

Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State

by Scott Gates and Sukanya Podder

Abstract

Islamic State relies heavily on the recruitment of foreign fighters. We examine this recruitment from an organizational perspective. We analyze how the process of recruitment of foreigners shapes the adverse selection problem affecting the dissident groups that they join. We also examine the different mechanisms used to maintain the allegiance and compliance of foreigners as opposed to indigenous recruits. More broadly, we analyze how the recruitment of foreign fighters affects the organization. Foreign fighters and local recruits exhibit significant differences in recruitment patterns and motivations for joining IS. This could create problems for the organization. Evidence of such strife, however, is not discernible. Given the information at hand, IS appears to be effectively managing the mix of foreign and local recruits.

Keywords: Jihadism, ISIS, foreign fighters, recruitment

Recent reports indicate that over 20,000 foreign fighters have joined militant Sunni organizations in the Iraq/Syria conflict.[1] Most of them have joined the Islamic State (IS). The majority of the foreign fighters are Arabs coming from neighboring countries or the Maghreb. An increasing number of recruits are now coming from the Chechnya and Dagestan regions of Russia with estimates of 2,000 recruits.[2] Around 20% of the foreign fighters are from the West.[3]

Research on foreign fighters or transnational insurgents has tended to focus on the phenomenon in general or as it relates to global jihad. Scholars have focused on trends and numbers, individual decisions and motivations to join an insurgent movement abroad, or security implications.[4] Indeed, most analysis of IS recruitment has focused on processes of radicalization, featuring the individual being recruited. Such analysis is typically framed as a societal problem or a security problem. Few studies have examined how foreign fighters have affected insurgency movements.[5] We frame our analysis as an organizational problem, not as a societal problem or as a (Western) security problem. We limit our analysis to IS in Iraq and Syria, the primary operating environments of the organization.[6] Our focus is on how Islamic State as an organization employs these thousands of foreign fighters and what it means for the organization. How does IS effectively use local recruits from Syria and Iraq and the diverse set of foreign fighters? How does the recruitment of so many foreign fighters affect the organization?

Foreign fighters and IS

David Malet defines foreign fighters as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts.”[7] Thomas Hegghammer builds on this formulation in the following ways: “an agent who (1) has joined, operated within the confines of an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid.”[8] This definition serves to exclude mercenaries, the troops of intervening armies, and “refugee warriors” (i.e. individuals who are connected to the civil conflict but reside in another country).[9] Hegghammer notes at least seventeen instances of jihadist foreign fighter participation in major conflicts since the 1980s.[10]

Transnational insurgents potentially serve to strengthen insurgent groups by contributing resources, fighters, and know-how. However, they can also introduce new ideas and affect the nature and direction of the conflict. This is because foreign fighters differ from local rebels in two important respects. First, they

are selected for ideological commitment (since going abroad to fight is entirely voluntary) and second, they have fewer personal stakes in the conflict (no personal grievances, no land, assets, relatives, or prospects of political office, for example). Indeed, it is this combination of ideological motivation, non-parochialism, and detachment from local politics that can sometimes make foreign recruits attractive for the host group. But foreign fighters can also create a clash of preferences and interests within the organization.[11]

As a rebel organization at war, IS seeks military victory. Unlike many other jihadist groups, such as the Taliban, who seek to hold and govern territory (but within a confined space), IS is the only group that combines rebel governance with expansionist territorial ambitions – to create an Islamic Caliphate. The name of the group belies its ambitions to establish an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria unified by the rule of a Caliph. These territorial ambitions do not involve secession from an existing state, but the eradication of two existing states. Indeed, one of their slogans is “this Khilafa [Caliphate] will have no borders, inshallah, only fronts.”[12] To achieve this goal, the harassing techniques of guerrilla warfare and occasional terrorist acts are inadequate. Holding territory is paramount. And to do that conventional warfare is required, thus IS needs extensive manpower and military equipment. Indeed, the strategic and tactical implications of IS’s goal are significant, as the nature of the insurgency is indelibly affected by such ambitions.

IS is not just engaged in conflict with the governments of Syria and Iraq, it is also in competition with other Syrian rebel groups. And even more relevant to IS, it is in competition with other jihadist groups. For example, it is in the process of cannibalizing the al-Qaeda linked Nusra Front and other small jihadist groups. The “moderate” opposition organized in the Syrian National Council/ Army is marginalized and of little military consequence – especially on the critical Northern front. The Nusra Front competes with IS over recruitment, and though allied at the beginning of the conflict in Syria, they began fighting one another in 2014. The competition is global. In this regard foreign fighters constitute an integral aspect of what IS is, and what it desires to be – *the* global jihadist group. Recruitment from the Middle East and North Africa as well as from the West, reifies the notion of the organization representing—if not constituting—global jihad.

The other issue here is of access. The ease of access into the Syrian warzone is similar to that of the early days of the Bosnian war according to observers. Western youth have travelled into northern Syria via Turkey, flying into Istanbul and transferring to domestic commercial flights or buses for the trip to the border, where they cross through legally or through smuggler routes.[13] This ease of access was due to a number of reasons, including the pre-war integration of the southern Turkish and northern Syrian economies and the complicated border policing task resulting from enormous refugee flows. However, Turkish authorities also displayed a certain leniency toward transiting foreign fighters, at least during the early years of the conflict. This lenient approach was informed by the calculation that such an influx of fighters would help accelerate the fall of the Assad regime. In retrospect, it has proved to be a miscalculation on Turkey’s part, and Turkey has tightened up its border policing arrangements considerably over time.[14]

Apart from the issue of access, popular support for the insurgency in Syria has been strong in the Sunni Muslim world, where mainstream clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi have been allowed by their governments to publicly urge people to go and fight in Syria.[15] Therefore, we must recognize that the foreign fighter phenomenon is linked to broader political dynamics and not simply Jihad or radicalization via social media and virtual propaganda.

The local dimensions of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, however, should not be neglected. Systematic repression and exclusion of the Sunni community by both governments has provided fertile grounds for local recruitment to IS. These local and global aspects of IS work together and compete. Local recruits join for one set of reasons and foreign fighters for another. How does IS address this issue and how does it affect the

organization? Moreover, how does remotely facilitated recruitment through the use of social media affect the organizational stability of IS with respect to both local and foreign recruits?

Social media and the recruitment of foreign fighters

IS has developed an effective virtual propaganda machinery.[16] Its media arm *Al Hayat* has been releasing videos showing different sides of the militant group. On the one hand is its face of cold terror such as of children holding decapitated heads; on the other are more Western friendly videos of IS militants posing with Nutella jars to demonstrate familiarity with Western lifestyles. More significant, as Zelin shows,[17] is that the majority of propaganda products are about IS providing governance, justice, and new construction. The theme of legitimacy is significant. This propaganda shares a number of key attributes: It tends to use video rather than text, takes full advantage of the linguistic skills of members (sometimes translating statements and videos into European languages), and makes good use of music—all of which appears to resonate with western youth culture. In addition to this, the importance of the ideological call to action cannot be underestimated: it highlights the wrongdoings of the enemy and the good deeds of Islamic State, and also stresses the inadequacies and sins of those that don't go and the qualities and rewards of those who do. While the online propaganda is increasingly important, offline traditional recruitment methods such as writing letters to prisoners and organizing at or around mosques are also being used, often hand in hand with social media campaigns.[18] Finally, the declaration of a caliphate in itself appears to have boosted recruitment further by making the organization seem stronger and more viable.[19]

The vast global social media presence of IS is sustained by significant manpower. Linguistic and technical skills are clearly evident. Obviously some effort is being made not only to recruit foot soldiers, but also to enlist technically proficient and talented users of social media to sustain the machinery of recruitment. Back office managers are often wives and young female supporters.[20]

The profile of foreign fighters is diverse, and can range from ignorant novices who view joining as a rite of passage to diehard militants looking for combat and martyrdom, while individuals that go for humanitarian reasons are often kidnapped or forced to fight.[21] The motivations informing the decision to leave are numerous and they vary and interact in complex ways we probably do not yet fully understand. Motivations may include the prospect of adventure, a desire to impress the local community or opposite sex, a search for identity, feelings of revenge, the search for camaraderie, the desire to make history, and much more. Some also appear motivated by the millennial-apocalyptic promises of IS, as well as by the opportunity to die as a martyr and go to heaven.

While some western born recruits are alienated and disaffected youth, many are not.[22] As a group, European foreign fighters do tend to be socio-economic underperformers – a study of 378 German foreign fighters, for example, found that only a quarter had finished high school and a third had criminal convictions – but there are many exceptions, especially in the UK, where foreign fighters for some reason come from somewhat more affluent backgrounds than their comrades in other European countries.[23]

Fresh recruits: Employing foreign and local fighters

Once the foreign recruit has arrived in Syria or Iraq, IS as a military and political organization must determine how to most effectively employ the new personnel. One of the main advantages of recruiting foreign fighters is having another pair of boots on the ground. Foreign fighters also bring a diverse set of linguistic skills to the organization further enabling their social media recruitment tactics. Western

recruits also seem to be playing a special role in handling non-Arab hostages and collecting ransom money. Moreover, some recruits will turn out to be effective soldiers and even leaders. Given IS's goal of establishing a new Caliphate and the conventional warfare that such a goal entails, the needs for manpower are considerable.

Recruitment patterns from within territory controlled by IS are different. Direct evidence of local recruitment processes is scarce, but indirect evidence and the experiences of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), al Shabaab in Somalia, and jihadis in Chechnya show that the typical recruit from the IS controlled areas exhibit a different profile than the regional foreign fighters, who in turn, display very different characteristics from the Western volunteers.[24] Foreign fighters from Central Asia are battle-tested and highly regarded soldiers. Inexperienced recruits from the West, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries among other sources can be trained to be excellent combatants, but many will be given tasks that match their skills. Native recruits from Syria and Iraq seem to exhibit stronger anti-Shiite attitudes than the foreign fighters. The global appeal is for Islam and jihad in general, while the local context emphasizes sectarian conflict and threat from the "other". The nature of "what one is fighting for" undoubtedly varies between those recruited from abroad and those recruited from Iraq or Syria. For the foreign fighters, the motivations will be more universal while the natives will be motivated by grievances and a personal history of exclusion. For some native recruits, they might not have joined unless pressed to do so.

Foreign fighters may serve IS by helping to achieve its main goal, to establish the Caliphate. Local recruits have preferences shaped by the Syrian and Iraqi governments as well as by local social networks. Local fighters are more inclined to settle grievances and work to achieve particularistic goals. Foreign fighters are to a greater extent motivated by more ideological goals. These differences could create a rift in the organization as was the case with Al Qaeda in Iraq. AQI failed to accommodate the two cultures. Iraqi Sunnis were critical of AQI for the foreign presence in its leadership and fighting forces and for its attempts to impose its own radical brand of Islam on Iraqis, and its use of extreme violence.[25] So far, IS seems to be managing this potential area of conflict better. In sum, the use of foreign fighters presents an opportunity for IS's leadership. If well integrated into the organization, they can serve to mitigate particularistic motivations and personal vendettas, which run counter to the goals of the organization's leadership.

How IS deals with potential problems with recruits

The recruitment of foreign fighters affords a number of advantages to an organization, but exposing an insurgent movement to outsiders presents a number of potential problems that must be addressed by the leaders of a rebel group. Two information problems are inherently linked to hierarchical relations in any organization: adverse selection and moral hazard. Adverse selection refers to information about the agent's type. The problem is recruiting the wrong type. Given the very nature of being a foreign fighter, IS will know less about these individuals than about local recruits.

In a rebel organization such as IS with a broad-based global recruitment policy, adverse selection is significant. He might be incompetent. Indeed, a number of foreign recruits have never held a gun in their lives. Many volunteers from the West may actually be a liability in the battlefield. Significant numbers of foreign recruits have no military skills, no familiarity with the terrain, poor language aptitude, and are prone to sickness and unused to harsh conditions.[26]

A recruit could also be a spy or infiltrator. Given the large numbers of foreign fighters, some of whom who are largely ignorant of Islam (the purported *Islam for Dummies* types) or do not know Arabic, an infiltrator

could join with ease. This presents a significant problem for IS. How does the organization determine whether a new recruit is a spy or genuine?

The recruitment of psychopaths or over-zealous recruits is another potential problem. The Arab contingency in Bosnia committed such excesses that they became a political liability.[27] A decade ago, the excesses of al Qaeda in Iraq resulted in a Sunni backlash.[28] Despite the extreme violence committed by IS, the organization does not want to employ an uncontrollable psychopath. Such an individual would pose a threat to his fellow combatants and could create serious rifts in the organization. Clearly crazy types will be identified early, but detecting latent human time-bombs is more difficult.

To mitigate these potential problems, fresh recruits are brought to separate training facilities, segregating foreign fighters and natives. At these training facilities Islamic State recruiters also determine whether a recruit has special skills such as computer engineering, or other social media skills, or whether he is more suited for combat.[29] After the initial vetting, the recruit is assigned a specific job.

IS also uses this time to assess whether a foreign recruit is a spy or not. The problem is how to do so. Given the demands for recruits and the large number of foreign volunteers, the danger of infiltration is not insignificant. Other organizations vet by soliciting costly signs of an individual's complete dedication,[30] and there is plenty of circumstantial evidence that IS does so too. It is reasonable to assume, for example, that one of the reasons IS gets foreign fighters to commit egregious acts (like decapitation), is that it is an effective discriminating sign (since Western intelligence operatives are not allowed to kill on the job in that way). Like many other groups, IS also tries to deter infiltrators by inflicting horrific punishments on suspected spies.

Foreign fighters and native recruits tend to receive different assignments. Reports from officials engaged in battle with IS in Syria state: "The ones actively fighting in the first wave of the attacks, they are mostly using central Asian members" while "Local Arab forces are used to shore up defensive positions,"[31] General Ali al-Wazir Shamaray of the Iraqi army recounts similar experience in his battles against Islamic State forces in Diyala Province: "We often see the foreign fighters in the first wave of attacks and then the Arab fighters will come in after an area is cleared." [32] Suicide bombers, who play a critical role in IS attacks appear to be dominated by foreign fighters.[33] Given these tactics, foreign fighters probably suffer disproportionate casualties.[34]

IS has successfully deployed suicide tactics involving special armored bulldozers, armored Humvees, and VBEIDs (vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices), in conjunction with sniper protection and extensive infantry combat. Such tactics have the added advantage of helping to manage human resources. Someone suspected of being insane only need to conduct the one suicide mission and no longer serves as a threat to other soldiers. Someone regarded as incompetent in combat can be put behind the steering wheel and drive the bomb into the enemy. Similar tactics can be used to test the commitment of suspected spies and infiltrators. IS is thereby able to address the adverse selection problem and successfully employ an effective military tactic.

The following account of recent combat in Ramadi demonstrates how IS tactics succeed:

On May 5, Islamic State launched an attack on Ramadi's city center, but Iraqi helicopters and the Golden Division repulsed the advance, Iraqi state media reported. Running battles along the bridges across the Euphrates River separating Ramadi's southwestern Islamic State-held neighborhoods from the city center continued for days, with Iraqi forces holding their lines. By May 13, Islamic State had established a team of snipers closer to where Iraqi police and army units were based . . . The next day, Islamic State launched its surge by sending a single armored bulldozer to the concrete barriers on the outskirts of the government lines. The bulldozer worked unimpeded for close to an hour, removing concrete walls, Iraqi officials said. Once the road was cleared, Islamic State fighters drove about six VBIEDs, including an armored Humvee and armored dump truck, into the government complex . . . Over the next 72 hours, the terrorist group set off at least another 20 VBIED and suicide bombs.[35]

While adverse selection is a significant problem affecting the recruitment of foreign fighters, moral hazard is the bigger problem for native recruits. Moral hazard is about the problem of latent opportunism. In hierarchical relationships the agent will often be presented with the opportunities to shirk his duties. A superior in such a hierarchy will be unable to monitor all activities of subordinates. Rewards alone will not be enough to get around the problem. Punishment certainly can create an incentive, but it depends on being able to monitor the actions of subordinates. The problem is that there is no way that a military organization such as IS would be able to monitor all activities of all members. Bureaucracy alone will never solve the moral hazard problem.[36]

Internalized beliefs can serve as a powerful motivation to not subvert the goals of the organization as a whole. Having been recruited from the local environment, more will be known about these individuals. The information problem for the organization in recruiting locally is not one of adverse selection (i.e. not knowing an actor's type), but one of moral hazard (hidden actions). In this regard, indigenous fighters are much more likely to engage in actions subverting the goals of IS's leadership, given the temptations to engage in vindictive violence, personal vendettas, or selfish gain. The leadership of any organization lacks the resources to adequately monitor the actions of all subordinates. This is especially true of a military organization, where the flow of information is inherently limited through the proverbial fog of war. Hierarchy, bureaucratic oversight, and standard operating procedures are institutional mechanisms whereby an organization attempts to limit the problem of latent opportunism.[37] Indeed, IS is developing an extensive bureaucracy to at least define what counts as insubordination.

In an organization dependent on solidarity and camaraderie, exclusion can serve as an effective mechanism. Humiliation and loss of honor can be powerful punishments. By recruiting large numbers of zealots, these values pervade IS, serving to limit defection and other forms of misbehavior. Indeed, organizations drawing on extremist ideologies exhibit strong patterns of allegiance with little defection or desertion.[38]

Clash between local and global interests

The presence of these ultra-zealous values held mainly by a minority of soldiers, however, could potentially create serious problems within the organization. A clash of organizational cultures can emerge. As was witnessed earlier in Bosnia and Chechnya, the foreign fighter presence in IS has undermined the indigenous population.[39] Foreign fighters in IS are largely pursuing goals framed within a religious conflict narrative and show little solidarity with the native Iraqi and Syrian's grievances against the government and the sectarian nature of the conflict.[40] Moreover, the superior capacity of some foreign fighters and their better access to weapons, funding, and skills present another manner in which resentment and differences can be magnified. The very qualities that make those foreign fighters attractive to IS could sow the seeds of

factionalism. Strong command structure, devout ideology, and the inculcation of a fierce allegiance to IS by all are ways to address these problems and maintain organizational unity. Military victories also serve as strong unifiers, bonding soldiers towards a common goal of creating the new Islamic Caliphate.

Conversely, losses can sow dissent. In the wake of the Kobani campaign, tension among the ranks of the IS emerged. In-fighting between Uzbek and Chenyans is reported to have killed at least two senior IS officials. The clashes only ended with the intervention of Omar al-Shishani, a prominent Chechen IS commander.[41] Frustration over battlefield setbacks led to this internecine strife among the elite forces of IS.

There are no such reports of native Iraqi/Syrian – foreign fighter (mostly non-native Arabs) conflict within IS yet. The lack of evidence may be because access to insider testimonies and organizational documents is limited at present. Signs of disillusionment among foreign fighters are evident, nonetheless. Richard Barrett suggests that “most foreign fighters arrive with good intentions and often recoil when they witness wrongdoing or brutal tactics by the groups they join. This can spur them to join other groups or simply to return to their home countries disenchanted.”[42] Leaving is a risky strategy. If anyone is caught trying to escape they will be imprisoned or killed. IS has imposed nighttime curfews and erected roadblocks to curb desertions. From September 2014 to February 2015, more than 120 foreign fighters hoping to return home were reportedly killed by IS as reported in a Lebanese news daily.[43] Indeed, some foreign recruits have become disillusioned but to some degree this seems unsurprising given the utopian apocalyptic appeal of the recruitment process. The reality of war certainly isn’t going to be like the virtual world sold by the recruiters and imagined by the recruits.

The potential for warlordism or parochial insubordination by native troops is a real possibility in IS. There are plenty of stories of harsh rule under IS authority, where sanctions against proscribed behaviors are severe. Such behavior is consistent with the organizational goals of IS. We should expect some degree of selective violence and personal vendetta, but that is not what is reported from the towns under IS rule. Reports of warlordism tend to be vague or discussions of its possibility. Information flow from these territories is limited, but we see little significant evidence of widespread conflict between native soldiers and foreign fighters.

Conclusion

In contrast to most rebel military organizations engaged in armed conflict, IS uses conventional military tactics to secure and hold territory. State-building is the central objective. Hit-and-run tactics of guerrilla warfare or terrorism are inadequate. In order for IS to achieve its expansionist territorial goal, it requires tremendous manpower. Boots on the ground are not enough. IS needs a dedicated fighting force willing to engage in self-sacrifice. Foreign fighters serve this role. IS draws on the military experience and prowess of Central Asians forming the bulk of the front-line of attacking forces and snipers. Less experienced foreign recruits are used as suicide bombers driving heavily armed Humvees and VBIEDs.

To recruit these foreign fighters, IS has developed an extensive social media recruitment machine. Drawing on linguistic and technological talent, the recruitment net is cast around the globe. The declaration of the new Caliphate and military victories serve to enhance the effectiveness of IS’s recruitment efforts. Foreign fighters are given the more dangerous roles in the organization, but to a large extent this is a role they want. Worse would be to be left out of the fight.

IS’s reliance on foreign fighters has fundamentally altered the organization. Yet, there are few signs thus far that IS has been weakened by a clash of interests between foreign fighters and native recruits. There is,

however, a potential for internal conflict to emerge between native IS soldiers and foreign fighters. So far though, IS has maintained the establishment of the Caliphate as the ultimate goal, which serves the interests of all parties, the Syrians fighting Assad's regime, the Iraqis motivated by sectarian cleavages, and foreign zealots.

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Notes

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- [34] An analogous situation arises in dangerous industries employing foreign workers, who suffer a disproportionate share of accidents. See Choi, Youngjin, "High-risk work, cultural conflicts and labor mobility: The experiences of foreign workers in the shipyard industry on the Korean East Coast," *International Area Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2014): 57-74.
- [35] Margaret Coker, "How Islamic State's Win in Ramadi Reveals New Weapons, Tactical Sophistication and Prowess," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 May 2015, at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-states-gains-reveal-new-prowess-on-battlefield-1432592298> (accessed 1 June 2015).
- [36] For a formal proof of this, see Scott Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance: The Microfoundations of Rebellion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 111-130. For private sector firms, the inherent problem of moral hazard see Bengt Hölmstrom, "Moral hazard and observability," *The Bell Journal of Economics* (1979): 74-91.
- [37] See Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma*; Shapiro and Siegel, "Moral Hazard"; and Peter Schram, "Managing Terror".
- [38] Scott Gates and Ragnhild Nordås, "Recruitment, Retention and Religion in Rebel Groups," (2015) PRIO manuscript.
- [39] Ben Rich and Dara Conduit, "The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 2 (2015): 113-131.
- [40] Thomas Hegghammer "Syria's Foreign Fighters," *Foreign Policy*, 9 December at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/09/syrias-foreign-fighters/> (accessed 10 February 2015).
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- [42] Richard Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria" (New York: The Soufan Group, June 2014), p. 20, at <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2015).
- [43] Karam, "Signs of tension".