



# Transnational Volunteers Against ISIS

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*The creation and maintenance of a database like the one underpinning the research laid out in this article is inevitably a continuing and collaborative enterprise.*

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# Introduction

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The age of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has seen a great deal of ink spilt on the “Foreign Terrorist Fighter” (FTF) phenomenon. Researchers have placed particular emphasis on understanding those FTFs from Western countries joining ISIS and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, such as Jabhat al-Nusra (now Jabhat Fatah al-Sham). At the core of these studies are databases that store information on the background, antecedents and other variables, such as personalities and motivations. Two efforts stand out: one is the database (and associated research efforts) by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), at King’s College London.<sup>1</sup> Another database, by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), at the University of Maryland, currently includes information on approximately 290 individuals who have been publically identified as having left, attempted to leave or expressed an interest in leaving the United States to join foreign conflicts.<sup>2</sup> This work and similar efforts have thrown much needed light on the issue of FTFs and the groups they join.

This article attempts to make a small contribution to the literature on these foreign volunteers through an exploration of the underreported phenomenon of the volunteers travelling to Syria and Iraq to take part in the fight against ISIS and other jihadist groups. The core of the study draws on a database set up in late 2014, when the first volunteers began to appear on social media and early reports of Western fighters in Syria began to filter through to the mainstream media.<sup>3</sup> The database has been continuously updated to the present. As of 1 August 2019, this database has details of 500 individuals,<sup>4</sup> making it one of the largest of its kind.

This first part of this paper sets out the background to the issue of FTFs, provides a survey of previous relevant studies and introduces the database that underpins the present study, describing how it was developed, giving the criteria for inclusion as well as the reasoning behind some of the decisions in database construction. The second part examines the motivations of the anti-ISIS volunteers by looking at implications prompted by the involvement of these individuals in the anti-ISIS conflict both at a personal level and from the point of view of governments and legal regimes. Finally, some avenues for further study are suggested.

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1 ‘Western Foreign Fighters in Syria’, <http://icsr.info/projects/western-foreign-fighters-syria/>; see also A. Carter, Shiraz Maher and Peter R. Neumann, ‘#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks’, London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2014, pp.9–10.

2 This database, Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the United States (PIRUS), captures information of American foreign fighters in several phases – pre-travel, travel and return – of their life-cycle. Individuals included within the dataset include those joining or attempting to join the Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISIS, al-Shabaab and the YPG. See ‘Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the United States (PIRUS)’, ‘Understanding the Threat: What the data tells us about US Foreign Fighters’ (September 2015), and ‘Overview: Profiles of Individual Profiles of Radicalisation in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF)’, April 2016. START: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. <http://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalisation-united-states-pirus>; [https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_PIRUS-FF\\_InfographicSeries\\_April2016.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS-FF_InfographicSeries_April2016.pdf); and [https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_PIRUS\\_WhatDataTellUsAboutForeignFighters\\_AnalyticalBrief\\_Sept2015.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_WhatDataTellUsAboutForeignFighters_AnalyticalBrief_Sept2015.pdf) (accessed 1 Oct 2018).

3 This study was originally submitted in October 2018. Minor revisions were made to bring the data on the foreign volunteers up to date until 1 August 2019.

4 This number – 500 – was the exact figure arrived at by 1 August 2019.



# The Issue of FTFs

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## Database: Methodology and Criteria

The database was constructed to examine individuals who in some way or other were outsiders drawn to the conflict, who felt the need to fight ISIS (or other jihadist groups) or volunteer close to the front line in other ways in the anti-ISIS conflict.<sup>5</sup> Individuals who fought for the Free Syrian Army, Iranian Shia fighters fighting on the side of the Assad regime in Syria or foreigners with other pro-Assad forces were excluded from the database.

Information concerning each individual was recorded in approximately fifty categories. The categories cover basic identifiers (including name, age, sex, nationality, which group the individual fought for, when he/she entered and left the conflict zone, the date the individual was killed, if applicable) as well as further details about the individual's past (previous military experience, other professional experience, whether the individual had a criminal record). In addition, there were categories for recording the motivations and ideology of the individual (where available).

For the purposes of this study, none of the individuals under consideration has been interviewed, contacted or interacted with in any way. The writer does not refer to the full names or other personal details of the individuals. Instead, when referring to these individuals, first names only have been used. However, where the individual in question has been quoted in press reporting or interviews (including those on YouTube), or when his full identity has been revealed in the mainstream media (for example, as a result of being killed), full names are used.

“Foreign fighter” is a necessarily loaded term lending itself to multiple connotations. David Malet defines them as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict”.<sup>6</sup> This has been elaborated on and refined by others, including Thomas Hegghammer who defines a foreign fighter to be someone who: (1) has joined, and operates 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 organisation; and (4) is unpaid.<sup>7</sup>

Difficulties arise when attempting to use these definitions for anti-ISIS volunteers. First of all, those who choose to join the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria, the Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG), based primarily in northern Syria (the major constituent part of the SDF) or, particularly, the Peshmerga in Iraq, the official military forces of the Kurdish Regional Government, could in some ways claim to be fighting with official forces. Secondly, a significant number of anti-ISIS fighters from the West (and particularly from Europe) have Kurdish or Assyrian

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<sup>5</sup> The present author is grateful to researchers from the ICSR, King's College, London, for knowledge sharing on the issues pertaining to database construction.

<sup>6</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts*, p.9.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad', *International Security*, Vol. 35 No. 3, 2011, pp.57–8. See generally the discussion in Joseph A. Carter, Shiraz Maher and Peter R. Neumann, '#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks', London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2014, pp.9–10.

Christian roots or kinship links. As such, here are the two overarching principles for including individuals in the database:

**Volunteerism.** The individuals were drawn to the conflict because they felt, of their own free will, that they had a role to play against ISIS and other jihadist groups.<sup>8</sup> Their primary motivation is not recompense.<sup>9</sup>

**Proximity to danger.** The individuals were engaged at or near the front line and either joined one of the main local fighting groups or performed a supporting role behind the front line that could conceivably expose them to some degree of risk.

Before proceeding to specific criteria for inclusion, it is useful to examine the various types of individuals who fall short of inclusion at this stage.

**Military contractors / Trainers / Mercenaries.** A growing number of individuals appear to have taken up paid contracting at or near the front line. Where a mercenary or paid contractor role has been established, such individuals have been excluded as they do not fit within the volunteerism criterion.<sup>10</sup>

A similar issue arises with individuals involved in a training capacity near the front line. Some are volunteers, while others appear originally to have been volunteers at the front line but have now transitioned into contracting or training work. Some are part of armed groups such as the YPG or Peshmerga but do more administrative or corporate work.<sup>11</sup> The general principle has been to include these individuals only if they have also spent time at or near the front line as volunteers.<sup>12</sup>

**Birds of Passage.** Also excluded are a number of individuals (often operating in the conflict zone singly or in very small groups) who could loosely be termed war tourists or transient birds of passage, who have never taken part in actual conflict against ISIS (although they might have tried to form associations with groups like the YPG or Peshmerga).<sup>13</sup>

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8 There has been conflicting information about whether volunteers are paid by the YPG and Peshmerga (the two groups that have the highest number of foreigners join). Some reports (particularly at the earlier phases) suggested that foreign volunteers in the YPG and Peshmerga receive no salary; however, it appears that at least some receive a basic allowance. One British fighter with the YPG, interviewed in 2017, stated that he was paid a monthly allowance of £40. 'Brit fighting ISIS in Syria vows to fearlessly carry on – despite £120,000 bounty on his head', *The Daily Mirror*, 18 Feb 2017, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/brit-fighting-isis-syria-vows-9845145> (accessed 20 Nov 2017).

9 Mercenaries, such as those employed by Russia on the ground in the conflict zone in Syria, have been excluded. For examples, see Julian Borger and Marc Bennett, 'Scores of Russian mercenaries reportedly killed by US airstrikes in Syria', *The Guardian*, 13 Feb 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/13/russian-mercenaries-killed-us-airstrikes-syria>; and James Milner, 'The Insane Story of Russian Mercenaries Fighting for the Syrian Regime', *The Huffington Post*, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-milner/the-insane-story-of-russi\\_b\\_4317729.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-milner/the-insane-story-of-russi_b_4317729.html)

Where coercion is suspected, the individual has been excluded. See the case of Halil Alptekin, a young Belgian Kurdish fighter from the town of Herentals near Antwerp, whose parents publicly complained in November 2014 that he was forced by members of the PKK to join the struggle in Iraq in 2009 and forbidden from returning home. 'Laat onze zoon naar huis terugkeren', <http://www.hln.be/regio/nieuws-uit-herentals/-laat-onze-zoon-naar-huis-terugkeren-a2134701/> (accessed 29 Nov 2014). Individuals like this have been excluded from the database. I am grateful to Guy Van Vlierden for a personal communication on Halil Alptekin and similar cases.

10 An example is a former Czech soldier, Lumir Nemeč, who owns a private security company and who provides training to Kurdish fighters, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/domaci/1621807-kdyz-cesky-veteran-cvicil-kurdske-bojovniky-v-syrii-spal-se-samopalem-pod-hlavou> and <http://www.securitymagazin.cz/zpravyl-1404053719.html> (accessed 11 Jan 2017).

11 An example is Zac Huff, an American who volunteered to serve in the Israel's IDF and then joined the Kurdish Zeravani Peshmerga in what appears to be an advisory or corporate relations role: 'IDF volunteer who served in Kurdish Peshmerga: "We aren't doing enough to fight Islamic State"', *Jerusalem Online*, 3 Apr 2015, <http://www.jerusalemonline.com/news/middle-east/israel-and-the-middle-east/idf-volunteer-served-in-kurdish-peshmerga-they-view-us-as-their-brothers-12657> (accessed 2 Nov 2017).

12 An example of an included individual is an Italian named Alex Pineschi, an Italian military veteran who founded a military consulting firm that appears to have had some role in training Peshmerga fighters but who as an individual also fought with them. See <http://repubblica24.com/militare-italiano-combatte-isis-video/> and <http://www.congedatitfolgore.com/it/un-italiano-combatte-con-i-peshmerga/> (accessed 9 Jan 2017).

13 An example of such birds of passage is Daniela Lazarová, 'Friend of Czechs arrested in Turkey: Their main goal was to establish a Field Hospital', *Radio Praha*, 24 Nov 2016, <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/panorama/friend-of-czechs-arrested-in-turkey-their-main-goal-was-to-establish-a-field-hospital> (accessed 18 Apr 2018). I am grateful to Michael Murad for a personal communication on this issue and on possible Czech volunteers more broadly. The Czech who is included in my database is a separate individual.



**Civilian or humanitarian workers.** There is evidence of increasing numbers of individuals who have come to be a part of the Rojava experiment in a variety of support roles (such as teachers), to participate in the socialist experiment in northern Syria or to contribute to civil society in other ways.<sup>14</sup> These individuals have been excluded.

**Medical contingents.** Individuals from these groups, armed or unarmed, have been considered provided that there is evidence that they have consistently spent time close to the front line and, in general, bear arms.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, there are also well-organised medical groups close to the front line but clearly not there to fight. These have been excluded, as have individuals who have travelled to Syria and Iraq for purely humanitarian reasons.

The specific criteria used to sift through profiles (with fulfilment of one criterion deemed sufficient to merit inclusion) were:

- (a) Credible references to individuals having being involved in volunteering at or near the front line in press reports, media profiles or interviews.
- (b) Individuals who self-identified as being part of this conflict in their social media posts, either as fighters or active volunteers at or near the front line, checked against acceptable supporting content.
- (c) Interactions with other individuals known to be fighters (either through posts on social media accounts, comments by others on social media deemed reliable or inferences from images on accounts, including individuals tagged with their names), where inferences can reasonably be made that the first individual under consideration is or has been a fighter, checked against acceptable supporting content.

Not all individuals who matched specific criteria above were automatically included within the dataset. Where there was doubt, attempts were made to crosscheck individual profiles and identities against the other criteria in order to avoid skewing the conclusions made about the individuals in question.<sup>16</sup>

## Further Exclusions

The decision has been taken to exclude individuals from select geographical areas and ethnicities. Individuals and ethnicities with a direct proximity to the conflict (sometimes inhabiting the same conflict areas) who have joined the YPG or Peshmerga have been excluded. These include, for example, Arab militia (either as individuals or groups) in Syria, who have cooperated with or come under the banner of the YPG or latterly the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Individuals of Kurdish (or Assyrian Christian) origin have only been included when they hail from the diaspora from Europe (or the

<sup>14</sup> An example is included here: "A real revolution is a mass of contradictions": Interview with a Rojava Volunteer, *Novara Media*, 1 Feb 2017, <http://novaramedia.com/2017/02/01/a-real-revolution-is-a-mass-of-contradictions-interview-with-a-rojava-volunteer/> (accessed 2 Feb 2017).

<sup>15</sup> It is possible that these units were established or joined by individuals concerned that the authorities in their home countries will accuse them of having joined fighting groups (as opposed to those who could claim a humanitarian purpose).

<sup>16</sup> This has been necessary for a number of reasons. A small number of individuals could best be described as Peshmerga or YPG voyeurs, located far from the conflict zone but creating Facebook profiles that gave every suggestion of them having taken an active part in the conflict, even going to the extent of "befriending" bona fide fighters (Author's analysis of actual and "wannabe" anti-ISIS fighters' social media profiles).

USA) and their identities are either known or can be deduced with reasonable certainty. The database also does not include individuals from the West of Kurdish/Assyrian Christian origins who have returned to their ancestral countries to join armed groups *before* the beginning of the conflict against ISIS.<sup>17</sup> It also does not include individuals who fight solely for the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is in conflict with the Turkish state.

Volunteers from the area colloquially known as Rojhelat – the Kurdish areas of western Iran – have been excluded.<sup>18</sup> Separately, Turkish volunteers also pose an issue as there is evidence that large numbers of Turks (particularly those with a Marxist-Leninist orientation) have joined the conflict.<sup>19</sup> These fighters are not considered “foreign” by the YPG or Peshmerga and many appear to have integrated into fighting units as locals.

The database also does not take into account unverified allusions to raw numbers, such as those from the Kurdish diaspora in the West who have joined the PKK, the YPG or Peshmerga. Nor, for that matter, has the database been inflated by relying on occasional official national estimates of numbers of fighters. It is important in this context to note that some countries that have a large ethnic Kurdish population have reported a large number of individuals of Kurdish extraction leave to join the various Kurdish armed groups, including those active in Syria. One example is Germany, where a conservative estimate of 50 departures was provided by German security officials in late 2014, with the total thought to be much higher.<sup>20</sup> A separate and more recent number (this time including individuals without Kurdish ancestry) given by German official sources in April 2017 was 204, with 69 of the 204 fighters said to be German nationals.<sup>21</sup>

From time to time, social media and press outlets have reported groups of individuals in the West mobilising to join the conflict (particularly from 2015–16) or else providing facilitation or training services for those wanting to take part in the conflict.<sup>22</sup> Where there is no reasonable certainty that the individuals mentioned have actually travelled to and taken part in the conflict, the reports have not been taken into account when adding individuals into the database.

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17 For an example of such an exclusion, see the case of the Czech/Kurdish doctor, Rizgar Rashid. ‘Czech Doctor is the first Czech Citizen to Die in fighting ISIS’, 1 Jun 2016, <http://praguemonitor.com/2016/06/01/peshmerga-doctor-first-czech-citizen-die-fighting> (accessed 13 Jan 2017).

18 Some media estimates have suggested several hundred Iranian Kurds fighting with the YPG or Peshmerga. See ‘Iranian Kurds Bolster Anti-IS Forces in Syria’, *VOANews*, 28 Sep 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/a/iranian-kurds-join-the-fight-against-isis/3529076.html> (accessed 3 May 2018).

19 For estimates of Kurdish Turks joining the YPG (likely in the thousands), see the thesis written in fulfillment of the requirements for a Master’s degree at the University of Ghent, 2016–2017 by Simon de Craemer, *Strange Comrades: Non-Jihadist Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*, [https://lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/352/696/RUG01-002352696\\_2017\\_0001\\_AC.pdf](https://lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/352/696/RUG01-002352696_2017_0001_AC.pdf) (accessed 24 Jan 2018), p.14.

20 ‘German Kurds Join Fight against Islamic State’, *Spiegel Online*, 29 Oct 14. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/kurds-from-germany-joining-pkk-in-fight-against-islamic-state-a-999560.html> (accessed 4 Feb 17).

21 For this official estimate (which does not cover those who traveled from Germany to join the Peshmerga, but which in addition to YPG also includes PKK fighters), see ‘More than 200 people from Germany fighting with Kurdish forces against IS’, April 2017. <http://www.dw.com/en/more-than-200-people-from-germany-fighting-with-kurdish-forces-against-is/a-38371055> (accessed 20 Nov 17).

In the case of only one country has information on fighters been included when the present writer did not himself have access to the details of the fighters themselves. This concerns Belgium. The present writer was unable to find social media profiles or credible media reports concerning Belgian anti-ISIS fighters, but another expert has shared evidence and profiles of such individuals, with some granularity on details of the individuals - five in all. These individuals (all of whom have Kurdish ancestry, and all of whom have left traces or are active on social media, have been included. Three of them were supporters of the PDK (Kurdish Democratic Party) and active in Iraq (two from Antwerp, one from Brussels). Two others (one from Liège and one from Aalst) were in Syria. While these are the only Belgians included, the overall numbers of Belgians with Kurdish ancestry thought to have made the journey to the frontlines is in all likelihood much higher. I am grateful for a personal communication from Guy Van Vlierden on this subject.

22 For examples, see Ben Makuch, ‘Ex-NATO Soldiers Are One Step Closer to Officially Joining the War Against ISIS’, *Vice*, 13 Jan 2015, [http://www.vice.com/en\\_ca/read/ex-nato-soldiers-are-one-step-closer-to-officially-joining-the-war-against-isis-273](http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/ex-nato-soldiers-are-one-step-closer-to-officially-joining-the-war-against-isis-273) (accessed 20 Nov 2017), and Randy DeSoto, ‘23 U.S. Veterans Are About To Take The ISIS Problem Into Their Own Hands In An Epic Way’, 18 May 2015, <http://www.westernjournalism.com/23-u-s-veterans-are-about-to-take-the-isis-problem-into-their-own-hands-in-an-epic-way/> (accessed 21 Nov 2017). One security consulting firm, Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), headed by Matthew van Dyke (who asserts to have fought for Libyan rebels against the forces of Muammar Gaddafi in the Libyan civil war), claims to send US military veterans to aid and train Assyrian Christians in Iraq: Jillian Angeline, ‘Firm recruits military vets to train Iraqis’, <http://www.kcentv.com/news/military/firm-recruits-military-vets-to-train-iraqis/502565425> (accessed 14 Jan 2018).

## Existing Studies

Six studies on the subject are of note. The first, published in August 2016 by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD), is based on a dataset of three hundred anti-ISIS foreign fighters.<sup>23</sup> Another study, by Kyle Orton and published by the Henry Jackson Society in August 2017, is in part a study of the PKK, but also provides a detailed analysis of sixty of the foreign fighters under the PKK-linked YPG, based primarily in northern Syria, which has been one of the most effective groups battling ISIS.<sup>24</sup> A third study, by Simon de Craemer, is a treatment of the issue (with some suggested policy implications and responses). De Craemer's study is based on a database consisting of 366 individuals. Like the present author's own database, this has been constructed using newspaper and media reports as well as profiles and references on social media.<sup>25</sup> The most recent study, by Ariel Koch and published in June 2019 in the peer-reviewed journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*, employs primary and secondary sources to analyse the mobilization of right-wing and left-wing foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq to fight against ISIS.<sup>26</sup>

There are two additional studies that are concerned solely with American volunteers fighting ISIS. The investigative website Bellingcat published a report on anti-ISIS fighters in August 2015. In its dataset were 108 individuals (a conservative estimate, going by the account of the author of the report, Nathan Patin).<sup>27</sup> A second study, by Jason Fritz and Joseph K. Young, was published in October 2017 and focused on 34 American citizens, with what could be considered "full" data for 29 individuals.<sup>28</sup>

These studies are welcome additions to an area underserved by research. It should be noted, however, that each of these studies sets out to do different things and employs different parameters for inclusion in their respective datasets. The ISD study is concerned with any Westerner engaged in the conflict against ISIS and groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. Besides including Westerners volunteering for Kurdish groups, such as the YPG and Peshmerga, it also includes Westerners with the Free Syrian Army (which originally had the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as its principal adversary), as well as Shia militias engaged in fighting ISIS.<sup>29</sup> The Patin and Fritz/Young studies are wholly concerned with Americans. The Fritz/Young study collected data for a specific period: September–November 2015. It did not include social media analysis, even though many of these fighters inhabit the world of social media alone, often not cropping up at all in press reports (the latter being the main source for the Fritz/Young study).

23 "Shooting in the right direction": Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq', Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Horizon Series 1 (August 2016), <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ISD-Report-Shooting-in-the-right-direction-Anti-ISIS-Fighters.pdf> (accessed 19 Feb 2019).

24 Kyle Orton, 'The Forgotten Foreign Fighters: The PKK in Syria', The Henry Jackson Society, August 2017, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/3053-PYD-Foreign-Fighter-Project-1.pdf> (accessed 1 Nov 2017). The report occasioned some degree of controversy as it equated the PKK (listed as a terrorist organisation by the US and the EU) with the YPG (which is not similarly listed), with some, including family members and associates of dead Western fighters profiled in the report, angered by the suggestion that returning fighters could engage in criminal acts or "lone-actor terrorism" once home. See for example "Our sons were heroes" say families of British men killed fighting Isis', *The Guardian*, 2 Aug 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/aug/20/our-sons-were-heroes-say-families-of-british-men-killed-fighting-isis> (accessed 7 Nov 2017). This author, although offering assessments throughout this paper on the motivation and mindsets of foreigners fighting in Syria and Iraq with the YPG and other groups, does not engage in the longstanding debate about the actual nature of the links between the PKK and the YPG; nor is there an intention to attach labels such as "terrorist" to these individuals. Finally, the author has chosen not to make sweeping (and ultimately futile) assessments as to the "rightness" of the cause of these fighters.

25 de Craemer, *Strange Comrades*.

26 Ariel Koch, 'The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 2019; (published online 10 Jun 2019).

27 Nathan Patin, 'The Other Foreign Fighters: An Open-Source Investigation into American Volunteers Fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria', August 2015, <https://www.bellingcat.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/The-Other-Foreign-Fighters.pdf> (accessed 2 May 2018).

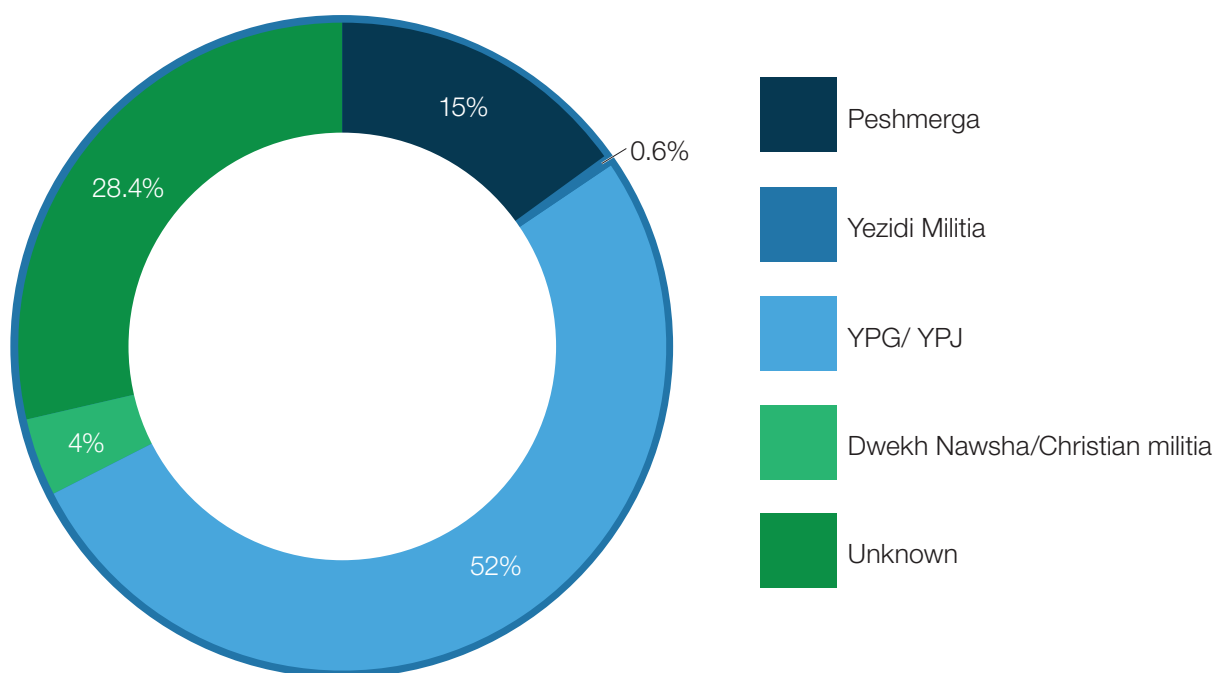
28 Jason Fritz & Joseph K. Young, 'Transnational Volunteers: American Foreign Fighters Combating the Islamic State', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017; published online 27 Oct 2017).

29 "Shooting in the right direction": Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq', ii and p.18.

## The Individuals

As of 1 August 2019, the database has a total of 500 individuals (of whom 22 are women). Of these, there is enough data for 187 individuals to arrive at some sort of understanding as to their motivations and their past, as well as more basic identifiers (name, age, nationality). Some 61 of these volunteers have been killed, including 45 in engagements with ISIS.<sup>30</sup>

### Group Affiliations



- 60% of the individuals in the database volunteered in Syria with the YPG or its female equivalent, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).
- 21 individuals (4%) are known to be affiliated with a Christian militia, the most numerous being volunteers with the Dwekh Nawsha, a force created in 2014 to defend Assyrian Christians in Iraq's Nineveh plains against ISIS.
- Four individuals volunteered for Yezidi militias.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Some YPG volunteers (8 in all) have been killed by Turkish troops or by Turkish airstrikes, with several of these deaths occurring following the Turkish offensive in Afrin in northern Syria, which began in January 2018, aimed at dislodging forces of the YPG and Syrian Democratic Forces from the area. See, for example, Emma Vardy, 'Briton Anna Campbell killed fighting with Kurdish YPJ unit', *BBC News*, 19 Mar 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43453292> (accessed 10 Oct 2018).

<sup>31</sup> For the Yezidi militia, see Joanna Paraszczuk, 'Yazidi Militias Fight IS In Iraq, Amid Kurdish Rivalries', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11 Jun 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-yazidi-militias-kurdish-region/27066780.html> (accessed 11 Feb 2018).

- 15% were affiliated with the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq. The Peshmerga poses a particular issue as numerous statements from Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials suggest foreign volunteers are frowned upon. The policy seems to have been more relaxed an earlier stage, but at the time the research was conducted (2014–18), there appear to have been very few Westerners with Peshmerga, partly it appears as a result of Western diplomatic pressure exerted on the KRG. In particular, the number of foreign volunteers with the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) Peshmerga appears non-existent. However, Peshmerga affiliated with the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) have from time to time seen foreign volunteers.<sup>32</sup>
- There has been a degree of flow-through between groups. 34 can be shown to have passed from one group to the other, with eight individuals having volunteered at different times with both the YPG and Peshmerga.

### Nationalities

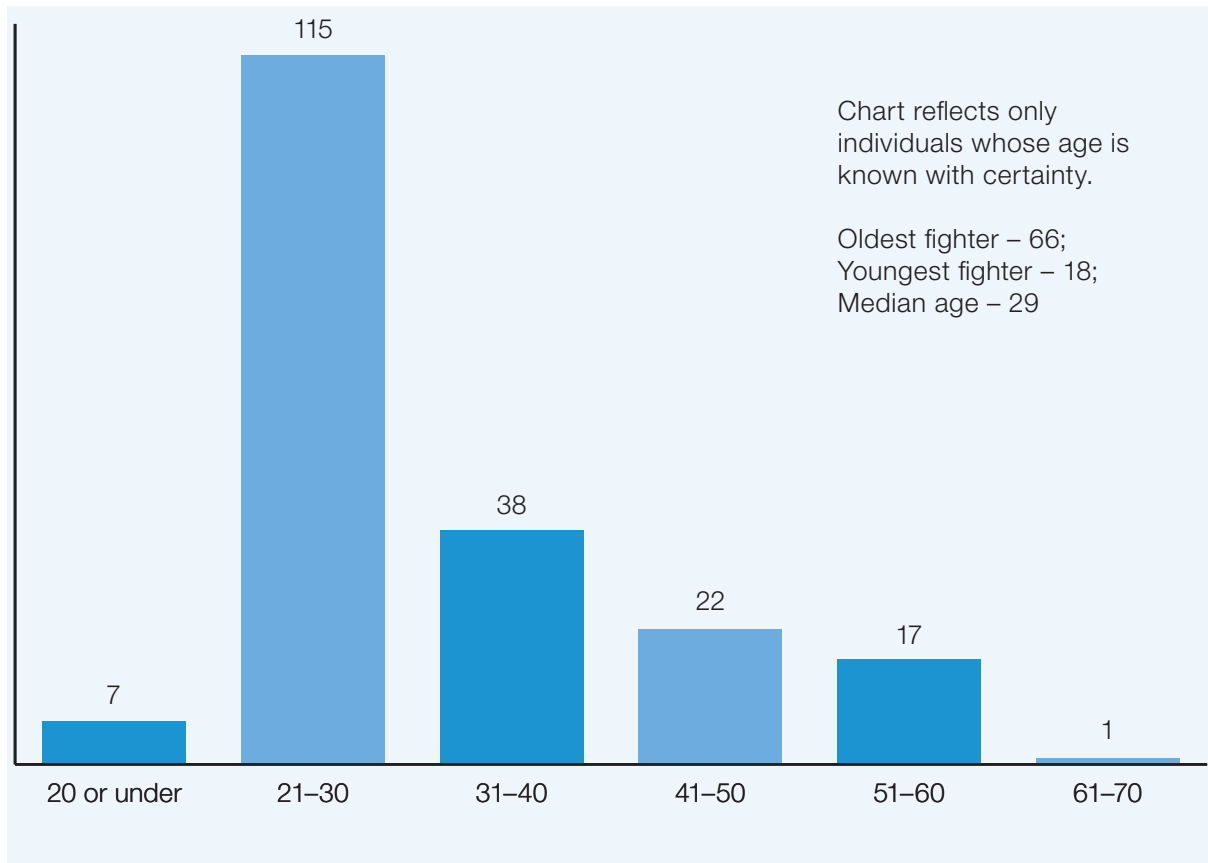
Nationalities of fighters		Nationalities of fighters	
“African”	4	Iranian	5
Albanian	2	Irish	3
American	173	Israeli	2
Australian	10	Italian	18
Austrian	1	Japanese	1
Argentinian	1	Korean	1
Belgian	6	Moroccan	1
Brazilian	6	New Zealander	5
British	61	Norwegian	6
Canadian	27	Polish	1
Chinese	2	Portuguese	2
Croatian	1	Romanian	3
Czech	5	Russian	4
Danish	6	Scottish	6
Dutch	7	Slovenian	1
Egyptian	1	Spanish	13
Estonian	1	Swedish	17
Finnish	2	Swiss	2
French	29	Turkish	5
German	19	Vietnamese	1
Greek	1	UAE	1
Hungarian	2		
Icelandic	1	Unknown	34

- The vast majority of individuals are American (173). The next most numerous are British, French, Canadian and German volunteers. Only a miniscule number of individuals come from Africa and Asia.

<sup>32</sup> Author’s analysis, social media posts by Westerners who joined Peshmerga units. See also Campbell MacDiarmid, ‘Peshmerga frown on Western Volunteers’, *Rudaw*, 16 Feb 2005, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/16022015> (accessed 1 Feb 2017), and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, ‘Peshmerga commander says they won’t accept any more volunteers’, *ARA News*, September 2016, <https://en1kurdipost.wordpress.com/tag/peshmerga-commander-says-they-wont-accept-anymore-volunteers/> (link broken; accessed on 11 Feb 2018).

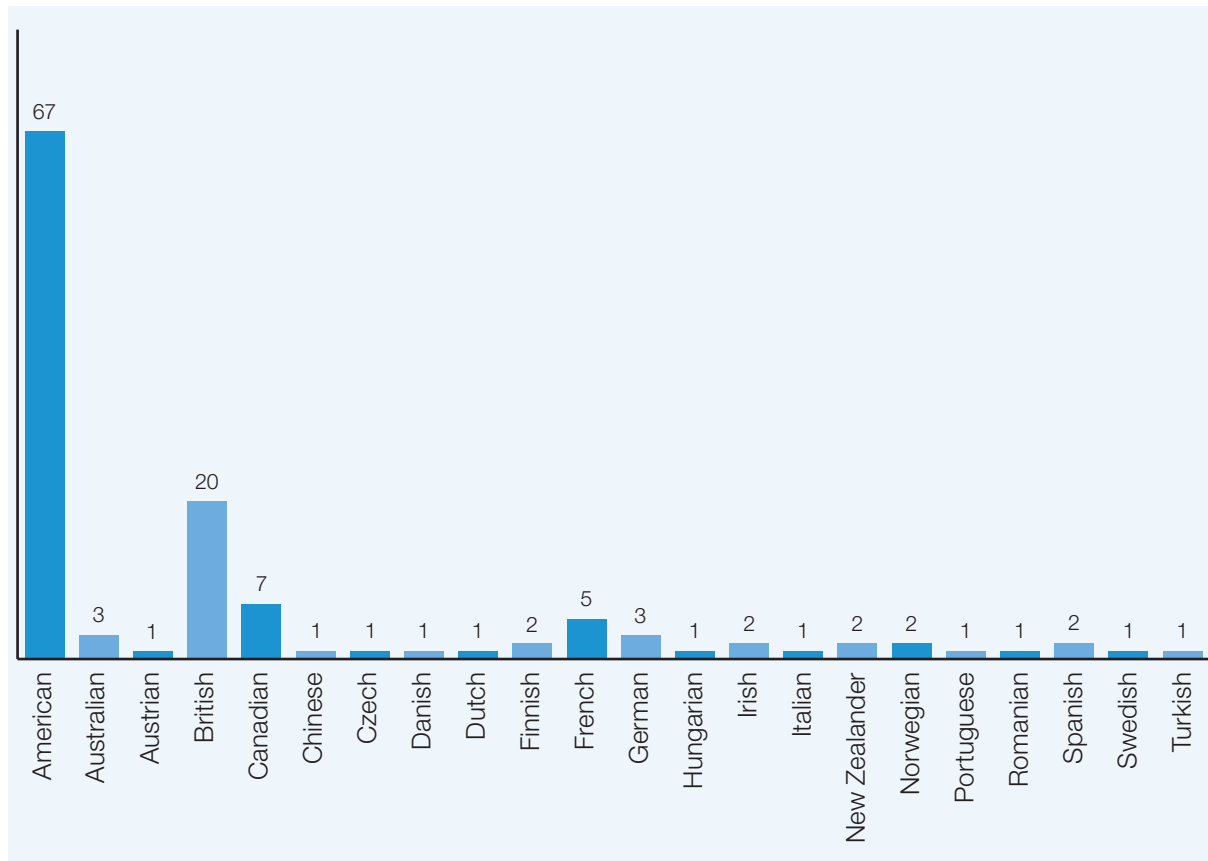
## Age

### Fighter's Age



## Military Experience

### Individuals with Military Experience



- Some 126 (25%) individuals in the dataset have military experience, including 67 (53%) Americans with previous military experience.

Embellishing or outright fabrication of a military record seems to be far from uncommon in the conflict zone, to boost one's credentials with other fighters or as a stratagem to maximise one's chances of seeing front-line action. Military experience has only been coded in when there is reasonably firm evidence.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> One example is the American Levi Shirley, who was killed while fighting with the YPG against ISIS. He claimed in conversations with other foreign volunteers to have served two years with the Marines when in fact he had no military record. Dan Lamothe, 'Levi Shirley wanted to be a Marine. Instead, he died an American vigilante fighting ISIS in Syria', *The Washington Post*, 21 Jul 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/07/21/levi-shirley-wanted-to-be-a-marine-instead-he-died-as-an-american-vigilante-fighting-isis-in-syria/?utm\\_term=.db1e2a0b27e3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/07/21/levi-shirley-wanted-to-be-a-marine-instead-he-died-as-an-american-vigilante-fighting-isis-in-syria/?utm_term=.db1e2a0b27e3) (accessed 3 May 2018).

## Social Media Activity: Observations

It is necessary at this stage to make some general observations about collecting data of this sort and the limitations of the database. Even when information was available to fill in profiles, critical information on these individuals (such as on motivations, names or nationality) was often lacking. The author also had to contend with the removal or deletion of information (either initiated by an individual or by the platform in question).<sup>34</sup>

Some 266 of the 500 entries in the database are individuals who only “existed” (for the purposes of data collection) at various points in time on social media.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, the author’s own analysis of social media accounts, occasional posts, media interviews, press reports and other open source material would suggest that many individuals – numbering over 234 – have taken part in the conflict without ever having posted on social media. It is telling, for example, that of the 61 fighters killed, 17 were not on the author’s database before their deaths. Nor did they feature on social media accounts (either through having their own accounts or through mentions by others). In short, the database gives only a very imperfect indication as to how many individuals actually took part in the conflict as foreign volunteers. It is likely that there are many more. One YPG coordinator for foreign recruits interviewed in 2017 stated that the YPG gets, on average, 25 applications in a month from would-be foreign volunteers; more than half of them received approval.<sup>36</sup> A knowledgeable individual, responsible for training foreign volunteers for the YPG, suggested there had been 800–900 foreign volunteers when interviewed in mid-2016.<sup>37</sup>

Many of these individuals have thought deeply, or else had their views evolve over time, before making the journey to the conflict zone. Others seem to have made more spur of the moment decisions. The START/UMD database was able to narrow down the window between individuals’ first mentions of an intention to travel to the conflict zone and the actualisation of this intention (19 months).<sup>38</sup> However, the present database, while suggestive in the case of a few individuals, does not provide enough granularity to give an overall sense. Only in a handful of cases does an individual in his or her social media posts openly contemplate, in advance, the decision to go. Some seem spontaneous, but other individuals seem to have agonised over their decisions. In a few cases the decision to make the journey to the conflict zone is preceded by the posting of content relating to the Kurdish cause, key battles or atrocities carried out by ISIS.<sup>39</sup> It is difficult, however, to attempt any estimates as to how many individuals had their thinking (and their decisions to travel to the conflict zone) shaped primarily through social media. Suffice to say that while social media played a role in influencing many individuals (and also in facilitating contacts either with individuals already in the conflict zone

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34 Important pages were cached and cached copies of websites were used in case of deletion. In the event that the analysis of any individual in this article is unclear, the author is happy to be contacted to discuss issues pertaining to evidence and identification.

35 Of this number, eight individuals have or had accounts on Instagram, 19 on Twitter and 254 on Facebook.

36 Shirin Jaafari, ‘For some Americans, the conflict in Syria is “the Spanish Civil War of our time”’, *PRI*, 13 Sep 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-09-13/some-americans-conflict-syria-spanish-civil-war-our-time> (accessed 11 Oct 2018).

37 ‘Basic Instinct: Meet the Westerners Hunting Down ISIS Jihadists in Syria’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrTJQwGwT-s> (see 6:08, accessed 1 Feb 2017).

38 Understanding the Threat: What the data tells us about US Foreign Fighters’, September 2015. START: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, pp.2-3, [https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_PIRUS\\_WhatDataTellUsAboutForeignFighters\\_AnalyticalBrief\\_Sept2015.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_WhatDataTellUsAboutForeignFighters_AnalyticalBrief_Sept2015.pdf) (accessed 8 Jan 2017).

39 There appears to have been a spike in arrivals (particularly with the YPG) during the battle for Kobane between September 2014 and March 2015, with several individuals posting on social media or stating in media interviews that this was a factor in their decision to volunteer. There is firm evidence for 72 individuals entering the conflict zone in 2015 (a number that exceeds confirmed arrivals in other years).



or with those who could assist in their travel), a great deal takes place in channels beyond public Facebook profiles. Any attempt to shed light on individual decision-making is further complicated by the fact that a great deal of the evolution of the individual's psyche and mental make-up, particularly in the crucial weeks or months before making the decision to go to Syria or Iraq, has probably taken place offline (or, in private online spaces).

This study does not aim to identify at an individual level the key influencers and disseminators of information. Nevertheless, it is worth making a few observations in this regard. During the height of the conflict (2014–17) there were approximately 38 individuals who could be said to be part of a “core” group. These individuals were connected to each other on key social media platforms (especially Facebook), commented on each other's posts and regularly commented on the conflict and/or their own involvement in it (such as by posting images or videos of themselves or their units near the front line).<sup>40</sup> They are largely known to each other directly or by reputation or through the mediation of other fighters. Many of these individuals have separately been interviewed by the press or been the subject of detailed media profiles. A few of them (in particular Jordan Matson from the USA, Hannah Bohman from Canada, and “Macer Gifford” from the UK, who have all fought for the YPG/YPJ) have become spokespeople for the Kurdish cause.<sup>41</sup> Another individual, Jac Holmes from the United Kingdom, may well be the Western volunteer who spent the most time in the conflict zone, having served three tours (from early 2015 until his death in October 2017) with the YPG.<sup>42</sup>

It is well known that individuals fighting with jihadist groups have over time become much more reluctant to post details of themselves on social media platforms. Much of their activity and communication with each other has instead moved to closed or semi-closed platforms such as Kik, Wickr, Telegram or WhatsApp. This type of movement away from open platforms such as Facebook appears to have taken place to a certain degree with the anti-ISIS fighters as well, some of whom have had their social media accounts suspended.<sup>43</sup> Other individuals have made their accounts private, while still others have tried to disguise their identities (by assuming false Facebook names or operating multiple Facebook identities). Some, while maintaining the semblance of an active Facebook presence, have simply chosen to exercise much more care in terms of what they post online, leading a cursory reader to the (false) conclusion that these individuals are far from any battlefield.

40 The majority of individuals with Kurdish ancestry appear to have integrated within the local units of the YPG or Peshmerga and, for the most part, seem to have been treated as locals. With rare exceptions, they appear to have a much more discreet presence on social media (if they have one at all), further complicating efforts to find such individuals. Those who do make an appearance on social media appear to interact mainly with local Kurds in the conflict zone, other Kurds from the larger diaspora fighting in the conflict zone or with the Kurdish communities in their home countries.

41 For Gifford, see ‘My revolution across Syria and beyond’, *New Internationalist*, 18 Sep 2017, <https://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2017/09/18/macer-gifford> (accessed 19 Feb 2019); For Bohman, see Ellen McGirt, ‘Hanna Bohman On Challenging Isis As Part of An All-Woman Fighting Force in Syria’, *Fortune*, 6 Nov 2017, <http://fortune.com/2017/11/06/hanna-bohman-isis-fear-us-women/> (accessed 19 Feb 2019); and for Holmes, see Tom Burrows and Julian Robinson, ‘British IT worker with his ISIS-fighting unit of western volunteers before he was killed clearing landmines in Raqqa’, *The Daily Mail*, 25 Oct 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5015381/Briton-fighting-ISIS-posted-pictures-hours-died.html> (accessed 10 Oct 2018). For Matson, see below, n.44.

42 Emma Vardy, ‘IS-fighting British man Jac Holmes killed in Syria’, *BBC News*, 24 Oct 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-41730369> (accessed 18 Sep 2018).

43 Eighty-one Facebook accounts identified in the course of research have since been taken offline.



# Motivations and Implications

## Motivations

*Men, then, as well as beasts, suffer pain when they are angry, and are pleased when they exact their revenge; those who fight for these reasons, however, are pugnacious but not brave; for they do not act for honour's sake nor as the rule directs, but from strength of feeling; they have, however, something akin to courage.*

Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book III

*What do you think people's motivations are for coming over here? Everyone is different. There are the people going there to make money, for their religious beliefs, and from moral standpoints, for those of us who aren't religious. Do you think people show up for the wrong reasons more often than the right ones? Absolutely. Money, fame, stupid shit – they're not going there for the betterment of the people. That is the only reason anyone should be going over there.*

Justin Smith, American volunteer with the YPG and Peshmerga<sup>44</sup>

The individuals in the dataset described in the preceding research are an extraordinarily disparate group. They are in the conflict zone for various reasons. A few have chosen to share their reasons for taking part in the conflict on social media, in interviews and in documentaries. A few have even written books on their experiences.<sup>45</sup> However, for the vast majority, the traces of the reasons for coming to the conflict zone in the first place are in a great many cases either absent or fragmentary at best, to be pieced together from stray comments, occasional news profiles and comments online from associates. The present writer was able to find some sort of motivation for 214 (43%) of the individuals in the dataset.

The critical point to note is the multiplicity of motivations not simply across the group but within individuals themselves. Previous studies have correctly noted the futility of attempting to isolate one overriding motivating factor that has drawn individuals in question to the conflict.<sup>46</sup> The majority of individuals in the database experienced many entwined motivations. A case in point is Jordan Matson, from the United States, one of the first Western volunteers to come to the conflict zone. Matson first started posting on Facebook about the fight in Syria in September 2014. His social media posts and media interviews evinced the “classic” combination of motivations for joining the conflict: sympathy for the Kurds, moral outrage at ISIS atrocities,

44 “Interview With Former American Infantryman and Peshmerga Volunteer Battling ISIS”, *SOFREP*, 27 Jan 2016, <https://sofrep.com/46587/interview-former-american-infantryman-peshmerga-volunteer-battling-isis/> (accessed 18 Apr 2018).

45 For example: Dillon Hillier, *One Soldier: A Canadian Soldier's Fight Against the Islamic State* (HarperCollins, 2017), Mike Peshmerganor, *Blood Makes The Grass Grow: A Norwegian Volunteer's War Against the Islamic State* (Amazon, 2018), Erwin Stran, *CAB Hunter* (CreateSpace, 2017), Jesper Soder and Johan Fredriksson, *Nar Varlden Tittade Bort* (M.npocket, 2017), Karim Franceschi, *Il Combattente: Storia Dell'italiano che ha Difeso Kobane* (Rizzoli, 2016), Christian Haller, *Sie nannten mich "Held": Wie ich als Deutscher in Syrien gegen den Islamischen Staat kämpfte* (Riva, 2015), Tim Locks, *Fighting ISIS* (Pan Macmillan, 2017), Ed Nash, *Desert Sniper: How one ordinary Brit went to war against ISIS* (Little, Brown, 2018), Claudio Locatelli, *Nessuna resa. Storia del combattente italiano che ha liberato Raqqa dall'Isis* (Piemme, 2018), Joanna Palani, *Freedom Fighter: My War Against ISIS on the Frontlines of Syria* (Atlantic Books, 2019), Azad Cudi, *Long Shot: My Life As a Sniper in the Fight Against ISIS* (W&N 2019) and Jim Matthews, *Fighting Monsters* (Mirror Books, 2019).

46 “Shooting in the right direction”: Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq, p.14, p.20.

anger regarding inaction on the part of the international community and Western governments, and religious belief.<sup>47</sup>

What follows, therefore, is an analysis of the main motivating factors, *without* what would be a counterproductive attempt at each and every juncture to state how many individuals in the dataset held that particular set of beliefs. In most cases, there is very little to be gained by asserting that an individual is motivated solely by one factor.

There appear to be five broad “buckets”, or motivating factors, for individuals joining the conflict. The first concerns ideology. The second, and by far the largest, covers the spectrum of wanting to do good, fuelled by some sort of moral outrage or what could loosely be called “search for meaning”. The third covers adventurism. The fourth covers religious belief and the fifth concerns military service. It is important to see these buckets as existing for purposes of *loose* categorisation. Precise segmentation is not desirable given that many of these buckets overlap.

### Ideology

Some individuals see themselves at the metaphorical front line. By coming to the conflict zone to fight, they are playing a role in ensuring that ISIS is kept at bay, or delaying its advance to their own countries:

*“I am a proud British citizen... how I defend Kurdistan, I am also ready to defend UK as well, [what I am doing now] is not only for Kurdistan... but some of my fighting is to defend UK as well.”*<sup>48</sup>  
“Mama Kurda”, British Peshmerga Volunteer

Some individuals view the conflict in very Manichean terms:

*“I try not to oversimplify it. I try not to make it about good versus evil ... but this is pretty much as close as it gets.”*<sup>49</sup>  
John Gallagher, Canadian YPG Volunteer

Others are clearly either anti-Islamic to some degree, or seek to take revenge for terrorist attacks carried out in the West by Islamist terrorist groups such as ISIS:

*“I wonder who is going to be the first spineless western politician to come out in the media and say that the Paris murders had nothing to do with Islam, that Islam is a religion of peace that western countries welcome Muslims etc?”*  
Rob Hartley, British Volunteer

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<sup>47</sup> For Matson, see <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/wisconsin-man-fighting-kurds-isis-couldn-sit-watch-christians-slaughtered-anymore-article-1.1966129> and <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/27/world/meast/syria-former-us-soldier/index.html> (accessed 19 Feb 2019).

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2014/08/23/kurdish-londoner-fighting-isis-in-mideast/> (accessed 19 Feb 2019)

<sup>49</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/11/19/after-dying-while-fighting-against-the-islamic-state-in-syria-canadian-will-receive-a-heros-tribute/?utm\\_term=.91254c701461](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/11/19/after-dying-while-fighting-against-the-islamic-state-in-syria-canadian-will-receive-a-heros-tribute/?utm_term=.91254c701461) (accessed 19 Feb 2019).

*"Killing an ISIS member, to me that's doing a good deed to the world. All of them need to get wiped out."*<sup>50</sup>

Jeremy Woodard, American YPG Volunteer

Of the 214 individuals for whom reasons for being in the conflict zone can be discerned, some sort of factor that could be considered "ideological" can be discerned for 35 individuals (16%).

One Greek YPG fighter, Kristopher Nicholaidis (who operated under the Kurdish nom de guerre of Nestor), was 28 years old when he entered the conflict zone in 2014. He is a self-proclaimed democratic socialist who, by his own account, comes from a political family.<sup>51</sup> "I consider IS jihadists as 21st century fascists posing a greater global threat as they barbarically spread Islamofascism on an international level ... I joined this struggle to fight against global fascism in defense of democracy and peace in Kurdish Rojava."

One individual from Germany fighting with the YPG (who operated under the Kurdish nom de guerre of Cihan Kendal), was 23 when he entered the conflict zone in 2013 and belonged to a leftist anarchist group that fought against right-wing movements in Germany. He apparently rose to become a YPG commander. "What ISIS is practicing in Rojava, and in the Middle East in general, against the people of the region, is a huge attack on humanity, on human values ... We are not just fighting for a free Kurdistan, we fight for an equal world, and I am an internationalist."<sup>52</sup>

There are fighters and supporters who view fighting for the YPG as fighting for its socialist revolution. Worthy of mention is Ivana Hoffman (Kurdish nom de guerre Avasin Tekosin Guenes), a German national with African ancestry, and the first female Western fighter to be killed (in March 2015 at the age of 19). Hoffman spent her youth in a communist youth organisation, espoused Marxist-Leninist ideology and was apparently a member of Turkey's Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP). The eulogies for her and imagery disseminated of her suggest that she was seen in some quarters as part of the wider socialist or internationalist cause.<sup>53</sup>

Another individual, "Jacques" from France (Kurdish nom de guerre Sirat), who was in his twenties when he entered the conflict zone in 2015, claims to have been a "Marxist internationalist revolutionary militant" since his teenage years. Jacques has told the media, "I also came here to help the Kurdish people. They have been martyred and persecuted by all kinds of regimes, discriminated against throughout history, but they have an enormous capacity for resilience. Another thing is that their main enemy, Daesh, is today the incarnation of neo-fascism."

50 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29705167> (accessed 19 Feb 2019). The author's intention is to give in the following pages a sense of motivations of anti-ISIS volunteers, drawn from many sources. Where no identifier or source is given, the quotation in question is drawn from a personal social media account.

51 Unless otherwise stated, the ages given to volunteers refer to the age at which they entered the conflict zone.

52 <https://www.wearplanc.org/blog/interview-with-ypg-commander-cthan-kendal/> (accessed 19 Feb 2019).

53 For Hoffman, see <http://redstaroverdonbass.blogspot.sg/2015/03/ivana-hoffmann-on-right-side.html>; 'Why the revolutionary Kurdish fight against ISIS deserves our support', *The Guardian*, 10 Mar 15; 'Our Comrade Avasin, Communist Fighter, Internationalist Revolutionary is immortal', 8 Mar 2015, <http://www.icor.info/2015/our-comrade-avasin-comunist-fighter-internationalist-revolutionary-is-immortal>, and 'German woman, 19, dies fighting Islamic State in Syria', *BBC*, 9 Mar 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31796228> (accessed 7 May 2018).

Several fighters with the YPG either have pronounced anarchist sympathies or self-identify as anarchists. An example is Robert Grodt, from California, aged 28 at the time of his death in the battle for Raqqa in July 2017. Grodt, described by friends as an idealist, had a history of political activism and was involved in the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2011. He was married with a four-year-old daughter, had studied philosophy in college and was described by friends and family members to be an idealist. In one video he made, he said: “My reasons for joining the YPG was to help the Kurdish people in their struggle for autonomy in Syria and elsewhere and also to do my best to help fight Daesh and help create a more secure world.”<sup>54</sup>

Another YPG volunteer with apparent anarchist affiliations was Haukur Hilmarsson (Kurdish nom de guerre Sahin Hosseini), from Iceland, who appears to have attained the rank of commander within the YPG. He later joined the fighting against Turkish forces in northern Syria; he was killed in February 2018 fighting the Turks in Afrin. Prior to coming to Syria, Haukar had been a well-known sociopolitical activist in Iceland for many years. He was dedicated to human rights and first gained national attention in 2008 when he attempted to block the deportation of an asylum seeker by standing in the way of his airplane. Haukur was also active in the 2008–9 protests against the government, gaining attention by climbing onto the roof of the parliament building and hoisting the flag of a local supermarket chain on the building’s flagpole.<sup>55</sup>

The YPG creed, linked in many – perhaps most – respects to the thought of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, may be attractive to the more ideologically minded and left-leaning of the Western volunteers, or to those who find the YPG’s vision of democratic confederalism appealing. But it does not hold universal appeal. Some Western fighters who refused to accept the YPG’s ideology appear in the earlier stages of the conflict and left the YPG to join Christian militias such as Sutoro or Dwekh Nawsha.<sup>56</sup>

As shown above, some individuals fighting ISIS espoused left-wing, Marxist or anarchist thinking. Fighting alongside them, in smaller numbers, are those with diametrically opposed ideologies. Some fighters are members or ardent supporters of far-right movements or political parties in their home countries. For example, one British fighter from Dwekh Nawsha is an admirer of the far-right party Britain First and holds the view that Islamic extremism is spreading throughout the UK by “out-breeding” the white population.<sup>57</sup>

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54 For Grodt, see David Rovics, ‘Nazis, IS, Antifa, the YPG, Democratic Landlords, the Spanish Civil War and Fake News’, *Counterpunch*, 25 Aug 2007, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/08/25/nazis-is-antifa-the-ypg-democratic-landlords-the-spanish-civil-war-and-fake-news/>, Megan Specia, ‘First, a Symbol of Occupy Wall Street. Then He Waded Into Syria’, *The New York Times*, 12 July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/12/world/middleeast/occupy-protester-robert-grodt-dies-in-syria.html>, and Michael Todd, ‘New details released for former Santa Cruz man killed fighting ISIS’, *The Mercury News*, 14 Jul 2017, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/07/14/new-details-released-for-former-santa-cruz-man-killed-fighting-isis/> (accessed 24 Mar 2018).

55 Paul Fontaine, ‘Mother Of Icelander Killed In Syria Pleas For More Information’, *The Reykjavik Grapevine*, 9 Mar 2018, <https://grapevine.is/news/2018/03/09/mother-of-icelander-killed-in-syria-pleas-for-more-information/>; Larissa Kyzer, ‘Haukur Hilmarsson’s Death Confirmed’, *The Iceland Review*, 10 Mar 2018, <http://icelandreview.com/news/2018/03/10/haukur-hilmarssons-death-confirmed/>; ‘Rojava: Announcement from Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity (RUIS) about Haukur Hilmarsson’, 20 Mar 2018, <https://insurrectionnewsworldwide.com/2018/03/20/rojava-announcement-from-revolutionary-union-for-internationalist-solidarity-ruis-about-haukur-hilmarsson/> (accessed 11 Oct 2018).

56 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/christian-foreign-fighters-deserting-kurdish-ypg-syria-because-theyre-damned-reds-1976493133> (accessed 19 Feb 2019).

57 For this and other examples, see de Craemer, *Strange Comrades*, p.65. It is also worth noting that a few Americans within the dataset exhibited through their social media posts and media interviews a type of thinking that could broadly be characterised as ‘right-wing Christian’. A few also have a fondness of posting images of themselves with guns when back home. Appearances of the Confederate flag and, separately, crusading imagery are not unknown in the social media accounts of these individuals. (Author’s analysis, Facebook posts of American anti-ISIS fighters.) The links these individuals might have to other groups (including far right groups and militia groups in the United States) would repay further investigation.

It might seem tempting to separate out individuals who are “ideological”, in a political sense, from those who are not. But the sense of the present writer, having observed these profiles for the better part of four years, is that the utility of doing so is limited. There may be individuals in the fray who are neither communists nor anarchists, nor even greatly sympathetic to the Ocalan brand of democratic confederalism. However, some of these individuals may be motivated by a general sense of helping the Kurdish people (either in terms of fending off the ISIS onslaught or of assisting in fostering more Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria). This is a recurrent motif to be found both in many of those described above who could be labelled “ideological” and in those who do not espouse any political creed.

Consider the case of “Arges Artiaga”, aged 41 when he entered the conflict zone, from Galicia in Spain, who began volunteering with the YPG in February 2015 and has served on at least three tours. Artiaga saw major action, including at the battle for Raqqa, as a sniper and, it appears, as a commander of Unit 223, which mainly comprised foreigners. He has told the media that he has no particular political ideology, and is fighting for “human values” and to put an end to ISIS, “which is a threat to the whole world”.<sup>58</sup> Artiaga said: “The trigger for me to join YPG was the horrid genocide that was perpetrated in August 2014 by the Daesh group against the Yazidis in Iraq and the brutal attack in Kobane.”

Consider, too, the Canadian John Gallagher, who first fought with Peshmerga and then with the YPG. From a politically minded and socially aware family, Gallagher was a precocious child (he spent his childhood summers reading high school physics textbooks). He joined the air cadets in elementary school and expressed an interest in becoming a military officer around the age of twelve. He joined the Canadian army aged 18 and served in Bosnia, leaving the military after three years to complete a double major of political science and gender studies at York University, followed by a Master’s degree in political science (he also sought acceptance into a Ph.D programme). Gallagher, who also ran for Toronto city council in 2010, was described by friends and family as someone whose “adult life seems to have been spent searching for purpose” and who “really did have very strong ideas of right and wrong, moral and ethical ideas. And he tried his whole life to make sure that he was doing what he perceived to be the right thing.”<sup>59</sup>

In a widely reproduced Facebook post on 6 May 2015, six months before he was killed near Al-Hasakeh, Syria, Gallagher stated his reasons for fighting with the Kurds. The final three paragraphs of his wide-ranging post are given below as they give some sense of the multiple motivations of not just Gallagher, but many others in the database:<sup>60</sup>

*“I was raised in a fundamentalist religious environment. If today I have any intellectual or spiritual existence worth fighting for,*

58 Ráfa López, ‘Arges Artiaga: “Todo el que va a Siria sabe que puede volver a casa en una bolsa de plástico”’, *Fara de Vigo*, 25 Feb 2018, <http://www.farodevigo.es/mundo/2018/02/25/arges-artiaga-siria-volver-casa/1844124.html>; Christiane Waked, ‘From Galicia to Raqqa: Spanish Sniper trying to save Humanity’, 15 Dec 2017, <https://blogs.khaleejtimes.com/2017/12/15/from-galicia-to-raqqa-spanish-sniper-trying-to-save-humanity/> (accessed 24 Apr 2018).

59 Taylor Lambert, ‘John Gallagher Died Fighting the Islamic State. His Story Is More Than Tragedy’, *Vice News*, 12 Nov 2015, <https://news.vice.com/article/john-gallagher-died-fighting-the-islamic-state-his-story-is-more-than-tragedy> (accessed 24 Apr 2018).

60 Why the War in Kurdistan Matters’, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=10152939717688845&id=642603844&\\_\\_fns&hash=Ac3w\\_3hmW5bdzMdW](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10152939717688845&id=642603844&__fns&hash=Ac3w_3hmW5bdzMdW) (accessed 18 Apr 2018).



*it is because it was impossible for the religious forces in my life to have their way and shield me from the assaults of reason and conscience. They could teach me that evolution was a lie, but they couldn't prevent me from reading about it or prohibit the public schools from teaching it. They could tell me blasphemy was a sin, but they couldn't prevent me from sneaking Monty Python and South Park. The mechanisms of society, in other words, gave me the tools by which I could make myself free. They saved my life. Who safeguards the social machinery now? Only an overbred political elite and intelligentsia who burble about the urgent need to never give offense. This is not only a disgraceful failure; it is a national emergency.*

*"Like theocracy today, fascism used to be an international movement, with fascist parties in every western country. Then World War II happened. Nazi Germany became the standard-bearer of fascism, and when it was crushed, the movement wasn't just destroyed, it was discredited for all time. Ironically, the rise of ISIS gives us the same chance now. We have the ability to eradicate jihadism in our lifetime. The terrorists' own playbook sees the taking and holding of territory as a necessary step to discredit Western democracy and prove that the Caliphate is a real political possibility in the 21st century. We have to prove that it is not. And like we did with Nazi Germany, we must crush it with overwhelming, unrelenting force. We have to take it while the mass graves are still fresh, while there are still survivors to give testimony to the atrocities they've witnessed, while the murderers are still around to be put on trial. Only by destroying ISIS without mercy can we discredit the idea, and force the would-be jihadis and fellow-travellers to give up their insane dreams of a new Mecca and join the modern world.*

*"I'm prepared to give my life in the cause of averting the disaster we are stumbling towards as a civilization. A free Kurdistan would be good enough cause for any internationalist, but we are fortunate enough to be able to risk our necks for something more important and more righteous than anything we've faced in generations. With some fortitude and guts, we can purge the sickness that's poisoning our society, and come together to defeat this ultimate evil. I've been fighting this battle in one way or another for my entire life. I hope for success. The rest is in the hands of the gods."*

## **Moral Outrage / Wanting To Do Good / Search For Meaning / Kurdish Solidarity**

The theme highlighted above – a motivation to join the Kurds in their fight against ISIS after witnessing what ISIS had done in Syria, and preferring to act rather than doing nothing – occurs in a great many profiles. Many individuals are morally outraged and want to help, or else see the conflict as something through which they can find meaning in their lives. Of the 214 whose motivations have been stored in the database, 150 individuals fall within this category:

*"You can't stay on your sofa and see the TV and see what happened and do nothing. You need to move and do what I need to do. My life is nothing if I can't help these people, the Kurdish people. You don't need to come from the same country and speak the same language..."*



*"I had the choice of continuing to watch the videos of the sickening atrocities and doing nothing or getting off my backside and doing something about it."*<sup>61</sup>

Aiden Aslin, British YPG volunteer

*"I came to YPG to help YPG and help Rojava Kurdistan to be free"*

*"The main motive for me to be here is to protect civilians against IS radicals. I'm truly glad to be here to help the people in the fight against this terrorist group ... What they are doing here is completely unacceptable. I really appreciate the Kurdish people and their struggle."*

Julian, a 22-year-old French volunteer for the YPG,  
Kurdish nom de guerre Heval Shores

*"I felt the necessity to do something in the face of the massacres perpetrated by ISIS gangs against the people from other nations and faith groups. I would not be able to relieve my conscience by just donating 100 kroners."*<sup>62</sup>

Jesper Soder, a Swedish volunteer for the YPG and Peshmerga,  
Kurdish nom de guerre Heval Agit

Jordan McTaggart (nom de guerre Ciwan Firat), an American with the YPG who was killed in August 2016, told the media that he was an atheist, but that he found through his research that the YPG shared many of his values and beliefs. McTaggart said that he saw travelling to Syria to help them in their struggle against ISIS as something productive he could do with his life.<sup>63</sup>

Justin Smith, a US army veteran who fought both with the YPG and Peshmerga, says: "I went back to fight Daesh because I was sick and tired of sitting on my ass watching innocents being murdered in the hundreds – women and children included. My breaking point was watching a clip that was labeled 'ISIS member kicks Christian baby to death' ... I'm not religious in any way, so I didn't give a f\*\*\* about the religion. The fact that this c\*\*\* was kicking a baby to death for something it had no control over disgusted and brought out the best in me." Smith states that he had PTSD after serving in Iraq in the US army. "In the States, there is too much idle time, too much time just doing nothing or sitting around drinking, or anything like that. It's better here. Like I have said countless times, I get to do my job. I love my job."<sup>64</sup>

Erik Konstandinos Scurfield (who operated under the Kurdish nom de guerre Heval Kemal), from the United Kingdom, was killed in March 2015 while fighting with the YPG. He was a former Royal Marine in the British Army. One former British YPG fighter says of him, "He had no time for people who didn't believe in the cause." In the Royal Marines, as one associate remembers, "He went to his commanding officer to ask if Britain was going to Syria to fight Isis ... When he was

61 <https://www.newarkadvertiser.co.uk/news/i-want-my-life-back-9031664/> (accessed 19 Feb 2019)

62 <https://anfenglish.com/news/around-500-europeans-fighting-in-the-ranks-of-ypg-12472> (accessed 19 Feb 2019)

63 Liz Gelardi, 'Coloradan Jordan MacTaggart killed fighting in Syria', *The Denver Channel*, 6 Aug 2016, <https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/southern-colorado/reports-coloradan-jordan-mactaggart-killed-fighting-in-syria> (accessed 20 Apr 2018).

64 'Interview With Former American Infantryman and Peshmerga Volunteer Battling ISIS', *SOFREP*, 27 Jan 2016, <https://sofrep.com/46587/interview-former-american-infantryman-peshmerga-volunteer-battling-isis/> (accessed 20 Apr 18); for Smith see also 'Why Some Americans Are Volunteering to fight the Islamic State', *PBS News Hour*, 21 Jul 2015, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/americans-volunteering-fight-islamic-state> (see 4:24 to 5:15, accessed 19 Feb 2019).

told no, he couldn't comprehend it ... He's always been the kind of kid who never expected other people to do things for him: if something you want is not happening, get off your bottom and do something about it." Scurfield posted on his Facebook before joining the YPG the words of Sophie Scholl, the anti-Nazi activist, "How can we expect righteousness to prevail when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause? Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go, but what does my death matter, if through us, thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?"<sup>65</sup>

An American YPG fighter, Levi Shirley (Kurdish nom de guerre Agir), who was 24 at the time of his death in July 2016 during the battle for Manbij, had, according to his family, always wanted to join the US Marines, but was unable to do so due to his poor eyesight. Seemingly adrift in life, he encountered a video showing ISIS atrocities: "It made me angry and it shocked me and it made me feel every possible emotion that you could possibly think of when you think of a disgusting act being committed like that. And so then I thought to myself, 'There's got to be something I can do to stop that'." He told his family that this was his chance "to do something noble for once."<sup>66</sup>

Several fighters see themselves as standing up to be counted at a moment of history and are keen to make comparisons with other similar moments in the past where individuals collectively took a stand against tyranny or oppression. As one volunteer with the YPG, "Macer Gifford" from the UK, notes, "For people like me who grew up post-9/11, this is our Churchillian moment. We want to fight back against Islamic fascism, protect innocent people and fight for democracy. We want to come home with a sense of fulfillment."<sup>67</sup> Levi Shirley appears to have enjoyed comparing his participation in the fight against ISIS to that of the Eagle Squadrons, American pilots who flew and fought for the Royal Air Force before the United States officially joined the Second World War.<sup>68</sup> But it is the Spanish Civil War that is most often referenced by individuals in the conflict under consideration – especially those with the YPG. One young American leftist, interviewed by the media in 2017 waiting for the YPG's approval to come to Rojava, said, "Each generation gets only a limited amount of opportunities to actually make a difference in the world ... for me and like-minded individuals the Rojava revolution is the Spanish Civil War of our time."<sup>69</sup>

Joanna Palani, a politics and philosophy student from Copenhagen, appears to have joined the YPG in 2014 at the age of 21 and subsequently served with Peshmerga. An Iranian Kurd by descent, Palani is the daughter and granddaughter of Peshmerga fighters. Palani's family was forced to flee their home during the Gulf War, moving to Copenhagen when Palani was very young. Palani lived

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65 "Death Of A British Soldier: Why Did This Marine Give His Life To Fight Isis? *FHM*, 30 Mar 2016, <http://www.fhm.com/posts/death-of-a-british-soldier-why-did-this-marine-give-his-life-to-fight-isis-96899>; Matthew Taylor, Nigel Bunyan and Fazel Hawramy, 'Family of ex-marine who died battling Isis praise his courage and conviction', *The Guardian*, 4 Mar 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/04/royal-marine-scurfield-killed-fighting-isis-fearless-warrior> (accessed 20 Apr 2018).

66 Dan Lamothe, *The Washington Post*, 21 Jul 2016; see also David Kelly, 'The Marines wouldn't take him. So Levi Shirley went to war on his own', *The Los Angeles Times*, 9 Sep 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/projects/la-na-denver-levi-shirley/> (accessed 7 May 18). There is some suggestion of individuals making the decision to join the fight after key events reported in the news, such as beheading of aid workers, the plight of Yezidis trapped on Mount Sinjar or ISIS fighters parading their dead victims. One social media post reads: "The particular thing that brought me here was seeing a photo of an ISIS fighter holding up the severed head of a woman and grinning at the camera". These types of posts are common on social media accounts of anti-ISIS volunteers.

67 Matt Blake, "'It wasn't about killing people': what drove a British farmer to the Syrian frontline?", *The Guardian*, 29 Oct 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/29/isis-wasnt-about-killing-people-what-drove-british-farmer-syrian-frontline> (accessed 4 Jan 2017).

68 Dan Lamothe, *The Washington Post*, 21 Jul 2016.

69 Shirin Jaafari, *PRI*, 13 Sep 2017.

a “normal, comfortable life” growing up and her favorite hobbies were reading and target practice. In November 2014, she left college and headed to fight in Syria for the Kurds as a sniper, aiming to help defeat ISIS and Assad, and to “fight for human rights for all people.” While on home leave, her passport was invalidated by the authorities and Palani was warned that she risked imprisonment if she went back to the conflict zone. She attempted to return to the conflict in the summer of 2016 and was arrested by the Danish authorities in December that year. At the time of writing she is in custody and appears to be facing an ongoing legal process.<sup>70</sup>

## Adventure

*“I want this to be a seasonal job. Go plow snow in the winter and fight ISIS in the summer.”*

*“If anybody sees this on YouTube and thinks of themselves as gangsta, come to Syria, cuz this is gangsta gens.”*

*“ISIS is America's dog to fight ... I crave that fight, man. I crave a good fight. And a just one.”*

“Matthew Hinstridge” (a citizen with dual New Zealand/UK nationality who operates under Kurdish nom de guerre Welat Rojava) was aged 37 when he entered the conflict zone in 2015 to fight for the YPG. Hinstridge was said by friends to be very fond of hunting and shooting. He was a New Zealand infantryman from 1996 to 2001, deployed to East Timor in 2000 with the New Zealand Defence Force, and later worked as a private military contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan. When asked of his motivation to venture to Syria, Hinstridge replied that he found war addictive: “I enjoy these environments. And ISIS are a concern for anyone who values freedom. So here I am.” Hinstridge has also shared other aspects of his motivation:

*I pay attention to the world, learned about the Kurds fighting Isis and discovered a small number of Westerners here and followed suit ... People like Isis need to be fought, problems don't go away, if ignored they get worse. The presence of Isis in Syria is the main factor. When they are destroyed I will go. They will be [destroyed], but will reappear elsewhere.<sup>71</sup>*

Adventure and a fascination for the martial also comes through strongly in the case of Mario Nunes from Portugal, who was 21 when he first entered the conflict zone in early 2015. Nunes, (nom de guerre Heval Kendal) was killed in May 2016 while with the YPG.<sup>72</sup> He was a soldier in the Portuguese army before heading to Rojava to join the war on ISIS. He told Portuguese media that “I cannot deny that the war fascinates me. Maybe it's the influence of my father and my uncles,

70 For Palani, see Nick Fagge and Lara Whyte, ‘ISIS want to kill me, capture me and turn me into a sex slave’, *The Daily Mail*, 7 Feb 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4170840/Joanna-Palani-admits-sniper-fights-isis.html#ixzz5DPXEQRmN>; and Lara Whyte, ‘Danish woman who fought against Isis faces jail sentence’, *The Guardian*, 19 Dec 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/19/danish-woman-who-fought-against-isis-faces-jail-sentence>. For a more sceptical view of Palani's presence – and accomplishments – at the frontlines, see Jack Murphy, ‘Fake News alert: no, this Danish woman did not kill 100 ISIS fighters’, *SOFREP*, 13 Feb 2017, <https://sofrep.com/74725/fake-news-alert-no-danish-woman-not-kill-100-isis-fighters/> (accessed 24 Apr 2018).

71 Caleb Harris and Amy Maas, ‘Kiwi fighting Isis had small-town childhood’, 8 Nov 2015, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/73676726/kiwi-fighting-isis-had-smalltown-childhood>; Amy Maas and Talia Shadwell, ‘Kiwi Joins ISIS Fight Against Islamic State in Syria’, 25 Oct 2015, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/73353491/kiwi-joins-fight-against-islamic-state-in-syria> (accessed 3 May 2018).

72 It is unclear whether he was killed in action, was captured and executed by ISIS or committed suicide to avoid capture or in captivity.

who are almost all in the army or the security forces. I have always been interested in history and this was an opportunity to be part of it rather than reading about it.” Nunes, who appears to have deserted the Portuguese army in order to join the YPG, further explained that he did not fight for money, but rather it was a duty to defend human values, and that he wanted to be a part of history, “not just read about it in a book”.<sup>73</sup> Nunes’s friends and family described him as having joined the YPG “out of disgust of the ISIS actions”.

Dutch YPG fighter Sjoerd Heeger (who used the Kurdish nom de guerre Baran Sason) was 23 when he entered the conflict zone in 2017. He had been a refuse collector in the Netherlands. He died fighting for the YPG near the city Deir ez-Zor near Raqqa in February 2018.<sup>74</sup> Heeger had also been part of a far-right ultra-nationalist Ukrainian group fighting in eastern Ukraine against Russian forces. Those familiar with Heeger suggest that he did not mind which “side” he was even on: according to these accounts, he simply seems to have sought out these types of environments. Having not found enough “action” on the Ukrainian front and wanting to experience more, he ended up in Syria.<sup>75</sup>

An Austrian citizen known as “Benjamin F” joined the Austrian armed forces aged 17 and served in Kosovo, where he appears to have spent most of his time in the barracks: “I was bored to death,” he said in an interview. Something of a thrill seeker with a thirst for danger, Benjamin F then had a stint protecting ships in the pirate-prone waters off the coast of Somalia. He then tried unsuccessfully to enrol in the French Foreign Legion and returned to Austria to work in Vienna as a security guard. Benjamin F made his way to eastern Ukraine when fighting broke out there, then subsequently to Syria, where he first joined the YPG and then Peshmerga, only to return to the conflict in Ukraine. Benjamin F was suspected of having committed war crimes in the Donbass region and was arrested in April 2018 under a European arrest warrant.<sup>76</sup>

## Religious Belief

There is a very small number of either born-again or evangelical Christians who have chosen to volunteer in the conflict. One individual refers to himself on social media as a “Soldier of Christ”, with yet another stating that he “heard God’s call” to take up arms after watching a television report about the plight of the Yazidi people trapped on Mount Sinjar by ISIS fighters in Iraq.

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73 <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/5cbccb5c-ec5a-498f-87c9-e8a111be247e/portuguese-ypg-fighter-s-body-repatriated>; <http://www.sabado.pt/portugal/detalhe/o-portugues-que-foi-lutar-contra-o-estado-islamico>; <https://www.portugalresident.com/2016/05/30/portuguese-soldier-who-went-awol-to-fight-daesh-executed-on-syrian-border/> (accessed 19 Feb 2019).

74 There is scant information about Heeger’s death but social media posts suggest that he may have been killed fighting Turkish forces, the Syrian army or an Iranian-backed militia.

75 <https://delendaestziobot.wordpress.com/2018/02/17/in-memory-of-sjoerd-heeger/>; [https://www.reddit.com/r/syriancivilwar/comments/7y85sl/dutch\\_ypg\\_volunteer\\_baron\\_sason\\_sjoerd\\_heeger/](https://www.reddit.com/r/syriancivilwar/comments/7y85sl/dutch_ypg_volunteer_baron_sason_sjoerd_heeger/); <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/nederlander-die-streed-tegen-is-komt-om-in-syrieneuml-ae86337a/>; <http://theregion.org/article/12859-ypg-three-foreign-fighters-killed-in-fight-against-is-and-attack-by-turkey-on-afrin>, and Jack Losh, “Ukraine turns a blind eye to ultrarightist militia”, *The Washington Post*, 13 Feb 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-turns-a-blind-eye-to-ultrarightist-militia/2017/02/12/dbf9ea3c-ecab-11e6-b4ff-ac2cf509efe5\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.2b006f664942](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-turns-a-blind-eye-to-ultrarightist-militia/2017/02/12/dbf9ea3c-ecab-11e6-b4ff-ac2cf509efe5_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.2b006f664942) (accessed 2 May 2018).

Compare Sason/Heeger’s point of view with that of Evgeny “Anton” Semenov, a Russian who fought briefly for the YPG in 2015. Semenov claimed that “It was all the same to me who I fought for”, noting even that he could have fought for Peshmerga or even the Assad regime. For Semenov, see Kyle Orton, “The Forgotten Foreign Fighters: The PKK in Syria”, pp. 97–8.

76 Fascinated by War: An Austrian in Donbass”, *DW.com*, 4 May 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/fascinated-by-war-an-austrian-in-donbass/a-38705835> (accessed 16 Sep 2018).

It should be noted, however, that many who fight with Christian militia do not appear to be deeply religious. At least some volunteers who choose a militia such as Dwekh Nawsha rather than the YPG do so for other ideological reasons, such as discomfort over the left-wing ideology of the YPG.<sup>77</sup>

Some of their posts:

*"I'm in #Iraq helping to raise a Christian army to fight #ISIS"*

*"I saw what they were doing to my sisters and brothers in Christ over there, and how they are also killing Muslims, probably more than Christians ... I just felt like it was what God was calling me to do."*

One American volunteer, Brett, an army veteran who had served in Iraq in 2006, said that he had joined Dwekh Nawsha in Iraq's Nineveh province where Christian villages still held out against ISIS. "Here I'm fighting for a people and for a faith, and the enemy is much bigger and more brutal ... These are some of the only towns in Nineveh where church bells ring. In every other town the bells have gone silent, and that's unacceptable." Brett also added that he was not afraid to die for his faith. "Everyone dies ... One of my favorite verses in the Bible says: be faithful unto death, and I shall give you the crown of life."<sup>78</sup>

Another American who views the conflict in religious terms is Chris Toney, a navy veteran who volunteered with Peshmerga. Toney said he was moved by his Christian faith to take the fight to ISIS: "I saw what they were doing to my sisters and brothers in Christ over there, and how they are also killing Muslims, probably more than Christians ... I just felt like it was what God was calling me to do." He called ISIS "pure, unadulterated evil", the equivalent of the Nazis who carried out the Holocaust.<sup>79</sup>

## Military Service

*There is another motivation that drives veterans of the Iraq war to want to return to the fight there: Seeing Islamic State celebrate victory in the villages where our friends bled or died fighting the insurgency. It makes many of us wonder if our war was for nothing, that perhaps we failed. So that is the jumble of emotions I felt when I heard Patrick's story, and that I'm guessing other veterans of the Iraq war feel as they watch the battle against the Islamic State rage on. We know that there is nothing easy about killing. We know the hardships and heartbreaks, the guilt and pain of combat. And yet, we think of going back.<sup>80</sup>*

77 See 'Christian foreign fighters deserting Kurdish YPG in Syria because they're "damn Reds"', MiddleEastEye, 19 Feb 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/christian-foreign-fighters-deserting-kurdish-ypg-syria-because-theyre-damned-reds-1976493133> (accessed 16 Sep 2018).

78 Isabel Coles, 'Westerners join Iraqi Christian militia to fight Islamic State', *Reuters*, 16 Feb 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-iraq-foreignfighters/westerners-join-iraqi-christian-militia-to-fight-islamic-state-idUKKBN0LJ0NB20150215> (accessed 7 Oct 2018).

79 Jason Howerton, 'Exclusive: Intense Helmet Cam Video Captures American Volunteers' Nearly Deadly Run In With Islamic State', *The Blaze*, 8 Apr 2015, <https://www.theblaze.com/news/2015/04/08/exclusive-intense-helmet-cam-video-captures-american-volunteers-nearly-deadly-run-in-with-islamic-state> (accessed 28 Mar 2018).

80 Thomas James Brennan, 'The Curious Draw of the Battlefield', *The New York Times*, 11 Mar 2015, <https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/11/the-curious-draw-of-the-battlefield/>. Brennan, a former sergeant in the US Marine Corps, was deployed in Iraq with the Marines. He did not volunteer in the conflict against ISIS but is here analysing motives of volunteers (including those of a personal acquaintance, Patrick Maxwell) (accessed 19 Feb 2019).

Some 126 individuals within the database have had past military experience. Within this group, many saw service with the US military in Iraq or Afghanistan. A small number, never deployed in combat, evinced frustration over missing out on combat, with the attendant feeling that the “job” had been left unfinished in some way. American Chris Willis (who was with Dwekh Nawsha as well as Peshmerga, and who had earlier served two tours in Iraq with the 82nd Airborne Division) said in an interview, “seeing the situation that’s happening over here. I mean, when we left the first time we didn’t leave it like this ... And as soon as we pull out, to see the city I was in get taken over, and bases I was in getting taken over, it’s absolutely unacceptable. And I am just trying to do what I can.”<sup>81</sup> Another individual, the American Ryan O’Leary, aged 28 when he entered the conflict zone in 2015, fought with Peshmerga having previously served with the US military in both Iraq and Afghanistan. O’Leary developed PTSD symptoms subsequently, saying that he felt rootless after leaving the military and yearned to serve again.

O’Leary is not alone. A small number of individuals (six) appear to have PTSD or mental trauma arising from past military service.<sup>82</sup> One former Marine who served two tours as a machine gunner with the US Army in Iraq in 2007 puts it thus: “I felt a big part of my PTSD is trying to find a reason for that mayhem and bloodshed, and I thought maybe if I go back I can fill that hole.”<sup>83</sup>

Another veteran says on social media:

*My PTSD and social anxiety have been circulating faster than I can occupy my mind to not think about it. The coping methods aren’t working like they used to. And I’m gaining a tolerance to my medicine. Need help but can’t file for VA [Veterans Affairs] yet and I’m not in a schedule that can accommodate to attending behavioral health. So I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place.*

A few had other unexplained or unresolved issues while in the military. Jordan Matson, discussed above, never saw combat during his two years with the US military nor was he sent overseas to serve. By his own account, Matson apparently had some sort of disciplinary issue and was “railroaded” out of the army, with the military (again by his own account) refusing his multiple efforts to re-enlist. Interviewed in 2014, when he was one of the first foreigners to join the YPG against ISIS, Matson said, “Civilian life just wasn’t for me. The normal 9-to-5, I just wasn’t comfortable with it ... Over here, everything makes sense.”<sup>84</sup>

An American named Patrick Maxwell was 29 when he entered the conflict zone and volunteered with Peshmerga for seven weeks from late 2014 to January 2015. He was a veteran who served in Iraq with the Marine Corps in 2006 but did not engage in any actual fighting while he was there. Honorably discharged by the army in 2011,

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81 ‘Veterans join grassroots movement Veterans against ISIS’, *ABC Action News*, 20 Aug 2015, <http://www.abccactionnews.com/news/region-pinellas/volunteers-join-grassroots-movement-called-veterans-against-isis> (accessed 4 Jan 2017).

82 The actual number may well be higher.

83 Dion Nissenbaum, ‘The American Veterans Who Fight ISIS’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 Sep 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-american-veterans-who-fight-isis-1441362601> (accessed 18 Sep 2018).

84 Ivan Watson, Gul Tuysuz, and Dana Ford, “At peace” in war: A former U.S. soldier battles ISIS’, *CNN*, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/27/world/meast/syria-former-us-soldier/index.html>; Jacob Siegel, ‘The U.S. Veteran and Wisconsin Boy Who Went to Fight ISIS in Syria’, *The Daily Beast*, 3 Oct 2014, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-us-veteran-and-wisconsin-boy-who-went-to-fight-isis-in-syria> (accessed 2 May 2018).



he drifted from job to job, working in construction, as a security contractor in Afghanistan, pedaling a bicycle taxi and as a real estate agent. As ISIS was reaching its apogee, it dawned on him that the fight against ISIS was a chance for him to finally be involved in actual fighting and finally see some action. “I may not be enlisted anymore, but I’m still a warrior ... [I] figured if I could walk away from here and kill as many of the bad guys as I could, that would be a good thing. It was also a chance to have a story that no-one else could beat, I guess, and have an adventure while I’m doing it.” Maxwell also told the media, “I’m very libertarian in my beliefs and I don’t think we need to be committing U.S. boots to the ground to do another long war like that ... But myself as a private citizen – if I want to go take a vacation and shoot some terrorists in the process, that should be my own business.” Maxwell said he went to Iraq in part because little was keeping him at home. His time with Peshmerga ended when American Special Operations forces advising the Kurds spotted him, with American officials subsequently putting pressure on Peshmerga officials not to allow American civilians to join their ranks.<sup>85</sup>

For some individuals, previous military experience appears to have fallen short of their own expectations in some way. For others, there were failures in attempts to gain higher qualifications or status in the military. These failures may have played a part in the individual in question seeking validation or adventure (or perhaps both) by joining the fight against ISIS. Ashley Johnston, who was the first Westerner to be killed fighting for the YPG in February 2015, was by vocation a postman from Australia, but had apparently spent time as a rifleman and combat medic in the Army Reserve, as well as several months as a peacekeeper in the Solomon Islands. He had also tried unsuccessfully to join special forces regiments and the British Royal Marines.<sup>86</sup>

There are a small number of individuals (twelve have been captured in the database) who never served in the military but for whom a military calling was clearly a motivator. An example is Dean Evans from the United Kingdom. Evans, a volunteer with the YPG, was 22 at the time he was killed in July 2016. His biological father a soldier, Evans showed a deep interest in all things military from a very young age and wanted to join the British army. Evans’ mother, who died suddenly of an undiagnosed heart condition when he was seventeen, had apparently told him, “You were born to wear a uniform. If your heart says be a soldier, follow it.” Evans’ stepfather remarked, “All Dean ever wanted was to be a soldier. His country wouldn’t let him, so he sought a way to get a uniform. Even if it killed him.”<sup>87</sup> Evans was unable to join the British army due to health reasons. He also apparently tried and failed to join the French Foreign Legion.<sup>88</sup>

85 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/us/disenchanted-by-civilian-life-veterans-volunteer-to-fight-isis.html>; <http://www.texasstandard.org/shows/031215/meet-the-texan-who-volunteered-to-fight-isis/>. An interview with Maxwell can also be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8sNkyjPvBY> (accessed 25 Mar 2018).

86 ‘Kurdish fighters hold funeral for Australian ex-soldier, Ashley Johnston, killed fighting Islamic State militants’, *ABC* (Australia), 22 Mar 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-14/kurdish-fighters-hold-funeral-for-ex-australian-soldier/6318732> (accessed 4 Jan 2017); Lucy Thackray, Sarah Dean and Laura Wells, ‘He was a good man who never complained and was always positive’, *The Daily Mail Australia*, 25 Feb 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2968589/Australian-Western-fighter-die-fighting-ISIS-alongside-Kurdish-soldiers.html> (accessed 19 Feb 2019).

87 ‘Briton killed fighting Isis in Syria “dreamed of being a soldier” but failed Army medical because of asthma’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 Oct 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/29/brit-killed-fighting-isis-in-syria-dreamed-of-being-a-soldier-but/> (accessed 4 Jan 2017).

88 ‘What Drove a British Farmer to the Syrian Frontline?’, *The Guardian*, 29 Oct 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/29/isis-wasnt-about-killing-people-what-drove-british-farmer-syrian-frontline> (accessed 4 Jan 2017). Note, too, the case of Canadian Nazzareno Tassone, who was killed while fighting with the YPG in December 2016. Earlier in his life he had tried to join the Canadian military but was denied on account of a chest condition. ‘Canadian Fighting ISIL in Syria Killed’, *The Cambridge Times* (Canada), 4 Jan 2017, <http://www.cambridgetimes.ca/news-story/7049257-canadian-man-fighting-isis-in-syria-killed/> (accessed 9 Jan 2017).

## Misfits and Others

One British volunteer, Tim Locks, who fought with Dwekh Nawsha from February to July in 2015, quit and returned home, complaining about “lack of professionalism” and “egos”. In a Facebook post reported by the media, Lock referred to “the daily politics, dramas brought to us by unbalanced individuals that shouldn’t even be there, the ulterior motives and constant barrage of lies and lack of professionalism”. These had “finally worn me down”.<sup>89</sup>

Some volunteers do seem to have characteristics suggesting them to be unsuitable to serve at the front line. They may be there for what, at least in the eyes of other volunteers, appear to be the “wrong” reasons. The present writer’s analysis of social media posts by fighters who have been in the conflict zone for some considerable amount of time suggests that there is some wariness of – if not distance from – individuals who arrived during the latter stages of the conflict against ISIS. Some of the “old-timers” felt recent arrivals were more concerned with taking selfies, prospective book deals, their GoFundMe accounts (a preferred means of funding for those seeking to travel to the conflict zone with suitable equipment) than with actual fighting.

There is a subgroup populated by a small number of Walter Mitty-type individuals. An example is Michael Enright, a British actor who joined the YPG in early 2015. His media interviews show little difference with those who exhibit the “wanting to do good” characteristic.<sup>90</sup> He also appears to have joined the YPG on account of the need for adventure. But he very quickly became extremely unpopular with other Western volunteers and there are also suggestions, which Enright has vigorously denied, that he was a “poser” attempting to boost his acting career and profile. His detractors even questioned his mental health.<sup>91</sup> To Enright’s credit, he has stayed in the conflict zone for some time (until 2017). The same cannot be said of others who made spur of the moment decisions to join the conflict. An example is Dean Parker, an American surf instructor based in Costa Rica who made, by his own account, a knee-jerk reaction to join the YPG after watching a television report about the plight of the Yazidi people trapped on Mount Sinjar by ISIS: “I started crying ... so right then and there I decided I was gonna come. I had a knee-jerk reaction and I bought a plane ticket right there and then.” Parker lasted not much more than two months in the conflict zone before returning home, appearing to have been out of his depth and unable to cope with the privations he encountered there.<sup>92</sup>

A small number of individuals (14 in the dataset) have previous criminal records or earlier run-ins with the law. An extreme case is that of Michael Windecker, from the United States, who volunteered with Peshmerga until he was unmasked as a sex offender in 2015. When

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89 “Over-inflated egos, unbalanced individuals and a lack of professionalism”: British doorman’s withering assessment of foreign mercenaries battling Isis as he quits to return home after five months fighting in Iraq’, *The Daily Mail*, 21 Jul 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3169817/British-nightclub-bouncer-fighting-isis-iraq-return-home-five-months-dodging-incoming-tormenting-Daesh-brothers-arms.html> (accessed 5 Jan 2017). Locks did, however, praise other individuals, his “brothers-in-arms” (presumably less flawed in his view) with whom he had fought.

90 “After I saw the cowardly way James Foley was killed, I knew I had to do something,” Enright, told media in July 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2015/07/10/actor-turned-anti-isis-fighter-michael-enright-talks-life-on-syrian-frontline.html> (accessed 19 Feb 2019)

91 Jordan Matson in particular has spoken out (in his Facebook posts) against Enright. See ‘Kurdish Fighters ask US to Extract Hollywood Actor in Syria’, *Channel4 News*, 4 Jun 2015, <https://www.channel4.com/news/michael-enright-ypg-syria-kurdish-fighters-matson> (accessed 5 Jan 2017).

92 Tom Wyke and Tim MacFarlan, “It’s cold, rainy, muddy, no heat, no hot water”: Florida surf instructor who quit his job to fight ISIS returns home after just 10 weeks – having not fired a single shot’, *The Daily Mail*, 7 Jan 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2900111/Florida-surf-instructor-quit-job-join-fight-ISIS-returns-home-just-10-weeks-having-not-fired-single-shot.html#ixzz5EtsC53QU> (accessed 7 May 2018).



confronted with his past convictions, Windecker suggested that his case or cases had been closed, but the sheer length of his criminal record, spanning sixteen years, was eye-catching. The past charges against him included domestic violence and weapons violations, as well as a sexual assault charge and failure to register as a sex offender. He had spent several stints in jail. Windecker's Peshmerga commanders initially praised Windecker's "ferocity", but distanced themselves from him when they became aware of his criminal record. A fellow American Peshmerga volunteer stated "Nobody wants him around at all ... We contemplated kicking his ass every day. Hope he goes to prison when he returns to the States. He's a huge liability."<sup>93</sup>

## Push and Pull

Personal circumstances and, in some cases, the hope of escaping them also appear to have played a role in the decision to travel to the conflict zone. It is extremely difficult, however, to separate these out from some of the factors listed above (such as a search for meaning or redemption). It is partly on account of this that this paper has not sought to posit a dichotomy between "push" and "pull" factors. Notwithstanding this, some push factors, especially those relating to psychological conflict, are worth highlighting. I have termed these "submotivators": they appear to have formed an important part of the decision-making substratum.

Illustrative in this respect is the case history of one fighter who came from outside the Western orbit. This individual, "Ba Sipan", came from China. His name appears to be an amalgamation of his Chinese family name "Pan" (潘) and his Kurdish nom de guerre, Ba Si. Born in Luzhou, a prefecture-level city located in the south-east of China's Sichuan province, Pan was 25 when he reached the conflict zone in Syria in October 2015, after having written on his blog a month earlier about how he had "made up his mind" to join the YPG, apparently inspired by media reports of 23-year-old British Chinese volunteer Huang Lei (the first YPG fighter of Chinese ethnicity). Pan, whose family was unaware of his intention to join the YPG, subsequently indicated that he had twice fought on Kobane's front line. Unable to speak English or Arabic, Pan had to rely on electronic dictionaries to communicate with his fellow YPG fighters.<sup>94</sup>

Pan's case is noteworthy as there are signs of both push and pull factors at work. On 1 July 2012, Pan posted on his blog that his "girlfriend just got married, but [he] was not the groom". He also stated that he could not find permanent employment in China, while also blogging that everyone "needed to do something meaningful with their lives ... [for him] this meant fighting ISIS". Pan also observed that "ISIS has taken so many innocent lives".<sup>95</sup>

93 Jacob Siegel, 'An American Fighting ISIS Is Convicted Sex Offender', *The Daily Beast*, 27 Apr 2015, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/an-american-fighting-isis-is-convicted-sex-offender> (accessed 7 May 2018).

94 Marnie O'Neill, 'Chinese man fighting ISIS with Kurdish YPG fears deadly consequences after going public', *news.com.au*, 12 Dec 2015, <http://www.news.com.au/technology/online/social/chinese-man-fighting-isis-with-kurdish-ypg-fears-deadly-consequences-after-going-public/news-story/06d57475d49286c3ed0a88259588ddce> (accessed 16 Sep 2018). Information on Ba Sipan has also been taken from his posts on social media, occasional media profiles on him and his comments on Chinese microblogs, which have now been largely removed but which have been cached by the author.

95 Pan was to blog about ISIS in December 2015, stating that ISIS were "lunatics". Pan blogged that there were many villagers (both Kurds and Arabs) living in his area and that members of ISIS would shoot anyone they encountered, regardless of whether they were militants or civilians.

Individuals who attempted to join the conflict, or who considered the possibility but did not do so, do not form part of the database underpinning this study. However, in some cases, their motivations and thoughts repay study. One case is Wang Yuan DongYi, a naturalised Singapore citizen of Chinese descent. From late 2015, when he was 23, Wang began to empathise with the Kurds and feel revulsion towards ISIS.<sup>96</sup> He left Singapore and was on his way to Turkey and then Syria to join a Kurdish militia group (not named by the authorities, but likely the YPG). While en route he was located by the authorities of a third country (on the request of the Singapore Government) and repatriated to Singapore. Wang had been looking to escape from personal setbacks and was in debt from a failed business venture. As he later told the media, “I was thinking, since I have so many troubles in Singapore, maybe if I go to Syria to do something great – greater than what I can do here, maybe it’ll make my life more meaningful in a way.”<sup>97</sup>

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96 Lim Yan Liang, ‘23-year-old Singaporean on way to Syria to join anti-ISIS Kurdish militia fighting arrested under ISA’, *The Straits Times*, 16 Mar 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/23-year-old-singaporean-on-way-to-syria-to-join-anti-isis-kurdish-militia-fighting> (accessed 19 Feb 2019).

97 Justin Ong, ‘How 2 Singaporeans got back on the “right track” after “dark path” of radicalisation’, *ChannelNewsAsia*, 4 Aug 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/how-2-singaporeans-got-back-on-right-track-radicalisation-isd-10587728> (accessed 24 Aug 2018). Based on internal evidence in the media reporting, the writer has made the assessment that the “Kenny” profiled here is the same individual as Wang Yuan DongYi.

# Overall: Observations and Further Work

## Radicalisation (?)

**F**ighting in foreign conflicts for a cause that one considers just can give individuals a sense of meaning and purpose.<sup>98</sup> As has been shown above, some of the individuals who have joined the fight against ISIS have indeed been engaged in a search for meaning or purpose. However, using this as the sole explanation for joining the conflict seems somewhat trite.

Many anti-ISIS fighters could be said to have left self-interest behind, as well as their loved ones, in order to make potentially costly sacrifices for strangers. The literature on radicalisation has shown that an individual can move to a radical mindset to justify violence in support of a cause, through, for example, a feeling of moral outrage, especially when those individuals or beliefs they identify with are under threat or persecuted.<sup>99</sup>

But would it in fact be correct to assume that some of these individuals have gone through some type of radicalisation process? Answering this definitively – if indeed a definitive answer is possible – is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a preliminary, comparative exploration of the issue may be useful, especially given that some individuals who have fought ISIS clearly had within them a deep internal psychological conflict or driving process that might seem familiar to students of the field. Consider an individual from France, known as Ravachol, a young man who, aged 18 in 2017, went to fight with the YPG. Ravachol first discovered the YPG and its cause on the internet and decided to join it:

*I stopped school, stopped visiting my friends, spent my time watching communist propaganda videos on the internet and one day I discovered Rojava and the anarcho-communist revolution. I told myself, I have to go.<sup>100</sup>*

The isolation from friends and society, alongside deep immersion in aspects of the cause that he is about to join, will not be unfamiliar to those who have studied radicalisation, with this snippet above bearing some similarities to those who have joined groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS and al-Nusra.

One work on the subject of radicalisation, by McCauley and Moskalenko, identified a number of mechanisms at work in the process of radicalisation in the course of examining case histories of hundreds of individuals. Some of the mechanisms they identified

98 See Arielli, *From Byron to Bin Ladin*, pp.85–6.

99 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, 'Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual From Radical Opinion to Radical Action', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26 (2014), pp.69–85, in particular p.76.

100 Un communiste français chez les Kurdes: "Mon travail c'est d'éliminer les gars de Daech", *Égalité et Réconciliation*, 21 Mar 2018, <https://www.egaliteetreconciliation.fr/Un-communiste-francais-chez-les-Kurdes-Mon-travail-c-est-d-eliminer-les-gars-de-Daech-50234.html> (accessed 11 Oct 2018).

and grouped under an overarching “individual radicalisation” theme are relevant to the present study. One, “group grievance”, can relate to another group or cause, even if this does not touch on (or include direct harm) to the individual who might be radicalised. Some individuals, as McCauley and Moskalenko point out, might see their feelings amount to no more than empathy or sympathy, with no further action taken. But for others, the altruism felt can be a precursor (or even a factor) to action or even violence. McCauley and Moskalenko also correctly point out the difficulty in explaining why particular individuals go further and commit violence in the name of the group or cause they identify with.<sup>101</sup>

A second mechanism described by McCauley and Moskalenko, also relevant here, is the search for adventure, status or money (thrill seeking) – these mechanisms can compel individuals to join a militant organisation. Such individuals may then spur others who previously did not hold radical ideas or who were previously apolitical into radical action.<sup>102</sup> A third mechanism potentially relevant here is what McCauley and Moskalenko term “unfreezing”: individuals who, compared to their peers, may have significantly fewer commitments and attachments (family being one) keeping them anchored. A sense of individual disconnection makes them more susceptible or amenable to identifying with another cause, or even taking up arms on its behalf.<sup>103</sup>

What could be gleaned from this admittedly brief thematic survey, when held against the preceding analysis of individuals in the dataset is that there are aspects of some of the anti-ISIS fighters’ thought and reasoning process that mirror that of radicalised individuals. At a personal level, individuals of the Muslim faith around the world are, thanks to the ubiquity of social media and the internet, subject to images relating to the idea of the oppression of their co-religionists. In addition, ISIS until recently recruited actively through its promotion of the powerful idea of the Caliphate. On the other hand, while many anti-ISIS fighters do not share the same religion as, say, the Kurds, they were nonetheless outraged or identify with them (often subject to the images of ISIS beheadings and atrocities against the Kurds or other communities in Iraq and Syria), and thus feel compelled to do something to help. In contradistinction, it could be observed that YPG does not engage in propagandistic mass recruitment; instead, it must be sought out, as do all the other groups or militias that anti-ISIS foreign fighters end up joining.

It is useful here to consider Sageman’s idea of a “bunch of guys”. In positing a bottom-up process of recruitment into terror networks, Sageman suggests that what matters most in recruitment into terrorist organisations is trusted friends and joining from the bottom up.<sup>104</sup> But in the case of anti-ISIS foreign fighters, we do not see group decisions to join. Unlike some who joined jihadist organisations, anti-ISIS foreign fighters did not have a common place of worship, and no loci (except perhaps online) for them to share views. Those who join jihadist groups sometimes have other forms of shared relationship (say,

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101 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalisation Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.26–33.

102 McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, pp.64–9. See also McCauley and Moskalenko, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26 (2014), pp.69–85.

103 McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, pp.75–81. The present study is not the first on anti-ISIS fighters that recognises the utility of some aspects of the McCauley and Moskalenko approach (particularly the ideas of Group Grievance and Personal Motivations). See Fritz and Young, “Transnational Volunteers”, pp.12–13.

104 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp.65–70.

through recreational activities), but this is not apparent for the anti-ISIS fighters.<sup>105</sup> What stands out in particular for the anti-ISIS fighters is the deeply personal nature of their mental journey, a journey that culminated in travel to join what was by no means a single, monolithic organisation or movement.

What about once they had joined the organisation or movement? Sageman argues that analysing relationships between terrorists is important, such as interactions between leaders and followers.<sup>106</sup> But anti-ISIS fighters, with a few exceptions, generally fight with Kurds or other minorities. From the social media evidence available to the author, it does not appear that interactions of the type highlighted by Sageman (either intra-group interaction or interactions between followers and leaders – there are very few “leader” figures at the scene of conflict) influence thought processes or still less feed into radicalisation.

For the vast majority in the database, there is very little to suggest a *predisposition* to violence, notwithstanding the fact that the individuals under study have taken up arms against ISIS and that a substantial number had previously served in the military. Overwhelmingly the volunteers seem to suggest through their social media profiles and interviews that they have fought ISIS out of a sense of moral or ideological belief, or a desire to protect those attacked by ISIS, or a combination of these.

However, questions remain to be asked – but likely not answered – as to the extent to which experiences at the front line have had an effect on (or in some way radicalised) the individuals in question. Bearing in mind McCauley and Moskalenko’s suggestion that radicalisation could be seen as “increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict”, it is worth considering the extent to which the accumulated experiences at the front line made it more likely in some ways that the anti-ISIS volunteers might engage in violence elsewhere.<sup>107</sup>

Terrorists, as Martha Crenshaw observes, inhabit a closed society, cut off from the mainstream:

*Isolation and the perception of a hostile environment intensify shared belief and commitment and make faith in the cause imperative. A pattern of mutual reassurance, solidarity, and comradeship develops, in which the members of the group reinforce each other’s self-righteousness, image of a hostile world, and sense of mission.*<sup>108</sup>

This is only partly applicable to the group under consideration in this paper. Based on the present writer’s analysis of social media posts of volunteers who have spent significant amounts of time in the conflict zone, it could perhaps be said that some are alienated for various reasons from mainstream society, and that others, particularly those who “seek meaning”, do indeed find a measure of the mutual reassurance and solidarity highlighted by Crenshaw. But in the view

<sup>105</sup> Some anti-ISIS foreign fighters might have a shared experience of military service in common, but while information or views might have been exchanged online, there is little or no evidence that groups of veterans familiar with each other or tied by military service joined the anti-ISIS fighter together.

<sup>106</sup> Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, pp.23–4.

<sup>107</sup> McCauley and Moskalenko, ‘Mechanisms of Political Radicalisation Pathways Towards Terrorism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008), pp.415–433, in particular p.416.

<sup>108</sup> Martha Crenshaw, ‘The Causes of Terrorism’, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (July 1981), pp. 379–99, particularly p.393.

of the present writer, commitment in many cases relates more to the individual motivating factors described above and has less to do with a “shared cause” that they have with their comrades on the front lines in Syria and Iraq. These comrades, as noted above, inhabit a very wide band within the spectrum of religious, ideological and political belief (and some have none of these).

There is also little evidence from the dataset, coded behaviour and other observations that individuals have been radicalised by their experiences or interactions in the conflict zone. It must be recognised, however, that there are gaps in the data for almost all the profiles. It is possible that some trauma, indoctrination or hardening of ideological positions has been at work that eludes empirical observation.

## Returnees

Decades of scholarly research has shown that the vast majority of individuals with radical or extremist beliefs never act on them.<sup>109</sup> No anti-ISIS volunteer, on return to his country of origin, appears to have attempted violence in the name of his or her cause. However, it is worth pondering certain profiles, such as those with committed political views (the anarchists, or the far right), who held these views before – and separate from – the conflict with ISIS. It could be argued that such individuals who have drunk very deeply in the fountains of a certain political, religious or ideological persuasion might subsequently attempt to further their cause in other locations through non-peaceful means.<sup>110</sup> This would not of course be without precedent: history has seen movements whose members have fought in a certain locale (sometimes with an altruistic motivation), and then moved over time to contemplate and execute attacks within their home countries, sometimes as a result of an accretion of political grievances.<sup>111</sup>

A well-documented concern with ISIS returnees is that they might form networks in their home countries, or carry out lone-wolf attacks. Is this sort of concern warranted for the anti-ISIS fighters? The vast majority of anti-ISIS fighters do not profess the same open enmity to the West that ISIS fighters do. That said, these are individuals who on account of their time spent in the conflict zone would have familiarised themselves with weapons and military tactics. Many would have killed, and it is possible that some might have engaged in, or been associated with, actions that might be considered “crimes”, albeit done in or perhaps after the heat of battle.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, some have specific political grievances or an ideological orientation that puts them at odds with their governments, or indeed that may have caused them to fall foul of the law at an earlier time. An example is a Spanish individual, Juan Manuel Soria, active in Syria and Iraq against ISIS with both Yezidi militia and the YPG. Soria had been the ideological leader

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109 Randy Borum, ‘Rethinking Radicalisation’, *Journal of Strategic Security* Vol. 4, No. 4 (2012): pp.1–2; McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, pp.219–21.

110 It should be remembered that not all foreign volunteers fighting against ISIS had immaculate records with the authorities in their home countries before departure to the conflict zone; in addition, some returning home are alleged to have committed crimes after their return. The most serious case to date is that of Ashley Dyball, an Australian who volunteered with the YPG in 2015. In April 2017, Dyball was arrested and charged with the murder of an Australian man. ‘Ashley Dyball, anti-IS fighter, in custody over suspected murder of Samuel Thompson’, *ABC News*, 1 Apr 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-01/ashley-dyball-in-custody-over-suspected-murder-samuel-thompson/8406912> (accessed 6 Jul 2018).

111 See the comments of Bart Schuurman, *Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist: A Multilevel Analysis of involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002–2005* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), pp.117–18.

112 See the interview with one German YPG volunteer, “Christian Haller”, who makes allusions to war crimes and breaches of the Geneva Convention by the YPG and other parties. ‘Ich wünschte, ich wäre im Moment in Afrin’, *Stern*, 18 Feb 2018, <https://www.stern.de/politik/ausland/tuerkei--deutscher-kaempfte-mit-kurden-gegen-den-is---ich-wuenschte-ich-waere-in-afrin--7835302.html> (accessed 22 Aug 2018).

of a neo-Nazi gang based in Valencia, with quantities of ammunition and firearms found at his residence at the time of his pre-ISIS arrest by Spanish police in 2005.<sup>113</sup>

Measuring the impact or threat of these individuals when they return home, however, is not a straightforward matter, with informed commentators positing a range of opinions. Some have suggested that the “ideological” types, or those who have through their time come to closely identify with the Kurds, may pose a threat, while arguing that the scale of this threat is on the whole marginal, with only a small number likely to engage in violence in the name of their cause.<sup>114</sup> Others point, correctly, to “ideological leftists” with the YPG who were earlier part of anarchist and left-wing groups (particularly in Greece, Italy and Spain) that themselves employed violence.<sup>115</sup> And then there is also the argument that cannot be discounted entirely that Western YPG volunteers may get involved in PKK activities (in Europe, for example) including attacks on Turkish interests.<sup>116</sup>

## Legal Regimes

When it comes to assessing whether returning anti-ISIS fighters might pose a threat to their home countries, the discussion above is fairly inconclusive. Whatever the actual danger, governments have already begun to take action against nationals who have gone to fight in the conflict, using whatever legislative tools are at hand.<sup>117</sup> Australia, for example, in a 2014 amendment to its counter-terrorism legislation, criminalised entering a foreign country with the intent to engage in hostile activity unless serving in or with the armed forces of the government of a foreign country. This was put to the test when an Australian citizen, Jamie Williams, was prevented from travelling to Syria to join the YPG in December 2014 and charged the following year with preparing to engage in hostile activities. Williams argued at the time that the Kurds were exercising “effective governmental control”. In 2016, the case was dropped without the authorities offering a detailed explanation. Williams later did make the trip to the conflict zone, taking part in the liberation of Raqqa.<sup>118</sup>

Denmark has legal provisions that are not entirely dissimilar. Tommy Mørck, an Aarhus native who volunteered with the YPG, in June 2018 became one of the first anti-ISIS fighters in Europe to be sentenced to jail. Mørck, who remains free (pending appeal), was charged under a 2016 amendment to the Danish criminal code that allowed

113 Joan Canterero, ‘Juicio sin castigo al ideólogo de los neonazis valencianos del “caso Pánzer”’, *Publico*, <https://www.publico.es/espana/juicio-castigo-al-ideologo-neonazis.html> (accessed 26 Aug 2018). For some sense of Soria, his militant ideology and his criminal past, see Ferran Barber, ‘La ultraderecha española quiere renacer con una “cruzada” contra el ISIS’, *El Confidencial*, 19 Aug 2016, [https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2016-08-19/cruzada-estado-islamico-extrema-derecha-espanola-irak-siria\\_1246462/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2016-08-19/cruzada-estado-islamico-extrema-derecha-espanola-irak-siria_1246462/) (accessed 26 Aug 2018). See also de Craemer, *Strange Comrades*, p. 65. I am grateful to Simon de Craemer for a personal communication on Juan Manuel Soria.

114 Guillaume Corneau-Tremblay, ‘The Threat from Western Volunteers in Kurdish Groups’, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-threat-from-western-volunteers-in-kurdish-groups> (accessed 24 Aug 2018).

115 Orton, ‘The Forgotten Foreign Fighters: The PKK in Syria’, pp.126–7.

116 *ibid.*

117 For reasons of space, the following discussion will not cover those volunteers (most commonly Westerners with the YPG) who have been detained by Turkey and who have occasionally faced charges in that country. It will also not cover the cases of volunteers detained by KRG authorities for various reasons. For examples, see ‘Briton who volunteered with YPG arrested in Turkey’, *Rudaw*, 30 Jul 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/30072017> and ‘Three foreign YPG volunteers released from jail, going home’, *Rudaw*, 24 Apr 2016, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/240420166> (accessed 11 Oct 2018).

118 Nick McKenzie and Richard Baker, ‘Challenge for government over whether to prosecute foreign fighter’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 Jan 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/challenge-for-government-over-whether-to-prosecute-foreign-fighter-20180130-p4yz2p.html>; Matt Brown, ‘Australian foreign fighter Jamie Williams describes “block by block” battle against Islamic State in Raqqa’, *ABC News*, 25 Jul 2018, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-19/australian-reveals-he-fought-is-in-syria/9456102> (accessed 12 Sep 2018).



the authorities to prohibit people from travelling to and staying in certain conflict zones without advance permission. Mørck's six-month sentence occasioned a fair amount of domestic discussion. This was not simply because he was the first individual to be charged under the amendment or because the prosecution argued (successfully, it appears) that fighting with the YPG against ISIS did not constitute a mitigating circumstance, but also because no Danish ISIS fighter has yet, at the time of writing, been charged under this law.<sup>119</sup>

The UK's approach has been both piecemeal and evolving; the country has seen a small number of YPG volunteers prosecuted. As one MP put it during the April 2016 Parliamentary debate on the issue, "two were arrested under the Terrorism Act; four were questioned, but not arrested; fourteen came and went at will, unquestioned, three of whom have been on a second or third tour of duty overseas."<sup>120</sup> But after a period where anti-ISIS volunteers might be subject to not much more than occasional scrutiny and questioning, from 2017–18 the UK has carried out a small number of arrests under its Terrorism Act, with prosecutions and court cases ongoing. Aidan James, who fought with the YPG, was scheduled to go on trial in November 2018, charged with preparation of acts of terrorism and attendance at a place used for terrorist training.<sup>121</sup> As of February 2019, James is still awaiting trial.<sup>122</sup> Another individual, James Matthews, who also fought for the YPG, had earlier in 2018 faced similar charges and the prospect of a trial, but the prosecution dropped the case on evidential grounds. Matthews' case was the first time that terrorism legislation had been used to prosecute someone who was helping a group that was also being assisted by the UK government, a point picked up by Matthews' lawyer, who observed that there was no guidance on whether such people fell under the purview of the Terrorism Act.<sup>123</sup>

Overall, governments trying to take action against nationals who have volunteered in this conflict have had decidedly mixed results. Clearly, there will continue to be discussion about the legality of individuals fighting against ISIS, and whether these volunteers (and YPG fighters in particular, given the associations with the PKK) should be exempt from counter-terrorism and foreign fighter laws.<sup>124</sup>

It remains to enumerate briefly on avenues for future research:

What has been presented in this paper is a snapshot of individuals across the period 2014–19. What would be useful would be research that follows the fortunes of these individuals over a longer period. Some may simply slip back into society. But their future trajectory may also be affected by their interactions with the state. Those who face either a formal legal process or some other form of state scrutiny, such

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119 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, 'Danish anti-IS volunteers could face years in jail', *Kurdistan 24*, 18 Aug 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/44dd255b-fecd-498f-9b1e-7dd5b96d86af> (accessed 16 Sep 2018).

120 These observations were aired during the April 2016 Parliamentary debate on the issue: 'UK Citizens Returning From Fighting Daesh', *Parliament of the United Kingdom*, 19 Apr 2016, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2016-04-19/debates/16041942000002/UKCitizensReturningFromFightingDaesh> (accessed 20 Sep 2016). Cited and quoted in Orton, *The Forgotten Foreign Fighters*, p.127 and n.612.

121 Tom Duffy, 'Formby man charged with terrorism set to stand trial at the Old Bailey', *The Liverpool Echo*, 31 Jul 2018, <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/formby-man-charged-terrorism-set-14974314> (accessed 18 Sep 2018).

122 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/james-matthews-isis-british-soldier-terror-charge-syria-army-uk-a8770781.html> (accessed 19 February 2019)

123 Mattha Busby, 'British man who fought ISIS in Syria has Terror charges dropped', *The Guardian*, 31 Jul 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jul/31/james-matthews-who-joined-kurdish-forces-to-fight-isis-not-guilty> (accessed 16 Sep 2018).

124 For discussion, see Henry Tuck, "'Arrested, jailed, bailed" – why it should be illegal to fight against ISIS', <https://www.isdglobal.org/arrested-jailed-bailed-why-it-should-be-illegal-to-fight-against-isis/> (accessed 26 Sep 2018).



as surveillance, may develop an increased antagonism towards the state. What cannot be ruled out is the possibility that the treatment they receive may have the effect of strengthening convictions or potentially pushing them further down an ideological pathway that leads to extremism.

Observers should not be too quick to assume that, with the conflict in Syria and Iraq against ISIS appearing to be winding down, all the anti-ISIS volunteers will simply return home and get on with their lives. By late 2017, it had become clear that matters were not so straightforward. While the majority of foreign volunteers do indeed appear to have returned home, some have elected to stay on in Syria in order to continue fighting with the YPG, this time against Turkey, whose troops had advanced into Afrin.<sup>125</sup>

Apart from identifying with the Kurdish (and specifically the YPG) cause in some exceptional way, it appears that several of those who have stayed on to help defend the YPG against Turkish incursions inhabit hardline ideological positions congruent with the YPG's philosophy. Many appear to self-identify with revolutionary far-left (or anarchist) or antifa-linked positions.<sup>126</sup> As one knowledgeable commentator puts it, "The humanists, former soldiers and adrenaline-seeking adventurers became scarcer, giving way to the ideologues."<sup>127</sup>

Other volunteers have taken part in conflicts further afield. The conflict in eastern Ukraine (which has seen Ukrainian forces battle pro-Russian separatists) is known to have drawn volunteers, mostly from the West.<sup>128</sup> Social media analysis, press reporting and media interviews of the individuals in question suggests that the complex mix of motivations that one sees for those foreign volunteers fighting in Syria and Iraq is replicated in Ukraine, where foreign volunteers have fought on both sides. Even while fighting ISIS, international YPG fighters would sometimes discuss the possibility of heading to Ukraine as their next theatre of conflict.<sup>129</sup> A few are actually known to have made the journey to Ukraine, either directly or after some time elsewhere (in their home countries, for example).<sup>130</sup> Some of the individuals who have fought in Syria or Iraq and also in Ukraine are of the heavily "ideological" variety, while others (those fighting on the side of Ukraine) see themselves as freedom fighters making a stand against Russian aggression.<sup>131</sup>

125 Western volunteers prepare to fight against Turkish forces in Afrin', *The New Arab*, 24 Jan 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/1/24/western-volunteers-to-fight-against-turkish-force-in-afrin> (accessed 5 Jul 2018); Gianluca Mezzofiore, Tamara Qiblawi and Angela Dewan, 'Foreign fighters in Syria turn their weapons on Turkey', *CNN*, 24 Jan 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/24/middleeast/turkey-syria-foreign-fighters-kurds-intl/index.html> (accessed 24 Jan 2018).

126 See, for example, a brief interview with a French "revolutionary" in Afrin, Serhad Tiqqun: <http://www.france24.com/en/20180223-syria-afrin-foreigners-westerners-far-left-join-kurdish-revolution-fight-turkey> (accessed 5 Jul 2018).

127 Guillaume Corneau-Tremblay, quoted in 'Far left on the front lines: The Westerners joining the Kurds' fight in Syria (Part 1 of 2)', *France24*, <http://www.france24.com/en/20180223-syria-afrin-foreigners-westerners-far-left-join-kurdish-revolution-fight-turkey> (accessed 5 Jul 2018).

128 The best treatment of these fighters can be found in Kacper Rękawek, 'Neither "NATO's Foreign Legion" Nor the "Donbass International Brigades": (Where Are All the) Foreign Fighters in Ukraine?', Polish Institute of International Affairs Policy Paper, No. 6 (108), March 2015, [http://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=19434](http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=19434) (accessed 24 Mar 2018). A convenient summary of some of the issues may be found in 'Ukraine conflict attracts foreign fighters – on both sides', *The Financial Times (Blogs)*, 22 Apr 2015, <http://blogs.ft.com/the-world/2015/04/ukraine-conflict-attracts-foreign-fighters-on-both-sides/> (accessed 7 Jan 2017).

129 Author's analysis of social media posts of the individuals concerned. Separately, at least a few individuals who have fought in Ukraine have subsequently made their way to Iraq and Syria (author's analysis of Facebook posts of the individuals concerned).

130 For individuals with the YPG who later joined units in the Ukraine conflict fighting against Russian forces, see Seth Harp, 'The Untold Story of Syria's Antifa Platoon', *RollingStone*, 10 Jul 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/untold-story-syria-antifa-platoon-666159/> (accessed 25 Aug 2018).

131 For the profile of an Englishman who fought with the YPG and then with pro-Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine, see Emma Vardy, 'The Briton fighting "other people's wars"', *BBC News*, 29 Apr 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43899959> (accessed 27 Sep 2018).

As noted above, several anti-ISIS volunteers have likened themselves to the volunteers of the International Brigades fighting on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>132</sup> Beneath the romantic anti-Fascist sheen cloaking the histories of the anti-Fascist volunteers of the Spanish Civil War, it can be shown that many foreign volunteers had complex motivations. The present study has shown similar, overlapping complexities in terms of why individuals chose to join the fight against ISIS. An urgent need exists for a larger study examining the phenomenon of those who seek to take part in conflicts that strictly speaking are not their own. This study would ideally correlate taking part in foreign conflicts with the sense of adventure, alienation or even search for meaning that many volunteers seem to evince. In such a study, social media would not simply be a tool for observation. It might even be said to be a key factor that initiates some individuals' search for meaning in the first place. Only further examinations (taking into account other conflicts and tracking those volunteers in Syria who move onto these fresh battlegrounds) can confirm this. And only through such study can corroboration be gained for the thesis that at the interstices of belief, ideology or meaning-seeking behaviour, our age will see an increasing number willing to defend their cause through whatever means necessary.

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<sup>132</sup> Shirin Jaafari, *PRJ*, 13 Sep 2017.





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