

Foreign Fighter Recruitment as the Continuation of a War

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ABSTRACT

Recruitment of foreign fighters has become essential to the study of Islamist terrorism, especially following the rise of the Islamic State (IS). There is a widely accepted assumption in the literature on European jihadists that the pathways into Islamist militancy are identical across different cases. In an attempt to find universal answers to what motivates recruitment, researchers often de-contextualize the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Consequently, there is a gap left by previous studies on European jihadists that have not paid much attention to indigenous Muslim communities with recent experiences in conflict and with a high contribution of foreign fighters. The thesis focuses on post-war radical milieus in Europe to understand the specific context of foreign fighter recruitment. The research question that guides the dissertation is: “How do post-war radical milieus in Europe shape the recruitment of foreign fighters?” By stressing the significance of local influencers in the recruitment of Bosnian and Albanian foreign fighters, the dissertation investigates the evolution of post-war radical actors, their activities, and their contribution to radical socialization.

The dissertation asserts that the radical milieu of foreign fighters is highly influenced by authority figures, and their availability in a local context determines the trajectory of recruitment. Post-war radical milieus shape foreign fighter recruitment by providing influencers with the authority to manage structures and narratives that seek to encourage radical action. According to the framework of the dissertation, unlike radical milieus in Western Europe, post-war radical milieus, still in the European context, emerge as a byproduct of a domestically experienced conflict. Therefore, radical influencers were able to build authority and capitalize on it for the sake of recruitment facilitated by the external conditions of the radical milieu’s emergence. The impact of influencers in post-war radical milieus is possible due to the conducive environment of post-war fragility.

The theoretical problem that this dissertation aims to address is whether the recruitment of foreign fighters is leader-led or leaderless. Thus, the dissertation focuses on radical actors and activities to stress the importance of locally managed networks as a venue of socialization. To analyze the role of radical influencers in recruitment, the dissertation employs Discursive Opportunity Structure (DOS) (Koopmans and Statham 1999), which is a framework situated in social movement theory. This framework allows the combined effects of a context, radical structures, and narratives to be analyzed in relation to foreign fighters. To get insights into the role of radical influencers in managing post-war radical milieus, the dissertation relies on four theoretical propositions concerned with the origin, structures, narratives, and followers of a radical milieu. The dissertation uses case studies and employed a two-stage data collection process, which included extensive desk research of open sources and semi-structured interviews. The dissertation contributes to the literature on foreign fighters by providing insights into social relations, authority, and decision-making processes that concern the departures of foreign fighters to the battlefield.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"From his house [my son] left for Syria, not from mine"(Spaic 2015). These are the words of a Bosnian father, who testified in 2015 at the trial of a Salafi leader accused of and sentenced for the recruitment of Bosnian IS foreign fighters. This testimony points to the crucial role of local radical influencers in the pre-departure phase of recruitment.

1.1. Research topic

Recruitment of foreign fighters has become essential to the study of Islamist terrorism, especially following the rise of the Islamic State (IS) (also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh). Questions such as who gets recruited, how, and why, have been topics of inquiry in research on the anti-Soviet jihadist resistance in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Mujahedeen units in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Chechnya in the 1990s, and the more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Previous research on foreign fighters has testified to similar recruitment patterns across cases in history, from locating potential recruits to framing a conflict (Malet 2010, 97). Foreign fighters are not only jihadists; they are also communists, far-right nationalists, fascists, and anti-fascists (See Table 1). Foreign fighters took part in at least ninety conflicts since the Congress of Vienna in 1814, or more than a quarter of all modern civil wars (Malet 2018, 7). Although European citizens are known to have supported various causes other than jihad in foreign conflicts, this is the cause that has attracted the highest number of martial volunteers across modern history (Malet 2018, 7).

Table 1 European foreign fighters across history.

Conflict	Foreign Fighters	Approx. Total	Approx. Europeans
American Revolution (1770s-1780s)	Various Private Volunteers	500	400
Bolivarian Revolutions (1810-1820s)	Albion Legion, Irish Legion	7000	7000
Greek War of Independence (1820s)	Filiki Eteria	1500	1200

Italian Risorgimento (1860s)	International Legion	2500	2500
Russian Revolution and Civil War (1910s-1920s)	International Brigades	50000	30000
Spanish Civil War (1930s)	International Brigades, Leftists, Fascists	60000	55000
Afghanistan (1970s-2000s)	Jihadis	25000	1500
Bosnian War (1990s)	Jihadis	5000	500
Chechnya (1990s - 2010s)	Jihadis	700	20
Somalia (1990s-2010s)	Jihadis, Al Shabaab	2000	200
Iraqi Occupation (2000s)	AQI	5000	100
Yemen (2010s)	AQAP	4000	200
Ukraine (2010s)	Azov Battalion, Donbass International Brigade	3000	3000
Syria-Iraq (2010s)	ISIS, Jihadis, Peshmerga	40000	5000

Source: Malet, David. 2018. “The European Experience with Foreign Fighters and Returnees”, *Egmont Papers*, (6-16), 11. * The author notes that figures provided in this table are estimates based on the best information available. Thus, figures should be regarded and used with extreme caution.

The large-scale manifestation of the phenomenon in the Syrian War has increased the interest of scholars in both individual paths to radicalization and recruitment patterns. Unlike previous conflicts, the involvement of European jihadi combatants in Syria has been unprecedentedly high in numbers. About 5000 foreign fighters were recruited from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Belgium, while some 1000 from the Western Balkans also traveled to the battlefield at the height of the conflict (Rudic 2017). This latest trend in jihadist recruitment has been the focus of studies concerned with radicalization in the West.

1.2. Research problem

The problem that remains unresolved in the literature is whether the recruitment of foreign fighters is leader-led or leaderless in the framework of the global jihadist movement. On the one hand, IS propaganda, accelerated by social media, allowed for global recruitment without knowing the recruits. Thus, individuals, who want to support the cause of jihad through action, could find their way to the battlefield without participating in any radical structure. On the other hand, the

decentralization of foreign fighter recruitment and the clustered departures speak for pre-existing leader-led radical structures embedded in a local context. This means that various combinations of top-down and bottom-up factors may incentivize foreign fighter recruitment in different contexts.

1.3. Literature Review

There are four major theories that researchers employ to explain what motivates recruitment of foreign fighters: ideology, marginalization in the West, social network mobilization, and online radicalization. The debate between Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy presents the first two as alternative arguments to recruitment, pointing to if and how ideology matters. The second two offer opposing claims in favor of either in-person or online socialization.

Researchers have sought to answer whether top-down recruitment by international networks or bottom-up self-recruitment were the main avenue by which individuals were drawn into terrorism (Coolsaet 2015; 2016b; Coolsaet and Heinke 2018; Neumann 2007; 2010; 2012; 2016; Nesser 2016). The literature on terrorism offers two alternative approaches. The debate between Hoffman and Sageman, which dominates the academic discussions after 9/11, points to centralized versus decentralized strategic choices. Bruce Hoffman explains terrorism from the top-down standpoint, or “leader-led jihad” (Hoffman 2006). He asserts that the Al Qaida-led threat to the West has been coordinated by a central leadership, and therefore, is a product of the group’s strategic goals.

By contrast, Marc Sageman’s “leaderless jihad” portrays the threat as a bottom-up outcome of socialization among like-minded individuals (Sageman 2004; 2008; 2016). He explains an individual’s decision to become involved with terrorism by the individual’s needs for identification and belonging, social grievances, and personal frustrations. He puts less emphasis on a group’s ideology and strategy. Both approaches comprise elements useful to comprehend the way IS

foreign fighter recruitment is organized. However, they do not entirely explain structures and dynamics set in a context, and therefore, they do not provide a framework to analyze the radical milieu of recruitment.

1.3.1. Ideology

The role of ideology in the recruitment of jihadists in the West has been particularly present in the post-9/11 scholarship, which explains radicalization as an ideologically driven process (Coolsaet 2016b). The debate between two prominent French scholars, Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy, is central to theorizing the role of ideology in the recruitment of European foreign fighters. Kepel argues that the turn towards religious extremism cannot be understood separately from the religious doctrines being promoted globally, and especially the brand of Salafism exported out of Saudi Arabia. Kepel stresses the role of radical Islam as essential to understanding radicalization in the West (Kepel 1997; 2005; Kepel and Jardin 2017). Contrary to Kepel's view, Olivier Roy asserts that the turn of many young Europeans to jihadism can be explained not as radicalization of Islam but "Islamisation of radicalism" (Roy 2004; 2010; 2017).

1.3.2. Marginalization in the West

Previous research on European jihadists points to integration failures of second and third generations Muslims (Neumann 2007; 2012; 2016; Roy 2008; 2010; 2017; Nesser 2016). Neumann asserts that European Muslims often feel that Western societies have not offered them the respect and equality that they believe they deserve (Neumann 2007, 40). Thus, radical Islam is understood as an alternative offering a community, a sense of belonging and acceptance. These explanation has been dominant in research on European jihadists in the West placing the discussion

on foreign fighter recruitment in the broader debate on multiculturalism and religion in modern society (Coolsaet 2016b).

1.3.3. Social networks

Studies on European jihadists strongly emphasize the role of social networks in recruitment (Sageman 2004; 2008; 2016; Nesser 2016; Coolsaet 2015; 2016b; Neumann 2012; 2016; Holman 2016; Reynolds and Hafez 2019; Roy 2004; 2008; 2017). Most studies on IS agree that recruitment happens within the framework of loose social networks and is the outcome of a relational process. This argument stresses the role of kinship and friendship bonds, as exposure to ideological content often happens through informal socialization. Previous studies on jihadi recruitment, have shown that people join the cause of jihad in small groups of friends and relatives and are often part of social networks with other prospective foreign fighters (Sageman 2004; Hafez 2012b, 193; Malet, Daymon, and de Roy van Zuijdewijn 2020).

1.3.4. Online radicalization

Research on Islamist militant recruitment has stressed the increasingly important role of the internet (Clarke 2019; Klausen 2015; Behr et al. 2013). Social media have played an essential role in the jihadists' operational and recruitment strategies (Klausen 2015). Social media enabled peer-to-peer radical socialization through evolving networks that remove the geographical constraints on recruitment. Nonetheless, previous research does not find that the internet is a substitute for in-person meetings but rather complements in-person communication (Behr et al. 2013). This argument appears in earlier studies on IS and Al-Qaeda and emphasizes the need for further exploration of the relationship between in-person and online radical socialization that serve recruitment purposes (Behr et al. 2013; Neumann 2012; 2016; Nesser 2016).

1.4. Gaps

The theories of recruitment discussed above make two gaps in the literature on foreign fighters particularly evident. First, in searching for universal answers to the recruitment process, scholars de-contextualize the phenomenon of foreign fighters. There is a widely accepted assumption in the literature on jihadi recruitment that the pathways into Islamist militancy are identical across the world.

However, radicalization and recruitment into the Islamist militant movement in Europe differ from similar processes in the Middle East or South Asia (Neumann 2010). There are significant differences between Muslim communities within Europe. For instance, Neumann shows in his research that Muslim communities across Western Europe differ in their histories of immigration, countries of origin, and language, and these differences have implications to the kinds of Islamist militant structures that have emerged in European countries (Neumann 2007; 2010). Previous studies on European jihadists have failed to pay enough attention to indigenous Muslim communities with recent experiences in conflict and with high contributions of foreign fighters. References to European Muslim communities “as if they represent one unified group with similar ethnic, cultural and socio-economic characteristics” (Neumann 2012, 12-13) limit our understanding of mobilization in a context.

Although the networks of Islamist militants often cross boundaries and create similar recruitment patterns, there are distinctions that result from the diverse nature of European Muslim communities. The histories of the local “radical milieus” (Malthaner and Waldmann 2014) are important when analyzing how individuals are recruited from European Muslim populations (Neumann 2007). For instance, the histories of the radical milieus across Belgium or Sweden differ from those in BiH or Kosovo. The first two have been shaped by immigration processes, while the latter by wars. One could argue that jihadi fighters from post-violent societies in a European

context do not differ significantly from their Western counterparts in recruitment patterns or individual profiles. Nonetheless, by not exploring the link between recruitment and the post-violent legacy of some fighters' radical milieus limits our knowledge about the logic of mobilization at the local level.

Second, the four theories discussed above show that the literature on foreign fighters is recruit-centric (Hegghammer 2013a). While scholars have focused on recruits, the broader pool of actors and activities that precede and facilitate recruitment is largely unstudied. Studies on Islamist networks in Europe more often seek to profile those who get involved in terrorism. Hence, research on foreign fighters does not study the radical milieu of foreign fighters in-depth. One cannot ignore that for an individual to decide to become involved in political violence, a decision is shaped by both personal and communal vulnerabilities, as well as by the tactical choices of recruiters. These choices may include where recruiters look for candidates, how they screen them, and who they are inclined to admit (Hegghammer 2013). To sum up, sources of authority and impact with possible contribution to the foreign fighter phenomenon remain undertheorized.

1.5. Purpose

The research question that guides the dissertation is: "How do post-war radical milieus shape the recruitment of foreign fighters in the European context?" The dissertation examines the evolution of post-war radical milieus to understand their influence on the recruitment of Albanian and Bosnian foreign fighters. This entails finding out how the origins and dynamics of radical milieus are related to the legacy of war and post-war fragility. By looking at the pre-departure socialization of foreign fighters into radical milieus, the dissertation seeks to provide insights about social relations, structures, and decision-making processes that result in the eventual departures to the battlefield. The dissertation studies post-violent societies in the European context with an empirical

focus on the Western Balkans. It does not search for a direct link between the 1990s conflicts in the region and the high number of individuals who traveled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016. Instead, it seeks to connect the war and the post-war spread of radical values, by a variety of actors, e.g. religious charities and radical preachers, to the gradual consolidation of a radical milieu and the consequent recruitment of foreign fighters.

The dissertation looks at typical cases to maximize learning opportunities for studying radical structures and authority in post-war radical milieus. Typical cases show the phenomenon in detail and allow us to analyze the mechanisms and processes justified by previously formulated theoretical expectations. The dissertation's overall objective is to identify actors and activities related to recruitment through a systematic empirical investigation of radical milieus that were established in a post-war context. By doing so, the dissertation aims to generate useful theoretical additions for future research on this topic.

1.6. Argument

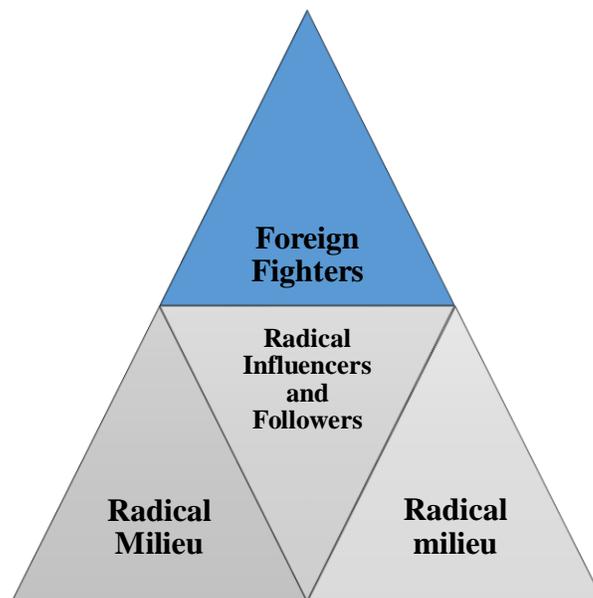
Post-war radical milieus play the unique role of constructors as well as exploiters of radical norms in the period between the end of a domestic conflict and the recruitment of foreign fighters for the Syrian War. Post-war radical milieus shape foreign fighter recruitment by empowering radical influencers and enabling their authority to be recognized by a large pool of followers due to post-war fragility. Consequently, foreign fighter recruitment in post-war radical milieus does not follow the locations of domestic war atrocities but instead the locations of radical influencers, who capitalize on the void left by the war and provide life guidance and values.

Post-war fragility, understood in this research as the outcome of a domestic conflict, is the key factor to the appearance of post-war radical milieus. Fragility here is not only an issue of state capacity after a war but also of relationships in a society (Marc et al. 2012). While some elements

of fragility concern the state, others are deeply rooted in societal dynamics, meaning, specifically, the way that individuals and groups interact and, consequently, the relationships that form. As a result, post-war radical milieus enable the appearance of radical authority figures and socialization between radical influencers and their followers.

Foreign fighters are only the visible part of a post-war radical milieu, whereas the presence of radical influencers speak for the persistence of such micro-societies. In the Balkan context, radical influencers' pathways have been largely determined by local conflicts, as they could and can benefit from the ideological and material resources that supported the intervention of radical Islam during the war and post-war periods. It was in the hands of influencers whether or not to take advantage of the opportunity for radical action offered by the Syrian War and to encourage the recruitment of foreign fighters (See Figure 1). Thus, recruitment is driven by the strategic targeting of local radical influencers, not only by the personal motivations or intentions of their followers.

Figure 1 A structure of a foreign fighter radical milieu.



1.7. Contribution

The dissertation contributes to the literature on foreign fighters within the broader scholarship on terrorism and recruitment into radical movements by developing a theoretical model that shows how actors and activities, born out of war and post-war fragility, have shaped a distinctive radical milieu. The dissertation shifts the analytical focus of foreign fighter mobilization from recruits to recruiters. It establishes a theoretical link between the foreign fighter phenomenon and the emergence of radical communities as a side effect of war. Additionally, the dissertation makes a rich empirical contribution with data on the recruitment of Bosnian and Albanian foreign fighters.

1.8. Theory

The dissertation uses social media terms *influencers* and *followers* to describe roles in radical socialization. This vocabulary reflects the understanding that the recruitment of foreign fighters is not situated within a strictly hierarchical, extremist network but a radical milieu with the features of a multilayered, loose movement.

The dissertation employs the Discursive Opportunity Structure (DOS) framework (Koopmans and Statham 1999) to investigate the role of post-war radical milieus in foreign fighter recruitment. The justification for this choice derives from the way that foreign fighter recruitment is mostly understood in the literature: as a type of violent transnational activism of networks embedded in the global jihadi movement (Malet 2010; 2018; Moore and Tumelty 2008; Hegghammer 2010; Bakke 2014; Moore 2015; Crenshaw 2017). Therefore, social network and social movement theories have been widely preferred by scholars in exploring jihadists' pathways.

The DOS combines effects of framing with discursive opportunities provided by cultural and structural contexts. The cultural context in which framing takes place determines the success of the movement in framing to achieve certain goals. To understand why a frame succeeds, one

must consider not only the content of the frame but also the broader circumstances in which the framing takes place (McCammon et al. 2007). Movement frames take into account pre-existing political and cultural environments, and therefore, the frame can possibly produce the movement's desired political outcome. While DOS are apparent on a larger, cultural level, in the end, the movement actors are the agents who make decisions about how to respond to such opportunities (Ferree 2003; Gamson and Meyer 1996).

How does the DOS apply to foreign fighter recruitment? The way DOS are understood in this dissertation is as a macro-structure that shapes individual level processes and actions. The combination of context, the movement, and the narratives have a role in triggering specific moments and affecting individual decision-making. The macro-factors that shape the DOS in the case of post-war radical milieus concern different aspects of post-war fragility, including political, socio-economic, religious, and societal fragility, which are explained at length later in this chapter.

The role of radical influencers is the micro-level of analysis. The dissertation asserts that the presence and persistence of radical influencers largely determine the survival of a post-war radical milieu where foreign fighter recruitment takes place. Radical influencers have the freedom to choose whether and when to take advantage of their influence over targeted communities. Influencers can, therefore, choose to encourage participation in violence. Thus, recruitment is neither entirely dependent on individual motivations of prospective foreign fighters, nor on the trigger moment, which happened to be the Syrian War.

There are a few theoretical premises that derive from the literature on foreign fighters in the West and find application in the framework employed here. First, recruitment occurs via social networks set within larger, often marginalized, communities. Such social structures are both a source of and a venue for collective action. They enable the dissemination of recruitment messages

and facilitate community members identifying themselves with the cause of a distant conflict (Malet 2013). A key finding in the literature on jihadi fighters is that recruitment is not done through a central unit, but it is more often performed at the grassroots level (Coolsaet 2015; 2016b; Nesser 2016; Sageman 2016). Therefore, influencers and followers are not “atomized individuals” but participants of small groups connected to each other (Sageman 2004, 137). They have a variety of roles and often belong simultaneously to various organizational layers of the recruitment process (Nesser 2016; Neumann 2016).

Second, the pre-departure socialization between followers and influencers is an essential phase of radicalization and an individual’s decision to get involved in violence. Radical influencers orient their frames towards action, and fashion them at the intersection between a target population’s inherited culture and their own values and goals (Tarrow 2011, 144–45). The way an issue is framed corresponds with the ability of a movement to mobilize supporters (Snow and Benford 1992; Benford and Snow 2000; McAdam 1996). Whether the process of framing succeeds in fostering collective action depends on how a frame resonates with the population it seeks to mobilize (Bakke 2014). This resonance does not occur automatically; someone needs to foster it.

Nonetheless, followers may differ in their exposure to radical socialization, commitment, and individual motivations. It is not the conversion of a single individual but more frequently a conversion of small groups from the same villages, the mosque, gym, and/or youth center (Della Porta 2009). On the one hand, they may have taken part in activities that led them to decide to engage with violence and travel to the “caliphate”. On the other hand, they may have a positive, passive relationship with a radical milieu, which is the case of most women and children, and thus, have exposure to radical socialization and narratives without necessarily being the decision-makers concerning their departure to the warzone. Therefore, the radical milieu of foreign fighters

is heterogeneous and multilayered; it has a core and a periphery where a range of radical influencers and followers are situated. Followers may have either a positive active or passive relationship with a radical milieu. Social interaction within the framework of a radical milieu provides the survival and reinforcement of radical norms and narratives.

To apply the discursive opportunity structure to the empirical research, the dissertation introduces a set of theoretical propositions concerned with origin, structure, narratives, and followers of post-war radical milieus:

Origin:

Radical milieus emerge as a byproduct of war and post-war fragility. As fragility has been present in its political, religious, and societal aspects, the appearance of radical actors and activities have been highly incentivized.

Structure:

The geographical distribution of recruitment follows the trajectory of radical influencers. If targeted activities of influencers are present, clusters of foreign fighters are more likely.

Narratives:

Radical influencers in post-war societies are likely to combine global jihadi narratives (macro level) with local jihadi narratives (micro level). Thus, radical influencers utilize war memories and legacies of local conflicts to make their recruitment messages appealing to local followers.

Followers:

Only if followers have an active positive relationship with radical influencers and the respective radical milieu could they participate in a decision-making process that results in a departure to a foreign battlefield.

1.9. Research Design

Empirical context. The Balkans' recent history is marked by the dissolution of Yugoslavia through wars (BiH 1992-1995 and Kosovo 1998-1999). One of the byproducts of these processes was the appearance of radical networks turning the region into a key spot for extremists in the late 1990s.

This legacy makes the Balkan region unique in the European context and arguably had implications for the recent recruitment of foreign fighters from this part of the continent. The appearance of jihadi-Salafism in the Balkans is a post-conflict phenomenon. The emergence of what is understood here as radical milieus followed the two major conflicts in BiH (1992-1995) and Kosovo (1998-1999). The influx of Islamic charitable organizations encouraged the growth of Salafism, with jihadi Salafism being its most extreme form.

Foreign fighters from all parts of the region traveled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016. The biggest contribution in numbers were jihadi combatants from Kosovo, followed by BiH, N. Macedonia and Albania. Many of them initially joined the Al-Qaeda affiliate, Al-Nusra Front, or various rebel groups fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and only later moved to the ranks of IS. Overall, up to 1070 individuals from the region reportedly traveled to the battlefields by the end of 2017 (Azinović and Bećirević 2017). Approximately 300 have returned, more than 200 have been killed, while some 400 remained there by the end of 2018. The data includes women, minors, and the elderly – most of whom were noncombatants and account for one-third of the entire Balkan contingent (See Table 2).

Table 2 Number of individuals from the Western Balkans in Syria/Iraq, 2012-2016.

	Men	Women	Minors
Albania	79	27	38
BiH	172	58	57
N. Macedonia	140	14	No data
Kosovo	255	48	96
Montenegro	18	5	4
Serbia	37	12	10
Total	701	164	205

Source: Azinović and Bećirević 2017.

The communities of interest in this research, Bosnian and Albanian Muslims, are understood as vulnerable due to their collective experience of post-war fragility. The literature on Islamist recruitment in the West shows that radical influencers take advantage of places in which individuals are likely to be vulnerable, lack orientation, or experience personal crises – factors that are widely believed to make people more receptive to the appeal of militant Islam (Neumann 2007). Dysfunctional welfare and educational systems, endemic corruption, and economic inequality draw the contours of today’s socio-political reality of these societies. Thus, various aspects of post-war fragility have arguably played a permissive role, allowing for the evolution of Salafi narratives and the continued generosity of Islamic charities.

War is a condition in this dissertation that limits the scope of the research to Muslim communities in Europe with a comparatively high contribution of foreign fighters and recent war experience. The research population of the dissertation is narrowed to Salafi communities whose origins in war and post-war settings likely determines their agential role in foreign fighter recruitment. This situates the empirical analysis of Albanian and Bosnian foreign fighter contingents within the conceptual scope of jihadi Salafism.

Although radical milieus are understood as the outcome of the war and post-war fragility, radical milieus are not seen here as militarized structures. Moreover, not all parts of a radical milieu tolerate or promote religiously justified violence. Yet, post-war radical milieus have their own value system that rejects the one of the larger society in terms of religion, civil liberties, equality, and justice. Thus, the socialization of influencers and followers into a radical milieu is understood as a radical step from the point of view of the mainstream European society. The unit of analysis refers to radical influencers and their followers who share linguistic, ethnic, and geographical ties.

The two regional contingents are distinguished from each other based on ethnicity, not the country of origin (See Table 3).

Table 3 Foreign Fighter contingents from the Western Balkans in Syria.

Foreign Fighter contingents	Albanian Foreign Fighters (Albania, Kosovo, N. Macedonia, Montenegro)
	Bosnian Foreign Fighters (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo)

The dissertation is the outcome of a three-stage methodological process: 1) data collection through extensive desk research of open sources; 2) fieldwork including interviews, research meetings, and research on judicial documents; and 3) data analysis. The key outcome of this empirical investigation is systematized data on radical influencers and foreign fighters. Overall, I have collected data on the pathways of more than 500 individuals from the Balkans, known to have been directly or indirectly involved in foreign fighter recruitment. The list of radical influencers contains data on influential Salafi leaders active in the region between the 1990s Yugoslav Wars and the outbreak of the Syrian War. While most of them were involved in the grassroots recruitment, a small number of radical influencers traveled to the battlefields to also become foreign fighters. Building original datasets has allowed me to identify recruitment patterns and locations, and to establish a logic of connectivity between involved actors.

1.10. Terminology

The terminology of the dissertation derives credibility from previous research on foreign fighters, jihadi terrorism, Islamist movements, Al-Qaeda, and IS. Its theoretical grounding is in social movement theories, and this allows it to explain social interaction between actors in post-war radical milieus. Conceptually, the dissertation situates the empirical analysis of Albanian and Bosnian foreign fighters within the scope of violent extremism in a sense of “advocating, engaging

in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic, and political objectives” (USAID 2011).

Foreign fighter: The dissertation employs David Malet’s definition of a foreign fighter that is “a non-citizen of a state experiencing civil conflict who arrives from an external state to join an insurgency” (Malet 2013). Despite some conceptual ambiguities, *foreign fighter* is widely recognized as a usable term among researchers and security experts, and its definition fits the research goals of the dissertation for several reasons. First, it does not limit the concept to a specific set of motivations, ideological, and socio-economic triggers. Second, it does not put an equal sign between foreign fighter and terrorist, two notions often used synonymously in public discussions. The concept of a foreign fighter is employed with an emphasis on pre-departure socialization, rather than the later violent activities, in which individuals might take part. A foreign fighter is further limited to the theoretical perspective of jihad. It reflects the fundamental ideological tenet of groups like Al-Qaeda and IS that “violent jihad is the only path to defending the Islamic world (Clarke 2019, 15).”

A *foreign fighter* contingent is a heterogeneous group of people, who share geographical/linguistic/ethnic characteristics and have traveled individually or in small groups to the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria. Members of a foreign fighter contingent are motivated by the intention to contribute to the establishment of the IS caliphate, participate in fights and/or support other radical factions on the ground.

A *radical milieu* of foreign fighters describes the larger community from which violent actors emerge (Winterbotham and Pearson 2020). It is the “social setting” of radicalization (Malthaner and Waldmann 2014). A radical milieu is a community highly influenced by authority figures

whose engagement with either Salafism or jihadi Salafism define the core and the periphery of the radical milieu.

A *radical influencers* is a self-proclaimed imam, a hate preacher, or a charismatic jihadi militant who is recognized as an authority figure in the radical milieu. Although radical influencers are not given any authority from a central leadership organization, they gain prominence in the grassroots socialization process. This dissertation distinguishes between radical influencers who openly engage with violent propaganda and those who do not.

A *follower* is the local target of jihadi propaganda who is exposed to it via online and in-person socialization with peers and radical influencers. Followers may be individuals who have acted upon their radical views and became foreign fighters. Followers may choose not to join the battlefield for various reasons or may be prevented from travelling by local authorities. Followers may have positive active or positive passive relationship with the radical milieu depending on the types of activities they take part in.

1.11. Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into seven chapters. *Chapter Two* reviews previous research on foreign fighters to gather knowledge on recruitment. The dissertation examines studies on Islamist movements, recruitment into IS and Al-Qaeda, militant activism, radicalization, and root causes of terrorism. It further looks at the participation of jihadi fighters in the two Chechen Wars, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the most recent in Syria. This literature points to four distinct approaches to the study of European foreign fighters: ideology, marginalization in the West, online radicalization and social network mobilization.

Chapter Three presents the dissertation's theoretical framework and research design. The theory is built around four theoretical propositions concerned with origin, structure, narratives, and

followers of post-war radical milieus. These propositions, inspired by DOS, are tailored to explore the relationship between radical influencers and their followers to understand who is targeted to go and fight in a distant conflict and how. At the macro level, the dissertation examines the environment in which foreign fighter recruitment takes place, which is the radical milieu. At the micro level, it studies at the role of radical influencers in recruitment. This chapter argues that the interdependence between origin, structure, narratives, and followers of a radical milieu is defined by the discursive opportunities provided by domestic wars and that such contexts condition the influence of ideological actors.

Chapters Four and Five: In the empirical portions of Chapters Four and Five, the Bosnian and the Albanian radical milieus are studied separately and the foundation for a comparative analysis in Chapter Five is laid. The order of the two case studies follows the chronological order of the wars (BiH 1992-95 and Kosovo 1998-99) and the logic that the Bosnian radical milieu has deeper roots, and therefore, has been more evidently manifested compared to the Albanian one.

Chapter Four is devoted to the evolution of the Bosnian foreign fighters' radical milieu. Around 400 people of Bosnian descent traveled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016 with the intention to join groups such as Al-Nusra Front or IS. The analysis indicates that ideological actors and activities during the Bosnian War and in its aftermath had a formative role in shaping the Bosnian radical milieu. The power centers of foreign fighter recruitment identified in this chapter show that radical influencers could build their authority on the legacy and resources inherited by war and post-war humanitarian activities. Consequently, foreign fighter recruitment followed the trajectory of radical influencers, both internal and external to the region. The research testifies to strong leadership ties between local radical influencers and Bosnian diaspora communities across Europe.

Chapter Five studies the Albanian radical milieu with approximately 600 people from Albania, Kosovo, and N. Macedonia. The Albanian radical milieu relied on strong domestic power centers, however, lacked a particularly influential power center linked to Albanian diaspora communities. The research has identified pre-departure leadership ties that overcome national borders and have been established along geographical proximity, pre-existing social networks, ethno-linguistic ties, and similarities in ideological backgrounds. The data shows that the recruitment in Albania was slightly detached from the same process in Kosovo and N. Macedonia. The analysis points to pre-war, war and post-war formation of the radical milieu in relation to the Kosovo War. Unlike Bosnians, Albanian jihadist networks are “younger” in their organization and ideological commitment.

Chapter Six derives insights from comparing the two cases. This chapter points to several important differences between the Bosnian and Albanian radical milieus. The analysis distinguishes between a cause of a conflict driven by religion, as in the case of BiH, and by nationalism, as in the case of Kosovo. This distinction aims to show that a cause of a conflict may either restrict or encourage the growth of a post-war radical milieu. While both radical milieus are seen as the outcome of post-war fragility, there are ideological and organizational variations that make the spread of radical influence follow different trajectories over time. Albanian and Bosnian foreign fighters differ in demographic characteristics and their previous exposure to combat. The older the radical milieu, the better established its leadership and structures are.

Chapter Seven is the conclusion, with the research findings pointing toward the need to recognize that European jihadists are not identical in terms of history, motivation, and resources, as they come from different radical milieus. Most often, foreign fighters from post-war radical milieus are not individuals with a past experience of domestic wars. However, they were

overwhelmingly socialized into radical milieus that appeared after domestic conflicts. Radical influencers from post-war radical milieus rely on political opportunities, organizing structures, and cultural frames different from the ones in Western Europe. Post-war radical milieus provide radical influencers with the resources to institutionalize their radical authority due to the post-war fragility of the context. The dissertation finds that the recruitment of Bosnian and Albanian foreign fighters is largely leader-led in the context of a radical milieu, and thus, concludes that relationships that emerged from post-war fragility were essential to foreign fighter recruitment.