence against anti-Kurdish combatants. Iraqi officials have expressed concern and vexation at what they perceive as the Kurds drawing the borders of an independent Kurdistan, and the start of a break-up of Iraq.

the immediate release of Abdullah Öcalan/Apo from Turkish prison. PKK is the only effective ground force against Daesh in Syria/Rojava and are true heroes and freedom fighters for taking up arms to defend the Kurdish population in Turkey/Bakur. I am not afraid to openly confess my full support to PKK”

(Scandipesh 2016)

Another recurring topic regards the fighters’ financial woes. Volunteer fighters receive food and shelter, but equipment is sorely lacking. Therefore, most volunteers have taken to arranging their own weapons and armour. Since foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq generally rely on their own funding to purchase equipment, their social media is almost always partly meant to raise money through donations. These donations can take on the form of financial contributions from private supporters through platforms such as PayPal or GoFundMe, but can also come from manufacturers of combat equipment providing their product free of charge, often in exchange for some posts praising and linking the brand⁵⁵. ‘Shoutouts’ to followers who have donated routinely follow posts, and new content often calls for donations. Importantly, NJFF’s also ask followers to share NJFF social media with their friends in order to increase exposure (and thus, donations):

“fighting as a volunteer in the Peshmerga is turning out to be a costly affair. I don't get paid being here and so far, I have spent over 13,000\$ on weapons, ammunition, ballistic protection, gear, clothing, transportation and more. I hate asking for help, however, If I'm going to stay here for a while, I will need your support. You can do this by clicking on the link in my bio and donate a few bucks. If you can't or don't feel like donating money, you can support me by tagging your friends in this picture, repost my footage and spread the word about the crowdfunding on other social media. Sometime, moral support can be as good as financial help”

(Peshmerganor 2016)

⁵⁵ This advertising practice is not new on social media (and Instagram in particular).

6.2 Facebook

As a social media behemoth, Facebook has proven to be popular with non-jihadist foreign fighters, and the most important function is that of a recruiting platform. The aforementioned *Lions of Rojava* Facebook page is filled with posts and comments from aspiring fighters. The images posted by the page itself showcased photographs of different foreign fighters posing in full combat gear, and a banner celebrating deceased Western ‘martyrs’. Undeterred by these images of deceased Western fighters, or maybe encouraged by the abundance of comments hailing them as heroes and martyrs, aspiring fighters from all over the world leave messages behind, hoping for an answer from one of the page’s administrators. Some proclaim their sympathy for the Rojava project, the Kurdish fighters, or the Kurdish cause in general, others share anti-Turkey images and cartoons. The page is an indicator of the growing importance of social media for the Kurdish movement, but also showcases the interconnection with both existing and aspiring foreign fighters. Klausen (2015: 20) also finds that recruitment is a key function of *jihadist* social media.

Perhaps one of the clearest indications that Facebook remains a powerful tool for foreign fighters within Kurdish ranks and indeed the Kurds themselves is the virtual tug-of-war that has been playing out for the last year or so. On July 2nd, 2015, Turkish newspaper *Yeni Akit*⁵⁶ published a story on the verification of the YPG’s page. Facebook’s verification program, running since 2013, displays a small blue checkmark next to the names of pages that Facebook has deemed authentic, so users can easily find the correct page to communicate with in a sea of duplicates and fan pages. In their incendiary article, *Yeni Akit* portrays the YPG as a terrorist group and equals the page’s verification mark with official U.S. recognition of the YPG as a state institution, particularly because Facebook is US-based and the YPG page was categorized under the Government Organization description. The short article states the following:

⁵⁶ Conservative and Islamist daily infamous for its Islamic extremism and hate speech. The controversial paper has ties with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP. Hasan Karakaya, the paper’s editor-in-chief until his death in 2015, was a close friend of Erdoğan and died of a heart attack during a visit to Saudi Arabia with the Turkish president.

Facebook recognizes terrorist YPG as a [sovereign] state organization!

Facebook is named in another scandal. The US-based Facebook recognizes the YPG, the Syrian branch of the terrorist group PKK, as an official state institution!

*Facebook, who recognizes the **terrorists YPG's** Facebook page as a government agency, has verified the page with a **blue verification sign**. The site is known to block pages that share violent photos and videos. This essential rule of the website is not being applied to the terrorist YPG organization or to related pages. **The terrorist YPG, WHO SHARE GRUESOME PHOTOS AND VIDEOS WITH DEAD BODIES IN THEM**, is recognized as a state on Facebook, instead of being blocked. The US-based Facebook paving the way for carnage in Syria by supporting and recognizing the YPG as a state, is just a revelation of the obvious.*

(“Facebook terörist YPG'yi devlet olarak tanıdı” 2015, translated from Turkish, emphasis in bold original)

Some two weeks later, Facebook removed the official verification from the YPG's page. Five months later still, on December 27th of 2015, the YPG page, with some 500,000 'likes', was deleted, as was the *Lions of Rojava* page. News of the deletion was swiftly shared, and when the page came back online on April 14th, the YPG page administrators shared their thoughts in this post, accompanied by two screenshots:

“To the media and public

After repeated attacks by the Turkish state, hostile to the rights of the Kurdish people politically, in the media and electronically – and even militarily, in front of the whole world and the international community, the Turkish state, with the help of the Syrian opposition coalition, closed all pages calling for the protection of the Kurdish people [...] and the freedom of the Kurdish people.

A media official called Tarek al-Jazairi, with the help and support from the Turkish government, reported several pages, including the People's Protection Units [YPG] page, which had 394,000 followers and was verified by Facebook Inc. [...] On Thursday, April 14th, the official People's Protection Units page was restored, after

several months of hard work, communicating with several Facebook company centers in foreign countries, including Sweden and England (London) and both formally and legally. And we in the media center promise that we will continue our work and our struggle against those hostile to the rights of the Kurdish people.

In the two images:

The first: of the agency belonging to Turkey's ruling AKP

Second: Media consultant in the Syrian opposition coalition, Tarek al-Jazairi

April 14, 2016

Public Information Center – NRG”

(“To the media and public” 2016, translated from Arabic)

The first image the post refers to is a screenshot of the *Yeni Akit* article. The second screenshot is a July 14 post by Facebook user Tarek al-Jazairi, where al-Jazairi, who also posts links to the official Facebook page of Erdoğan, posted a screenshot of the YPG's page without the verification symbol present. The caption, in Arabic, reads “By the grace of God, we have completed work with the Facebook administration to cancel the authentication of the official page for this terrorist organization prior to completely closing it down”. As of May 2017, the YPG's Facebook page is online but has no verification.

Though causality here cannot be assigned with certainty, and the possibility of propaganda must be heeded, the idea of online action groups targeting social media is not to be understood as far-fetched. The AKP is known to be very active on social media ever since the Gezi protests. In 2013, the AKP recruited a 6,000-heads-strong social media team to “promote the party perspective and monitor online discussions”, according to an AKP official (Albayrak & Parkinson 2013).

Non-jihadist foreign fighters and Kurdish activists alike have expressed dismay at what they now perceive as both Turkish online attacks and Facebook censorship, as it has severely impacted their online presence. The reality is that the legal position of Facebook intertwines with local Turkish law and politics to form a curious form of limiting online activities by Kurdish activists, foreign fighters, and bloggers. On March 16th, 2015, Facebook updated their Community Standards guidelines and released their latest Global Government Requests Report. In the report, Facebook shares information about the requests the company receives from governments regarding Facebook data and content. Clarifying the update, the official Facebook page of founder

Mark Zuckerberg shared a post "explain[ing Facebook's] philosophy". In the post, Zuckerberg writes that Facebook users

“need to recognize the different legal and cultural environments in which we operate. Every country has laws limiting certain expression, and these are often shaped by culture and history. For example, Holocaust denial is prohibited in Germany. Content that defames Atatürk is illegal in Turkey. In many Muslim countries, content regarded as blasphemous is banned as well. Governments sometimes order us to remove content they believe is illegal but that doesn't violate our Community Standards. We provide information about these orders in our Global Government Requests Report. We fight to protect our community from unnecessary or overreaching government intervention. Facebook is a new kind of service, so we often face regulations that have little precedent. We push back to make sure we only comply with government demands when they're lawful and necessary. If we have to block something prohibited in one country, we generally try to leave it unblocked for the rest of the world so that limitations on sharing and voice are minimized. We also work to expose how governments restrict what people share, and that's why we publish the Global Government Requests Report”

(Zuckerberg 2015)

Government requests can take the form of two demands. Data requests, firstly, are official government requests asking Facebook to share data relating to criminal cases. Secondly, content restriction requests relate to governments asking Facebook to restrict access to certain content, arguing it violates local legislation. Importantly, the governmental requests here differ from Facebook's own Community Standards (such as the immediate removal of child exploitation content, which is also illegal in most countries). Regarding data related to criminal cases, the United States tops the request list with 26,579 user account requests, according to the latest figures. India (6,268) and the UK (4,489) complete the top three. Government content takedown requests are spread more unevenly, with most countries submitting none at all. Most requests

come from India⁵⁷ (15,155⁵⁸) and Turkey (4496).

Clarifying their content removal following Turkish takedown requests, Facebook states they have “restricted access in Turkey to categories of content in response to requests from the Telecommunications Authority, Turkish courts, and the Access Providers Union. We also restricted access to content in categories identified as illegal that have been brought to our attention by non-government entities, such as NGOs and members of the Facebook community. The majority of the content was restricted under local law 5651, which covers a range of offenses including personal rights violations, personal privacy, and defamation of Ataturk” (“Government Request Report: Turkey” 2015).

Even more Turkish censorship rules came to light in 2012 when a Moroccan worker at outsourcing firm *oDesk* (now *Upwork*) leaked a guidelines document describing Facebook’s censorship and takedown system. Amine Derkaoui, aggrieved by working his way through reported Facebook posts for 1 USD per hour, leaked the file to condemn the exploitative practices of outsourcing work to underpaid third world workers. However, most media focused the news story on the social networking website’s ban on bare-nipple breastfeeding photographs while tolerating graphic pictures of “deep flesh wounds” and “crushed heads” (Arthur 2012). There are four different consequences that outsourced Facebook operators can give reported posts, defined as following by the leaked document:

- Confirm: “with respect to the moderation tool, a decision which implies that there is a violation on a piece of content, as reported by the user”
- Unconfirmed: “a decision which implies that there is no violation on a piece of content, as reported by the user”
- Escalate: “A decision taken on a piece of content that sends it to the social media client’s internal review team for further action”
- Ignore: for so-called ‘irrelevant’ pieces of content which need not be reviewed in order to assess whether there is a violation or not.

⁵⁷ India has the second-largest Facebook userbase, following the United States. According to Facebook, the “majority of the content was restricted under local laws against anti-religious and hate speech that could cause unrest and disharmony within India”, with reports of some atheist groups being blocked. The Indian constitution protects freedom of speech, but sections of the country's penal code (notably §153A and §295) prohibit insulting religions and inciting hostilities between different religions.

⁵⁸ Almost tripling the figure of the second half of last year, which counted 5,832 requests.

The guidelines include a section on the international compliance rules which Zuckerberg talks about in his update post. There are six types of content that are not allowed⁵⁹, the first type being holocaust denial with a focus on hate speech. The other five points are all aimed at compliance with Turkish law, such as the banning of any and all attacks on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the burning of Turkish flags. More relevant for the removal of the YPG page and Kurdish social media presence in general, however, is the blanket ban on maps of Kurdistan, a violation which must be escalated for further review by Facebook’s internal team. Supporting the PKK is also forbidden, as is simply *depicting* the PKK. Facebook users are also not authorized to post any Abdullah Öcalan-related content. Interestingly, PKK and Öcalan content is allowed by Turkey (and thus by Facebook) when it clearly depicts anti-PKK or anti-Öcalan sentiments. From the document, it seems that Turkey is the only country that receives such a special treatment from Facebook, barring Germany’s holocaust denial legislation.



Figure 16. Slide from the leaked oDesk document with guidelines on prohibited content.

Facebook has many reasons to comply with Turkish law. Aside from the obvious profit loss, Turkey “represents a huge potential audience for U.S. tech companies, with its growing population of young digital natives and its rapidly transforming economy” (Dewey 2015). Facebook also knows that the possibility of a general ban on Facebook and related services is very real. Twitter was blocked in the country for two weeks in 2014 after the platform was used to make allegations of corruption in presidential circles. Similar to Facebook, Turkey was the first country for which Twitter used its “Country Withheld Content” tool; Twitter now actively withholds content⁶⁰, including two profiles known for publicizing corruption. It is realistic to say

⁵⁹ See Appendix I for screenshots of relevant excerpts from the document.

⁶⁰ As of June 2014, Twitter blocked 14 user accounts and hundreds of tweets.

that these kinds of censorship and social media regulation have been amplified following the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Since Instagram was acquired by Facebook in 2012, Community Guidelines have followed mostly the same patterns, and therefore NJFF profiles are prone to simultaneous deletion across different social media platforms:

“Ok, guys. So my last post was deleted by Instagram and I got a warning. Apparently, I'm not allowed to tell you news regarding Turkey's war against the kurds ⁶¹. I know that several fighters with the YPG, including westerners such as [@jesper.soder](#), have had their Facebook accounts closed or deleted for the same reason. And as you might know, Instagram is owned by Facebook. It's sad to see how Facebook is bowing down for turkish censorship and turkish president Erdogan, who have previously blocked Twitter and YouTube in Turkey because of people criticizing the turkish government. This is dissapointing, Instagram. This is dissapointing. [#freekurdistan](#)”

Peshmerganor 2016

⁶¹ For the original Instagram posts that was deleted, see Appendix II.

7. Policy evaluation

7.1 Local reactions

Local reactions to the presence of foreign volunteers have been mixed. The Syrian government refuses their presence; Bashar al-Assad contends that “if there are foreigners coming without the permission of the government, they are illegal, whether they want to fight terrorists or want to fight any other one. It is the same. It’s illegal, we can call it” (Assad, 2016).

IS allegedly responded to the presence of foreign fighters by placing substantial bounties on any armed foreign volunteer. Western fighters told media that the bounties amount to up to \$150,000, though no further evidence could be found.

Because Ankara considers the YPG a terrorist group, Turkey considers Western foreign fighters in their ranks terrorists as well. Yunus Akbaba, spokesman for the Turkish prime minister, affirmed that the Turkish government considers the YPG a “terrorist [group] and anyone fighting under their banner will be considered terrorists [...] It is the responsibility of the countries where they come from to prevent them from joining these groups. Turkish forces will confront them if they are fighting under the banner of terrorist groups, regardless of whether they are members of allied countries” (Ensor, 2016).

On the Kurdish side, reactions are heavily influenced by factionalist politics. The YPG in Syria warmly welcomes foreign fighters, though not particularly for their tactical added value – the YPG does not specifically vet for fighters with military experience. The international members of the YPG have been said to affect “the morale of people, and they leave behind a spirit of brotherhood and internationalism” (Lucente, 2015). Many of them also become staunch activists for the Kurdish cause as a whole, campaigning for Rojava and the Kurds. Because media in the home countries of these foreign fighters are more than interested in interviews with them, this provides the Kurdish activism campaign with a substantial amount of media exposure, and Kurdish officers have implored NJFF’s to “do interviews and get our point of view across” (ibid.) to build rapport between the Kurds and the world. The role of Western volunteers as activists and propaganda disseminators (rather than procurers of a tactical advantage) for the Kurds warrants more research.

However, NJFF’s with the YPG have also participated in actual combat – the Manbij offensive in particular cost several NJFF’s their lives. Foreign fighters who were killed in action become martyrs; their portraits disseminated on posters in YPG territory, their likeness uploaded and spread through social media; their deaths lamented by hundreds if not thousands of Kurds

chanting *şehîd namirin* – ‘martyrs do not die’. The father of a local YPG militant that was killed said the Western volunteers are not foreigners: “We call them our brothers who fight for humanity [...] They are sons of this soil and I offer my condolence to [their] martyrs⁶² [...] My son protected his own region, but foreign fighters protected humanity” (van Wilgenburg, 2016). Salih Muslim Muhammad, co-chairman of the PYD, said that the “Kurds are very happy with these foreign fighters. They do not feel alone, in the past the Kurds only had [the] mountains⁶³, but now we have Americans, British, French and Germans, and many of them were martyred” (Mamo, 2016).

The situation is markedly different for those wanting to join the Iraqi Peshmerga. The Kurdistan Regional Government’s official stance is that the Peshmerga does not accept any foreigners, for reasons of legal and diplomatic nature. Jabar Yawar of the Ministry of Peshmerga told the Guardian that the KRG does “not accept any foreigners joining the peshmerga forces. We are an army, not a militia [...] The law does not allow us to accept these foreigners. Those volunteers who are now with the peshmerga forces have nothing to do with us. The ministry of Peshmerga is not responsible for them.” (Hawramy & Jalabi, 2015). Additionally, KRG representatives in the diaspora countries have echoed that the Peshmerga need weapons rather than manpower, advising diaspora Kurds against joining the armed forces. Despite this official stance, foreign fighters are still fighting alongside Peshmerga. Many early volunteers were sent to the 9th Brigade, led by the English speaking General Araz Abdulgadir. An official of the 9th explains the Peshmerga had not “asked for them to join us but they have come as volunteers and we didn’t want to let them down after they took such a long trip. [However we] don’t want to send them to the frontline and get them killed⁶⁴” (MacDiarmid, 2016). The aversion to bring foreign fighters into perilous combat situations reflects the Peshmerga’s apprehension towards a public relations imbroglio in case of death. In that optic, the volunteers may produce more security issues than they solve (Jaklin, 2015).

Though no data exists, most foreign fighters still active with the Peshmerga currently seem to be fighting with the PAK’s armed wing, HAK-R, though the PUK has also welcomed foreigners into its Peshmerga⁶⁵ (van Wilgenburg, 2016b).

⁶² The role of martyrdom in the YPG is an important one, which has affected the status of deceased foreign fighters and undoubtedly attributed to the idealization of the conflict for many fighters, both local and foreign. Further research into the phenomenon is certainly warranted, but falls outside the scope of this thesis.

⁶³ Muslim is referencing a Kurdish proverb which states that the Kurds have ‘no friends but the mountains’.

⁶⁵ Notably, IDET.



Figure 17. Inauguration of a Scandinavian PAK Peshmerga unit. Behind the Romanian , Kurdish, and Swedish flag, we see (from left to right): @jesper.soder, PAK commander Hossein Yazdanpanah, @nordveg and @scandipesh.

This discrepancy indicates that most of the Peshmerga forces are still very much run by the regional parties such as the PAK and the PUK, who may set up their own recruiting networks locally and in the diaspora - but the net is closing. One foreign fighter said that “KRG rules regarding volunteers became gradually stricter soon after our arrival. KDP was trying to send them away or keep them off the frontlines, PUK would help them but did not have the power of renewing their visas” (“Hello folks”, 2016). Kurdish authorities in Erbil have also “increasingly pressed foreign governments to discourage their citizens from travelling to Iraq to join their ranks because they can become a liability” (Kalin, 2016). The KRG’s turndown of foreign fighters has also affected those willing to fight with the YPG in Syria instead, since most cross KRG territory to get into Syria. Imposing up to one month jail time for illegally crossing the border and up to 1,000 USD in fines for expired visas, the KRG effectively blocks the recruitment of foreign fighters by the YPG. Several foreign fighters have been arrested and detained. A British YPG volunteer who was jailed for an expired visa said that “It hasn’t been like that from the beginning that [YPG]

volunteers get into trouble with the KDP. In the beginning it was all cool” (van Wilgenburg, 2017). Families of deceased fighters have also reported troubles returning their bodies (Frantzman, 2016).

It is not known what prompted the KRG crackdown on foreign fighters. While the officials cite purely legal reasons, a Canadian fighter told several different media that “US military advisors pressured Peshmerga commanders to take the volunteers off the frontline”, but such claims are categorically denied by KRG officials (MacDiarmid, 2015). A Western diplomat in Erbil said his government has “no interest in our own nationals coming here as volunteer” and that “the KRG authorities are well aware of our position” (MacDiarmid, 2016).

To add to this outside pressure, the foreign volunteers turned out to be a mixed bag of unpredictable characters and personalities. A Peshmerga commander said that some “did not show real commitment to the anti-ISIS campaign, [while others] participated in important battles and have proven themselves as good soldiers” (van Wilgenburg, 2016). The conflicts between foreign fighters in the YPG also prompted a more severe vetting and training process, as did the fact that many of the fighters were not familiar with the YPG’s ideology.

7.2 Legal framework

The judicial approach to the activities of citizens traveling abroad to fight against IS has been quasi non-existent in comparison to the criminal justice response that jihadist fighters have seen. The legal framework is complex, variable, and often unclear. Some countries have taken to explicitly condemning the practice and seemingly commit to judicial persecution of returning fighters – often in the face of significant public opposition⁶⁶. But the lion’s share of countries practices some form of realpolitik, whereby foreign fighters are only prosecuted if they were member of a group contrary to their country’s interests and allegiances.

The legal framework for this consists of the fact that, in general, those traveling abroad to join the Syrian and Iraqi conflict are not perceived as committing any crime at all. Indeed, the absolute majority of (Western) countries’ legislation does not include any provisions that would provide for a judicial prosecution of citizens privately and voluntarily fighting against IS. However, several caveats may apply, depending on different jurisdictions.

For example, most countries that allow involvement in foreign conflicts do forbid joining

⁶⁶ For example, a petition demanding amnesty for a Dutch foreign fighter gained more than 66,000 signatures (“Steun Jitse Akse”, 2016).

a terrorist organization. Though neither the YPG nor the Peshmerga are a designated terrorist organization in most countries, they are affiliated with the PKK⁶⁷, which often is. This connection with the PKK has caused much of the legal obscurity surrounding non-jihadist foreign fighters. SAPO, the Swedish security service, even went as far as to say that “people who fight for the PKK “aren't automatically guilty of a crime” and would be prosecuted in Sweden only if they violated the laws of war or used banned weapons (Olsen & Ritter, 2014). A spokesman for the Dutch Justice Ministry on counterterrorism said joining the PKK is a crime, though “he stopped short of saying [those joining] would be prosecuted” (ibid.). On the other hand, Silhan Özçelik, a British woman of Kurdish background, was convicted to 21 months in a young offender institution for merely attempting to join the PKK (Davies, 2015). Two revolutionary Spanish fighters were also arrested returning from Syria because their communist organization had ties to the PKK. According to an American foreign fighter, the YPG’s affiliation with the PKK is circumvented by the US through the SDF:

“Oh there is [a military relationship between the YPG and the United States]. It’s an insanely cynical one, but there is one. We get air support from them, which we call in on tablets, which are otherwise used to play Bubble Pop. [...] The YPG, they don’t give anything to. We don’t get anything from them: no training, no guns, no ammunition—nothing. But the SDF, on the other hand, [sarcastic tone] because it is a new organization that doesn’t have any ties to the PKK, they get some guns and some training and some—I don’t think they get any money, actually I don’t think they even get any training. But [the SDF] get some guns from [the U.S.]”

(Belden, 2017)

Countries may also forbid their citizens from fighting in state entities, but not in non-state militias such as the YPG. They can also prohibit engaging in conflict against one or more allied states. Importantly, combat behaviour consisting of, for example, killing an enemy (i.e. a member of IS) can, in some cases, be formally qualified (and prosecuted) as murder. However, because of obvious evidentiary difficulties, prosecution is often cancelled. Some countries’ legislation also explicitly excludes such activities, classifying them under ‘necessary defence’, e.g. Czechia (CTHH, personal communication, April 25, 2017). A Dutch veteran sniper who openly asserted killing “forty or so” IS-fighters (Ponsen & De Waal, 2015) until he was wounded and returned to

⁶⁷ For example, through the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK).

Europe, was not prosecuted. Public prosecutors often refrain from pursuing legal action, even if a legal basis is found, because they do not always find prosecution in the public interest – unlike the prosecution of jihadi fighters.

The governments who support this view on NJFF's keep to a tradition of 'condemn nor condone' – i.e., they advise against all travel to Syria and Iraq, but do not condemn the foreign fighters' actions. Countries who have no legal repercussions for NJFF's with the YPG and Peshmerga include but are not limited to⁶⁸ the US, UK, Canada, Israel, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, France, Norway⁶⁹, New Zealand and Czechia.

While the US and Canada⁷⁰ seem to have the most hands-off approach despite their high number of volunteers, the UK seems to have the strongest form of monitoring over returning fighters: many of them are denied direct entry into their home countries. Instead, most are questioned upon return from the conflict zone, arrested under the Terrorism Act, and subsequently released on bail for some weeks. However, those leaving for Syria have openly stated their intention to join the YPG and have been allowed to continue their journey (Barbani, 2015)⁷¹. No prosecution has been formally initiated for those joining the YPG. Other charges against NJFF's, in an array of countries, have largely followed the same formula.

At the level of the European Union, too, there is no long-term strategy. According to professor of Comparative Politics Vera Eccarius-Kelly, European officials are aware of volunteers traveling to Syria to fight with the YPG, but there is no long term strategy (Eccarius-Kelly 2014). This lack of European policy is also noticeable in the area of arming the YPG, with Germany supplying heavy weapons, Denmark some protective gear, and other member states abstaining from donating equipment (ibid.) The member states achieved an agreement on European cooperation regarding foreign fighter intelligence, but it solely discusses jihadist fighters.

Some countries have seemingly applied the full extent of the law to those joining, or attempting to join, the conflict in Syria. The Australian government, despite they themselves arming the Kurds in their fight against IS, have vowed to persecute citizens who join the conflict under the Crimes (Foreign Incursion and Recruitment) Act of 1978. A spokesperson for Australia's

⁶⁸ Governments of countries with NJFF's were contacted to inquire about the legality of such undertakings, but declined to comment. The legality or illegality in the countries described here were determined through media articles reporting from government officials.

⁶⁹ "Our focus as a security service will be more on groups like IS and not people going to defend areas against the IS," said Trond Hugubakken, spokesman for the Norway's PST security service.

⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the Canadian government has sent mixed messages (Lynch, 2014),

⁷¹ Some leaving for Syria have not been granted passage by British authorities, notably because of refusal to give policemen access to their smartphone. While joining the YPG or Peshmerga is not a crime, it seems, failing to provide a smartphone PIN made the Brit plead guilty to obstructing a 'Schedule Seven' search under the UK's Terrorism Act ("Brits travelling to Syria", 2017).

attorney general said it is “illegal to fight in Syria for either side of the conflict [...] If you fight illegally in overseas conflicts, you face up to life in prison upon your return to Australia [...] We know there are some Australians who think they’ve made the right choice in becoming involved in overseas conflicts, but that choice only adds to the suffering in Syria and Iraq and it’s putting those Australians and others in mortal danger” (Robertson, 2015). However, the same spokesman later stated that “travelling to conflict zones such as Syria and Iraq to participate in hostile activities [...] *may* constitute a criminal offence” (Doherty, 2016, my italics). In practice, returning fighters have been detained and subsequently released without charges, though some have stayed under police investigation and passport confiscation for more than a year; one fighter told the Australian Federal Police “[i]f I’m the bad guy, then fucking charge me [...] I don’t care. I’ll do my time” (ibid.). Another would-be fighter was barred from getting on a plane towards Qatar, and was formally arrested eight months later on foreign incursions charges. However, half a year later the case was dropped by the public prosecutor on instructions by Federal Attorney General George Brandis – who refused to comment beyond saying he had exercised his “discretion” (Oakes & Goswell, 2016).

The political machinations behind the decision might become clearer analysing the case of another Australian aspiring combatant who was detained at the airport *en route* to Syria. After being formally arrested and charged with “conduct which was preparatory to the commission of an offence ... namely entering a foreign country with the intention of engaging in a hostile activity” (Marshall, 2016), an international relations conundrum began to seep its way into the case. The Crimes Act allows for Australians to join governments with legitimate mandates, but those are broadly defined as any “authority with effective governmental control” (ibid.). Thus, the would-be fighter’s defense was hinged on the premise that the YPG exercises governance in the region to the degree necessary. As the candidate-combatant’s lawyer states it, “[a] jury would have to decide whether [the YPG] had met the threshold as an autonomous region in the Middle East [...] Can you imagine – an Australian jury deciding a matter of international politics? [...] If we had won this case, [the Australian aspiring fighter] would have put another arrow in their quiver of statehood” (Marshall, 2016). Instead, the action was dropped, with no explanation given. Thus, the reality of Australia’s prosecution of NJFF’s is far from what has been described as a “clear-cut approach to foreign fighters[which] does not allow any special dispensation for those fighting for, or alongside, anti-ISIS organisations or groups” (Tuck, Silverman & Smalley, 2016: 46).

The same authors state that the Belgian government forbids “any citizen from joining a foreign army, regardless of its criminal status or intentions towards their state of origin”, citing

article 140 of the Belgian Penal Code. However, article 140 explicitly mentions participation in the activities of a terrorist organization. In reality, the Belgian government seems to follow the majority of European countries in their condemn-nor-condone approach. For example, a Belgian Kurd openly testified about his time fighting with the Peshmerga on Belgium's main public Dutch-language TV station (Vranckx, 2014).

Denmark has effectively stopped NJFF's from traveling to Syria, though not on the basis of making the YPG or Peshmerga illegal to join. Rather, the country's government signed a new law allowing its justice system to issue a travel ban and seize the passport of anyone suspected of planning to travel to an armed conflict to fight. The law does not specify the kind of fighter, but it came in response to Denmark being the second biggest source of jihadi fighters, trailing only Belgium. Joanna Palani, a Kurdish-Danish woman who had previously fought in Iraq and openly expressed her intention to return, was jailed for some three weeks for violating the travel ban⁷². All other Danes affected by the laws were suspected of fighting alongside IS ("Danish woman loses passport for fighting Isis", 2015).

The country with the soundest legal framework against fighting with the Kurds is Switzerland. Swiss law forbids engagement in foreign conflicts "based on the fact that almost all Swiss male citizens are members of its conscript army, and remain active reservists for most of their lives. It also has its origins in Switzerland's long history of providing mercenary soldiers to other armies – including the Pope's Swiss guards" (Huggler, 2015). Nevertheless, the ten Swiss citizens with Assyrian backgrounds who have left for the Middle East to fight with the Syrian Military Council have seen no prosecution, it seems – though it is unknown whether they are back in Switzerland or if authorities are even aware of their activities. One exception is the case of Johan Cosar, an ex-Sergeant who claims to have went to Syria to work as a journalist, but he then proceeded to take up arms and even co-found the MFS. He was charged upon return in 2014, and the criminal investigation has recently been closed. As of April 2017, his case was passed into the hands of magistrate Roberto Colombi, who now will decide whether to advance to trial or not (Lepori, 2017).

In conclusion, no governments have yet decided to formally prosecute citizens for fighting with the YPG or Peshmerga: those detained were mostly stopped for 'circumstantial' reasons. Thus, not one court has yet made a judgment on the legality or illegality of joining Kurdish factions to combat the Islamic State.

⁷² Palani appealed the decision, but Copenhagen City Court did not take her side.

7.3 Policy evaluation

In conclusion, policymakers have mostly refrained from taking a clear stance condemning the practice of private citizens participating in the Syrian war to fight against the Islamic State. An American involved in training Assyrian units once formulated Western policy towards NJFF's succinctly by saying that "as long as you shoot in the right direction [they] don't care" (Eleftheriadou, 2015: 17). While these policies may seem like the result of a straightforward evaluation, they certainly are troublesome. Most of these 'condemn-nor-condone' policies stem from the fact that the number of non-jihadist fighters pales in comparison with those fighting for organizations such as IS, and the belief that the inherent risks are negligible. Indeed, policy makers opt instead to prioritize their resources towards jihadist fighters. However, the political and social ramifications of fighting in a foreign conflict are significant, and some effects would be easily mitigated were there a strategy in place – let alone prevent the deaths of dozens of volunteers who chose to travel toward the conflict.

For one, though public opinion often idolises foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, they have been subjected to criticism and scepticism, often from other volunteers. Many accusations have denounced what is perceived as 'war tourism': lingering around in the region in a relatively safe manner while posting social media content stating otherwise⁷³. One of the more popular NJFF's on social media posted

"There are several groups on Facebook that are recruiting volunteers to "fight" the Islamic State alongside the Peshmerga. The only problem with this is that no volunteer group is actually allowed to fight. They're usually placed under the command of a defensive or reserve unit, so they spend all their time at a camp, being bored and starting drama within their own group or with other groups as a result [...] I usually try avoiding calling out other volunteers, even though many of them are frauds, because of all the drama that follows. But it's becoming harder and harder to watch some of these guys take credit for what just a few of us have done. [...] This guy, [redacted], spent 2 weeks (!) in Kurdistan before going home [...] he wasn't allowed on the front and spent his time taking

⁷³ The concept is not new: Hegghammer (2010: 63) mentions the case of Afghanistan in the eighties, where foreign fighter casualty rates were so low (between 2 and 6 percent) and average tours so short "that some referred to the late volunteers as jihad 'tourists'."

photos for his Facebook page [... He] started a crowdfunding [sic] campaign and is asking for money [...] stop making up crazy war stories, you were only a tourist”
(Peshmerganor 2016)

These kinds of accusations are rife within the online NJFF community. For many, they seem to be rooted in truth: NJFF's themselves have brought up their disillusionment with the passive roles they are assigned to. One of several volunteers indicated similar sentiments, saying he “never even shot at the enemy. I was never in combat [...] Those thinking their [sic] gonna be these movie youtube firefights, it ain't gonna happen. The Kurds are not gonna put any of us in that type of danger [...] Not just me but all foreigners I'm pretty sure of. [...]” (Barbarani, 2015). A US-based Assyrian group financing the NPU claims militias like the Dwekh Nawsha rarely see combat: “They are not an effective fighting force. The [KRG] has set them up for show and made no effort to fund them. They attract and then repel foreign fighters because they don't do anything” (West, 2016). Alleged reasons for this ‘war tourism’ range from Kurdish apprehension to put them on the front lines⁷⁴, to donation fraud and fighters' own volition to stay safe.

On the other hand, many fighters have denied these accusations. One NJFF said that “[i]f you don't end up at front, you either didn't want to, the hevalen [did not] think you were competent, or you disrespected the culture” (Patkasper, 2017). Statements like these are supported by several testimonies, the deaths of foreign fighters in the midst of battle near al-Shaddadi and Manbij, and HD action camera footage of Western fighters uploaded to YouTube. The trouble with these kind of allegations is that the NJFF's in Syria and Iraq are a very heterogeneous group, members of many different militias and armed forces, within a complex political landscape. While some fighters were caught red-handed lying about their heroic escapades in the region (Murphy, 2014), others died fighting the Islamic State head-on:

I mean, this simply isn't true most of the time. Every time my unit fought, I fought. Every advance, I advanced with them. Every attack, every defense, me and the other westerners were a part of. The Westerners earned their stripes in Manbij and then some. A lot of the time, westerners simply choose the wrong unit for fighting. Or they happen to be in a unit that doesn't see a lot of action, just by chance. And also, what overtly negative press has there been when a foreigner has been killed? What repercussions? If anything, the death

⁷⁴ One might argue that the foreign fighters are more valuable to the Kurds as an activist and propaganda tool than in a purely tactical or military manner.

of a foreigner brings more press than it would've if they were living. And any press is good press”

(“International unit of the YPG operating in Tabqa”, 2017).

Regardless, not all volunteer fighters act out of mere altruism. There are documented cases of NJFF's with criminal backgrounds who have fled to Iraq and Syria to escape prosecution. Among those with criminal records are sex offenders (Siegel, 2015) and rapists (“Convicted rapist”, 2016), an American charged with battery of a police officer (“Wanted N. Fort Myers man”, 2016) and a Brit who was charged with grievous bodily harm after breaking a teenager's jaw (Rkaina, 2015). Many of them travelled to Syria to escape outstanding warrants.

Then, there is the absolute dominance of veterans within the ranks of the foreign fighters. Their reintegration into civilian life, a martial Achilles' heel, seems quite flawed when they abandon it to join a bloody international conflict and pay for the privilege themselves. Many of these veterans show symptoms of stress disorders or openly admit to PTSD or depression, afflictions which could easily worsen under the new circumstances in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, research has shown that pre-existing trauma and mental health issues are known risk factors for increased mental health challenges (Mitchell, 2010). Those joining the conflict driven by feelings of revenge could very well be confronted with complete inaction rendering their sentiments of impotence even stronger – without the presence of professional help. This disillusionment reported by many returning volunteers, as well as other risk factors such as low unit cohesion, poor leadership, or young age (ibid.) could influence foreign fighters' mental health.

Others are driven to Iraq and Syria by desperation rather than choice. One veteran was worried about the ordeal and had accrued misgivings – but as his relationship fell apart, his unemployment continued and his accommodation was lost, he contemplated that he had the choice between being “homeless, or go to Iraq. So I left” (McLaughlin, 2015). To be clear, the difficult transition from military to a civilian life is an ongoing challenge that reaches far beyond the scope of this paper. But without proper research, letting veterans choose their conflicts to participate in seems an unsustainable approach to solving the problems associated with reintegration.

Another problematic aspect is that of payment. Foreign fighters routinely refer to themselves as volunteers, and react with some irritation to accusations of being a mercenary. They are indeed not paid by their militia⁷⁵ nor by any state, and the expenses for their undertaking

⁷⁵ Though some report limited stipends of about 108 USD in the YPG, meant for food and small personal purchases (Perry, 2017).

they bear themselves. But many of the fighters do attempt to regain some of their expenses. Some volunteers have released books about their exploits, with rousing titles such as *Fighting ISIS: How One Ordinary Brit Went to War*, *When the World Looked Away*, or *They Called Me "Hero": How I Fought as a German in Syria Against the Islamic State*. Others capture footage on their mobile phones and action cameras, selling it to news organizations later. Two fighters sold footage of them “driving along a road *en route* to Syria and running through a village next to the YPG control base they were stationed at” to Sky News for the sum of £6,000 (Murphy, 2014).

Failed crowdfunding campaigns for aspiring fighters scattered across the web not only indicate the number of aspiring combatants, but also reveals another stream of revenue. Fighters with more than a hundred thousand followers, for example, have successfully set up extensive crowdfunding campaigns. Not only do they call upon their followers to make donations through crowdfunding websites and directly through PayPal, but they are also contacted by manufacturers of military equipment (e.g. telescopic rifle sights), looking to switch up their commercial campaigns with images of real-life use of their products in an active theatre of war.

Thus, social media accounts have become a virtual battleground for likes and followers. One of the most successful crowdfunding fighters told *Morgenbladet* that “[p]ictures of dead IS fighters have proven to be very popular. That, and images that look cool, like the ones I published a few days ago with flames in the background” (Traavik 2016, my translation). It seems no coincidence that he often posts such photographs combined with an action film quote. Professor Ethan Mollick, expert in crowdfunding, says he has never seen anything like this use of the platform (ibid.).

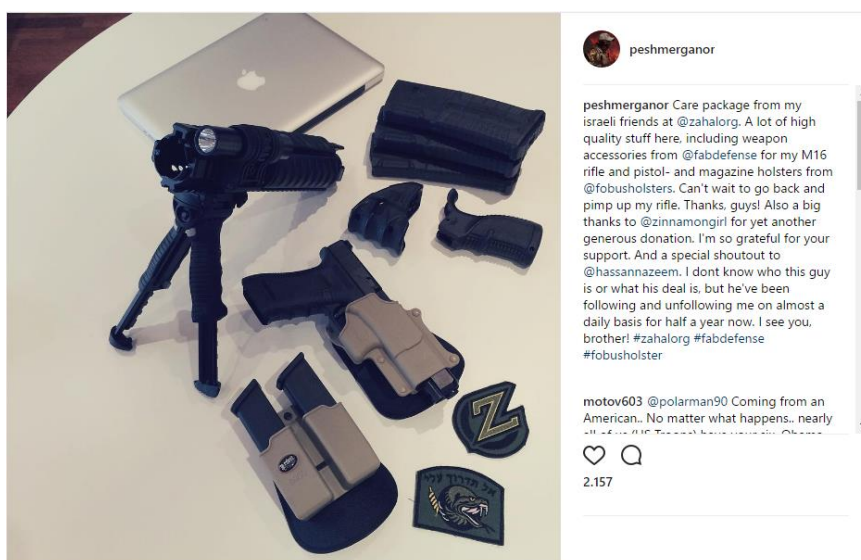


Figure 18. @Peshmerganor thanks sponsors and followers for their donations.

Also to be considered is the import of the Syrian and Iraqi conflict into foreign fighters' respective home countries. While some countries may have chosen to join the US-led coalition against ISIS, states specifically opt not to get involved in a boots-on-the-ground fashion, barring training operations and semi-secretive special forces involvement. However, foreign fighters proudly display the flag of their countries as an embroidered patch worn on the sleeve of their uniform – often in conjunction with the flag of Kurdistan. One Swedish fighter posted of his exploits, stating “usually when there are incoming mortars normal people run to cover, well we do the opposite by running up to the roof with the big Swedish flag and ask for even more” (Peshmergaswe 2016b). This kind of use of a national flag may lead to misunderstandings with dire consequences. It is unclear what would happen if a citizen is captured, for example, and how far countries gauge their responsibilities to extend – a captured NJFF would imply a meaningful propaganda opportunity for IS, and certain death for the captive.

The implications for foreign fighters' home countries do not stop there. Back home, returned foreign fighters and their families have received death threats from IS sympathizers on several occasions. Government officials have also expressed concern at the rising hostilities between Kurdish activists and hardline Islamists and Salafists across Europe (Buchanan, 2014). The German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) issued a warning on the "strong emotionalization" of the two sides (Diehl & Schmid, 2014), while a Kurdish-German fighter affirmed that “it is only a question of time before we will see a further escalation [here in Europe]” (ibid.). Such a spiral of violence could be invigorated by returning fighters from both sides of the front lines. Returning fighters could also ‘radicalize’ supporters of the Kurdish cause by swaying them towards recruitment through idealization of their anti-IS struggle. According to Malet, the “use of social group networks for recruitment” carries several benefits, such as permitting “recruiters to employ social pressures to join” (Malet, 2009: 101). The informal networks that run along the borders of Kurdish activism, propaganda and recruitment are mostly obscured and unknown, even to governments. This lack of information stands in stark contrast with what we know about the recruitment processes of the Islamic State (Oaten & La Canna, 2015).

The risk of ‘radicalization’ and recruitment, not necessarily in that order, radiates not only from within the tight-knit networks of ethnically Kurdish communities, but also from the revolutionist elements fighting with the Kurds. Take for example the two Spanish foreign fighters who were prosecuted upon return: members of the *Reconstrucción Comunista* – a Marxist-Leninist party from Spain whose secretary-general was jailed for PKK recruitment and possession of explosives (Arroyo, 2016). But right-wing, Christian fighters among the members of the Dwekh Nawsha have also displayed disquieting behaviour.

Using crusade symbolism, they equate their armed activism in the Christian militia with a holy war – even though locals retort that they “don’t want to fight a holy war for Christians”, despite valuable media attention and potential funding. “We fight for our land [...] We aren’t crusaders [...] That’s how they make it look” (Morris, 2015). Indeed, according to some researchers, the Christian fighters follow an “apocalyptic logic” (Benraad, 2015), convinced they are defending the Judaeo-Christian civilization with an ideology that grew as a response to the fundamentalism of the Islamic State. “There is a sacralisation of combat from both sides [...] they leave to relive history in a grand adventure in the name of religion – they assume the spirit of the Crusades [...] it’s cause versus cause, civilization versus civilization” (ibid.).

This symbolism, which is shared among online supporters of the Christian militia, has since long been used by the far-right political current dubbed the ‘counterjihad’, an anti-Islamic transnational movement with a political mythology and iconography that draws heavily on the Crusades (Mjaaland, 2011). Academics have argued that “though it does not specifically call for violence, [counterjihad narratives] can act as inspiration for violent terrorist attacks like those carried out by [Anders Behring] Breivik, who emerged from the ECJM’s ideological milieu” (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun, 2013: 2).

It is not too far a stretch of the imagination to consider that anti-Islamists from the far right might join Christian militias. One member of the Dwekh Nawsha is an admirer of Britain First, the far-right nationalist political party campaigning against the perceived ‘Islamisation’ of the UK. According to him, Islamic extremism is spreading throughout the UK by “out-breeding” the white population, and he is convinced that “Britain in a few years will be a Muslim country, a complete Muslim country” (Neuhof, 2015). But the far-right counterjihadists among the foreign fighters have gone further than mere rhetoric. In fact, one fighter is the founder of the largest neo-Nazi party of Sweden and was sentenced to prison for the theft of the *Arbeit Macht Frei*-sign in Auschwitz (Hult, 2016). Another Spanish fighter was the ideological leader of *Pánzer*, a neo-Nazi gang based out of Valencia. At the time of his arrest, large quantities of ammunition and different firearms of various calibre were found at his residence (Cantarero, 2014). Important to keep in mind is that these returning fighters, whether they are far-right counterjihadist, revolutionist or pro-Kurdish, will have become familiarized with the use of guerrilla warfare and military technology, ranging from assault rifles to RPG’s and explosives, including returning fighters who had criminal records before they left for Syria or Iraq.

Another troublesome factor is the possibility of escalation stemming from intra-Kurdish

strife. Occasional clashes have erupted between Kurds⁷⁶, and foreign fighters joining different Kurdish factions could one day stand eye to eye. One Swedish fighter claims to have been arrested for refusing to fight other Kurds, though several other sources dispute his claim and state the Swede was not obeying menial orders (van Wilgenburg, 2017). In any case, the recent successes against IS could lead to increasing tensions between different Kurdish factions as they re-ignite the regional struggle for power. It is not unimaginable that NJFF's will be used to further Kurdish political agenda. For example, after the clashes between Turkey and the YPG in April of 2017, the question of anti-Turkish violence rises: how will governments respond when their citizens are embroiled in a conflict between Kurdish troops and the Turkish state – a NATO partner?

Moreover, the legal framework *an sich* has seen governments accused of hypocrisy. In a brief opinion piece on *Opinio Juris*, Richmond-Barak & Barber (2016) bring to the fore an excellent argument against the “logic of extending blanket legitimacy to Kurdish militia, while categorically denying it to others”, because it “is difficult to sustain at the level of international policy. Hamas and Hezbollah [like the KRG and other Kurdish factions are non-state actors who] effectively govern territory and have evolved into organized and recognized bodies. Yet foreign participation in one of these groups is unlikely to be regarded as acceptable”. Moreover, it surely cannot be the intention that IS members are declared *homines sacri*, and their killers – moving within a legal grey area – immune from prosecution.

State governments seem to base much of their legal policy on a faction's current allegiance. But particularly in Syria, with its complex web of actors and its plethora of different ideologies, it is not always clear where allegiances may lie (Tuck 2016). Others may argue that the wilful barbarism of the Islamic State stands in stark contrast with the perception of a democratic and inclusive Kurdish project. Governments have rid themselves of a clear expression of policy, let alone strategy, by merely saying that there is a “fundamental difference” between the Kurds and IS (Cameron, 2014). While such vague comments may intuitively feel correct for many, they do not offer a legal basis for distinction, which gives the feeling that governmental policy is based on ideology – a dangerous precedent to set, Richmond-Barak and Barber correctly argue (2016). Moreover, both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have criticized the Kurds for ethnic displacement, the destruction of entire villages, and use of child soldiers (ibid.). Foreign fighters with the YPG have stated reports of looting and mistreatment of civilians (Barbarani,

⁷⁶ The Sinjar clashes of 2017 saw fighting breaking out between pro-PKK Sinjar Resistance Units forces (YBS) and the Rojava Peshmerga under the authority of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), Barzani's political presence in Syria. A struggle for power in Sinjar emerged after PKK forces created a humanitarian corridor and trained a local militia for the Yezidis in 2014. This strengthened the PKK in the area, but the KDP wants them to vacate the region.

2015). The accusations do not put the Kurdish forces into the same camp as extremist militias by a long shot, but the examples are enough to jettison the illusion of easy judgment. If governments were to base their decision on whether armed groups respect international law, surely many foreign soldiers in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) would find themselves in a precarious legal condition.

The result is that there are no objective criteria set forth that convincingly fit the tacit acceptance NJFF's within a legal framework. The legal and judicial discrepancy that is made between the 'foreign fighters' joining the Kurdish cause and the jihadists fighting with IS, is only explained as self-evident.

Malet concludes his book with this:

“Increasing numbers of foreign fighters are a cause for concern, not alarm. Indeed, a number of transnational volunteers fought what would widely be considered “the good fight” against greater evils, and their members are acclaimed as heroes [...] transnational insurgencies have been with us for a long time and appear likely to be factors in civil conflicts for the foreseeable future”

(Malet 2013: 214)

While the risks associated with NJFF's are indeed substantially less alarming than those of their jihadist counterparts, a clearer policy toward them can benefit both governments, fighters, and the actors in the conflict – especially since the influx of foreign fighters now will not be the last one. Governments should establish clear and objective legal criteria to deal with foreign fighters in an array of scenarios. For Europe, supranational guidance from the European Union could aid in this enterprise. Existing programmes and organizations as European Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC) could extend their focus foreign fighters as a whole. Follow-up on returning fighters could be integrated into veteran care services or returning jihadi fighter programs – of course using extreme caution regarding these two different groups.

Another, complimentary, possibility is reaching out to specific groups that are strongly represented within the NJFF population: ethnic Kurds and Western veterans. Kurdish diaspora organizations should be involved in the public awareness process. Kurds in various diaspora themselves should be fully informed of the dangers of the conflict, not swayed by online and social media posts. They should also be reminded of the official KRG stance, who have repeated time and again that not manpower but material aid is needed the most. Veterans, too, should be discouraged from joining the conflict. Those still wishing to make an impact outside of the armed

forces using their specific skill sets should be pointed towards organizations working within more well-defined legal frameworks.

At the same time, those looking to engage themselves should be encouraged to do so in an alternative, safe, and legal manner. For example, they could be driven towards non-armed activism and volunteer work. Other options include enacting change through political structures, or even joining armed forces: Malet argues that rather than “attempting to suppress any group, a misguided approach that would surely backfire and generate recognition of threat, the alternative is to build the appeal of national civil and military institutions so as to facilitate greater identification with the state and fellow citizens. While some view nationalism as a threatening phenomenon, it presents an alternative to transnationalism, and it is not necessary to fight fire with fire” (Malet, 2013: 213).

8. Conclusion

Because the topic remains an under-researched aspect of the Syrian civil war, this dissertation has attempted to shed some light on non-jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. To do so, a historical overview has illustrated the beginnings of the influx of volunteers, as well as the growth of the amount of NJFF's and the role of the Kurdish diaspora. The case study presented the results of open source, data-driven research among 366 fighters. Those results indicate that non-jihadist fighters come from all over the world, though the US takes a strong lead. We have seen that a 'typical' NJFF is a male in his twenties who has joined the YPG, driven by feelings of anger and impotence towards IS. However, different volunteers are driven by an array of push and pull factors – just as jihadist fighters are. Other recurring motifs are the presence of veterans, fighters of an explicitly stated leftist political ideology, and those explicitly rejecting the leftist ideology of YPG and its subsidiaries.

An analysis was also made of the social media posts of several foreign fighters, which demonstrated the diversity of the posts and the use of social media for purposes of crowdfunding, sponsoring, and recruitment. Research also showed that NJFF's and Kurdish online activists are hampered by Turkish law. Local reactions to the presence of foreign fighters with the Kurds revealed that Kurdish politics are of paramount importance to understand the process of foreign volunteers fighting in the conflict.

Reviewing the legal framework, we have seen that not one court has yet made a judgment on the legality or illegality of joining Kurdish factions to combat the Islamic State. Prosecution has systematically been dropped by fighters' home countries, though the reasons as to why are still a matter of speculation. In any case, the legal framework is obscure and needs clarification.

I have argued that this clarification is necessary because the condemn-nor-condone practices that are rife today are not without consequence. We have seen the infighting between the volunteers as well as the allegations of war tourism and donation fraud. More importantly, the dominating presence of veterans is a cause for concern. Other important issues include the implications for fighters' home countries and possible escalation of the conflict there, the possibilities of radicalisation, and the presence of right-wing 'counter-jihadist' culture among the NJFF's.

Even though it is possible that the peak of NJFF leaving for Syria and Iraq may have passed because of increasing successes against Islamic State and, perhaps, unofficial pressure, there is need for a formalised strategy. The conflict in Iraq and Syria was not the first, nor will it be the last, where transnational groups establish successful resistance along ethnic, religious or sectarian lines – and confront an equally international response on the other side.

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10. Appendix

10.1 Appendix I: relevant screenshots from leaked oDesk document

Content That Should Be Escalated

International Compliance/IP Blocks:

- Photos AND/OR text making fun of/attacking/depicting negatively/criticizing, Ataturk.
- Burning the Turkish flag [other flags are ok to be shown burning]
- Maps of Kurdistan [as of now, only maps are escalated; other references are merely confirmed]
- Holocaust denial [any discussion of holocaust denial should be escalated]

IP Blocks and International Compliance

Escalated:

1. Holocaust denial which focuses on hate speech
2. All attacks on Ataturk (visual and text)
3. Maps of Kurdistan (Turkey)
4. Burning Turkish flag(s)

Confirmed (unless clearly against PKK and/or Ocalan):

1. PKK support and depiction
2. Abdullah "Apo" Ocalan-related content

10.2 Appendix II: Peshmerganor's deleted Instagram post

"Turkey is currently targeting PKK, and PKK and Peshmerga are two different organizations that must not be confused with each other. Turkey won't target the Peshmerga unless they want an all-out war with the kurds and have the international community to turn against them. PKK have a strong, communist ideology, and I don't care much for communism or any other "ism's" that try to force their ideas on free thinking people... however, I respect that women are treated as equals in PKK and I feel PKK deserves recognition for their fight against the Islamic State and for rescuing thousands

of Yazidis fleeing from the jihadists in Mount Sinjar last year, when the Peshmerga failed. Furthermore, it wasn't PKK that broke the truce with Turkey last month, it was that crazy, turkish dictator who started this war. Turkey have carried out 3(!) air strikes against the Islamic State so far, and over 300 against PKK, who are one of the ground forces that have offered the Islamic State most resistance. It's like I predicted almost four weeks ago when the truce was broken... the Islamic State have gained their own airforce, courtesy of turkish president Erdogan. But Erdogan have litteraly opened up the gates of Hell... kurds all over Turkey have had enough and are revolting, and this is just the begining. One final thing. I'm getting a lot of hate messages from turks on Instagram... my problem isn't with the turkish people, but with your government. Know the difference.

terroristdogan # peshmerga # pkk”

(Peshmerganor 2016)