#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks

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Executive Summary

Context

- Over the last 12 months a team of researchers at ICSR have created **a database which contains the social media profiles of 190 Western and European foreign fighters. More than two thirds of these fighters are affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusrah or the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS)** – two groups that have, at one point or another, maintained formal relationships with al-Qaeda. The social media activity of these users provides a unique and unfiltered window into the minds of Western and European foreign fighters in Syria. This paper series is named after their eulogising of fallen comrades as 'Greenbirds,' a scriptural reference to the virtues of their perceived martyrdom.

Aims

- This is the first in a series of papers that draws on information from this database. **It examines the question of how foreign fighters in Syria receive information about the conflict and who inspires them.**

Findings

- The paper shows that Syria may be the first conflict in which a large number of Western fighters have been documenting their involvement in conflict in real-time, and where – in turn – social media represents an essential source of information and inspiration to them. **In the minds of the foreign fighters, social media is no longer virtual: it has become an essential facet of what happens on the ground.**

- Based on our database, the report finds that **a large number of foreign fighters receive their information about the conflict not from the official channels provided by their fighting groups, but through so-called disseminators** – unaffiliated but broadly sympathetic individuals who can sometimes appear to offer moral and intellectual support to jihadist opposition groups. The ability of jihadist groups to exert control over information has been significantly eroded, while private individuals, who are (mostly) based in the West and who may have never set foot inside Syria, possess significant influence over how the conflict is perceived by those who are actively involved in it.

- The paper also **reveals the existence of new spiritual authorities who foreign fighters in Syria look to for inspiration and guidance**. Although there is no evidence to suggest these individuals are physically involved in facilitating the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, or that they are coordinating their activity with jihadist organisations, they are playing the role of cheerleaders. Their statements and interactions can be seen as providing encouragement, justification, and religious legitimacy for fighting

in the Syrian conflict, and – whether consciously or not – play an important role in radicalising some individuals.

- Based on quantitative analysis of their popularity within foreign fighter networks, the paper **identifies the two most prominent of these new spiritual authorities as Ahmad Musa Jibril and Musa Cerantonio**. Jibril, a U.S. based preacher with Arab roots who is in his early 40s, does not explicitly call to violent jihad, but supports individual foreign fighters and justifies the Syrian conflict in highly emotive terms. He is eloquent, charismatic, and – most importantly – fluent in English. So is Musa Cerantonio, a 29 year old Australian convert to Islam who frequently appears on satellite television and has become an outspoken cheerleader for ISIS. Both men are very different and consequently have different appeals. Ahmad Musa Jibril is a subtle, careful, and nuanced preacher, while Musa Cerantonio is much more explicit in his support for the jihadist opposition in Syria.

Contents

Introduction

Three years after the peaceful revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, Western hopes for a new era of democracy and change in the Arab world have faded. Nowhere have they been shattered so profoundly as in Syria, where a peaceful uprising has turned into a protracted civil war. What's more, the conflict has caught the imagination of jihadists[1] who have presented themselves as defenders of the country's Sunni majority against a tyrannical Shia regime. As a result, Syria has become the cradle of a resurgent al-Qaeda: a magnet for recruits, offering the skills, networks and motivation needed to produce another generation of jihadists.[2]

One of the conflict's defining features has been the presence of foreign fighters. In December 2013, ICSR estimated that up to 11,000 fighters from 74 nations had gone to Syria – a greater number than in 'every other instance of foreign fighter mobilisation since the Afghanistan war in the 1980s.'[3] While most of these fighters were thought to be from the Middle East, a significant minority – up to 2,800 – are European or Western.[4]

Who are these European and Western fighters? What inspires them? How do they go, and why do they leave? In previous conflicts, analysts had to rely on hearsay and anecdotal evidence to answer such questions. The Syrian war is different. Already considered the most socially mediated conflict in history,[5] it presents researchers with unprecedented opportunities to study events, people and social phenomena as they develop – in real-time – through the collection of data from a wide range of social media platforms. This offers rich sources of data for social network analysis and other sophisticated methods for understanding individual jihadist actors and the social context in which they are situated.[6]

Over the past 12 months, a team of researchers from ICSR have created a database which contains the open source social media profiles of 190 Western and European foreign fighters. More than two thirds of these fighters are affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusrah or the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), the two groups that have, at one point or another, maintained formal relationships with al-Qaeda. The social media activity of these users reveals a unique and unfiltered window

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1   The authors are fully conscious that – for mainstream scholars of Islam – jihad is a complex religious concept which translates as 'struggle' and can have a number of meanings depending on time, place and context. Not so, however, for the self-declared 'jihadists', who believe that 'Zionists', 'Crusaders', Shia Muslims, and other non-orthodox Sunni sects are at war with (mainstream Sunni) Islam; that jihad is a religious duty for every able-bodied Muslim; and that the only true meaning of jihad is 'physical fighting.' The overwhelming primacy and emphasis on armed struggle in order to 'liberate' Muslim lands, introduce a particularly rigid form of Islamic law, and spread Islam marks out 'jihadism' as an ideology, and it sets its followers apart from the vast majority of mainstream Muslims. In practice, of course, there are many gradations and subtleties that distinguish different jihadist groups, their beliefs, aims and methods. See, for example, Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 5; John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 26-8; David J. Kilcullen, "Subversion and Countersubversion in the Campaign against Terrorism in Europe", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30(8) (2007), p. 653.
2   Peter R. Neumann, 'Suspects into Collaborators', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36 No. 7, 2014, pp. 19-21.
3   Aaron Y. Zelin, 'Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans', ICSR Insight, 17 December 2013: http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/
4   Ibid.
5   Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, 'Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War', *Peaceworks* No. 91, 2014.
6   For examples of social network analysis of social media within the Syrian context see: Derek O'Callaghan, Nico Prucha, Derek Greene, Maura Conway, Joe Carthy, and Pádraig Cunningham, 'Online Social Media in the Syria Conflict: Encompassing the Extremes and the In-Between', 2014, accessed 1 February 2014 http://arxiv.org/abs/1401.7535v1; Lynch, Freelon, and Aday, 'Syria's Socially Mediated War'; Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher, 'Tweeting for the Caliphate: Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda', *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 6 Issue 6, 2013, pp. 19-23.

into the minds of a population about whom much has been written and speculated.

This is the first in a series of papers that draws on information from our database. It examines the question of how foreign fighters in Syria receive information about the conflict and who inspires them. Our key findings indicate that:

• The official accounts of jihadist groups represent just one of a multitude of sources from which foreign fighters receive information about the conflict. So-called disseminators – unaffiliated but broadly sympathetic individuals – have become increasingly popular.

• The Syrian conflict has produced a set of new spiritual authorities to whom Western and European foreign fighters are looking for guidance and inspiration. The most prominent ones are the American-based cleric Ahmad Musa Jibril and the Australian preacher Musa Cerantonio whose eloquent speeches about the Syrian conflict has gained them a large following. Jibril is more subtle and less explicit than Cerantonio, and although there is no evidence to suggest that either of them are physically involved in facilitating the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, the empirical data shows they have become important sources of religious and political support and motivation.

The paper consists of two main sections. The first describes the foreign fighter database and the specific dataset that was used to analyse influence and sources of information. The second presents the findings, highlighting the role of disseminator accounts and providing background on the two clerics that have emerged as key influencers and spiritual authorities.

Section 1: Methodology

The analysis in this report is grounded in social network analysis, which studies the pattern of relationships between different actors to uncover and explain social phenomena.[7] The basis for our investigation is a database of social media profiles from Western and European fighters. From these profiles the research team then extracted a dataset designed to identify their most important and/or prominent sources of information and inspiration.[8] This section describes the nature and content of the database and explains how the relevant data was prepared for analysis.

The Database

Our foreign fighter database lists 190 social media users originating from Western and European countries who were identified over a period of nearly 12 months (ending in February 2014). This was a manual process principally using a variation of the snowball sampling techniques which are particularly effective for identifying small subsets of individuals who are mixed in with larger populations – in this case, foreign fighters among the general population of pro-jihadist supporters on Facebook and Twitter.[9]

We also relied on open source and proprietary software to structure the data. Most prominent among these tools was Palantir Torch, a platform for the aggregation, visualisation, and analysis of information on Twitter. The team also used Palantir Torch to identify influential and frequent contributors within pro-jihadist networks and found other users on Twitter who, although not influential, contributed to the research objectives in other ways.

Defining Foreign Fighters

There is no agreed upon definition of a foreign fighter. David Malet defines foreign fighters as 'non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict' although his definition does not include soldiers of foreign militaries participating in the conflict, employees of private security firms, or foreigners who join a state's military and partake in the conflict in return for pay, citizenship, or other privileges.[10] Thomas Hegghammer has proposed two definitions. The first builds on Malet's definition and narrows it through stricter criteria for inclusion by requiring that an individual:

1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency;
2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring

7   Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp. 3-17.
8   All aspects of the research have been conducted in accordance with King's College London regulations for ethical conduct in research. An application for ethics approval was sought and granted (internal reference REP(WSG)/13/14-10).
9   Robert Hanneman and Mark Riddle, *Introduction to social network methods* (University of California, Riverside, 2005) accessed 12 December 2013, http://faculty.ucr.edu/~hanneman/nettext/; David Knoke and Song Yang, *Social Network Analysis: Second Edition*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc, 2008) p. 18.
10   David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 9.

factions; 3) lacks affiliation to an official military organisation; and 4) is unpaid.[11]

Hegghammer's second definition allows for any person 'who leaves or tries to leave the West to fight somewhere else,' and includes individuals who engage in 'any military activity (training or fighting), using any tactic (terrorist or guerrilla tactics), against any enemy (Western or non-Western) – so long as it occurs outside the West.'[12]

The only objection one might have to these definitions is the issue of payment. Hegghammer and Malet are clearly trying to exclude mercenaries, but some jihadist groups are known to provide modest remuneration for their fighters such as in Afghanistan where al-Qaeda provided its fighters with contracts specifying financial rewards.[13] The same is true in Syria where groups like Jabhat al-Nusrah and ISIS provide modest stipends for their members.[14] For this reason, we included foreign members of armed opposition groups regardless of whether they are being paid or not – provided there was no indication that payment or profit-seeking was the principal motivation for becoming a foreign fighter.

For the purposes of this paper, then, a foreign fighter is any person who has travelled to Syria to join any group opposed to the Syrian government; performs combat activities; and lacks Syrian citizenship (or, if ethnically Syrian, is ordinarily domiciled outside of the country). Moreover, the only foreign fighters that were of interest for this particular study were those who had travelled from Europe (excluding Russia and Turkey), North America (Canada and the United States), Australia and New Zealand.

Coding Foreign Fighters

Classifying social media users as foreign fighters within the terms of this definition can be difficult. There are incentives for some to create social media accounts that imitate or mimic those belonging to foreign fighters. This may include individuals seeking increased status, reputation, or influence, while others might be created by journalists or intelligence agencies seeking access to privileged information. This makes it extremely important for researchers to differentiate between authentic and counterfeit profiles.

For the purpose of coding foreign fighters in our database we took those who identified as such, *in conjunction with* the presence of other supporting content which not just confirmed their presence in Syria but also their involvement in an armed group. Acceptable content includes photographs, videos, posts originating from Syria (indicated by geo-tags), consistent and credible updates detailing events on the ground, or statements from friends and/or family about their activity and presence in Syria.[15] In a limited number of cases we have also made contact with purported foreign fighters to establish the veracity of their claims. Individuals who met these criteria were then coded as foreign

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11   Thomas Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad', *International Security*, Vol. 35 No. 3, 2011, pp. 57-58.

12   Thomas Hegghammer, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting', *American Political Science Review* Vol. 107 No. 1, 2013, p. 1.

13   CTC West Point Harmony Index, AFGP-2002-600045

14   "Abu Abdullah", interview by Shiraz Maher, Joseph A. Carter, and Peter R. Neumann, Antakya, Turkey, March 2014; "IJ", Internet interview by Shiraz Maher, November 2013.

15   In some cases individuals claim to be in Syria and provide updates from the ground, but have very little photographic evidence of their presence. If, however, another foreign fighter with photographic evidence in their profile acknowledges the presence of that individual, we would classify him as a foreign fighter.

fighters, while those who merely stated they were present in Syria but provided no further evidence were excluded from the database.[16]

Organisational Affiliation

Foreign fighters were coded as being affiliated with a particular organisation if they self-identified as such or provided other information – for example, in Tweets or Facebook updates – that clearly indicated membership of a particular group. This additional information could include content such as photographs, propaganda material, or other physical artefacts bearing the logo or name of a particular organisation. In cases where foreign fighters displayed a near equal preference for two organisations – for example, Jabhat al-Nusrah and ISIS – the fighter's affiliation was coded as unknown.

As a result, nearly 55 per cent of the foreign fighters in the sample were identified as members of ISIS, while just under 14 per cent were thought to belong to Jabhat al-Nusrah. The Free Syrian Army, Liwa al-Tawheed, and Ahrar al Shaam are the least represented, comprising just over 2 per cent of the total sample combined. Unknowns – fighters that could not safely be coded as belonging to any group – make up 29 per cent.

Although the sample does not claim to be a perfect representation of Western and European fighters in Syria, the prominence of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusrah members does correspond with earlier work produced by ICSR. In December 2013 we estimated that the vast majority of foreign fighters in Syria had joined either ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusrah. This also corresponds with interviews we conducted during fieldwork in Turkish border towns in March 2014 where activists, transporters, smugglers, and fighters confirmed that most foreign fighters join one of those two groups. Indeed, the foreign composition of ISIS is so acute that many simply referred to the group as 'the foreigners,' sometimes using the two terms interchangeably.[17]

Country of Origin

Foreign fighters were coded as residents or citizens of a country if they self-identified as such in tweets, status updates, or profile information. In cases where this information was lacking, we looked for other indicators of Western or European origin. It is important to stress that spoken languages alone were not enough to code someone as being from a particular country. Hence a French speaker about whom nothing else was known would be coded as 'unknown.'

The United Kingdom ranked first in our sample with 17.9 per cent of the total, followed by France (11.6 per cent), then Germany (11.1 per cent), Sweden (10 per cent), Belgium (8.9 per cent), and the Netherlands (6.3 per cent). Eastern European countries (Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia) comprised 9.6 per cent of the sample, while non-European Westerners (Australians, Canadians, and U.S.

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16   It is perfectly possible that – despite the rigorous methods that were applied in each case – the sample still contains a small number of false positives, although they are unlikely to have affected the paper's conclusions, especially since many of the findings are grounded in degree centrality measures, which have proven robust under conditions of small amounts of error. Stephen A. Borgatti, Kathleen M. Carley, and David Krackhardt, 'On the robustness of centrality measures under conditions of imperfect data', *Social Networks*, Vol. 28 Issue 2, 2006, pp. 124-136.

17   Multiple Interviewees, interviews by Shiraz Maher, Peter R. Neumann, and Joseph A. Carter, Antakya and Reyhanlı, Turkey, March 2014.

Americans) accounted for 5.3 per cent. Nearly 19 per cent were coded as unknown.

Based on our estimate of foreign fighters from December 2013 our sample is not fully representative of the Western and European foreign fighter population in Syria. While the numbers for Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom fit within or near the December estimate, the sample lacks social media accounts for eight of the (smaller) European countries from which foreign fighters are believed to have travelled to Syria.[18] Furthermore, while Belgium, France, and Denmark may be underrepresented, Sweden appears to be overrepresented.[19]

The Dataset

The conclusions reached in this paper are solely based on data taken from the social media accounts of foreign fighters. In particular we have analysed what fan pages these fighters like on Facebook, and who they follow, mention, and retweet on Twitter. There is some debate over precisely what it means to like something on Facebook or to follow someone on Twitter. This remains an emergent – and rapidly evolving – field of study among social scientists, although an authoritative recent study argued that:

> *Easily accessible digital records of behaviour [such as] Facebook Likes, can be used to automatically and accurately predict a range of highly sensitive personal attributes including [among others]… religious and political views.*[20]

In producing the dataset our principal task, therefore, was to build a picture of those 'records of behaviour' from the social media profiles of foreign fighters.

Of the 190 social media users listed in our database, only the data from 114 individuals was used in the dataset. This comprised a total of 121 unique accounts: 86 from Facebook and 35 from Twitter (with some crossover). Accounts that were excluded from analysis were left off in cases where they were added to the database *after* the collection of relational data from Facebook and Twitter had ended; or where accounts were deleted *before* such information could be captured. Another group of users were excluded because their privacy settings prevented the collection of any relational data.[21]

The overall profile of the 114 users whose social media profiles form the basis of our dataset are not fundamentally different from the 190 in the database. In terms of group affiliation, ISIS members constitute the greatest proportion (61.4 per cent), with Jabhat al-Nusrah membership comprising just 17.5 per cent. All other groups combined constitute less than 2 per cent, while unknowns represent 19.3 per cent. With regards to country of origin, the United Kingdom ranked first (with

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18   Zelin, 'Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria'.
19   In the case of Sweden, members of the public tipped off ICSR by emailing us details of various foreign fighter accounts.
20   Michal Kosinskia, David Stillwell and Thore Graepel, 'Private traits and attributes are predictable from digital records of human behaviour', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States*, Vol. 110 No. 15, 2013, p. 5802.
21   Similar to other studies about information loss on social media, we experienced significant issues regarding the collection of data as a result of accounts being deleted or shut down, privacy settings being applied more judiciously, or content being erased by users. See: Hany M. SalahEldeen and Michael L. Nelson, 'Losing My Revolution: How Many Resources Shared on Social Media Have Been Lost?', 2012, accessed 5 March 2014, http://arxiv.org/abs/1209.3026v1.

25.4 per cent of the total), followed by France (14 per cent), Germany (12.3 per cent), Sweden (8.8 per cent), the Netherlands (7 per cent) and Belgium (5.3 per cent). Eastern European countries collectively comprise 6.1 per cent. Non-European Westerners constituted 7 per cent of the dataset while 13.2 per cent were coded as unknown.

Facebook

To establish which pages were most popular on Facebook we relied on data collected from the accounts of 86 foreign fighters in our database. We did this by collecting all data relating to liked pages from each account which yielded data on 2,235 unique pages. This information was then used to generate a network consisting of 2,321 nodes and 3,009 edges for analysis and visualisation using Gephi.[22] This data revealed that 82.6 per cent ($N = 1846$) of Facebook pages are liked by just one foreign fighter. By contrast, 0.7 per cent ($N = 16$) of all pages are liked by at least 10 per cent (9 or more) foreign fighters. This indicates that popularity and influence is concentrated within a few Facebook pages which receive a high proportion of likes from foreign fighters.[23]

Twitter

The dataset drew on information from 35 Twitter accounts, which produced a network of 18,223 unique users – those who *followed* foreign fighters and were followed *by* them. In addition, the dataset also yielded information on 14,509 individual tweets, which consisted of 5,293 mentions; 2,746 retweets; 1,186 hashtags; and 1,969 web-links.

This data made it possible to identify the most popular and influential users on Twitter to foreign fighters by calculating their in-degree centrality based on who followed, retweeted, and mentioned them. It also allowed us to account for the influence of particular users by ranking them according to the raw number of retweets and mentions they received from foreign fighters.

We also examined the number of individuals followed by foreign fighters, which produced a list of 2,405 unique users. This generated a network consisting of 2,405 nodes and 4,285 edges. Within this network, 73.93 per cent ($N = 1778$) of Twitter users were followed by only one foreign fighter while just 1.91 per cent ($N = 46$) were followed by 10 or more. Foreign fighters also retweeted 827 unique users, producing a dataset containing 1,343 edges and 834 nodes. Mentions by foreign fighters on Twitter resulted in 1,135 unique usernames and a graph consisting of 1,139 nodes and 1,871 edges.

Taken together, this data enabled us to identify exactly who and what is important to foreign fighters on Twitter. These findings are discussed in greater detail in the following section.

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22   Mathieu Bastian, Sebastien Heymann, Mathieu Jacomy, 'Gephi : An Open Source Software for Exploring and Manipulating Networks', *Proceedings of the 3rd International Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence Conference on Weblogs and Social Media,* 2009, accessed 5 December 2013, http://www.aaai.org/ocs/index.php/ICWSM/09/paper/view/154.

23   This is consistent with other studies on the role of influence within social media networks. See: Meeyoung Cha, Hamed Haddadi, Fabricio Benevenuto, and Krishna P. Gummadi, 'Measuring User Influence in Twitter: The Million Follower Fallacy', *Proceedings of the 4th International Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, 2010, accessed 12 December 2013, http://snap.stanford.edu/class/cs224w-readings/cha10influence.pdf.

Section 2: Results

The aim of this paper is to uncover what matters to Western and European foreign fighters. By analysing their interests – Facebook likes and Twitter mentions, retweets and follows – we discovered a number of key influences which have received little, if any, attention in public discussion about Western foreign fighters in Syria.

The first part of this section draws on the Twitter accounts of foreign fighters. It reveals that the official accounts of jihadist groups are less important as sources of information than so-called 'disseminator' accounts, which are run by sympathetic individuals who sometimes lend moral and political support to those in the conflict. The second part of this section takes into account both Facebook and Twitter, highlighting the prominent role of a small number of spiritual authorities who – as our empirical evidence shows – foreign fighters have turned to as sources of inspiration. The backgrounds and activities of the two most popular individuals – Ahmad Musa Jibril and Musa Cerantonio – will be described in more detail.

The New Disseminators

Jihadist use of media has always attracted attention. Even before the September 11 attacks in 2001, al-Qaeda and associated groups harnessed new media to disseminate their message in a highly controlled form. Traditionally this involved producing propaganda videos – often with high production values – through media companies such as As-Sahab (the clouds) or Al-Malahem (the battles).[24] The platform through which these videos were launched and spread normally involved password restricted internet forums such as *Ansar al-Mujahideen, al-Ekhlaas, Faloja, or Shamukh*.

The ascent of Twitter in recent years has changed this. It has given rise to so-called disseminator accounts which spread information from the battlefield in real-time, publishing links to new videos and official statements, spreading photographs of battles, equipment, meetings, and 'martyrs.'[25] These disseminators are not foreign fighters nor do they have any official links to jihadist organisations. Instead, they broadly support the Islamist project in Syria and, in that respect, provide both moral and political support to the cause by establishing themselves as reliable sources of information.

Of course, disseminators are hardly new. In the mid-1990s videotapes from Bosnia and Chechnya were distributed among Muslim communities in Europe to draw attention to these conflicts.[26] This was a limited approach requiring the physical transmission of hardcopy material to known sympathisers. During the War in Iraq a new breed of disseminators began to emerge who were able to harness the potential of the internet. Younis Tsouli (also known as

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24   Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2009) p. 132; Philip Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics* (Washington D.C., Potomac Books, 2008) p. 105.

25   Longer statements are no longer published on Internet forums either, but are instead published through the 'JustPaste.It' website.

26   Shiraz Maher, 'Road to Jihad,' *Index on Censorship*, No. 4, 2007, p.145

Irhabi007) was one such individual. He became a prominent online activist by taking raw footage from insurgents in Iraq, editing it, and then releasing it on popular jihadist forums. Indeed, Tsouli was so successful from his flat in West London that Abu Maysara, a Syrian member of al-Qaeda in Iraq who oversaw the group's media output, contacted him directly. 'In the name of Allah I am pleased with your presence, my beloved brother,' he wrote. 'May Allah protect you.'[27]

Twitter has allowed the role of disseminators to evolve further. Looking at the 32 most popular accounts followed on Twitter by the foreign fighters in our dataset, 11 are those of disseminators.[28] Yet, of those twelve accounts only one ('jabhtannusrah') is the official account of a fighting group (see Table 1).[29] Moreover, there are no accounts from ISIS or Ahrar al-Shaam featured in the list, demonstrating that it is private disseminators who are the most important brokers of news to the online community of foreign fighters.[30] In other words, people like Tsoulis are now the norm – not the exception.

Table 1 Most followed disseminators on Twitter

Account Name	Popularity (%)
Shamiwitness	65.7
Abusiqr	62.9
Radicalislamist	57.1
Saqransaar	57.1
islamic_states	48.6
ash_shawqi	48.6
Troublejee	40.0
Iraqiwitness	37.1
khalid_maqdisi	34.3
nasserjan2	34.3
jabhtanNusrah	34.3

The most important disseminator, who is followed by nearly two thirds of the Twitter accounts in our dataset, is Shami Witness. His Twitter feed claims to offer 'musings on Bilad ash Sham [Greater Syria]… [and] Sunni Revolutions.'[31] Michael Kelley interviewed Shami Witness for Business Insider and describes him as 'an al-Qaeda supporter.'[32] That is perhaps putting it too strongly, but Shami Witness is clearly an invested follower of some jihadist fighting groups in Syria. In the past he has strongly criticised ISIS opponents, particularly after rebel infighting intensified in January 2014.[33] Kelley noted:

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27   Ibid.
28   Of the remaining ones, 13 are those of other foreign fighters; 2 belong religious figures; and 6 are those of academics, bloggers, and fighters' family members.
29   For a list of Jabhat al-Nusrah's official Twitter accounts see: http://justpaste.it/elq8. This document lists 4 accounts. Another one, run in Jabhat al-Nusrah's own name is widely acknowledged as being authentic.
30   A notable exception to the pattern of generally sympathetic disseminators is 'iraqiwitness', who - despite being featured on our list – seems to be more of a dispassionate observer.
31   Shamiwitness, Twitter account, https://twitter.com/ShamiWitness.
32   Michael Kelley, 'One Of The Most Popular Sources On Syria Happens To Be An al-Qaeda Supporter,' *Business Insider*, 20 January 2014, accessed 1 February 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/the-rise-of-shami-witness-2014-1.
33   Shamiwitness, Twitter post, 14 January 2014, https://twitter.com/ShamiWitness/status/419613917300547585; Shamiwitness, Twitter post, 7 January 2014 https://twitter.com/ShamiWitness/status/420654050455977984.

> *Shami told [Business Insider] that he doesn't 'agree with many ISIS tactics, especially [the] arrest of journalists', but supporting ISIS's overall project has led him to defend many of the ways it executes the plan.*[34]

The prominence of Shami Witness highlights the inability of jihadist groups to exert direct influence and control over their message. When jihadist conversations were previously restricted to internet forums, discussions could be policed and regulated. Dissent was monitored and, where necessary, curtailed by suspending troublesome forum members.[35] This is no longer possible on Twitter where both fighters and their supporters are able to engage in wholly unregulated conversations about whatever they please.

We were able to conduct an interview with one of the disseminators listed in Table 1.[36] When asked about their motivation, the disseminator replied that it was because of a strong sense of Muslim identity and the fact that 'there is lots of propaganda against the Muslim side.' Although they distanced themselves from ISIS, they also stated the conflicts in 'Syria and Iraq [are] one and the same', a view which mirrors that of groups like ISIS who want to wrestle political authority away from Shia governments and restore it to Sunni Muslims. When the interviewee was asked how they considered their role on Twitter, they responded, 'I don't intend to contribute to the conflict, [but] I intend to contribute to the toppling of these regimes.' Moreover, they valued the anonymity of Twitter, saying that if it was compromised, 'I won't hesitate to quit.'

Why are disseminators popular?

Several factors account for the popularity of disseminator accounts. The most important is that they usually possess language skills – for example, fluency in Arabic – which allows them to translate messages from official accounts (which are usually in Arabic) into the English language. For non-Arab speaking audiences in the West these bridging accounts clearly perform an important function.

Another factor is that many of the disseminator accounts provide a much broader overall view of the general picture in Syria. Foreign fighters and those operating official accounts are often exposed to a restricted view which is limited to their immediate locality or province. Fighters in Idlib, for example, may not necessarily always know what is happening in another province, such as Raqqah or Deir ez-Zour. Disseminators, because they are outside the country, can use a broader range of sources to provide a more thorough overview of the situation in rebel held areas. Moreover, because of their freelance status, they are also able to draw from a larger range of sources, not being tied to a particular group or receiving their information from only selected sources. This allows them to comment on the multiplicity of various groups fighting in Syria.

Finally, disseminators take the time to interact with their followers. Official accounts tend to only make announcements and spread news, making their flow of information unidirectional; that is, they tweet information and their followers receive it. These accounts do

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34   Kelley, 'One Of the Most Popular Sources on Syria'.
35   J.M. Berger, 'War on Error,' *Foreign Policy*, 5 February 2014, accessed 5 February 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/04/war_on_error_al_qaeda_terrorism.
36   Disseminator A, Internet interview by Shiraz Maher, 1 April 2014.

not tend to engage followers in conversation by answering questions or responding to queries, which makes them less appealing. Disseminators, by contrast, not only replicate the material coming from official accounts but also engage with their followers, taking the time to explain ambiguities or engage in polemic. This enhances their reputation and, over time, allows them to demonstrate their importance as both accurate and valuable contributors to the proliferation of jihadist material on social media. Indeed, the dataset reveals that of the eleven most popular disseminators listed in Table 1, six of them are also among the most mentioned and retweeted accounts by foreign fighters. Taken like this, the four most popular disseminators are: Shami Witness, Abu Siqr, Radical Islamist, and Saqr Ansaar.

It is important, of course, not to dismiss the relevance of official accounts altogether. They do enjoy a degree of popularity among the foreign fighters, although not as much as one would expect. In addition to the reasons already given, it is likely that the multiplicity of official accounts run by the two most prominent jihadist organisations on the ground – Jabhat al-Nusrah and ISIS – has caused their popularity to fracture.[37] Few follow all of them, suggesting that while fighters are keen to follow their official outlets, they will only follow one or two.

The New Spiritual Authorities

In creating the dataset, our team collected Facebook likes from 86 individual users, producing a list of 2,235 unique page names. Of these, 82.6 per cent (*N = 1846*) were liked by only one foreign fighter while the 10 most popular pages, which are listed in Table 2, were all liked by at least 10 per cent or more.

The majority of pages which are popular amongst foreign fighters on Facebook are propaganda pages. These pages typically focus on the Syrian conflict form a highly sympathetic perspective and publish broadly supportive material including images of the conflict (such as civilian suffering or of armed combatant), videos of battle, and motivational statements from Islamic history or the Quran. 'Wake up Oumma,' for example, is a French page which encourages greater activism from its readers. Other pages appear to be run by the fighters themselves, providing real-time updates from inside the country. It is unsurprising that such pages should feature prominently in our list, given the interests and personal investment of foreign fighters in the conflict. Indeed, it is possible that such pages may have been influential in their radicalisation, allowing them to access direct – and often dramatic – information about the conflict.

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37   The official list of ISIS twitter accounts comes from: http://justpaste.it/egsv. The official list of Jabhat al-Nusrah accounts comes from: http://justpaste.it/elq8.

Table 2 Top ten most liked Facebook pages

Page Name	Popularity (%)
Shaykh Ahmad Musa Jibril	20.9
Wake Up Oumma	18.6
Musa Cerantonio II	17.4
Shaam al-Ghareeba	17.4
Black Flags	15.1
Islamic News	14.0
We are all Islamic State of Iraq & Shaam – ISIS	14.0
Sheikh Sulaymaan bin Naasir al-Ulwan	11.6
The Victorious Party in the Land of Ash-Sham 10	11.6
Dawla Islamiya Média	11.6

More interestingly, three of the ten pages listed in Table 2 are those of religious figures, suggesting there is an emerging set of new clerical authorities who are important to Western and European foreign fighters in Syria. They are:

- Ahmad Musa Jibril
- Musa Cerantonio
- Sulaymaan bin Naasir al-Ulwan

The presence of Sulaymaan al-Ulwan, who only communicates in Arabic and does not maintain a presence on social media requires explanation. Along with several other scholars, Ulwan was part of a radical grouping in Saudi Arabia which Thomas Hegghammer has called 'the shu'aybi school' – a group of clerics named after its leading authority, Hamoud al-Uqla al-Shu'aybi. This group regularly supported Osama bin Laden throughout the 1990s and offered limited support for his objectives after the September 11 attacks.[38] Ulwan was later arrested by Saudi authorities in April 2004 for opposing the House of Saud and, in particular, its relationship with the United States. He was then released in December 2012 but was rearrested in March 2013 and subsequently sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment for having violated the terms of his release, which included an injunction to stop preaching against the Saudi government. Ulwan's defiance earned him a degree of popularity among radical networks and preachers, making him a *cause célèbre* throughout much of 2013.[39] Given this background, Ulwan's popularity among Western and European foreign fighters is probably more reflective of his celebrity status than his stance on the Syrian conflict or his scholarship, which many of the foreign fighters in the dataset are unlikely to understand or appreciate.

By contrast, Ahmad Musa Jibril and Musa Cerantonio – the two other preachers on the list – are both based in the West, speak English, and regularly communicate with Western Muslim audiences through social media platforms. Their popularity is also reflected on Twitter, where they are followed by 60 and 23 per cent of foreign fighters respectively, and

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38 Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) p.84.
39 Ahmad Musa Jibril – one of the other preachers on our list – described him as "one of the very last true ulema [sholars]."; see Ahmad Musa Jibril, Twitter post, 30 September 2013, https://twitter.com/ahmadmusajibril/status/384617588954648576.

is particularly strong among groups like ISIS, whose members provide a majority of their likes and follows (see Table 3).

Table 3 Popularity of spiritual figures by group (in % of accounts)

Name	ISIS		Jabhat al-Nusrah		Unknown	
	Facebook	Twitter	Facebook	Twitter	Facebook	Twitter
Ahmad Musa Jibril	55.6	52.4	22.2	33.3	22.2	14.3
Musa Cerantonio	60.0	75	33.3	12.5	6.7	12.5

None of this should suggest that either individual is a member of ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusrah, nor should it be taken as indicating that they are involved in facilitating the recruitment of foreign fighters. However, by looking at their centrality in the foreign fighter social media network (see Figures 1 and 2) it is clear that they are important figures whose political, moral and spiritual messages are considered attractive to a number of foreign fighters. Their personal background, functions and approaches are quite different, and the remainder of this section will describe their profiles, as well as similarities and differences.

Ahmad Musa Jibril

Ahmad Musa Jibril

Ahmad Musa Jibril is a Palestinian-American cleric born in Dearborn, Michigan, in the United States in 1972. He spent a portion of his childhood in Madinah, Saudi Arabia, where his father was a student at the Islamic University.[40] Jibril then returned to the United States and completed high school before also enrolling at the Islamic Universiy in Madinah, reading for a degree in Shariah. He later completed a JD and LLM at Michigan law school.

In 2004, Jibril and his father were convicted on a string of federal offences, including '42 charges of conspiracy, bank fraud, wire fraud, money laundering, failure to file income tax returns and felon-in-possession of firearms and ammunition.'[41] The Government produced a 'Supplemental Sentencing Memorandum' which stated that a family photo album seized during the investigation contained 'photos of Ahmad as a teenager dressed as a *mujahid*… [and] photos of very young children holding apparently real firearms, "playing" at holding each other hostage and aiming the weapons at each other's heads.'[42]

The memorandum also revealed that Ahmad Musa Jibril was running a radical Salafi website (AlSalayfoon.com) at the time of his arrest which 'contained a library of fanatically anti-American sermons by militant Islamic clerics, in English and in Arabic.'[43] They also found that he had sent a fax to CNN in 1996 claiming responsibility for the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, warning '[t]here will be a series of bombings that will follow no matter how many lives of ours are taken.'[44] Jibril

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40 'About Us', Ahmadmusajibril.com: The Official Website Dedicated to Ahmad Jibril, accessed 29 March 2014, http://ahmadjibril.com/aboutus.html.

41 United States District Court Eastern District of Michigan Southern Division, 'Opinion and Order Denying Petitioner's Motion for Summary Judgement', No. 03-80810.

42 United States District Court Eastern District of Michigan Southern Division, 'Government's Supplemental Sentencing Memorandum', No. 03-80810, 25 April 2005; available at https://web.archive.org/web/20071029194740/http://nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/U.S._v_Jebril_USGSuppSentMemo.pdf.

43 Ibid.

44 The memorandum stressed that it considered this claim of responsibility to be false, although it was indicative of Ahmad Musa Jibril's mindset. See ibid.

Wake Up Oumma

We are all Islamic State of Iraq & Shaam - ISIS

Ahmad Musa Jibril

Sulaiman ibn Nasir al-Ulwan

Shaam al-Ghareeba

Musa Cerantonio II
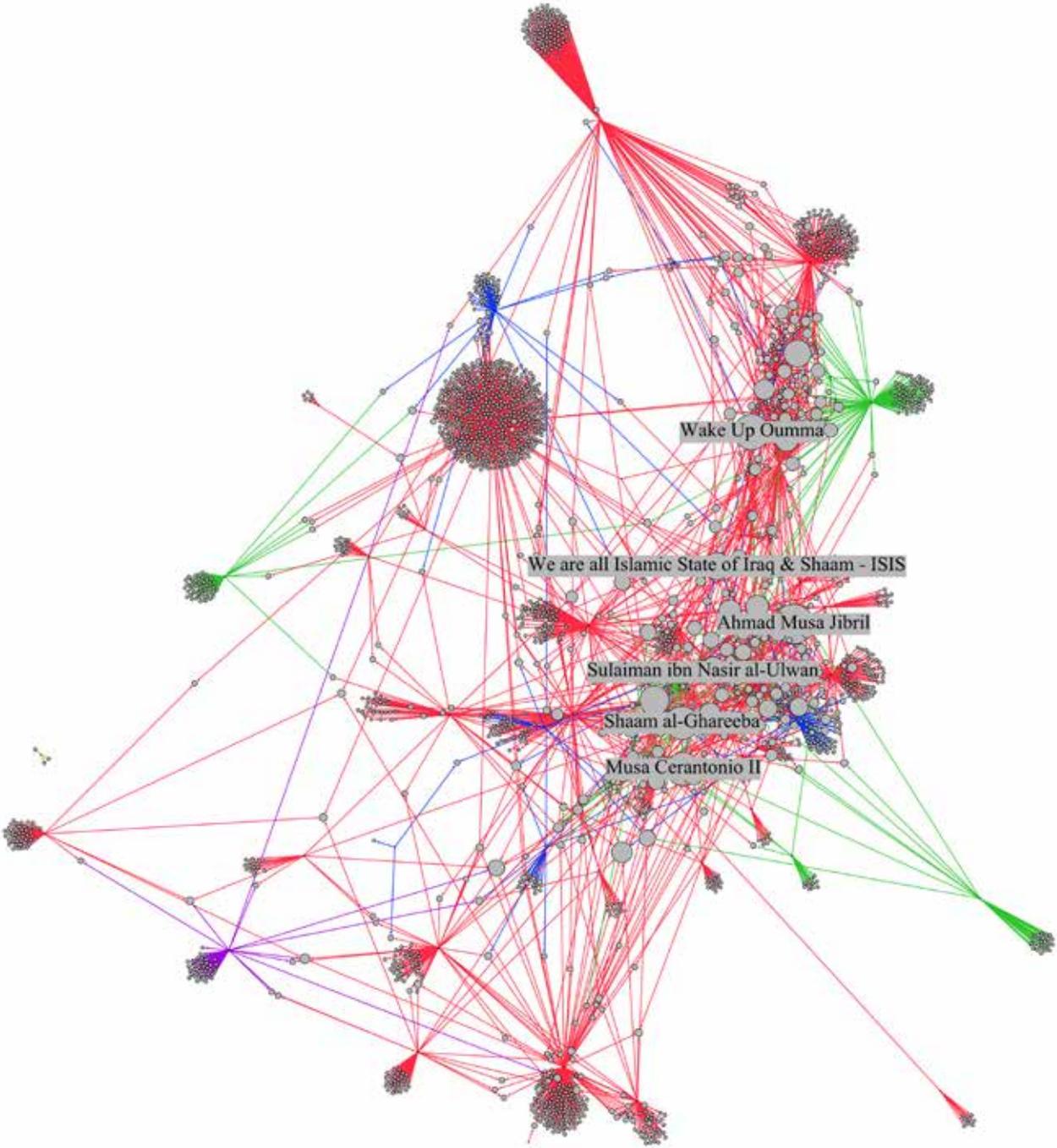
Figure 1 Most popular
Facebook pages (by
likes; node size indicates
in-degree centrality)

Key Labels identify popular
Facebook pages. The
groups corresponding to
different-coloured nodes
and edges are: ISIS (red);
Jabhat al-Nusrah (green);
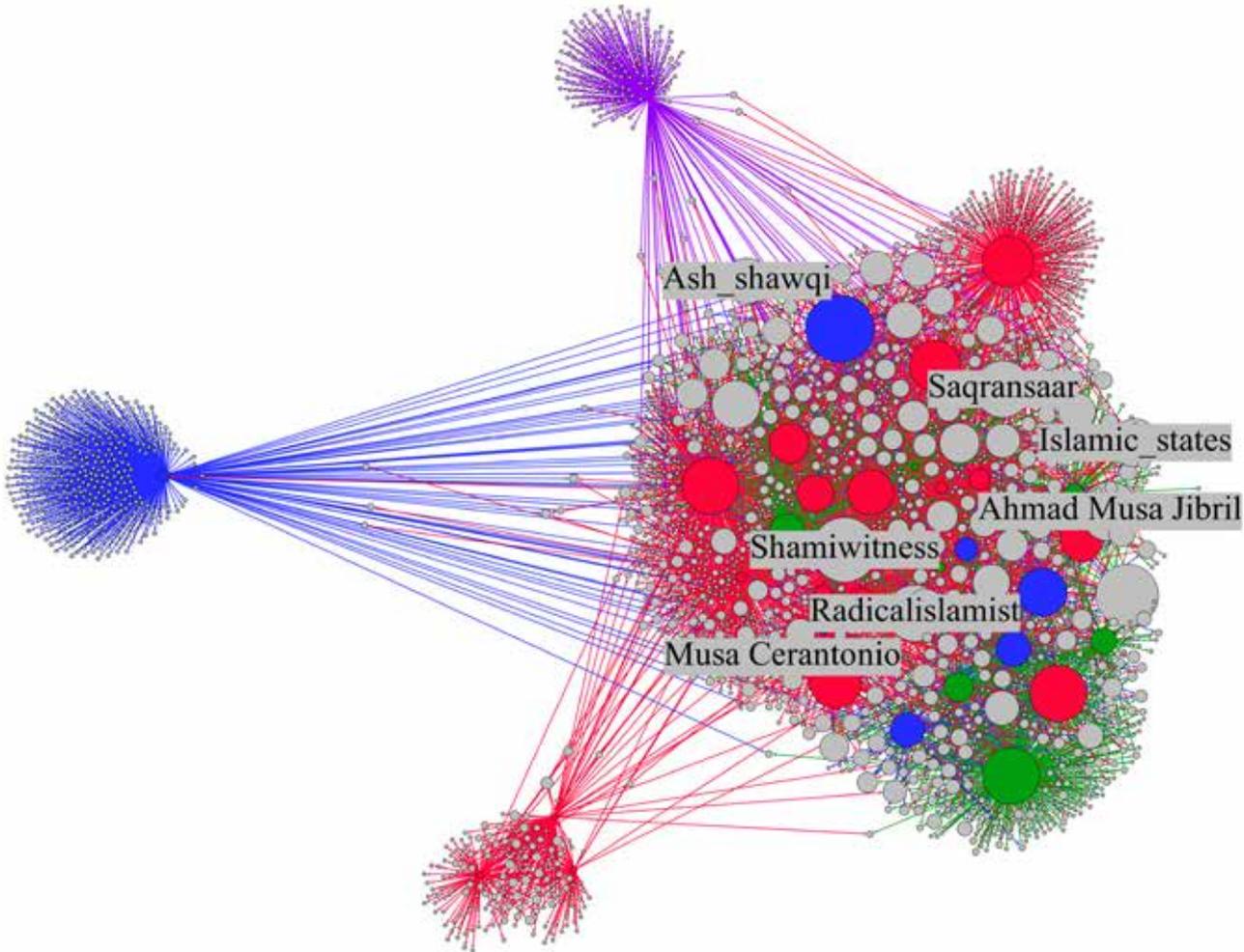unknown (blue).

Figure 2 Most popular
Twitter accounts (by
follows; node size indicates
in-degree centrality)

Key Labels identify popular
Twitter accounts. The
groups corresponding to
different-coloured nodes
and edges are: ISIS(red);
Jabhat al-Nusrah (green);
unknown (blue); and Harakat
ash-Shabaab al-Islam
(purple).

had also caused significant concern among Dearborn residents prior to his arrest. In 2003, he was dismissed from a local mosque because of his allegedly radical views and then began attending the Umar Bin Khattab Mosque in Brownstown.[45] In a report for *Beliefnet* some of Jibril's contemporaries described him as a 'a very powerful speaker,' who espoused anti-Western views.[46] Jawad Khan, who knew him at the time, noted:

> *Jebril's lectures turned into angry rants about western crimes against Muslims and he peppered his talk with invectives against Shi'a Muslims and called on God to turn Jewish children into orphans.*[47]

Less than a month after arriving at the Umar Bin Khattab Mosque, Jibril was also banned from attending prayers there and was incarcerated shortly after. On 30 March 2012, he was released from the Communications Management Unit at the federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana,[48] which is frequently criticised for its constant surveillance of inmates and the presence of a high number of prisoners convicted on terrorism related charges.[49]

Jibril is not a conventional cleric. It should be pointed out that Jibril does not openly incite his followers to violence nor does he explicitly encourage them to join the Syrian jihad. Instead, he adopts the role of a cheerleader: supporting the principles of armed opposition to Assad, often in highly emotive terms, while employing extremely charged religious or sectarian idioms. The general demeanour of his posturing towards the West is confrontational and distrusting, fuelling the perception of a Western conspiracy against both Islam and Muslims.[50] This is not to make a value judgement on Jibril's views, which he is entitled to hold. It should be recognised, however, that such views can easily be interpreted as offering support, encouragement, justification, and – particularly given his status as a religious leader – legitimacy for the decision to join a jihadist group in Syria.

Jibril has not published any notable works nor has he written any tracts celebrated by the radical community. His website lists only five works under 'books' most of which are short reminders on doctrinal matters rather than anything more substantive. The longest piece of work appears to be a book counselling against 'celebrating the holidays of the infidels.'[51] Instead, much of his popularity stems from Twitter and YouTube where he can be found delivering eloquent and impassioned lectures on a variety of topics from the Salafi understanding of the aqeedah (belief), to the situation in Syria. Jibril maintains his own channel on YouTube which includes, amongst other things, an exhaustive 33 part explanation of Tawheed – the Islamic concept of God's oneness.[52]

45   Omar Sacirbey, 'Extremism in Our Own Communities?', Beliefnet, 2006, accessed 25 March 2014, http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/2006/06/Extremism-In-Our-Own-Communities.aspx.
46   Ibid.
47   Ibid.
48   Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), inmate locator. Ahmad Musa Jibril's prisoner number was 31943-039.
49   Carrie Johnson Margot Williams, "Guantanamo North': Inside Secretive U.S. Prisons,' *NPR*, 3 March 2011, accessed 25 March 2014, http://www.npr.org/2011/03/03/134168714/guantanamo-north-inside-u-s-secretive-prisons.
50   Ahmad Musa Jibril, Twitter post, 13 January 2013, https://twitter.com/ahmadmusajibril/status/290455071479705601. Ahmad Musa Jibril, Twitter post, 13 February 2013, https://twitter.com/ahmadmusajibril/status/301531257198739456.
51   'Articles', Ahmadmusajibril.com: The Official Website Dedicated to Ahmad Jibril, accessed 29 March 2014 http://ahmadjibril.com/articles.html.
52   Ahmad Musa Jibril's YouTube page, accessed 25 March 2014, https://www.youtube.com/user/AhmadMusaJibril.

Jibril's charisma and fluency in English, coupled with his focus on both religious and contemporary issues, has caused his popularity to surge. Although he is not an express supporter of ISIS, a number of British ISIS fighters have told us that they watched his lecture series on Tawheed before embarking on jihad.[53] Indeed, Syria has featured prominently in Jibril's recent output. Thirteen days after his release from prison, he tweeted support for the rebels, comparing them to soldiers in one of Islam's earliest and most important conflicts, the Battle of Badr.[54] Less than a week later, he recorded and uploaded a sermon to YouTube titled 'Syria in our hearts.'[55] He told his audience:

When your brothers in Syria speak, everyone today needs to shut their mouth and listen, because they're proving themselves to be real men… the great army of the Rafida [a derogatory sectarian terms for Shia Muslims], Alawi, [and] Nusairi [a derogratory term for Alawites] in Syria, along with their brothers in south Lebanon, the soldiers of Hezbulshaitan [he is referring to Hezbollah as the 'party of Satan' here], along with militias from Iraq and soldiers from Iran, are all committing genocide against your brothers.[56]

Jibril is extremely popular on Facebook where his fan page has over 145,000 likes, making it 30 times more popular than the average fan page.[57] Unlike Musa Cerantonio (see below) Ahmad uses the page principally to promote and advertise his lectures, which means that entries tend to generate relatively few comments, although his Syria-related content does appear to be popular and widely shared' (see Table 4).

Table 4 Likes, Comments, and Shares on Ahmad Jibril's Facebook fan page (1/13-1/14)

Date	Subject	Likes	Comm.	Shares
11/01/13	Speak up to protect honourable women	42	12	19
20/01/13	Why action in Mali and not Syria	40	2	3
20/08/13	Happiness only in paradise	294	17	49
23/08/13	Circumstances change	329	6	68
31/08/13	Certainty in Allah	148	15	44
19/09/13	Ummah never gets defeated	270	9	87
30/09/13	Hold on to your belief	266	6	122
01/10/a13	Avoid sins	209	10	60
11/10/13	Do not commit sins	349	8	61
17/10/13	Fundamental principles	134	0	14
15/12/13	No money to Syria	1213	88	526
01/01/14	Kuffar rituals while conflict in Syria	1421	45	399
Total		4715	218	1452
Average		393	18	121

53 'AD', Internet interview by Shiraz Maher, February 2014.
54 Ahmad Musa Jibril, Twitter post, 12 April 2012, https://twitter.com/ahmadmusajibril/statuses/190291375894437888. The Battle of Badr (624) was an existential battle for the future of Islam.
55 Ahmad Musa Jibril, Twitter post, 19 April 2012, https://twitter.com/ahmadmusajibril/statuses/193082776768098306. Ahmad Musa Jibril, 'Khutbah(Speech) by Shiekh Ahmad Jibril Genocide, Murder, Beheading, Rape in our beloved Syria', 18 April 2012, accessed 25 March 2014, http://youtu.be/BUMUjQN773k.
56 Jibril, 'Khutbah'.
57 Sysomos Inc., 'Inside Facebook Pages', November 2009, accessed 2 March 2014, https://www.sysomos.com/insidefacebook/.

Analysis of Jibril's Twitter output reveals that the average retweet rate for his Syria-related tweets is 74.1, suggesting that each one is given considerable prominence. Furthermore, Jibril makes a consistent effort to interact with his followers, generating a much higher than average rate of response. In fact, our dataset shows that 1.25 per cent of Jibril's interactions on Twitter are with foreign fighters in Syria, to whom he has sent messages such as 'From my wake up to my sleep, you brothers there consume my thoughts and duaa [supplications]. Wallahi! I LOVE you all for the sake of ALLAH.'[58]

The most pointed example of Jibril's interaction with a foreign fighter came after the death of Ifthekar Jaman, a Portsmouth resident who moved to Syria and joined ISIS. After being in Syria for approximately seven months Ifthekar was killed in early December 2013 while fighting in 'Ghazwah al-Khair,' an ISIS offensive in Deir ez-Zour. Within hours of his death, Jibril sent a message of condolence via direct message (DM) on Twitter tto Iftekhar's brother (though there is no suggestion that his brother supports ISIS, Ahmad Musa Jibril, or jihadist activity in Syria).[59] Although direct messages are private, Ifthekar's brother uploaded the contents of Jibril's message to his public timeline. The message reads:

> *Aslamu alykum brother, if I'm correct from what I read you're a relative, possibly a brother to Ifthekar. May Allah subhanu watala grant you all patience. I didn't know him but when I read of him today it made me weep, may Allah be with you and may Allah grant him ferdous![60] (Please!) give me salam, love and respect to all the family. If I was there it would be a great honor to visit you all.[61]*

If anything, this demonstrates Jibril's willingness to engage with his followers and their enthusiasm for him to do so: the message was retweeted 97 times, favourited 141 times, and generated 3 responses. For the foreign fighters in Syria, it seems, Jibril is not just an eloquent and authoritative supporter, but is also someone who can be called upon to provide friendship and comfort in times of need.

Musa Cerantonio

SOURCE: YOUTUBE/PEACE TV

Musa Cerantonio

Musa Cerantonio is a 29 year old Australian cleric of Irish and Italian heritage. He converted to Islam from Catholicism at the age of 17 and has spent time studying Islam in the Middle East. He has hosted numerous English-language shows on Iqraa TV which is based in Egypt and broadcasts via satellite around the world.[62] Two of his most important shows are 'Our Legacy,' which covers Islamic history and civilisation, and 'Ask the Sheikh,' a live call-in show where viewers are able to ask him questions relating to Islamic jurisprudence.[63]

Although he has an account on Twitter, Musa Cerantonio is not an active user of the platform. At the time of writing he had just 1,774

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58   Ahmad Musa Jibril, Twitter post, 4 February 2014, https://twitter.com/ahmadmusajibril/
      status/430657921098059776.
59   MrJaman_, Twitter post, 18 December 2013, https://twitter.com/MrJaman_/status/413396928760926208.
60   This is a reference to the highest level of paradise, as understood in normative Islamic theology.
61   MrJaman_, Twitter post, 18 December 2013, https://twitter.com/MrJaman_/status/413396928760926208.
62   'Musa Cerantonio, Australian Convert To Islam, Promotes Jihadi Islam On Widely Aired Show On Saudi Iqraa TV,
      And Lectures Worldwide,' MEMRI, Special Dispatch Series No. 5102, December 11, 2012.
63   'Australian Islamist Musa Cerantonio Glorifies Jihad, Supports Jabhat Al-Nusrah In Syria,' MEMRI, Special Dispatch
      No.5231, March 11, 2013.

followers and 52 tweets. This is a small number, but one which still reveals his strong desire to engage and interact with followers. Of his tweets, 53.8 per cent involve interactions with other users, while an additional 38.4 per cent are retweeted. This means that 92.2 per cent of his tweets involve an interaction of some kind.

Most of Cerantonio's interactions on Twitter are spent arguing with the U.S. State Department's 'Think Again Turn Away' account, which is an account aiming to engage jihadists in discussion online. Setting aside the merits of such an approach, Cerantonio typically employs highly inflammatory language, for example, calling the State Department 'pussy Yankee scum', and claiming that 'the USA and its slaves like you are the greatest criminals on Earth.'[64] In one instance, he posted a modified image of the U.S. State Department seal which read 'U.S. Department of Rape.'[65]

By contrast, Cerantonio uses Facebook heavily to engage with his followers – which number more than 11,000 – and often posts opinions about the Syrian civil war. Compared to Jibril he is also much more explicit in his endorsement of violent jihad and support for jihadist organisations operating in Syria. This can be seen from his Syria-related posts on Facebook which are listed in Table 5, and the word cloud that was generated from their content (see Figure 3). One example of Cerantonio's inflammatory rhetoric comes from an instance where other rebel groups coalesced against ISIS during the recent infighting known as the *fitna*. Cerantonio commented:

> [W]hich law is it that the FSA wishes to implement, and which law do we see them implement at the moment in the areas which they rule? Among them are secularists, democrats, even Christians and other disbelievers. The FSA rules by laws other than the Law of Allah, and they hoist high the banner of nationalism, and remove the banner of the Word of Allah. So how can it be said that they are fighting a Jihad by any sane believer? No, rather it is Jihad to fight them and to remove them from power, along with their laws of falsehood and tyranny.[66]

This post – and many others like it – suggest that Cerantonio is a supporter of ISIS although he insists he is not a tribal loyalist who is committed to the group in all circumstances. Indeed, he qualifies his support by stating that his allegiance belongs to any group prepared to establish an Islamic state, the Khilafah, but that ISIS is currently the only organisation truly committed to this goal. He states:

> I have been very clear about why ISIS are the best forces on the ground and that is because they are doing what the others do not, i.e. establishing a state and declaring the intention to establish the Khilafah. The other groups such as the Islamic Front had announced that they will fight anyone who establishes a state, and were clearly against the Khilafah for some odd reason.
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> […]

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64   Musa Cerantonio, Twitter post, 24 March 2014, https://twitter.com/MusaCerantonio/status/448120980007698434; Musa Cerantonio, Twitter post, 21 March 2014, https://twitter.com/MusaCerantonio/status/447104813231120384.

65   Musa Cerantonio's Facebook page, 21 March 2014, accessed 30 March 2014 https://www.facebook.com/MusaCerantonioII/photos/pb.505961382819570.-2207520000.1396547896./601984423217265/?type=3&theater.

66   Musa Cerantonio's Facebook page, 'Whose Jihad Was Destroyed?', 16 March 2014, accessed 17 March 2014, subsequently deleted, but backed up by ICSR.

I have stated this before and I will state it again – As a Muslim I will pledge my allegiance to any man who establishes himself as the valid Khalifah of the Ummah.[67]

Compared to Jibril, Cerantonio's social media activity is less subtle and more openly political. In this respect he is less of an emotional 'cheerleader,' and instead appeals to logical argument, suggesting to his followers that support for ISIS represents the only 'rational' choice based on the principles of 'true' Islamic governance.

Table 5 Likes, Comments, and Shares of Syria-related posts on Musa Cerantonio's Facebook fan page (12/13-3/14)

Date	Subject	Likes	Comm.	Shares
16/12/13	Good vs. Evil in Syria	115	12	28
23/12/13	ISIS takeover of Ahrar HQ	155	24	17
31/12/13	Khalid Yasin views on Jihad in Syria	150	26	17
03/01/14	ISIS in Iraq	337	68	31
04/01/14	ISIS v. Hezbollah in Beirut	227	34	18
09/01/14	Islamic State progress map	234	37	46
14/01/14	ISIS gaining Raqqah	194	66	15
14/01/14	Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi & Nuruddin Zengi	307	84	117
17/01/14	Jarabulus ISIS battle	217	23	18
18/01/14	Manbij, Syria	159	18	11
18/01/14	ISIS moving in to Baghdad	423	64	36
21/01/14	Fighting in Ash-Sham	197	22	29
26/01/14	Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi	203	75	40
04/02/14	Ayman Adh-Dhawahiri	159	52	6
11/02/14	JN/Turkey/weapons	126	55	14
16/02/14	ISIS Mural	366	17	44
17/02/14	JN defectors to ISIS	154	61	22
19/02/14	Syria boy in desert photo	226	19	40
23/02/14	Taqba airport ISIS car bomb	291	40	20
24/02/14	Groups wanting Khalifah	277	106	58
26/02/14	Al-Jolani announcement	104	36	35
27/02/14	Abu Abdullah al-Afghani announcem.	125	32	22
03/03/14	His islamway.net profile	196	32	1
09/03/14	Current situation in Aleppo'	110	27	19
10/03/14	Flag displaying	269	19	70
11/03/14	ISIS Bayeaux Tapestry	153	14	3
26/03/14	Assad family killed in Latakia	208	21	13
Total		5682	1084	790
Average		210	40	25

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67   Musa Cerantonio's Facebook page, 24 February 2014, accessed 17 March 2014, https://www.facebook.com/ MusaCerantonioII/posts/589964771085897.

Figure 3 Word Cloud of Syria-related posts from Musa Cerantonio's Facebook fan page

Much like Ahmad Musa Jibril, Cerantonio is a fluent and charismatic English speaker who interacts with his audience. But the two clerics and their styles are different. Cerantonio is much younger and comes across as a 'first among equals' – rather than appearing as a 'father figure', which better characterises Jibril. This leads to the conclusion that, rather than competing, the two preachers are, in fact, appealing to their audiences in very different ways: while Jibril is a fan of Twitter, Cerantonio is more active on Facebook; where Jibril talks about religion and appeals to emotion, Cerantonio deals with politics; and while Jibril styles himself as a benevolent father figure, Cerantonio comes off as a canny, more energetic brother. Foreign fighters who follow them both are exposed to the same essential message: fighting in Syria is legitimate and honourable.

Conclusions

Much has been said and written about foreign fighters in Syria, particularly about the scale of jihadist volunteerism from both Western and European countries. These foreign fighters possess a unique set of interests and priorities which need to be explained and understood. That has been the overriding focus of this paper which has produced three notable findings.

The first finding – and one on which the entire report and its methodology are predicated – is that a surprisingly high number of European and Western foreign fighters are actively using social media. Syria may, in fact, be the first conflict in which a large number of Western fighters have been documenting their experience of conflict in real-time. For them, social media has come to represent both an essential source of information and inspiration. It is clear to us that in the minds of foreign fighters social media is not merely virtual: it has become an essential part of what happens on the ground.

Second, we found that a large number of foreign fighters receive their information about the conflict from so-called disseminators, rather than from official accounts maintained by fighting groups. These disseminators are officially unaffiliated but are broadly sympathetic individuals who are deeply invested in the conflict. In this respect, the ability of jihadist groups to control information has been significantly eroded while it is private individuals who now possess significant influence over how the conflict is perceived by those who are actively involved in it.

Third, the report has revealed the existence of new clerical authorities who foreign fighters in Syria regard as important and influential. Although there is no evidence to suggest that these individuals are directly involved in facilitating the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, or that they are coordinating their activity with jihadist organisations, they are clearly serving as cheerleaders for the cause. Their activities can be seen as lending support, encouragement, justification, and religious legitimacy for the decision of some to join the Syrian conflict as fighters. Whether consciously or not, they may be performing an important role in the radicalisation of some individuals and retain this importance among those who later decide to engage in active combat. Empirically, the two most popular clerical authorities identified in this report are Ahmad Jibril and Musa Cerantonio.

Finally, this paper illustrates the enormous amount of insight that can be gained from analysing information that is available online through open source material. Indeed, all of the information which formed the quantitative base of our analysis has been volunteered and self-published by the fighters themselves. A report published and endorsed by the former Chairmen of the 9/11 Commission in 2012 argued that instead of removing or censoring content on the internet, a more productive strategy would 'make maximum use' of the information violent extremists 'are sharing with others.'[68] This paper is a small illustration of the potential of such an approach.

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68   Neumann, 'Countering Online Radicalization in America', p. 39.

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